

POPULARITY AND POLITICS: THE UNCONVENTIONAL RISE OF BEN “COOTER” JONES IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

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Abstract

Celebrity politics is a growing area of research which explores the role Of entertainment industry figures in American elections. This study looks specifically at Hollywood celebrities and their involvement in politics through ideological leanings in film production, public advocacy, and even running for major public offices. The convergence of entertainment and politics is notable as celebrities have advantages in fundraising, news coverage, and public recognition, which Traditional candidates may not possess. However, concerns exist that celebrities lack the necessary governing skills to be effective public officials. This paper examines the case of Ben Jones, a celebrity who both won and lost elections, to understand the dynamics of celebrities in American politics. To explore this, a qualitative approach using case study analysis is employed. The findings suggest that while celebrities have advantages in campaigns, they may be overemphasized in terms of their potential impact on the political sphere. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on celebrity politics by providing a nuanced understanding of the role of celebrities in American politics, highlighting their potential advantages and limitations.

Introduction

There is a small but growing literature in the area of celebrity politics. Hollywood has been an active participant in American elections since the early days of its cultural significance. Louis B. Mayer, the co-founder of MetroGoldwyn-Mayer (MGM) studios, was a Republican leader. He chaired the California Republican Party and turned nominating conventions into prescribed staged extravaganzas designed to sell audiences on their candidates. Jack Warner, founder of Warner Brothers, did the same for Democrats. The films produced by MGM and Warner Brothers each had ideological leanings that reflected the views of their founders. For example, WarnerBrothers films during the Great Depression often featured heroic federal agents saving the day and fighting crime. The federal government was the “good guy” and the “savior” in a subtle attempt to shape public perceptions

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through fun action movies. Movie executives attempted to shape public sentiment in favor of their preferred partisan preferences (Brownstein 1990; Vaughn 1994; Ross 2011; Scott 2011; Wills 2017).

Celebrities from the entertainment industry have also been active in politics. Stars such as Marlon Brando advocated for Native American interests and promoted civil rights. Jane Fonda was a well-known Anti-Vietnam War activist. Charlton Heston became president of the National Rifle Association (NRA) to advocate for 2nd Amendment rights. Angelina Jolie has become an advocate for refugees. Bono from U2 has focused his efforts on developing nation debt relief. Leonardo DiCaprio is a spokesperson for environmental protection. Many celebrities get involved in social and political activism in the United States and internationally (Street 2002; West and Orman 2003; Huddart 2005; Rabidoux 2009; Tsaliki, et. al. 2011; van Krieken 2012; Wheeler 2013; Totman 2017).

Some celebrities have taken their activism to the next level and ran for office themselves. Celebrities like George Murphy, Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesse Ventura, and Al Franken were elected to major public offices (Longoria 2022a). There is a consensus among scholars of celebrity politics who argue that entertainment and politics have converged (Marshall 1997; Street 2001; West and Orman 2003; Corner and Pels 2003; Drake and Higgins 2006, Street 2012; Wheeler 2013; Stanley 2014; Turner 2014; Majic, O'Neill, and Bernhard 2020). Celebrities can become politicians and politicians can become celebrities.

Celebrity candidates have advantages that traditional candidates have difficulty matching (Wright 2019). Political reporter David Espo argued, “As identifiable public personalities before entering politics, they generally began their campaigns with formidable advantages in fund raising, news coverage, experience before television cameras and other areas that other first-time candidates can only dream of and their opponents can only fume at” (Espo 1986). Wright argues that 58% of celebrity candidates win their elections and warns of a coming “celebocracy” (Wright 2019). This is a problem because celebrities don’t have the necessary governing skills to be effective public officials (West and Orman 2003; Stanley 2014; Archer, et. al. 2020).

Wright (2019) counts George Murphy, Ronald Reagan, Sonny Bono, Ben Jones, Fred Grandy, Fred Thompson, and Donald Trump on the winning side of the win-loss ledger. However, these celebrity politicians also lost elections and should count on both sides of the ledger. In these cases, their celebrity was insufficient to get them reelected or to win an office with a different constituency. The literature on celebrity politicians seems to ignore, or undercount, the many losses by celebrity candidates. Therefore, the fear of a “celebocracy” might be overblown. Ben Jones is a celebrity who both won and lost elections. As such, his journey is an excellent case to study if one wishes to understand the dynamics of celebrity in American politics.

Understanding celebrity success and failure

Celebrities have three advantages that help them win elections. They have the talents, fame, and resources to help them succeed. These talents include being comfortable in front of live audiences and television cameras. They are also especially skilled at creating a personal brand that is easily recognizable and that resonates well with mass audiences. Being famous means that they have very high levels of name recognition. Name recognition, by itself, is a major predictor of electoral success (Stokes and Miller 1962; Kam and Zechmeister 2013). This fame provides them with large amounts of earned media, free media attention, to distribute their political message to voters. Celebrities are part of elite social networks. Their colleagues in the entertainment industry are wealthy people capable of giving large campaign contributions. These three advantages make celebrities more formidable candidates for public office than other political amateurs.

The notion that celebrity candidates have important electoral advantages isn't being disputed here. Indeed, the case of Ben Jones demonstrates how important these three factors are. However, a review of the celebrities that have sought elected office reveals two interesting points worth considering. The first is how often celebrity electoral victories can be viewed as flukes. These flukes can be divided into two types. The first type of fluke is the plurality rule or Electoral College systems. Many celebrities who got elected won with less than 50% of the vote. These include Sonny Bono (44%), Jesse Ventura (37%), Arnold Schwarzenegger (49%), Al Franken (42%), and Donald Trump (46%) (Longoria 2022b). The second type of fluke are problems with the incumbent candidate. Fred Grandy, star of *The Love Boat*, fully expected to lose when he ran for Congress. However, the incumbent was bitten by a wood tick and contracted Lyme disease causing him to drop out of the race. Grandy admitted that he couldn't have beaten the popular incumbent except for the fortuitous tick bite (Des Moines Register November 6, 1986). Ben Jones falls into this second category of flukes. The incumbent was indicted on money laundering charges just a few weeks before the election, allowing the challenger to gain an unexpected advantage. Many of the celebrities who managed to get elected seemed to win by historical accident, rather than overwhelming public support.

The second point worth considering is that there are many celebrities that lost their bids for elected office. The most prominent reason for these losses is that the celebrities represented the minority party in one party dominated districts or states. Linda McMahon and Stacy Dash were Republicans in Democratic areas. Ralph Waite, Nancy Kulp, and Ben Jones were Democrats in Republican areas. While this counts as a common reason to lose a general election some celebrities have lost primary contests because their policy positions did not align with the preferences of their party's primary voters. Sonny Bono lost his bid for the US Senate in California because he was too liberal for the conservative Republican voters in the state. Cynthia Nixon was too liberal for the more moderate Democratic voters of New York. Still other celebrities lose because their campaigns are viewed as publicity stunts and they are never taken to be serious candidates, even though they filed the necessary paperwork and actively campaigned. Gary Coleman, Roseanne Barr, Kanye West, and Caitlyn Jenner received less than 1% of the vote in their bids for office. While celebrity candidates have many advantages the political environment is of decisive importance to their chances of electoral victory (Longoria 2022b).

Talents

Jones fell in love with acting in college and volunteered for many student productions. After college he went on to the Alliance Theater in Atlanta where he would act in dozens of plays over the next 7 years. He also acted in over 30 television commercials, and numerous radio advertisements. He secured small roles in several movies *The Bingo Long Traveling Allstars*, *Smokey and the Bandit*, *The Million-Dollar Dixie Deliverance*, and *The Bagel Report* early in his career. In 1978 he was asked to audition for the role of "Cooter" for a new television show called *The Duke of Hazzard*. Jones said,

I went to the audition dressed as I usually dressed, in jeans and a work shirt, an old pair of boots, and a feed store ball cap. I was reading for Cooter, the good ol' boy mechanic with a wild and crazy streak. The producers didn't know the half of it. I not only understood this character, I had spent my whole life being this character. I was immediately cast in the role. (Jones 2008, 158)

The Dukes of Hazzard would turn Ben Jones into a celebrity television star.

Jones believes that actors are excellent candidates for public office. There is no difference between memorizing a script and memorizing a campaign speech.

Memorizing is a big part of what actors do. There has been a lot more attention paid recently to the confluence of show business in politics, and I've been asked about that connection a lot. Show business celebrities are in the

public spotlight a lot and many of them are politically involved. They have found as I did that just by showing up they can bring attention to a cause, a charity, or a political point of view. And often these showbiz folks have the kind of charisma and communication skills that lend themselves to advocacy. (Jones 2008, 195)

He also remarked that showbusiness is a difficult profession and that to succeed one needs to develop a thick skin for criticism. Actors and politicians require the same set of skills to be successful. His ease in front of cameras, ability to memorize lines, and thick skin for criticism aided his political ambitions.

Fame

The Dukes of Hazzard was a tremendously popular show in the early 1980s. In 1981 it was the second most popular show in America with a rating of 27.3. This meant that more than 27% of all television viewers in the time slot were watching the show (Brooks and Marsh 2007). The show's popularity allowed for extensive merchandising. Posters, T-shirts, lunchboxes, action figures, bicycles, and an entire array of other products were marketed with *The Dukes of Hazzard* trademark. It was a commercial success, but it did have its critics, "The national PTA condemned the show's recklessness. Prudes decried the shortness of Daisy Duke's shorts" (Jones 2008, 162). The popularity of the show meant that a Ben Jones appearance could draw a crowd and Jones used this ability to campaign for political candidates that he supported. His prominence in Georgia got him elected President of the Georgia chapter of the Screen Actors Guild and he was appointed Chairman of the Georgia Film Commission (Allen 1986; Shipp 1986).

Celebrity candidates get more media attention than traditional politicians. On election night 1986 the national *ABC News* broadcast made a special mention of two congressional races. Ben Jones in Georgia and Fred Grandy in Iowa (ABC News 1986). This extra attention serves to reinforce their already high levels of name recognition, giving them an advantage in the political arena. Jones noted that he was easily able to draw a crowd because voters wanted "to see what Cooter looked like in a coat and tie" (Espo 1986). Jones did not shy away from using his *Dukes of Hazzard* fame on the campaign trail. In 1988 he invited Sorrell Booke, AKA Boss Hogg, to one of his fundraisers. Ben Jones had a mock debate with Boss Hogg in full *Dukes of Hazzard* wardrobe. The spectacle was a crowd pleaser. Celebrities often mix their on-screen personas with their political identities. Arnold Schwarzenegger was the "Governator" and Clint Eastwood had bumper stickers that said, "Go ahead, make me mayor" referencing his most famous movie line (Longoria 2022b). The purpose is to turn the good will felt toward a popular character into votes for a real candidate.

Resources

Wright (2019) argues that celebrities have an easier time winning elections than other candidates because of their fundraising abilities. But this was not true for Ben Jones. In his six races for Congress Jones won the fundraising battle only once. This occurred in 1990 when Jones was the incumbent. It is expected that incumbents outperform their opponents due to their privileged position. Lobbyists tend to focus their efforts on politicians who can move their agenda forward and research indicates that interest groups overwhelmingly support incumbent candidates (Herrnson 1992; Krasno, Green, and Cowden 1994; Maisel 2019). Jones openly admits this, "incumbent Congressmen almost inevitably have bigger campaign war chests. That's because well-heeled individuals and special-interest PACs make it their business to curry favor with the powerful" (Jones 2008, 217). In every other race Jones raised less money than his opponent. Jones admits, "I wasn't very good at shaking the tin cup" (Jones 2008, 193).

Celebrities are supposed to be able to use their high-status network of friends to help them finance their campaigns. But, in the case of Ben Jones the celebrity usually raised far less than his opponents. This was true even though he did receive financial support from his Hollywood friends (Jones 2008). In 1986, Jones garnered a very competitive 47% of the vote despite raising a paltry \$118,166 to his opponent's \$753,889. In 1994, Jones raised \$318,659 and was trounced by Newt Gingrich who raised \$2,440,572. In 2002, Jones raised a meager \$188,471 and was handily defeated by Eric Cantor who raised \$1,440,429 (FEC n.d.). If Ben Jones is indicative of celebrity fundraising prowess, then celebrities are not fundraising juggernauts.

Table 1: Vote Percentage and Fundraising for Ben Jones

<u>Year</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>Vote %</u>	<u>Amount Raised</u>	<u>Opponent</u>	<u>Vote %</u>	<u>Amount Raised</u>
1986	GA-4	47%	\$ 118,166	Pat Swindall	53%	\$ 753,889
1988	GA-4	61%	\$ 522,594	Pat Swindall	39%	\$ 558,754
1990	GA-4	52%	\$ 707,046	John Linder	48%	\$ 696,858
1992	GA-10	30%	\$ 269,249	Don Johnson Jr.	53%	\$ 629,859
1994	GA-6	36%	\$ 318,659	Newt Gingrich	64%	\$ 2,012,572
2002	VA-7	30%	\$ 188,471	Eric Cantor	69%	\$ 1,440,429

Source: Federal Election Commission. fec.gov.

Here it would be useful to compare Jones with another television celebrity running in the same years. Fred Grandy was able to out fundraise all of his opponents in the years he ran for Congress. After college Grandy was a congressional staffer and campaign speech writer for Congressman Wiley Mayne in Iowa's 6th district. Grandy was familiar with the politics of the district and had connections with local political elites. After Congressman Berkley Bedell's unexpected illness Grandy had the good fortune of running for an open seat against the incumbent's congressional aide. With Ronald Reagan occupying the White House it was not far-fetched that television stars like Jones and Grandy could be viewed by voters as credible candidates for office. After his initial win Grandy benefited from "sophomore surge" and increased his vote share in subsequent elections (Ansolahehere, et. al. 2007; Lockerbie 1994). Unlike Jones who was redistricted out of his seat, Grandy was redistricted into a more favorable situation and ran unopposed in 1992. Grandy decided to primary the incumbent Republican governor, Terry Branstad, in 1994 and lost by a margin of 52% to 48% (Yepsen and Howard 1994). The incumbent was able to out fundraise Grandy by more than half a million dollars (Roos 1994).

Research shows that, with a few exceptions, celebrity candidates who win the fundraising battle tend to win their elections and celebrity candidates that lose the fundraising battle tend to lose their elections. Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood, Fred Grandy (in the congressional races), Sonny Bono (in the mayor and House races), and Arnold Schwarzenegger raised more money than their opponents and got elected. Sonny Bono (in the Senate race), Fred Thompson (in the presidential race), Fred Grandy (in the gubernatorial race), Shirley Temple, Gary Coleman, Roseanne Barr, Cynthia Nixon, Stacy Dash, Nancy Kulp, Kanye West, and Caitlyn Jenner raised less than their opponents and lost their elections. Jesse Ventura, Fred Thompson (in the Senate race), Al Franken, and Donald Trump raised less than their opponents but still managed to win in part because of the free media attention they received. Keeping in mind that three of these four won with less than 50% of the vote, only Fred Thompson was out fundraised and won a majority (Longoria 2022b). Democrats are expected to lose in districts dominated by Republicans. As an expected loser few donors are willing to contribute to a campaign whose outcome is all but certain. Consistent with the normal laws of politics minority party candidates like Ben Jones will have difficulty raising money for long shot bids for office. This is true for celebrities as well.

Table 2: Vote Percentage and Fundraising for Fred Grandy

<u>Year</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>Vote %</u>	<u>Amount Raised</u>	<u>Opponent</u>	<u>Vote %</u>	<u>Amount Raised</u>
1986	IA-6	51%	\$ 680,193	Clayton Hodgson	49%	\$ 407,661
1988	IA-6	64%	\$ 527,487	Dave O'Brien	36%	\$ 196,477
	D. Earl	28%	\$ 45,492			
1990	IA-6	72%	\$ 409,067	Mike		
1992	IA-5	99%	\$ 382,626	None	1%	\$ -
1994	IA Gov	48%	\$ 1,178,326	Terry Branstad	52%	\$ 1,825,222

Sources: Federal Election Commission. fec.gov; Roos, Jonathan. 1994. "Grandy Refuels Campaign with Cash." *The Des Moines Register*. June 4, 1994. Newspapers.com

Political Environment

Georgia's 4th Congressional District favored Republicans. Because the district was considered a safe seat for the incumbent prominent local Democratic officials scoffed at the idea of running. Party leaders asked Ben Jones if he was willing to declare himself as a candidate. He agreed knowing that his would be a long-shot bid. The DNC refused to offer financial support because they believed the district was a safe seat for the Republicans. But the district did have several colleges and a significant minority population providing a base of support for Democratic candidates like Jones. Early in the race Jones attacked Swindall for supporting school vouchers and undermining public education (Shipp 1986).

Ben Jones was not an ideal candidate for public office. He started drinking as a teenager and became an alcoholic for the next twenty years of his life. During those years he "had been arrested for drunkenness, disorderly conduct, drinking in public, resisting arrest, criminal trespass, assault, and assaulting an officer" (Jones 2008, 4). He admitted to smoking marijuana twice, "Once from 1957 until 1961 and once from 1963 until 1978" (Jones 2008, 195). He had four marriages dissolve because of his philandering and drunkenness. He knew his past would become an issue during the campaign and that his best approach was to be open about it.

As election day neared Jones made an issue of Swindall's own run ins with the law. Swindall had released his driving record, but the Jones campaign noticed it was incomplete. It excluded a traffic ticket with multiple citations. In 1980, Swindall drove through a red light, was driving without a license, and had a blood alcohol level of .08. A level of .10 is legally intoxicated, but prosecutors are allowed to prosecute starting at .06 if there are other signs of intoxication. The prosecutor filed DUI charges but later dropped them. Swindall said he left out the incident because the charges were dropped. Jones was aware that his own battle with alcoholism did not put him in the best position to criticize Swindall, but he believed that honesty was better than Swindall's omission (O'Shea and Green 1986).

Swindall was heavily favored to win the race (Sack and Straus 1986). Polling showed that 62% of voters favored Swindall, but that was before Jones made an issue of Swindall's DUI charge. After the unexpectedly close results in 1986 Democrats believed the district was competitive and immediately starting planning for another attempt to unseat Swindall. This was a case of Democrats underestimating their own potential in the district. They invested very little in the contest between Swindall and Jones, yet Jones came within 10,128 votes of beating Swindall (Sack 1986). It is likely that Jones's fame and last-minute tactics were a benefit that made the race much more competitive than it would have been otherwise.

He ran again in 1988, only this time the political establishment backed Jones. The DNC and allied PACs contributed to the campaign. Jones's past alcoholism and many divorces were now old news. Jones faced two first time candidates in a primary. They attacked him for being too liberal after he suggested legalizing marijuana, but Jones easily defeated them with 62% of the vote (Associated Press 1988). Then, during the general election the Jones campaign ran into a stroke of good luck. Just three weeks before the election Swindall was indicted on 10 counts of perjury and money laundering. The race, which was considered a toss-up, swung in Jones's favor. Jones got 61% of the vote eclipsing Swindall's 39% (Wallace and Ducanin 1988; Hall 1988; Schwartz 1988). Swindall would be eventually convicted on the charges.

Jones managed to win decisively in a Republican leaning district. This was not due to any celebrity advantage. It was due to the fact that voters are reluctant to elect people who are credibly accused of crimes. The public, rightly,

does not take kindly to people who abuse their authority. *People* magazine ran a cover story profiling Ben Jones after his electoral victory (Brower and Sellinger 1989). Very few newly elected members of Congress get that level of national media attention.

In 1990 Republicans were eager to win the seat back. State Representative John Linder was nominated to take on Jones. As an established political figure with his own base of support in the district he was a significant threat to the new incumbent. The campaign focused on Ben Jones's voting record. Jones supported President George H.W. Bush's plan to increase taxes and cut Medicare to balance the federal budget. In a Republican leaning district, it could help Jones to support a Republican president, but Republicans also tend to dislike tax increases and felt betrayed when Bush reneged on his "No new taxes" pledge. Linder himself believed that Bush's unpopularity could hurt him and other Republicans, "The president has changed the mood of the country. They've lost confidence in his ability to govern. That cynicism against a Republican president could work against a Republican" (Wolf 1990). But how would it impact a Democrat who sided with an unpopular Republican president?

Jones suggests that his career in entertainment could have been the decisive factor in his narrow victory that year, "Two days before the election, Linder ran a blistering negative TV ad that contained all the usual distortions. Political advertising uses all the techniques of show business. I'm sure that they thought it was too late for me to respond. But I had done a little show business myself" (Jones 2008, 227). Jones used his professional connections in the industry to put together a response within a few hours and his counterattack ad was on the air the next morning. Having been an actor in dozens of commercials Jones was well versed in the production of advertisements. His professional experience as an actor may have been critical to his success in politics because it gave him tools that may not be readily available to traditional politicians.

But there are other crucial factors. Incumbents have very substantial advantages in American elections (Stokes and Miller 1962; Erikson 1971; Herrnson 2008). Incumbents have very high reelection rates even when they aren't celebrities. Disentangling celebrity advantage and incumbent advantage will require further work, but it is likely that the two advantages work in tandem to help celebrity incumbents succeed. In addition, a president's party tends to lose seats in midterm elections (Campbell 1985; Abramowitz, Cover, and Norpoth 1986). This too could have been critical for Jones. Being a Democrat in a mid-term election with a Republican president can also explain Jones's victory.

In 1992 Democrats controlled both houses of the state legislature and the governorship in Georgia. Unfortunately, this was of no help to Ben Jones. Redistricting would turn Jones's 4th District into a Republican stronghold (McCarthy 1992b). Jones decided to run in Georgia's 10th Congressional District which contained a small portion of the old 4th District. At this point, however, Jones was mired in his own indignity. Jones had over-drafted his account seven times and was implicated in the House of Representatives banking scandal. The scandal was used against him by his Democratic primary opponent, state Senator Don Johnson, who was a well-known political figure in the district (McCarthy 1992a). After his defeat Jones returned to the entertainment industry. He proposed a situation comedy to television networks based on his political career but found employment as a radio talk show host (Cooper 1992; Yandel 1992).

In 1994 Georgia Democrats once again worried about not having a candidate to run against a Republican incumbent. They asked Jones to run in Georgia's 6th District against Newt Gingrich. Jones ran unopposed in the primary because Democrats viewed the district as a safe seat for Republicans (Alexander 1994a). Jones stood on principle and refused to take PAC contributions for the contest (Alexander 1994b). One of the advantages that celebrity political candidates have is large amounts of earned media. Jones was hoping this would be his lifeline,

I had figured on “free media” to get the word out. That is, the race itself would have a high enough profile that the press would be all over it. There was a lot of that, but it was not a good idea to get into a publicity contest with Newt Gingrich. He always had more cameras following him around than Madonna. (Jones 2008, 249)

In this case, Newt Gingrich was of such high profile as a politician that it eclipsed the high profile of Ben Jones. Jones said, “We had two chances to win: slim and none.... In the end, Gingrich beat me like a rented mule. He spent more money in the last two days than I spent during the entire campaign” (Jones 2008, 252). Jones understood the quixotic nature of his bid to unseat Gingrich but nevertheless felt compelled to re-enter the political fray.

Nineteen ninety-four was a watershed year for Republicans. Republicans took control of the chamber for the first time in nearly 40 years and Newt Gingrich was elected Speaker of the House. It was becoming increasingly difficult for Democrats to win in the South because of realignment (Smith III 1994). A midterm election with a Democratic president meant that Republicans were favored that year. The political environment was not a good one for the Democratic party and Jones lost because of his partisan affiliation.

Jones had purchased a home in Virginia and in 2002 found himself living in a district that was created to give incumbent Eric Cantor a safe seat. Once again, the Democrats couldn’t find an opponent and the election was set to be uncontested. Jones filed to run on the principle that voters should have choices. Cantor attacked Jones for having supported tax increases when he was in Congress. Jones once again refused to accept PAC donations and was easily defeated. (Hickey 2002; Jones 2008; Bell, Meyer, and Gaddie 2016). His partisan affiliation and his lack of financial resources could not be overcome by his now waning celebrity. Even a former congressperson couldn’t fight the historical trend. Democrats, even famous ones, are at a severe disadvantage in districts that are gerrymandered to protect Republican incumbents.

Conclusions

Although Hollywood is the epicenter of America’s entertainment industry and many celebrities have sought public office in California, Atlanta is becoming a popular destination for film producers. As governor, Jimmy Carter established the Georgia Film Office, a part of the Georgia Department of Economic Development (“Georgia’s Film History”). In 2021, the film and television industry spent \$4 billion in the state with 21 feature films using Georgia locations as a backdrop (“Georgia Film Records Blockbuster Year”). On Paramount’s streaming service Stacy Abrams, a candidate for governor in the state, made a guest appearance on *Star Trek: Discovery* (Mark 2022). Herschel Walker, the former NFL star, ran for the US Senate in Georgia. When it comes to celebrity politics, Georgia should not be ignored. In this southern state the entertainment industry is becoming a major political player and politicians maintain close ties with industry executives.

Ben Jones is a key figure in the intermingling of entertainment and politics. As a stage actor and television star Jones was comfortable in front of live audiences and skilled in front of television cameras. These are useful skills to possess for any would be politician. Some authors suggest that celebrities have a fundraising advantage when they seek political office, but this was not true for Ben Jones. Jones lost the fundraising battle in five of his six electoral contests. Celebrities that lose the fundraising battle have a high probability of losing and celebrities that win the fundraising battle have a high probability of winning. While celebrity candidates might have some advantages over traditional politicians the normal laws of politics still apply, and the political environment seems to outweigh the celebrity advantage.

In his first attempt Jones ran a competitive race despite being financially overmatched by the incumbent. His celebrity likely contributed to the better-than-expected showing. In his second attempt Jones got lucky. The

incumbent was indicted on criminal charges leading to a solid victory for the challenger. Jones's celebrity was not the reason for his victory. In his third attempt Jones combined celebrity advantage, plus incumbent advantage, plus negative presidential coattails to squeak out a very narrow victory in a Republican district. In other words, many factors had to coincide in just the right combination to allow a Democrat to win in a Republican leaning district. In his fourth attempt Jones lost a Democratic primary after being redistricted out of his own district and being mired in his own political scandal. In his fifth and sixth attempts Jones faced-off against Republican leaders in safely Republican districts and was expectedly crushed at the polls. Jones's celebrity could not overcome the partisan composition of the districts, nor the incumbent advantages of his opponents.

Jones joins a list of celebrity candidates who lost because they belonged to the minority party in a one party dominated district or state. Nancy Kulp (D), from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, lost in Pennsylvania's heavily Republican 9th congressional district. Ralph Waite (D), famous for his role on *The Waltons*, lost in California's heavily Republican 37th congressional district. Linda McMahon (R), famous from professional wrestling, lost two races for the US Senate in heavily Democratic Connecticut. Stacey Dash (R), from the movie *Clueless*, ran for Congress in California's heavily Democratic 44th district, but dropped out because it became clear her policy positions were far beyond anything the voters of the district would accept (Longoria 2022b).

Celebrities are not guaranteed a victory when they run for elected office. Jones was a southern Democrat in an era that saw the large-scale realignment of the South. The South was transitioning from solidly Democrat to solidly Republican (Bullock III and Rozell 2022). Jones was a Democrat swimming against the current and his many losses can be viewed as part of the Democratic party's increasing difficulties with southern white voters. His celebrity gave him name recognition and increased media attention which proved helpful in his campaigns, but alone were insufficient to secure electoral victories. Celebrity candidates are likely to lose if they are in an unfavorable political environment.

Should Americans be concerned about a "celebocracy" taking over our political system? Celebrities do have advantages that make them better than average candidates. However, many of the celebrity politicians who got elected appear to be flukes. Many of them won with less than 50% of the vote and benefited from a plurality rule system. Others, like Ben Jones, benefited from mistakes made by the opposition and might not have won otherwise. Many celebrities, including Ben Jones, lost their bids for public office. They represent the wrong party in a one party dominated district or state, they hold policy positions that aren't favored by the electorate, or they are never taken to be serious candidates and their campaigns are dismissed as publicity stunts.

Celebrities have as much right as anyone else to try to influence the political system. They can vote, become activists for favored causes, or run for office if they wish. Voters too can vote for whomever they prefer. They can vote for politicians with decades of experience or for newcomers with no political background. Ben Jones would agree that democracy is about giving voters choices and then allowing them to decide. Celebrity candidates may have many advantages, but they are not immune from the usual predictors of electoral success.

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