

I'M BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, AND I APPROVED THIS MESSAGE

By

RICHARD A. LEE

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Abstract

As Darrell West and John Orman explained in their 2003 book *Celebrity Politics*, celebrities make attractive political candidates. They have name recognition and financial resources; they are media savvy, and they are viewed as white knights untainted by politics.

But the skills needed to win a home-run title or star in a hit movie are not identical to those needed to conduct a successful political campaign.

In this paper, I explore how Bruce Springsteen's celebrity skills would translate to the political arena. I use knowledge and contacts I accrued while working in New Jersey as a political reporter, deputy communication director for two governors and public policy analyst. I also explore academic research on celebrity candidates, using West and Orman's book as a foundation.

Although Springsteen has indicated he has no interest in public office, we live in an era when a reality television personality became president of the United States. Thus, we have learned never to say never.

Introduction

The list of celebrities who have held public office in the United States is a long one. Athletes such as Bill Bradley, Jim Bunning and Jack Kemp; actors such as Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Fred Thompson, and entertainers such as Sonny Bono, John Hall and Martha Reeves are among the many who have served in elected positions.

Regardless of one's political ideology, Donald Trump's election to the presidency in 2016 is one of the most remarkable achievements in the world of politics by a celebrity. Although voters elected a former actor, Ronald Reagan, to the White House in 1980, Reagan brought political and government experience to the Oval Office, having served as governor of California for eight years. Trump never held elected office prior to his election as president. Some political experts posit that Trump's election opens the door for other celebrities to win election to public office. Others argue that Trump's performance as president will make voters wary of electing celebrities with no public policy experience.

Bruce Springsteen, one of the nation's most popular celebrities, is unlikely to seek public office. In fact, when *Variety* reporter Jem Aswad (2017) asked Springsteen if he ever is tempted to run for governor of New Jersey, he replied: "No. I would have no business in politics. I'm just not interested in policy-making enough."

Were he to toss his hat into the ring, Springsteen would be a formidable candidate. His resume matches up well with the credentials delineated by political scientist Darrell M. West (2003) in an article about celebrity politicians. According to West, "...celebrities are perfectly matched for the contemporary political era because of their wealth and fundraising capacity."

Name recognition and the ability to use television and other media also make celebrities attractive candidates, as does a trait West (2003) describes as the "white knight" phenomenon:

“In an era of extensive citizen cynicism about conventional politicians, voters often see celebrities as white knights from outside the political process who are too rich to be bought and thereby deserving of trust from the electorate,” he explained. “This gives celebrities a kind of credibility that normal politicians do not have.”

Measured by any and all of these standards, Springsteen emerges as a viable candidate for public office.

This paper further explores a hypothetical Springsteen candidacy through email and telephone interviews with political experts who have long been professionally involved with campaigns and elections, as well as individuals with experience in the music industry.

Methodology

The goal of the research was to determine Bruce Springsteen's strength as a political candidate. To learn the answer, I reached out to 35 individuals with political and music expertise. The group consisted of people with whom I had worked and/or built professional and personal relationships during my 43-year career, which has included jobs as a political journalist, rock'n'roll reporter, government communications official, campaign worker, public policy analyst and journalism professor. The group I contacted included individuals with experience similar to me. Several had backgrounds as journalists, and many had worked on political campaigns – some for Democratic candidates, others for Republicans. The group's collective experience included work in elected office, the New Jersey state cabinet,

polling, a presidential administration and presidential history. One member of the group has had a personal and professional relationship with Bruce Springsteen since 1972.

I drafted five questions and emailed them to the group. The email gave the recipients the option of either replying directly to the questions or simply sharing their thoughts on a Springsteen candidacy. I promised that I would not disclose individual names, but rather review and analyze all of the responses and then develop my own conclusions. I promised anonymity because, in my previous research on politics, individuals had been more forthcoming if their names and/or places of business were not associated with “What If?” topics, such as a hypothetical Springsteen candidacy.

The five questions were:

Q1: What would Bruce Springsteen's strong points be were he to run for elected office? His weak points?

Q2: If he were to enter politics, what level office would you recommend that he run for?

Q3: Would his current age be a negative factor?

Q4: Do you think he could be harmed by opposition research? Or is his life already an open book due to his celebrity status?

Q5: From your knowledge of Bruce Springsteen, is there an event or incident that stands out in your mind that indicates he would be a good candidate for public office?

A bad candidate?

Seventeen people responded to my emails. Their responses generated additional questions on the impact of the Trump presidency, the nature of celebrity and other topics. I conducted telephone interviews to explore these issues.

I also attempted to speak with three individuals who had careers in the music industry and later held political office – Jerry Butler, the original lead singer of the Impressions who has served as a Cook County, Illinois, Commissioner since 1985; John Hall, the leader of Orleans and a successful solo artist who served two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, and Motown legend Martha Reeves, who was a member of the Detroit City Council from 2005 to 2009. Unfortunately, none of the three responded to me inquiries, but I did find valuable information in *Still the One: A Rock'n'Roll Journey to Congress and Back*, a 2016 book authored by Hall about his careers in the entertainment and political arenas.

Several books and journal articles on politics and celebrity also proved helpful, most notably *Celebrity Politics* by Darrell M. West and John Orman.

Lastly, to obtain a different perspective on the issue, I conducted brief discussions with two sets of students. I shared my five questions with students in a sophomore level journalism course I teach and asked for their responses. I also conducted an informal survey with a group of high school seniors. Each student was asked to choose a celebrity he or she would most like to see as the nation's next president. Unlike the group of experts I reached out to, the students in both groups had little if any political expertise. They also were considerably younger than members of that group. While neither activity was statistically valid, the two discussions did provide anecdotal material for my study.

Results

Q1: What would Bruce Springsteen's strong points be were he to run for elected office?

His weak points.

Respondents most often cited Springsteen's ability to identify with working class families as a strong point for his candidacy. Eleven of the 17 people who responded touched upon this quality.

"Bruce has demonstrated through his career an ability to understand and connect with blue collar workers; that's a strength," said one respondent.

"I would argue Bruce's strongpoints would be that he understands the working man, his needs, his loneliness, his anxieties," said another.

Name recognition and money -- two of the advantages cited by West in his article on celebrity candidates -- were the second most-mentioned items. Each was listed as a strong point five times. Two items that result from name recognition and money -- the ability to attract large crowds and positive media coverage -- also were listed.

"He would throw a great rally," a political consultant said. "He knows how to be on message and how to market himself."

Other strong points included Springsteen's speaking ability, his intelligence, his authenticity and the fact that he would not be beholden to special interests.

"His strong point is obviously his heart," said one respondent. "He genuinely cares for people as evidenced by his constant fundraising for the food pantries and soup kitchens and his support of the drives. I think he is genuinely intelligent and he has a great sense of humor."

Another respondent spoke directly to an advantage Springsteen would have in the current political environment.

"I think we have learned the value of authenticity and candor in the past few election cycles, and Springsteen practically defines those qualities," he said.

On weak points, several experts pointed to his lack of political and government experience.

“Donald Trump cashed in on his celebrity and regardless of whether anyone agrees with his positions on various issues, there can be no dispute that the chaos we are seeing in his administration is due, in large part, to his lack of political or governmental experience,” one respondent noted. “Springsteen suffers from those same deficits.”

A few people said Springsteen’s lack of experience could be an advantage, serving as the “white knight” quality that West described. And one respondent suggested that experience no longer is high on voters’ priorities for candidates. “Trump -- and to a lesser extent Obama -- have proven that the American electorate does not value experience, and it is no longer a prerequisite for running for president,” he said.

Some respondents noted that Springsteen appears to have little interest in running for public office and has said so in published interviews. Those comments could come back to haunt him were he to change his mind.

Another concern expressed by several people was the need to compromise and court the favor of party leaders in order to succeed in politics. Comments included:

- “I think it's pretty clear Bruce would be unwilling to make the moral and ethical compromises often thought necessary to succeed in politics.”
- “Would he be willing to do the chicken dinners, the phone calls/meet and greets with county committee people?”
- “There is a skill set that successful public servants have: they play politics well, know how to horse-trade and understand how government works. It really does take more than following politics and having an opinion.”

- “Government is nuanced and it looks much different from the outside. The ability to work within the system and with different branches increases the likelihood of getting things done as opposed to simply distributing soundbites.”

On the other hand, one veteran political consultant scoffed at the notion that Springsteen would need to curry favor with political powerbrokers such as county chairs who determine who gets the party's endorsement (known as “the line”) in their counties. “He doesn't need the county line; he doesn't need to kiss the ring,” the consultant said. “They would be chasing him.” He also said Springsteen would be such a strong candidate that he could win without having the county lines.

Likewise, in a potential scenario in which Sen. Cory Booker would leave the Senate to run on a national ticket and create a vacancy coveted by Southern New Jersey Democrats who would back Rep. Donald Norcross, “Springsteen would clean his (Norcross') clock,” according to a respondent with a long history in Garden State politics.

A few people voiced concerns that Springsteen is too far to the left ideologically to gain broad support from the electorate. “Despite a fan base that spans the political spectrum, Bruce may be more left than is acceptable to many voters—and specifically more left than some hardcore fans willing to accept,” said one respondent.

Ironically, the item that emerged as Springsteen's strongest asset – his ability to identify with working class families – also was viewed as a weak point because his wealth and current lifestyle.

“His Colts Neck/Rumson lifestyle may not match the blue collar persona he has cultivated -- definite fodder for an opponent,” one respondent warned.

“He is a contradiction,” added another. “His public persona is for the working man, but he lives as an elitist in Rumson and sends his kids to private schools.”

Q2: If he were to enter politics, what level office would you recommend that he run for?

Most respondents recommended a federal office because of Springsteen’s fame and popularity .As one person put it: “There is only one office for Bruce, and it’s between 1599 and 1601 Pennsylvania Ave in Washington, DC.”

One man with experience in the executive branch of government suggested that Springsteen would fare better in the House of Representative or the U.S. Senate.

“I don’t think anyone should run for elected office in the executive branch of government because there really is a skill set and an experience level that is required although it is less necessary for the legislative branch where they are less obvious,” he said.

Others said Springsteen might be frustrated in a legislative branch, where he is just one of many lawmakers, and not the “Boss” he has been with the E Street Band.

A few respondents felt Springsteen would be more at home as a mayor since he could connect more directly with constituents and avoid the type of compromises that often take place in higher levels of government. One person noted that running for a higher office would subject Springsteen to scrutiny on hot button issues that could weaken his candidacy.

And another respondent suggested serving as an ambassador would be a good way to transition to a public role.

Q3: Would his current age be a negative factor?

Response to this question were unanimous. None of the respondents expressed reservations with Springsteen’s age (68). Many referenced the 2016 presidential race, in which a 70-year-old candidate defeated a 69-year-old.

Were he to run for office in New Jersey, Garden State voters already have indicated age is not a major concern. A poll conducted by the Monmouth University Polling Institute found that only 28 percent of New Jersey voters felt 72 is too old to be an effective president. Voters were split when asked whether 84 is too old to be an effective U.S. Senator. Forty-six percent agreed; 45 percent disagreed. Nevertheless, New Jersey voters did elect an 84-year-old, Frank R. Lautenberg, to the U.S. Senate by an overwhelming margin of 14 percentage points in 2008.

Q4: Do you think he could be harmed by opposition research? Or is his life already an open book due to his celebrity status?

Respondents did express some concerns, but by and large they did not foresee opposition research as a major problem for a Springsteen candidacy. The general consensus was that opposition research might unearth some troublesome issues, but it would take something egregious to derail his path to victory.

Rumors of affairs were cited by several people, but they acknowledged that he might get a pass – in part because of the how the public perceives the lifestyle of a rock star, but also because of Trump's success to win the presidency despite his personal actions.

Comments included:

- “Unfortunately, we have learned the hard way that celebrity status gives you a free pass insofar as past naughty behavior outside of public life.’
- “Perhaps a few years ago, I would say he could be harmed by opposition research, but if Trump could get elected with all the negative stuff out there about him, I think Springsteen could too.”

- “Part of me thinks Trump has ended morality and ethics as considerations in politics forever.”

Not every respondent felt Springsteen would be immune from the damage of opposition research.

“The fact that he is a public figure who’s been extensively written about does not mean there aren’t any unknown skeletons in his closet,” said one individual. Another warned that his “voluminous on-the-record statements and interviews for the past 40 years are readily accessible for researchers and for campaigns to take out of context.” As an example of what could happen, John Hall, the former leader the band Orleans who served two terms in Congress later, was the target of a negative ad about illegal drug use. Even though Hall had gone public with his drug addiction and successful recovery, his opponent ran an internet ad suggesting that he was not fit to serve in Congress.

One respondent explained how Springsteen would face a different type of scrutiny as a candidate.

“I think it is one thing to know a lot about a person and a different thing to have life events polled to see what resonates most with voters and then have that event consistently discussed with poll tested messaging that gets poured into paid media so it is the focus of every cycle,” he said.

“Even in his Broadway autobiography, there are things people know that are simply not discussed -- the Hollywood marriage and breakup with the band, his self-disclosed battles with depression,” he added. “And he has done a remarkable job of hiding his kids from the public eye other than his daughter's equestrian activities. Running for office has the potential to shatter hopes of anonymity for his family.

Facing opposition research for the first time would be “a dangerous prospect for an icon,” according to one respondent, who suggested researchers would delve into questions such as: Has he ever had a favor at the municipal building? A questionable zoning permit, a ticket quashed? For him or any of his kids or other family? The band? He owns a farm – what’s the tax break on the farmland assessment?

“The BuzzFeed/People Magazine/TMZ crowd would descend on New Jersey and they might find things that are not pretty,” she added. “In a career as long as his, surely there have been disputes, and anyone with an ax to grind would have a reason to come forward. I think this is his number one problem as a candidate.”

Q5: From your knowledge of Bruce Springsteen, is there an event or incident that stands out in your mind that indicates he would be a good candidate for public office?

A bad candidate?

This question generated only a few responses, and the items cited varied widely. However, a common theme did tie the comments together. They all describe characteristics and abilities that Americans expect in their leaders. They also describe the skillset needed to win elections.

- “When Bruce put out *The Rising* it struck a chord all over the world. He seized the moment and helped the healing of America. He captured the mood of America.”
- “His advocacy for Asbury Park. In his concerts, he would make a personal appeal to folks to visit Asbury Park and contribute in some way to saving it from the throes of poverty. Look at the city today. Asbury Park’s resurgence is almost a metaphor to what he has done for the human spirit with his music and performances.”

- “His behavior during the terrible storm (Hurricane Sandy) is how I expect my president or senator to act.”
- “Even though his efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, Springsteen's efforts to build the Vote for Change concerts in 2004 showed organizing and fundraising skills that would serve him well in politics.”
- “Probably a plus that even when he does political events, endorses candidates, etc., he speaks carefully without quotes that he could be slammed for, far from a firebrand.”

Student Discussions

The discussion with the college-level journalism class was notable because consistency was the quality students mentioned immediately when asked about Springsteen's strong points as a candidate. It was consistency of message – not the message itself.

Additionally, name recognition and fiscal resources were not mentioned at all. The informal survey with the high school students showed that they preferred entertainers as possible presidents rather than athletes, authors, business leaders and other types of celebrities.

Among the celebrities the students chose were Morgan Freeman, Joe Gatto, Kevin Hart, Anne Hathaway, Angelina Jolie, Travis Scott and Justin Timberlake.

Discussion

What makes Springsteen an attractive candidate has little to do with politics. As one respondent put it: “Bruce is a folk hero. Americans love electing heroes.”

Another found a sign for political success in Springsteen's concerts.

“Bruce can unite people, a fact clear to anyone who's ever seen the diverse crowds that gather for his marathon-length concerts,” he said. “They're cross-generational. That's

mostly because the music is good, but also partly because of who Bruce is: an entertainer, a preacher, and a source of comfort. These would all translate very well to a political career.”

As I reviewed and analyzed the email responses, phone interviews, readings and other facets of my research, one item the clearest items to emerge was that Springsteen is unlike any previous celebrity politician. He is more than a celebrity; he is a mega-celebrity with international appeal and a career that exceeds 40 years. One respondent said he may have been a bigger celebrity than Donald Trump prior to Trump's election as president. His unique status gives him an advantage over other celebrity candidates.

“I have a theory that trust in an already established celebrity is harder to shake than trust in or support for one who's coming up in politics and needs you on their side,” said one respondent. “It's why our current president seems nearly indestructible despite dozens of scandals and alleged crimes.”

Springsteen also is unlike other musical artists who have forayed into politics. Former Congressman John Hall perhaps is the best known example of a rock star was elected to public office, but he traveled a traditional route to Congress. Interest in local issues prompted him to run for – and win – a seat on the Ulster (N.Y.) County Legislature. He also served on the Saugerties Board of Education before running for Congress.

Springsteen's autobiographical theater show, *Springsteen on Broadway*, also sheds light on his ability to succeed in politics. A successful politician must be adept at delivering the same stump speech night after night. Although the words are the same, the candidate must make them sound fresh, and they must be delivered with enthusiasm. The dialogue in *Springsteen on Broadway* is virtually identical every night, yet Springsteen manages to make

each show entertaining, engaging and impactful – just as successful candidates do out on the stump.

In other facets of politics, Springsteen is untested. Respondents asked how he would do in a debate and whether he would release his tax returns?

“How does Springsteen play with millennials and the generation after them?” asked one respondent. “I think we’re going to see them more involved so Springsteen’s appeal to that demographic may not be as strong as it is to voters who have grown up listening to his music.”

Springsteen the candidate would need a different media skillset than Springsteen the rock star. As other celebrities have discovered, they can no longer decide when and where – and under what conditions -- they make themselves accessible to the media. Country music star Garth Brooks, a former college baseball player, learned the difference when he spent several weeks as a member of the New York Mets during spring training in 2000.

“There are no reporters in Brooks' dressing room when he goes from town to town on a concert tour,” *New York Times* reporter Tyler Kepner (2000) wrote about the experience. “Fans do not know where he stays on the road. He gives interviews when he has a specific reason to do so.”

"If I don't want to be got to, no one can touch me," Brooks told Kepner "If I want to blow up and I want to throw a chair through a Coke machine, I can do it and nobody would ever know about it."

Not only does the media environment differ, but celebrities, especially someone such as Springsteen who is the leader of his band, are likely to become frustrated in the world of politics and government.

“Once in office, at any level, the newly elected discover how difficult it is to affect the status quo,” Hall, the former rock star and congressman, wrote about his time in public office in his book (2006, p. vii).

In the book, Hall also warned that celebrities who enter office with positive outlooks will need to work hard to maintain their optimism. That optimistic attitude must be accompanied by a thick skin and a deep reservoir of confidence to survive the setbacks, ridicule, and hostile opposition sprung upon the bold from the amorphous ‘other side,’ ” he said (2016, p. viii).

The responses also yielded information that went beyond Springsteen’s viability as a candidate to speculation about how his candidacy would impact the nation’s political landscape. Several respondents felt a Springsteen candidacy would bring disenchanted Democrats back to the party.

“Obviously, Bruce would run as a run as a liberal Democrat, so bringing in those voters who are no longer part of the liberal coalition would be huge,” said one respondent.

“He would make a good candidate because of his ability to tell stories and connect with people, including and the blue collar folks the Democrats need to get back in their corner,” said another.

Springsteen also would attract Democrats who have strayed from the party for other reasons, according to a journalist who writes about politics nationally.

“The thing I think is most interesting about Springsteen is that I suspect there's a big overlap between his fan base and Trump's,” he said. “Many members of his blue collar base may be ancestral Democrats and union members but voted for Trump. So someone in his

position may be key to bringing the white working class back to the Democrats, focusing on economic issues rather than social and cultural ones.”

One individual noted that Springsteen’s attractiveness as a candidate would be enhanced by his ability to convince certain groups of Republican voters to support him (assuming he would run as a Democrat).

Lastly, a few people argued that if Springsteen’s goal is to effect positive change in public policy, he may be more effective doing what he does, rather than by entering the political arena. One public policy analyst said he views Springsteen as a lodestar, the term used for a star that guides the course of a ship.

John Hall, who as a musician was active in anti-nuclear efforts and educational and environmental issues, said people discouraged him from running for public office for similar reasons. U.S. Sen. Ed Markey, who was a congressman when Hall was pondering a run for Congress, told him: “Don’t do it. You are reaching way more people through your music, writing songs with environmental or political lyrics.” (2016, p. 62).

That message may very well hold true for Springsteen too, and if it does, then it will turn out that he wasn’t “born to run” after all.



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Richard A. Lee, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
St. Bonaventure University
Jandoli School of Communication
rlee@sbu.edu
716-375-2563 (office)
@richleeonline
richleeonline.wordpress.com