

Research Statement: Jean Clipperton

I am a political scientist and computational social scientist who studies how individuals create and interpret meaning through language, emotion, and culture, particularly in political contexts. My research bridges political communication, political behavior, sociology, psychology, and institutional analysis. At the center of my research is a core question: how do individuals and institutions use language to create shared understanding and construct identity?

My interest in political science began with an interest in what Douglass North calls 'the rules of the game' and this continues to drive my research focus (North 1990). I pursue this through four ongoing research areas, each providing a different perspective on the construction of meaning and identity. One explores how artists use language to communicate emotion and meaning, offering insight into the cultural conventions that shape public expression. A second examines how political candidates use music, including in playlists and at rallies, to cultivate their image, communicate with voters, and build political brands. A third considers musical identity, how listeners identify with genre and how music matters for daily life. A fourth explores fandom and its connection to political rallies. Across all my projects, I examine how shared meaning shapes political belonging, identity, and expression, connecting to ideas from North and Putnam (Putnam 2000; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994).

Institutions and Status

In an earlier project, I investigated how status and prestige are constructed and operate within the discipline of political science (Alter et al. 2020). We brought together data on publications, service, and departmental websites to create a comprehensive dataset of scholars and how they served the discipline of Political Science. We found distinctions between men and women in the amount of service they undertook and how different institutional structures for award selection (centralized vs decentralized) predicted gender balance across nominations. We contributed to a broader discussion on what it means to be in service to the discipline and how service may present a tradeoff with publications and research productivity.

Research on Music and Meaning

My research on music began with a close study of music as a site of emotional meaning. My recent piece in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* examines the emotional language in Taylor Swift's discography and its evolution over eras of her musical career (Clipperton and Bitsikokos 2025). We identify patterns in how artists use cultural and emotional signals to build narrative, identity, and connection. In this article, we develop a novel methodological approach, bringing together lexicon-based analysis with unsupervised machine learning to reduce the dimensionality of lyrical data. We reduced the data to two dimensions using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), thus preserving interpretability. We find that within

Swift's catalogue, there is an emotional dimension and a more linguistic dimension within which Swift's albums have evolved and shifted. This project offered both a substantive and methodological contribution: substantively, building on prior discourse around pop musicians and how they construct their lyrics, and methodologically in a multifaceted larger-scale approach to musical analysis.

In a working paper, we expand the data to include pop songs from the Billboard Hot 100, finding that the dimensional patterns we observed in Swift's work also apply more broadly to pop music. Through this, we find that our approach is suitable for multiple artists and can viably reduce dimensionality of large-scale data while maintaining interpretability of results, testing PCA against k-means clustering and UMAP. Our contribution is a distinct method that blends computational approaches, unsupervised machine learning and text analysis, with interpretable methods, yielding an easily applicable and replicable method for analyzing text. I am co-authoring this paper with a former student and we are revising this article to send out for review during this academic year.

Political Campaigns and Music at Rallies

My writing sample explores the use of pop music in political campaigns, specifically campaign rallies in 2016, 2020, and 2024. As political candidates are increasingly using music at rallies and releasing or revealing playlists, placing their selected songs into my framework, built upon my prior work on musical lyrics, can provide the opportunity to study how they construct their public image, build political brands, and signal values to voters.

This project builds on work by Grossmann and Hopkins, regarding party-level differences and how these lead candidates to conduct their campaigns differently (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015). Grossmann and Hopkins's *Asymmetric Politics* argues that the different constituents and party identities lead the Republican party candidates to focus on identity-focused messaging while the multifaceted nature of Democratic party supporters leads to more group-focused messaging. I find that this is borne out in their playlists as well: Republican campaign songs tend to be more nostalgic in their approach, referencing the past and incorporating mentions of gender. Democratic campaign songs, in contrast, are grounded more in the present and future with an emphasis on care and support.

As Grossmann and Hopkins focus primarily on party-level differences, I also incorporate work by Mansbridge (Mansbridge 2003, 2011) to explain within party variation. While party-level explanations are able to account for why we might observe the grouping of Democratic and Republican playlists thematically/lyrically, they cannot explain why Bernie Sanders's 2016 campaign playlist was so similar to Trump's playlists. To address variability across candidates, I

incorporate an understanding of candidate motivations and perceptions regarding their 'role' as a representative. For example, both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump portrayed themselves as iconoclastic candidates, apart from the 'machinery' of their parties. Leveraging Mansbridge's (Mansbridge 2003, 2011) idea of gyroscopic candidates helps explain these different approaches to campaigning – gyroscopic candidates are those who are at the center of the 'offering': they themselves are the product and investment.

The area of campaign music has not been studied computationally at scale. Methodologically, I incorporate text analysis measures, including lexicon-based LIWC with unsupervised machine learning methods (Principal Component Analysis) on song lyrics. The goal is to provide a rigorous-yet-easily-interpretable approach to studying text. There are other methodological approaches, such as word embeddings, that one might use for this study, but lexicon measures are appropriate for the scope and format of the text (short lyrical statements with repetition). A technical appendix in the paper lays out in greater detail how different approaches, such as supervised classification models and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) would not be appropriate. Across machine learning methods, there are alternatives for dimension reduction, such as UMAP, but my methodological approach prioritizes interpretability: results are presented visually in a two-dimensional space allowing for clear labeling of candidates.

Musical Identity

The next wave of the General Social Survey (GSS) accepted my submissions for questions regarding music listening and preferences. This project builds on how musical identity matters for listeners and connects to the political candidate project as it provides context for different findings that emerged: candidate age seemed to be important for the kinds of music and musical themes that candidates used in their messaging (Elizabeth Warren and Hillary Clinton had much more similar playlists than either did with Kamala Harris, for example).

Donald Trump's and Kamala Harris's campaigns were particularly interesting when contrasting their musical selections: Trump famously played not only "God Bless the USA" by Lee Greenwood many times, but also "Memory" from *Cats* (the Broadway musical) while Harris favored artists like Beyoncé (the song "Freedom" was Harris's campaign song) and Charli XCX. It may be that candidates choose songs that mirror their branding, preferences, or perceived preferences of constituents.

My accepted questions, included in this next wave, focus on listening patterns and how important music is to listeners as part of their identity. I use this project as an opportunity to understand how candidates' musical preferences may be a product of their own era just as much or more than a desire to appeal to crowds. My project brings together elite-level data on

what candidates play *and* population-level data on what listeners value, which can help explain how music functions within political campaigns.

Fandom

Third places provide spaces beyond home and work for socialization and community building (Oldenburg 1999; Oldenburg and Brissett 1982). Fandom, often associated with sports teams and pop stars, can itself function as a third place through the opportunity for shared experiences that creates linkages across location and fosters social capital. Political campaign rallies and the online communities that form around them are two such sites.

Political fandom has been particularly relevant within US politics, as in the case of Donald Trump: the atmosphere of political rallies with merch, music, and in-group names and signaling provides an opportunity to explore the notion of fandom more closely from a political lens. For this project, I compare artifacts from political campaigns and messaging, including Trump's red MAGA hats and Kamala Harris's 'Brat summer' messaging to Reddit commentary about them. Scraping comments from these subreddits allows for an in-depth analysis of discussion and community formation through keyness and topic modeling. This will shed light on how key terms matter, the depth and richness of conversation (such as oft-repeated memes and slogans, like Trump's 'Let's Go Brandon' as a derogatory statement against Joe Biden), the emergence of a shared language, and participation in events beyond the digital realm.

The idea of fandom as all-encompassing is not new (Elliott 2021; Jindra 1994; McCloud 2003), nor is its influence shaping identity (Groene and Hettinger 2016). Most conversations around fandom focus upon either the spaces fans occupy or the culture of the fandom community, and neither captures the mechanism that makes fandom self-reinforcing. Fandom creates structure that persists: fans participate in a shared community that rewards expertise and engagement, through official means (karma, points) or unofficial ones (reputation, merch), and that accumulated standing deepens the connection that produced it. I aim to establish and analyze that self-reinforcing mechanism in a political context, where the same fandom operates both at rallies and online.

Plan and Future Research

At the core of my research agenda is a question about the intersection of identity and culture, using music and politics as a means to understand it. In my book project, I will move from general campaign trends to individual candidates, including Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Kamala Harris. I am continuing to expand data from Trax on the Trail using both traditional (listening and Shazam) and machine-learning tools (ACRCloud) to incorporate additional rallies by political candidates in 2020 and 2024 and include song lyrics.

I plan to explore lyrical and sonic elements across candidates, in part to answer why “Uptown Funk” has been popular with both sides across elections. A second theme is how age, race, and gender connect to campaigns: Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, and Beto O’Rourke were all younger than other candidates and had music much farther away from the average Democratic candidate’s songs in recent presidential elections. This finding, coupled with results from the musical identity project, will help shed light on why candidates choose music for campaign events and how the music selection is perceived. I will also examine how a song’s chart performance, its musical features (such as tempo and timbre), and its lyrical substance relate to one another, building on my working paper. The book will conclude with how presidential campaign music informs other political candidates, such as the NYC mayoral campaign of Zohran Mamdani, where music played a central role.

Later work will expand beyond the US case. Music is also important in Latin American elections and social movements, such as the genre of protest songs, *nueva canción*. Future projects will continue to build on my findings in the US to explore how political candidates and campaigns in Central and South America incorporate music.

Methodological focus and background

My focus is on theory-driven computational methods. I have a broad background and range of skills including more traditional statistical inference in the Gender and Status project, survey design in the GSS music questions, and text analysis combining lexicon-based measures with machine learning: principal component analysis in the Taylor Swift and campaign projects, and transformer-based classification (DistilRoBERTa) in the campaign project. I also use scraping tools in the data gathering process, for example in gathering comments on subreddits, and audio recognition tools (ACRCloud) for gathering music content in campaign rallies.

Across three projects I have developed and validated a methodological pipeline to analyze lyrical text: a single artist’s discography, top Billboard hits, and campaign rally playlists. The contexts are very different and yet my core methodological approach is consistently able to offer interpretable results and insights.

I prioritize interpretability and suitability: word embeddings offer richness in longer text, but a lexicon-based approach is better for the repetitive nature of song lyrics. Similarly, a method like UMAP can also offer dimension reduction, but it lacks the ease of understanding and clear interpretable dimensions that PCA offers. In future work, I will analyze this tension explicitly: the conditions under which interpretability is worth the cost of forgoing more sophisticated methods. As methodological approaches become more capable and accessible, my work is

focused upon leveraging these capabilities while retaining interpretability and fidelity to substantive research. My aim is for the question to drive the method.

References

- Alter, Karen J., Jean Clipperton, Emily Schraudenbach, and Laura Rozier. 2020. "Gender and Status in American Political Science: Who Determines Whether a Scholar Is Noteworthy?" *Perspectives on Politics* 18(4): 1048–67. doi:10.1017/S1537592719004985.
- Clipperton, Jean, and Loizos Bitsikokos. 2025. "You Do Not Get to Tell Me about Sad: Swiftian Saudade in Taylor Swift's Lyrics." *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*. doi:10.1037/aca0000810.
- Elliott, Michael A. 2021. "Fandom as Religion: A Social-Scientific Assessment." *Journal of Fandom Studies* 9(2): 107–22. doi:10.1386/jfs_00036_1.
- Groene, Samantha L., and Vanessa E. Hettinger. 2016. "Are You 'Fan' Enough? The Role of Identity in Media Fandoms." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 5(4): 324–39. doi:10.1037/ppm0000080.
- Grossmann, Matt, and David A. Hopkins. 2015. "Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 13(1): 119–39. doi:10.1017/S1537592714003168.
- Grossmann, Matt, and David A. Hopkins. 2016. *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*. Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190626594.001.0001.
- Jindra, Michael. 1994. "Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon." *Sociology of Religion* 55(1): 27–51. doi:10.2307/3712174.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 2003. "Rethinking Representation." *American Political Science Review* 97(4): 515–28. doi:10.1017/S0003055403000856.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 2011. "Clarifying the Concept of Representation." *American Political Science Review* 105(3): 621–30. doi:10.1017/S0003055411000189.
- McCloud, Sean. 2003. "Popular Culture Fandoms, the Boundaries of Religious Studies, and the Project of the Self." *Culture and Religion* 4(2): 187–206. doi:10.1080/01438830032000135674.
- North, Douglass Cecil. 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511808678.
- Oldenburg, Ray. 1999. *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Hachette Books.
- Oldenburg, Ray, and Dennis Brissett. 1982. "The Third Place." *Qualitative Sociology* 5(4): 265–84. doi:10.1007/BF00986754.

Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster.

Putnam, Robert D., Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. 1994. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.

doi:10.2307/j.ctt7s8r7.