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From brat summer to Swift fall

Taylor Swift is stirring up the election campaign in the US. But how much influence do celebrities really have on the ballot box?

This summer witnessed one of the most impressive ascents in US politics. After Joe Biden's TV debate debacle, his Vice President, Kamala Harris, was nominated Democratic presidential candidate. In no time at all, she managed to dig the US Democrats out of a hole, overtake Donald Trump in the polls and give new hope to people who had feared the worst. At the same time, the United States and the whole world experienced a so-called 'brat summer', which may have played a not inconsiderable role in Harris' ascendance. But is there a chance that the brat summer will be followed by a Swift autumn?

After a long silence, the pop goddess and self-styled 'childless cat lady' Taylor Swift has now involved herself in the US election campaign. Descending from the upper spheres of the pop firmament, her Instagram post was almost like a prophecy. Immediately after the TV duel between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, Swift announced that she will be voting for Vice President Kamala Harris in the presidential election in November, calling on her fans to register to vote. The singer has broken one record after another with her music and tours. The world is at her feet. Her every utterance is devoured by millions of fans, as her latest deed shows. According to CNN, within two days, 52 222 people registered via the link Swift shared. Some 144 243 have also confirmed their registration status. Even in the contested 'swing states', which both Trump and Vice President Harris want to win, thousands of people supposedly answered the call. At first glance, it appears that Swift's popularity might be a gamechanger, and just in time, as Trump was already catching up and the brat summer is losing momentum. Can the Swift boost deliver Kamala Harris the presidency?

The brat phenomenon

Naturally Swift's announcement, as so often in an increasingly polarised America, provoked the first dissenting voices on social media. Videos

were shared by former fans burning their albums and fan merchandise out of disappointment with Swift's post. Trump described the singer as a 'very liberal person' and said that she would pay the price commercially. Later he wrote on his Truth Social platform in capital letters: 'I hate Taylor Swift'. What is interesting in Swift's case is *when* she decided to come out for the Democrats. It was no secret that Swift votes Democrat and, in the past, has even spoken out for Joe Biden, among others. For a while, it seemed odd that she hadn't done the same for Harris. Was it a tactical move to give the Democrats a kind of pop boost, just as the brat summer had propelled the Vice President's nomination.

To recap, 32-year-old British singer Charli XCX's album 'brat' provided the soundtrack for the summer. Her songs managed to capture the spirit of Generation Z. Many of them prided themselves on being 'brats', in the sense of cheeky, disorganised, aware of their own imperfections and celebrating it. 'Brat' became a new form of girl power, far from the aesthetic of the 'clean girl' who is always perfectly well groomed. The brat wave rolled unstoppably through social media and overwhelmed it, until finally even the Democrats couldn't help but ride the wave. The catalyst was a tweet by the mother of the movement herself. 'Kamala IS brat', Charli XCX wrote, thereby adopting the US Vice President into the movement. The Democrats' social media team used this shrewdly, changing the background of the official Harris campaign's X page to a neon-coloured brat green. TikToks by the Harris campaign, accompanied by music from Charli's new album, spread like wildfire. The brat girl's feminist approach chimed perfectly with the presidential candidate, who occasionally laughs too loud, but also with her role as prosecutor who will bring Trump to justice. Harris' presidential campaign got off to a flying start, rapidly overtaking Trump in the polls.

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Although many political TikTok campaigns fail or come across as awkward, Harris' approach was a hit. In contrast to some politicians in Europe, Harris was able to reach young people with humour and originality. But while the campaign has gained traction on social media, the question arises of whether she will be able to reach a broader audience. Biden's election four years ago showed the importance of mobilising young people for election victory. Some 65 per cent of young people between 18 to 24 years of age voted for him. This year, 41 million US-Americans belonging to Generation Z are entitled to vote. According to recent

polls around half of the 18- to 29-year-olds will vote for Harris, but only a third for Donald Trump. This is a definite plus, but not at the level of 2020, when Biden was elected. In any case, such polls need to be approached with caution. The European elections in Germany or even the elections in the east of the country show that young people, despite assumptions to the contrary, are up for voting for right-wing parties. It cannot be ruled out that in the end, young people will opt for Trump's macho masculine approach rather than the Democrats' 'brat' campaign. It is also questionable whether having Generation Z on their side will suffice to win the Democrats the election. As summer's lease expires, the brat campaign is losing momentum, and the presidential elections are drawing ever closer.

It would be a mistake to think that the Democrats' latest success means the election is in the bag. The overall picture is certainly much more complex. It's unlikely that Harris' campaign has yet reached the frustrated voters, the angry and the disillusioned, for example, in the industrial Rust Belt or in the swing states. Those US citizens who feel that their voices are not being heard and are averse to elites are unlikely to have much time for 'brats'. J.D. Vance, who grew up in the Rust Belt and portrays himself as part of the white working class in the US, resonates more there with his success story.

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A *New York Times* analysis throws some light on another fact. Trump's speeches are peppered with references to 'jobs', 'taxes', 'the economy' and 'inflation', while Harris has opted for 'mother', 'freedom', 'love' and 'family'. The two candidates have a different focus. If the Democrats want to win the votes of the disappointed white middle class they need to take their concerns seriously, which tend to revolve around jobs and the economy. Harris hasn't really gone there so far in her brat summer. As far as Taylor Swift is concerned, it would not be wise to rely too much on a Swift autumn. If a voter already leans a particular way, their favourite artist can reinforce their convictions. But there is no proof that an artist's

political leanings are enough to change a fan's mind completely and it seems rather unrealistic. Nor should it be forgotten that in 2016, Hillary Clinton had many prominent supporters, including Katy Perry, Miley Cyrus, Beyoncé, Ariana Grande and many others, and we all know what happened to her. It makes no difference how well Harris has reached out to Generation Z and others on social media, a pop culture tailwind doesn't seem to be enough. Perhaps during the remaining time, the Democrats should focus their efforts on the concerns of voters outside the mainstream. No matter how fun the 'brat' Harris has been so far or how popular Taylor Swift is, in the end, the usual issues will decide the election outcome.



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