

Chapter 85

The Causes and Consequences of Political Blogging

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ABSTRACT

“Blogging” has become an incredibly popular activity in recent years. Although political blogging broadly defined as a blog whose “content focuses on issues, events, and policy in a constituency, national, international, or party context” (Ferguson & Griffiths, 2006, p. 366) – constitutes only a small sliver of the overall blogosphere, it has attracted a great deal of attention from political scientists, mass communication specialists, and researchers interested in information technology. The primary focus of this attention has been on four central questions. First, what motivates political bloggers to blog about politics? Second, what is the nature of the politically oriented discussions found on political blogs? Third, what are the political consequences of political blogging? Finally, how have professional politicians used blogs in campaigns and once in office? This entry summarizes the existing literature into each of these questions and points to a number of issues that should be addressed in future studies of the causes and consequences of political blogging.

POLITICAL BLOGGING

“Blogging” has become an incredibly popular activity in recent years. In 1999, the total number of blogs was estimated to be around 50 (Drezner & Farrell, 2004a). In 2002, a *Newsweek* article calcu-

lated that the total number of blogs was 500,000, with a new blog starting every 40 seconds (Levy, 2002). Only one year later, a survey by the Perseus Development Corporation discovered that there were 4.12 million blogs on the Internet (Henning, 2003). Between 2003 and 2006, the blogosphere continued its rapid expansion – with the size of *Technorati.com*’s blog database doubling every six

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months. At the time of this writing (July 2010), *BlogPulse*, a Web site devoted to measuring activity in the blogosphere, is currently tracking over 140 million blogs.

What exactly is a blog? Although researchers have employed countless definitions for the term (Baumer et al., 2008; boyd, 2006), there is a general consensus that blogs are distinguished by four characteristics. First, blogs are free or impose very little in the way of financial cost on those who author them. The most popular blog hosting websites, such as *Blogger*, *Typepad* and *LiveJournal*, provide users with both the software to blog and with the server space required to publish their blogs on the Internet. Second, blogs require little technical knowledge to create and maintain. Blogging software creates a simple template that allows almost anyone with even a minimal familiarity with computer programs to quickly and easily post entries. Third, blog entries appear in reverse chronological order – with the most recent entries appearing at the top of the page. Finally, blogs are not subject to external editing and, therefore, provide the blogger with complete control over when and what to post. Indeed, because most blogging software provides a template that consists of nothing more than an empty text box, blogs allow users to post any words, pictures, audio or video content he or she may want. To put all of this more simply, a blog can be defined as a low cost and easy to maintain web page that allows users the freedom to post whatever they want and presents these posts in reverse chronological order.

As this definition suggests, blogs provide bloggers with complete control over when to post and what to post about. The result of this freedom is that blogs focusing on an almost infinite number of topics – ranging from finance to romance – can be found on the Internet. Because politics is a “sideshow in the great circus of life” (Dahl, 1961, p. 305), however, the vast majority of blogs are fundamentally non-political in nature. Carl’s (2003) survey of active bloggers, for

example, revealed that politics ranked fifth out of 15 possible topics of individual posts and an expansive assessment of the blogosphere carried out by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that only 1.4 million blogs contain purely political information (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). As another examination of the content found in the blogosphere concluded, “Blogging is many things, yet the typical blog is written by a teenage girl who uses it twice a month to update her friends and classmates on happenings in her life” (Henning, 2003, p. 1).

Although political blogging – broadly defined as a blog whose “content focuses on issues, events and policy in a constituency, national, international or party context” (Ferguson & Griffiths, 2006, p. 366) – constitutes only a small sliver of the overall blogosphere, it has attracted a great deal of attention from political scientists, such as Antoinette Pole at Montclair State University (2010), Matthew Hindman at George Washington University (2008), David Karpf at Rutgers University (2008, 2009, 2010) and Richard Davis at Brigham Young University (2009), mass communication specialists, such as David Perlmutter at the University of Iowa (2009), Kaye Sweetser at the University of Georgia (2007) and Mark Tremayne at the University of Texas, Austin (2006), and researchers interested in information technology, such as Karine Barzilai-Nahon at the University of Washington (2010). The primary focus of this attention has been on four central questions. First, what motivates political bloggers to blog about politics? Second, what is the nature of the politically oriented discussions found on political blogs? Third, what are the political consequences of political blogging? Finally, how have professional politicians used blogs in campaigns and once in office? The following sections will summarize the current research on each of these four questions in turn.

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