

**Sticking Together Online:
Political Participation and Ideologically Homogeneous Blog Consumption**

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ABSTRACT

Though political bloggers are often caricatured in the media as lone voices, their blogs provide virtual spaces for their readers to discuss politics and organize political action. The new expressive and participatory opportunities made available by the Internet in general and blogs in particular will only become more important to the political process as the number of people making use of them increases. At the same time that blogs have become an important part of the political landscape, ideological media in general have seen a rise in prominence. In this paper, we seek to examine the relationship between the ideological homogeneity of one's blog consumption and the tendencies to participate in and discuss politics.

Recent research suggests that participation and deliberation have a generally negative relationship with one another, and that homogeneous social networks are more effective for mobilizing participation than are cross-cutting networks (Mutz, 2006). We therefore expect that discussion within a mostly ideologically unified blog community acts as a pathway to participation for its readers by providing a safe space for mobilizing collective action. Using data from a survey of political blog readers conducted during November 2006, we scored respondents' five most frequently visited political blogs as either liberal or conservative and combined them for a measure of homogeneity. We then tested the role of this exposure variable in explaining political participation -- both on- and offline -- and reported contributions to online discussion. This study provides new evidence of links between the ideological composition of individual media consumption choices and the likelihood of engaging in various forms of political action.

Over the past several years, one of the most commonly expressed concerns about political blogs has been their tendency to present information through a particular ideological frame. Journalists from traditional news agencies have criticized blogs as “vitriol[ic],” “uninformed” and “malicious” (Klein, 2006), while scholars have made note of the blogosphere’s tendency toward severe self-segregation (Adamic & Glance, 2005). Implied in these concerns and critiques is the notion that ideological news content is somehow problematic for society. Indeed, this concern tracks with the long-standing concern among proponents of a robust civic society that homogeneous discussion networks prevent individuals from understanding the people with whom they disagree. Deliberative theorists suggest that sticking to like-minded discussion can lead people away from understanding the reasons behind their opponents’ beliefs and can prompt more negative views of the other side (Fishkin, 1991). However, other scholars note potential benefits of this kind of political interaction – particularly that individuals tend to become engaged directly in the political process through homogeneous channels (Mutz, 2006).

The conservative and liberal blogospheres recreate these pathways on a grand scale, by facilitating not just ideologically homogeneous discussion, but also opinion and analysis, ideologically driven news reporting, and collective action. The communities that emerge at many successful blogs are not just politically homogeneous, they thrive as a direct result of that homogeneity. Sites such as Daily Kos and Townhall.com attract readers who are interested in engaging in the political process. Although much attention has been paid to the potential for an echo chamber effect within the blogosphere (Weinberger, 2004), less focus has been given to the potential for large-scale collective

action inherent in engaged communities of like-minded individuals (see Gil de Zuniga et al., 2007; Veenstra et al., 2007). This study provides some of that focus by examining not only the ways that blog readers participate in politics, but doing so in comparison to their tendency to consume ideologically consonant blog content. Importantly, we do not seek to elevate the place of participation above deliberation in the pantheon of democratically desirable behaviors, but to follow the lead of Mutz (2006) in placing them on a level playing field. Both are critical parts of democracy, and our interest is in examining the extent to which an ideologically segregated medium may impact the way they manifest. We begin by reviewing the relationship between these two concepts in existing literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A recent stream of research has uncovered distinct paths leading to deliberation versus participation. Mutz (2006) demonstrated that the normatively ideal characteristics expected of a “good” citizen—engaging in political discussion with a diverse set of friends and acquaintances and at the same time an active political participant—may not be found commonly in a single package. The deliberator’s heterogeneous discussion networks encourage tolerance and open-mindedness, yet, because of social pressures and a desire to avoid conflict, exposure to political disagreement makes it less likely that she will vote and engage in other forms of political participation (Mutz, 2002). Homogeneous discussion networks appear to be related to intolerance and pluralistic ignorance; however, homogeneity can also encourage political participation. Like-minded networks offer encouragement, reinforce partisan ideas, and serve as safe enclaves for expression of opinions that might not otherwise be heard. They may produce “enclave deliberation”

(Mutz, 2006, p. 127) of the sort that mobilizes political action but may put at risk moderated, civil debate. There are trade-offs: the kinds of social networks and media use that encourage a deliberative mindset are not the same as those that may spur active engagement with politics.

Exposure to views from the “other side” doesn’t solely emerge from diverse interpersonal relationships. Mainstream mass media sources are also an important source of cross-cutting exposure. In a study of exposure to dissimilar views via interpersonal sources compared to mass media, Mutz and Martin (2001) showed mass media exposure produces more cross-cutting exposure than interpersonal discussion. Mainstream American news media outlets aspire to journalistic norms of balance and fairness, often resulting in a “one quote from each party” style of political reporting. This makes it difficult for readers—even those with strong partisan views—to opt out of hearing dissimilar viewpoints. It is, Mutz and Martin suggest, much easier for most people to choose friends with consonant views than it is to choose a newspaper whose reporting will always lean in one’s own political direction.

The relatively linear structure of mainstream news media also discourages selective exposure. Mutz and Martin (2001) found that newspaper and television news resulted in the largest perceived exposure to dissimilar views. They were further able to demonstrate that this perception was not distorted by hostile media perceptions, leading them to conclude that “traditional news media such as newspapers and television news hold the potential for creating greater awareness of cross-cutting views” (p. 110).

Exposure to heterogeneous information sources, and to the counter-attitudinal messages they provide, is a demonstrated antecedent of deliberative conversation (Moy &

Gastil, 2006). Mainstream media exposure is also an important contributor to the set of attitudes that have been linked to deliberation. Moy and Gastil found that print media use was linked to engagement in deliberative discussion. Reading print news was also linked to openness to political conflict. Of course, the newspaper reader does not engage in the two-way conversation possible in an interpersonal encounter, nor is she participating in the multi-vocal discussion available in a formal deliberative forum. Exposure to mass media is, however, a demonstrated antecedent of more idealized deliberative practice.

This study uses Verba and colleagues' (1995) definition of political participation as "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing the government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies" (p. 38). Thus, participation includes activities as diverse as emailing a petition, making phone calls on behalf of a candidate, donating money to a campaign, or attending a rally. As this study is exploratory in nature, we chose to examine effects on diverse forms of participation, both online and offline. Specifically, we examine traditional offline participation, on and offline expressive participation – defined by a range of opinion expressing activities – as well as using online tools to organize group participation, and donating money to campaigns.

Previous studies have assumed that people's set of online information sources will be more homogeneous and more partisan (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Sunstein, 2001) since the widespread availability of alternative information channels on the Internet has reduced the costs of finding like-minded information sources, enabling selective exposure to a homogeneous, reinforcing set of political ideas. However, empirical tests of this

claim are few and far between, particularly in the area of political blogs, even though those information sources are assumed to be a primary avenue of “cocooning” on the part of online users.

Perhaps the most notable work along these lines is Adamic and Glance’s “Divided They Blog” (2005). This work does establish a considerable level of balkanization of the blogosphere into liberal and conservative spheres, but what they demonstrate is not exactly the same point that Sunstein and others have asserted that readers will cocoon themselves by constructing a “Daily Me” consisting solely of blogs and other sites with which they agree. Their analysis is less dire if readers themselves find their way to a diverse assortment of blogs.

Other work looking at the behavior of blog readers themselves has produced results that are somewhat consistent with the demonstration made by Adamic and Glance (Kari, 2004; Tauscher & Greenberg, 1997). These works have shown that a typical online reader will navigate based on a “hub and spoke” manner, following links away from a main site and then returning to that page. However, the populations examined in those studies are not sufficient to speak to the particular audience of blog readers, who are markedly different than the general public in terms of motivation, engagement and political sophistication. Kari, for example, studied the surfing behavior of only 15 people, who were given a specific instruction to navigate the Web in search of information related to some domain of “personal development.” What has not been examined, and what this paper engages in below, is whether these findings are consistent with the actual online behaviors of people who read political blogs. The question remains as to how much variability there is in the homogeneity of political blog readers’ “blog diets.”

HYPOTHESES

Previous research has posited a variety of democratically desirable outcomes of politically cross-cutting discussion (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005), and has further examined the extent to which use of traditional news sources can stand in for interpersonal discussion, per se (Mutz & Martin, 2001). Traditional news use works in place of cross-cutting discussion because it generally conveys balanced and objective information from a variety of viewpoints – that is, traditional news consumers are exposed to views they may disagree with, much the way they are in the context of a cross-cutting discussion. Because blogs, as a news medium, tend to be much more ideologically driven and one-sided than traditional news sources, we suspect a similar but opposite may occur among those who tend to visit a homogeneous and like-minded selection of blogs. We test this proposition by positing homogeneous blog use as a kind of anti-deliberation, which, consistent with the findings of Mutz (2006), is related to a higher level of political participation but a lower amount of traditional news use. We propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Homogeneous blog use will be positively related to a) traditional political participation, b) offline expressive participation, c) online expressive participation, d) online group participation, and e) online political donation.

H2. Individuals who identify blogs as their primary source of news will have more homogeneous blog use habits than those who identify other sources.

H3. Homogeneous blog use will be negatively related to a) use of traditional print news sources, and b) use of traditional media for news surveillance reasons.

METHODS

Constructing a representative sample from within the blogosphere is both a qualitative and quantitative proposition. Technorati¹ offers its “biggest blogs in the blogosphere, as measured by unique links in the last six months.” The Blogstreet² ratings metric is its Blog Influence Quotient (BIQ). By such metrics not all blogs are equal. Some blogs have huge ratings, by traditional measures. Blogs such as the Huffington Post, Redstate, Powerline and MyDD are all frequently “blogrolled,” that is listed, in the blogs of affiliation lists of other blogs as well as repeatedly mentioned as “kings and queens” of the blogosphere by the political press.

Any survey of bloggers must take into account that some bloggers receive much more attention than others. Thus, the data collection process for this study began in autumn 2006 with lists of the top 300 most popular blogs using the above metrics, which were then narrowed down to political blogs – that is, those that have mostly political content. The sample was further refined by eliminating blogs that were not in English, which would have created problems for survey design and interpretation. Blogs that had not been in operation by the same blogger or groups of bloggers for at least two years were also culled in order to gain both a sample of experienced bloggers and an audience that was familiar with the blog content and style.

On the basis of this sample selection process, a survey solicitation was emailed to 154 top political blogs. This solicitation produced 66 usable responses from blog authors. Of these, 40 bloggers also posted a link to a separate survey for the readers of their blog. This survey produced 3,909 usable responses from the readers of these top political blogs. Of the total reader respondents, 26.2% were women and 73.8% were

¹ <http://www.technorati.com/pop/blogs/>

² <http://www.blogstreet.com>

men. The mean age of the respondents was 46 years ($SD = 12.3$). Ethnic distribution of the sample was 90.1% white. The median educational level was some graduate education and the median annual household income range was \$80,000-100,000. The gender, education and income skews in this data are consistent with previous research on blog readers (Rainie, 2005). Notably, this procedure also produced a very ideologically diverse sample, with 43% describing themselves as Democrats, 31% as Republicans and 14% as Libertarians.

Measures

The independent variable used in this study was constructed from the results of an open-ended question that asked respondents to list up to five blogs they “read most often.” Respondents listed 967 different sites, though that number includes many sites that are not blogs or are no longer in operation. A team of three coders coded each site for its authority score as measured by Technorati, which counts the number incoming links to the site in the past six months, and whether the site displayed conservative (1) or liberal (-1) ideology, or neither (0). Technorati tracks over 112 million³ blogs; thus, not being included in Technorati was taken as sufficient evidence of a site not being a blog, and such sites were removed from the analysis, leaving 726 unique blogs. All coding was completed April 12-13, 2008; Fleiss’ kappa for intercoder reliability was .66 (Fleiss, 1971; Landis & Koch, 1977). For each respondent, ideology codes for each blog listed were averaged to create a scale of blog diet ideology from completely conservative (1.0) to completely liberal (-1.0) ($M = -.035$, $SD = .916$). Not surprisingly, this measure is

³ <http://technorati.com/about/>

strongly bimodal, with 1251 respondents listing only liberal blogs and 1118 respondents listing only conservative blogs.

In order to determine the like-mindedness of this blog consumption pattern, the blog ideology score was interacted with the result of a battery of issue ideology questions. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with six of political position statements such as “I’m pleased with the outcome of the 2006 midterm elections” and “I oppose same sex marriage.” Responses were measured on a 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree) scale, with three items reversed so that a higher score indicated a more conservative position. The six items in the index had a Cronbach’s alpha of .93 ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 3.18$). Those who scored below 5 on this measure were recoded to -1, those at exactly 5 were recoded to 0, and those above 5 were recoded to 1. This recoded variable was multiplied by the blog ideology score to create a measure of individuals’ consonance with the blogs they read ($M = .751$, $SD = .519$). Seventy-three percent of respondents had a score of 1 on this variable, indicating that they only read blogs with which they share an ideology.

Dependent Variables. A total of 22 behavior questions were used to measure different forms of political participation, both online and offline. All items were measured in terms of frequency within the past 12 months from 0 (Not at All) to 10 (Very Frequently). Traditional political participation was measured with four items such as “Attended a political meeting, rally, or speech” (alpha = .83, $M = 1.93$, $SD = 2.39$). Offline expressive participation was measured with three items such as “Displayed a campaign button, sticker, or sign” (alpha = .72, $M = 2.83$, $SD = 2.65$). Online expressive participation was measured with six items such as “Used e-mail to contact a politician”

($\alpha = .83$, $M = 3.80$, $SD = 2.42$). Online group participation was measured with six items such as “Organized political activity via the Internet” ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 1.71$, $SD = 1.97$). Online political donation was measured with three items such as “Contributed money online to a political campaign in my area” ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 2.53$, $SD = 2.80$).

Four additional behavior frequency items were used to measure print news use, such as “Read a national daily newspaper” ($\alpha = .73$, $M = 4.87$, $SD = 2.71$). Respondents were asked to what extent they agree (0-10) with two statements measuring media surveillance motivations, such as “I use mass media to stay informed about what is happening in the world” ($r = .73$, $M = 4.66$, $SD = 2.67$). Finally, respondents were asked to choose their primary source of news from seven options: print newspaper, online newspaper, online news portal, the blogosphere, a particular blog, TV, or radio. The blogosphere or a particular blogs was chosen by 39.3 percent of respondents.

Control variables. Seven variables were included in our analysis for control purposes. As previously reported, age, education, income and gender were all measured with single items. Race was measured with a series of checkboxes corresponding to the methodology of the U.S. Census Bureau; for the purposes of analysis, those who indicated that they were white are contrasted with those who did not. A single open-ended question measured how many years respondents had lived in the community in which they currently reside. Finally, party affiliation was measured with two questions asking respondents to which party, if any, they belonged and how strongly affiliated they were with that party. Those items were combined to create a measure of party affiliation running from 1 (Strong Democrat) to 7 (Strong Republican).

Analysis. Hypotheses 1 and 3 were tested using weighted least squares regression. Weighted regression was employed because the blogger-level contextual variables occur at different frequencies – some blogs had as few as a single reader submit responses to the reader survey, while the most responsive blog community had 1182 members submit responses. Hierarchical linear modeling is often used to handle data in which cases are grouped into contextual clusters, such as survey data that includes information about respondents' home towns (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992), but these data do not lend themselves to such analysis because the groups at the contextual level are not necessarily discrete. Most, if not all, respondents read blogs other than the one which they are connected to through the survey, and may even read other blogs which are included in this data collection. Weighted regression allows for different error variances across the blog groups to be accounted for (Draper & Smith, 1981).

RESULTS

Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted an initial regression test to validate our measure of blog diet consonance, using a measure of the frequency with which respondents “visited a blog [they] disagreed with.” Blog consonance significantly and negatively predicted this measure ($\beta = -.17, p < .001$), from which we conclude that our constructed variable does a satisfactory job of measuring individuals' tendency to visit blogs with which they agree.

Consonant blog use was a positive predictor of each type of political participation that we tested: traditional participation ($\beta = .09, p < .001$), offline expressive participation ($\beta = .09, p < .001$), online expressive participation ($\beta = .12, p < .001$), online group participation ($\beta = .09, p < .001$), and online political donation ($\beta = .13, p < .001$). These

results provide support for all of the sub-hypotheses comprising H1. Additionally, gender (coded as male) was a significant positive predictor in all five models, while party affiliation (coded as Republican) was a significant negative predictor in all five models. Age was a significant positive predictor for both kinds of expressive participation, while income positively predicted online donations. Complete regression results can be seen in Table 1.

Our second hypothesis, suggesting that those who use blogs as their primary news source will have more consonant blog use than others, was tested using a t-test. The mean difference between those who use blogs as their primary news source (.85) and those who don't (.69) was significant at the .001 level, with $t(3013) = -8.515$. This result supports hypothesis H2.

Finally, consonant blog use was a negative predictor of both traditional news use measures we tested: print news use ($\beta = -.09, p < .001$), and media surveillance motivation ($\beta = -.12, p < .001$). These results provide support for both sub-hypotheses comprising H3. Republican party affiliation was a significant negative predictor of both measures, while education positively predicted print news use and age negatively predicted media surveillance motivation. Complete regression results can be seen in Table 2.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this extensive survey of blog readers suggest that the consumption of an ideologically consonant blog diet is related to various forms of political participation, both online and offline. Those with more consonant diets reported more participation in traditional group activities, expressive activities and political donation.

Additionally, we find evidence that consonant blog consumers have less exposure to the variety of viewpoints often found in traditional news media – they are more likely to identify blogs as their primary news source, and less likely to use print news sources or use traditional mass media to find new information about news stories. We take these results as evidence in support of the Mutz model of discussion and participation, reconfigured to fit the quasi-discussion model presented by the blogosphere.

These results imply both good and bad potential effects of blogs on the political process. Democratic theorists have long hailed the value of individual-level participation in political activity, whether through voting, public expression or group demonstration, and blogs present new ways for people to find ways to participate on their own or as part of a group (Veenstra et al., 2007). That consonant blog use predicts all types of participation suggests a beneficial impact of the like-minded grouping that happens in many blog communities. Indeed, many actions taken by blog communities in recent years reflect this connection, as disparate groups of like-minded individuals have bound together to push back against proposed changes to Social Security (Glover, 2006) and to press accusations against an Iraqi photojournalist with the Associated Press (Layton, 2006). Notably, these events will not necessarily have outcomes that all would consider to be good – photojournalist Bilal Hussein was held for 19 months before being charged, then soon released without being tried – but they are instances of groups working together toward political goals, outside the pathways of traditional media and institutions.

At the same time, consonant blog use predicts less use of print news sources. This is a potentially distressing result, as newspaper readership has consistently been linked to community engagement and civic behaviors (Putnam, 2000). Interestingly,

consonant blog use may be standing in for print news use as a precursor of political participation (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). Indeed, we find that the significance of homogeneous blog use disappears when the dependent measure refers specifically to following a link from a blog to a story on a news site ($\beta = -.01$, N.S.), suggesting that exposure to the mainstream news among blog readers may occur through mentions on blog posting. This raises additional questions as how readers of the news may be impacted by the blogger's "spin" on the story.

While some previous studies (Graf, 2006; Rainie, 2005) have surveyed blog readers to look at their motivations for reading and to gather basic demographic information, to our knowledge no previous survey of blog readers has asked in detail about blogs those readers frequently visit. This data, coded to detail the ideological make-up of individual blog diets, has proven useful to examine the effect of more politically homogeneous media consumption on democratic outcomes.

Our study provides an important extension of the work of Adamic and Glance's (2005) examination of the linking structure of the political blogosphere. Adamic and Glance explored the linking behavior of bloggers, but tell us little about whether readers' consumption patterns "obey" the roadmaps left for them in blogrolls. The current study provides some initial evidence that blog readers are not dissimilar from bloggers, in the sense that their readership is by and large divided along party lines. Democrats read Democrats and Republicans read Republicans.

This analysis only begins to scratch the surface of blog readers' consumption patterns. The partisan coding system we used – identifying blogs as liberal or conservative in affiliation – is certainly an oversimplification of the range of opinions

that populate the blogosphere. During the coding process, the diversity of the political blogosphere was abundantly clear. Future research should attempt to address this diversity systematically, creating blog typologies that might address not only bloggers' political leanings, but more structural features of blogs as well. We would expect, for example, that blogs might vary in the amount of participation they encourage from their readers in terms of adding comments or creating original posts. Some bloggers adopt a civil tone in their political commentary while others make incivility the norm. Such typologies will allow us to investigate increasingly sophisticated questions about the effects of blogs and blog readership.

Although exposure to the mainstream news media is an important measure of exposure to heterogeneous political viewpoints (Mutz & Martin, 2001), it would be useful in future iterations of this research to have detailed measures of activities that more closely approximate deliberative behaviors. For example, measures of political conversation (on and offline) with people different from oneself, and willingness to engage in deliberative discussion. Future research should also explore the impact of blog reading diet on the "darker side" of homogeneous political environments: intolerance toward those who hold opposing views. It seems likely that the same homogeneous environments that appear to inspire political engagement may also create greater rifts between strong partisans.

New media make it ever-easier for media consumers to self-select to an ideologically one-sided news and information environment (Sunstein, 2001). Our sample of blog readers provided an ideal test case to re-apply Mutz's (2006) thesis concerning cross-cutting exposure to political media patterns. As we demonstrate, blog reading

patterns appear to parallel the discussion networks Mutz analyzed in her recent work. Homogeneity is linked to participation, while heterogeneity is linked to seeking out alternative viewpoints.

One particularly fertile area for future research involves exploration of just what “alternate viewpoints” are in different contexts. For example, the 2008 Democratic presidential primary campaign provides a unique opportunity to examine a kind of like-minded disagreement, as Democratic partisans split their support nearly equally between Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama. In the case of this study, as well as many other similar studies, differentiating between an Obama supporter’s exposure to an Obama blog and a Clinton blog is impossible – if the respondent expresses liberal views and a Democratic affiliation, our data can go no further. This primary campaign provides a context in which an extremely detailed approach to disagreement could be deployed, which could greatly help our understanding of how characteristic and situational disagreements differ.

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Table 1

	Traditional	Expressive (Off)	Expressive (On)	Group (On)	Donate (On)
Age	.07	<i>.15</i>	<i>.17</i>	.05	<i>.09</i>
Education	.02	-.02	-.04	-.02	.02
Income	.07	.01	.03	.02	<i>.17</i>
Gender (Male)	<i>.11</i>	<i>.10</i>	<i>.12</i>	<i>.09</i>	<i>.11</i>
Race (White)	-.01	-.02	-.02	-.02	.01
Years in community	.07	.05	.05	.03	.01
Party affil. (Republican)	-.22	-.19	-.18	-.23	-.30
Blog Consonance	<i>.09</i>	<i>.09</i>	<i>.12</i>	<i>.09</i>	<i>.13</i>

Cell entries are standardized betas. Entries in *italics* are significant at the $p < .001$ level.

Table 2

	Print News Use	Media Surveillance	Followed Link
Age	.02	<i>-.17</i>	.01
Education	<i>.09</i>	.00	-.07
Income	.04	-.03	.03
Gender (Female)	-.02	-.04	-.08
Race (White)	-.02	.01	-.03
Years in community	.07	.00	-.01
Party affil. (Republican)	-.13	-.13	-.05
Blog Consonance	<i>-.09</i>	<i>-.12</i>	<i>-.01</i>

Cell entries are standardized betas. Entries in *italics* are significant at the $p < .001$ level.