

# SHALLOW NETROOTS

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Shallow Netroots: Hypertext Links to Advocacy Organizations in Political Blogs

Mark A. Leccese

Emerson College

Mark A. Leccese, Department of Journalism, Emerson College

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mark A. Leccese, Department of Journalism, Emerson College, 120 Boylston St., Boston, MA 02116. E-mail:

[Mark\\_Leccese@emerson.edu](mailto:Mark_Leccese@emerson.edu).

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### HYPertext LINKS TO ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS IN POLITICAL BLOGS

#### Abstract

In 2002, a weblog author coined the term “netroots” — a combination of the words “Internet” and “grassroots” — to describe the use of political blogs as a tool to spur political activism and political organization. This study gathered data to determine how frequently the top three progressive and the top three conservative blogs use hypertext links to direct their readers to the Web sites of political advocacy organizations. The study coded 2,087 hypertext links on these six influential political blogs for seven consecutive days in January 2008, during the presidential primaries, to determine what percentage of hypertext links took readers to advocacy organizations. Only 5.7% (n = 119) of links on these blogs directed readers to political advocacy Web sites. Although there may be a netroots phenomenon, it has manifested itself not in political blogs, but in the Web sites and mass e-mail and texting lists of the candidates and their campaign operations.

*Keywords:* activism, netroots, politics, media blogs, blogging, US politics, Internet, WWW, ideology, political communication, Web

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On Election Day in 2006, as the Democratic Party gained majorities in the U.S. House and U.S. Senate for first time since 1994, soon-to-be Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid wrote in a post on the blog Daily Kos: “Without the netroots, Democrats would not be in the position we are in today. It is as simple as that” (Reid, 2006, para. 6). Reid’s statement is just one of the many claims for the power of the netroots — a combination of the words “Internet” and “grassroots” — to recruit campaign volunteers, spread the campaign’s message and raise campaign funds. According to Davis (2009), since 2004, when supporters of the campaigns of Democratic presidential candidates Wesley Clark and Howard Dean used the Internet and blogs to boost their candidates into contention in the 2004 Democratic presidential primaries, bloggers, who comprise the core of the netroots, have claimed “incessantly” (p. 7) they have changed politics.

After Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, Kerbel (2009) credited bloggers with being “at the forefront of a wave of engagement in the political process” (p. 132), despite facing the disdain of the existing powers in electoral politics. Progressive bloggers, along with a handful of think tanks and activists groups, have had as their aim for the past seven years nothing less than remaking the way the Democratic Party conducts electoral campaigns (Stoller, 2007, para. 4). Farrell (2006) argued that bloggers, in driving the netroots movement, have “the potential to reshape the terrain of American democracy” (para. 3). Progressive bloggers boast they have already altered the outcomes in U.S. Senate races, helping defeat Joseph Lieberman in the Connecticut Democratic primary in 2006 and playing an important role in the 2006 elections to the Senate of Sherrod Brown of Ohio, Jon Tester of Montana and Jim Webb of Virginia

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(Davis, 2009, pp. 4-5). Wood (2007, para. 11) predicted the netroots movement would have a major impact in the 2008 presidential elections.

Winship (2006), author of The Democratic Strategist blog, attempted to make a rough calculation of the number of people participating in the Democratic netroots movement and came up with 2.24 million, making the netroots “a force to be reckoned with” (para. 7). Kerbel (2009) argues the number of people active the netroots movement does not need to be large, because the Internet acts as their “megaphone” (p. 6). He also wrote that by 2006 the netroots was “a movement with teeth (p. 62),” and to demonstrate the netroots power he compiled a set of metrics he argues proves the influence of the netroots in the 2006 federal election cycle: more than two dozen additional contested Congressional seats in 2006 then 2004; a significant increase over the same period in small-amount donor contributions; and growth in the number of campaigns that “converged” online fund-raising and a web presence with a “high profile” on independent political blogs (pp. 87).

Few political commentators have made more fervent claims for netroots than progressive bloggers and Democratic Party activists Armstrong and Zuniga (2006). The web, they argued, allows people across the country to organize powerful movements behind candidates and issues. The two wrote that millions of Web users were already involved in netroots organizing and that blog readers could grow to 20 million to 25 million by 2010 (p. 176).

Not only progressives have worked to use netroots to win elections and influence public policy: Republican candidates and the Republican Party have been working over the past few years to build their own netroots movement (Vargas, 2008, para. 2). While netroots started as primarily a phenomenon among supporters of the Democratic Party, the efforts of Republican

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Party activists to create their own netroots – sometimes known as “rightroots” – did not begin in earnest until after the 2008 elections (Vargas, 2008, para. 4). Still, in the midst of the 2008 presidential elections, one journalist confidently stated that Republican activists had no effective netroots (Copelin, 2008, para. 2).

As bloggers continue to solidify their place in the mainstream of American political debate, they become increasingly recognized as a political force (Davis, 2009, p. 100). Campbell (2009, p. 140) found scholarly discussion about blogs in scholarship centers on bloggers’ role in enhancing participation in the political process. Farrell (2006) calls this building “a community of action” (para. 9) and writes that netroots bloggers attempt to move this community to political engagement. Bloggers “supply energy and its crystallization, money, to actual projects that seek power” (Gitlin, 2007, para. 2). Political blogs do not just persuade, they are “collective organizers” (Kline, 2005, p. 13).

Political blogs — especially the top political blogs — wield enough political power that the bloggers are courted and consulted by politicians and government leaders. The Washington Post reported in the summer of 2009 that President Barack Obama, as he worked to get health care reform legislation passed, took the time to hold a conference call with “a handpicked group of liberal bloggers” (Bacon & Fletcher, 2009, para. 19). Democratic political consultants Feld and Wilcox (2008) reported that in the first half of 2007, Democratic presidential candidates posted a record amount of online campaign contributions. Obama’s success at raising campaign funds online was “eye-popping,” surpassing, just halfway through 2008, the total number of online contributors Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean had in his 2004 campaign. This, Feld and Wilcox wrote, “seemed to indicate that the netroots movement continued to grow rapidly” (p. 167).

In his 2008 campaign, Obama collected \$500 million in donations over 21 months from 6.5 million contributors, whose average donation was \$80, which demonstrated the Internet's ability to make voters feel empowered and get them active in electoral politics (Kerbel, 2009, p. 135).

Short of extensive and precise survey research, it would be difficult to demonstrate any cause and effect between the netroots movement and the outcomes of elections, which may be a reason for the dearth of scholarly research on netroots. Campbell (2009, p. 150) found little empirical investigation into the precise impact various types of voter contact has had on the mobilization of voters.

The netroots is a relatively new phenomenon and its definition remains imprecise. Feld and Wilcox (2008), defined netroots as citizen activists "using the Internet to gather information, to organize with other like-minded folks across the country, to plan events, to raise money, and to make the case for the candidate" (p. 36). Chait (2007) offered a more narrow definition of netroots: "a subset of the liberal blogs, constituting those blogs that are directly involved in political activism, often urging their readers to volunteer for, or donate money to, Democratic candidates" (p. 20). Farrell (2009) defined netroots as a wide and informal network of political bloggers, activists, organizers and fund-raisers who support the Democratic Party and Democratic candidates and do their political work using the Web rather than the traditional persuasive and organizational tools offered by the mainstream media, the telephone and face-to-face interaction (para. 1).

What all of these definitions have in common is the use of the web — particularly political blogs — to do political organizing traditionally done by leaflet, mail, telephone, and in person at coffees, fund-raisers and rallies. According to Davis (2009), blogs "reinforce readers

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views by offering them information that supports a particular worldview and spinning negatively any news that does not do so” (p. 74). But blogs do more than just reinforce — they attempt to mobilize readers to take some kind of action to further a political cause (pp. 80-81). Bimber and Davis (2003) identify four main areas in which political campaigns can most effectively use the Internet and blogs: opinion reinforcement, activism, donating, and voter registration and mobilization (p. 48). These four areas provide a useful framework for defining the goal of the netroots movement.

Blogs are the dominant element of netroots, and their reach continues to expand. Of the estimated 100 million active Internet users in the United States, 23% read blogs daily and 42% read blogs at least weekly. In 2008, more than 26 million Americans reporting they had started a blog, up from 20 million in 2005 (Universal McCann, 2008, p. 12). In fact, top bloggers themselves have become celebrities (Papacharissi, 2007, p. 37). The blogger Den Beste (2002), in the early days of blogging, posited that bloggers fell into two broad categories: those who write small essays and those who primarily provide their readers with a list of hypertext links to other web sites they find interesting. Den Beste called them “writers” and “editors,” (para. 11) but several of his readers suggested a catchier phrase, “thinkers and linkers” (para. 27). Many political blogs today are studded with links.

Hypertext links are the most important difference between blogs and traditional communications media, including one-to-one communication and one-to-many communication. Links and page views — the number of times a blog page is accessed on readers’ computers — are the measuring stick for blogs (Farrell & Drezner, 2008, p. 17). Hypertext links bring Web blogs together in a way that demonstrates the priorities and agendas of the Web sites’ authors. That is the purpose of hypertext links in a political blog: to direct readers’ attention to what the

blog writer believes provide credible or important sources of information (Turow & Tsui, 2008, p. 21). More than 90% of the political blogs studied by Davis (2009, pp. 77-78) provided hypertext links in their posts. Davis writes: “Links don’t just provide news and commentary to the reader; they often do so in a manner designed to reinforce” the political agenda of the blogger. Embedding a Web site with links communicates to the reader that the messages in the text and the messages to be found in following the links are dependent upon one another. This is a “profound psychological consequence” (Sundar, Kalyanaraman & Brown, 2003, p. 48).

In an experimental study of how hyperlinking patterns of campaign websites affect readers’ perception of candidates, researchers found the number of hyperlinks provided correlated with positive perceptions of candidates (Williams, Trammel, Postelnico, Landreville & Martin, 2005, p. 179). Hyperlinks stand out from the other text on a page and increase the user’s ability to control the information-seeking process, and the decision about what links to include is an exercise of online gatekeeping authority (Dimitrova, Connolly-Ahern, Williams, Kaid & Reid, 2003, p. 403-404).

Previous research on the hypertext linking patterns of political blogs found that the authors primarily link within their own political persuasion, and that political blogs rely heavily — and link with a high rate of frequency to — online mainstream media outlets for the information on which the bloggers then comment. A study of blog posts during the 2004 election, found that more than nine in ten links on progressive blogs link to other progressive blogs, and roughly the same number of links on conservative blogs direct the reader to other conservative blogs (Adamic & Glance, 2005, p. 4).

The most influential blogs — and thus leaders in the purported netroots movement — are those that receive the most visitors. Hyperlinks are precisely what creates this hierarchy of



blogs (Hindman, 2009, p. 18). Research on networks has further shown that popular blogs become increasingly popular. The Web has been described as “a complex, overlapping, ever-shifting set of individuals who have organized themselves into groups of every sort” (Weinberger, 2002, p. 108). Hypertext links, by their nature as ties between Web sites and the people who create and maintain them, are a key component in building social systems. Tracking which blogs are most frequently linked to by other blogs makes it clear which blogs are most influential. Two physicists researching the behavior of networks such as the Web have demonstrated that linking among Web sites conforms to a power law distribution, a “rich-get-richer” occurrence in which older nodes of a network receive far more incoming hypertext links than newer nodes (Barabasi & Albert, 1999). Hindman (2009, p. 53) confirmed the existence of a power law distribution among political websites. The blogger Bowers (2007) refers to this as the “short head/long tail” phenomenon (para. 12). Roughly 1% of left-wing political blogs receive more than 95% of all left-wing blog traffic (the “short head”), while the remaining 99% of left-wing political blogs receive less than 5% of all left-wing blog visits (the “long tail”).

We can examine the claims made by scholars, bloggers and journalists about the netroots phenomenon by determining the rate at which a sample of heavily trafficked blogs link to organizations that advocate or raise campaign funding for candidates, parties, or particular public policy issues. The more potential voters and donors who were directed to Web sites that urged readers to action in one of Bimber and Davis’ (2003) four main categories, the greater the impact we can ascribe to blogs and the netroots movement. As Schudson (2003) argued, all media organize not only information but audiences (p. 31), and the creation of an audience around a candidate or an issue is the purpose of netroots. By examining the linking patterns of

both progressive (Democratic) and conservative (Republican) blogs, we can determine to what extent netroots is a Democratic movement.

**RQ1:** What percentage of the total numbers of hypertext links do bloggers use to direct their readers to the Web sites of organizations advocating for candidates and issues?

**RQ2:** Do progressive (Democratic) and conservative (Republican) blogs link to advocacy organizations Web sites at different rates?

### **Method**

The first step in identifying the three most influential progressive blogs and the three most influential conservative blogs was to use a third-part source to sort blogs into those two categories. For this purpose, Politico.com's "Map of the Blogosphere" was used (<http://www.politico.com/blogosphere/>) because it places blogs along the political spectrum and does not include blogs operated by traditional mass media outlets (e.g., newspapers, TV news) that employ salaried journalists.

The next task was to use four different online blog-ranking services to determine which independent political blogs were most influential, based on a combination of daily visitors to each blog and the number of Web sites that link to each political blog (known as "links in").

Four blog-ranking services were consulted on January 8, 2008:

- Nielsen BuzzMetrics' BlogPulse ([http://www.blogpulse.com/08\\_01\\_07/topWeblogGroup.html](http://www.blogpulse.com/08_01_07/topWeblogGroup.html)), which ranks by daily links in;
- Blogrolling.com Hot 500 (no longer available; accessed on January 7, 2008), which also ranks by daily links in;

- Technorati.com (<http://technorati.com/pop/blogs/>), which ranks by a six-month rolling average of links in;
- The Truth Laid Bear Blogosphere Ecosystem (<http://truthlaidbear.com/ecosystem.php>), which ranks by daily visits.

Fifteen political blogs appeared in the top 10 of at least one of the blog-ranking services. To create the list of the three most influential progressive blogs and the three most influential conservative blogs, the top political blog on each site was ranked 1, the second was ranked 2, and so on. Among the four tracking sites, 13 political blogs appeared at or near the top in the rankings and were included in these calculations. Each of those blogs was assigned a score of  $14-n$  for each tracking service where  $n$  equals the rank, so that the top-ranked blog on each blog-ranking Web site received 13 points, the second-ranked blog 12 points and so on. The average of the scores from the four blog ranking systems was calculated and a 1 to 13 overall ranking was created based on the averages. The results appear in Table 1.

Table 1

*Blog Rank, Based on Four Blog-Ranking Services*

BLOG	BlogPulse	Technorati	TLB Eco	Blogrolling	TOTAL
Daily Kos	13	12	13	12	50
Michelle Malkin	10	8	10	10	38
InstaPundit	6	6	12	13	37
Talking Points Memo	11	9		11	31
Crooks and Liars	9	10	11		30
Think Progress	8	11			19
Power Line			7	9	16
Wonkette			8	7	15
Huffington Post		13			13
Huge Hewitt			6	5	11
Eschaton			9		9
Atrios				8	8
Volokh Conspiracy					7
Rightwingnews				6	6

To balance the number of progressive and conservative political blogs studied at three each, the fourth-ranked progressive blog, Think Progress, was deleted to add the third-ranked conservative blog, Power Line. The method produced the following results:

### **Progressive**

- Daily Kos (<http://www.dailykos.com/>)

- Talking Points Memo (<http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/>)
- Crooks and Liars (<http://www.crooksandliars.com/>)

### **Conservative**

- Michelle Malkin (<http://michellemalkin.com/>)
- InstaPundit (<http://www.instapundit.com/>)
- Power Line (<http://www.powerlineblog.com/>)

All the examined links on these six political blogs were followed and coded to determine the number of total links that led the reader to an advocacy organization Web site, with advocacy organization defined as any Web site, including blogs, of a candidate or a partisan fund-raising group, “watchdog” group or single-issue group, in addition to other partisan groups.

The study coded all links on the front pages of the top three progressive and top three conservative political blogs in the U.S. over seven consecutive days — Thursday, January 10, 2008 to Wednesday, January 16, 2008 — during the beginning of the 2008 Democratic and Republican primary season. If a link was to a video on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), the video and the posting details were examined to determine if any advocacy organization posted it.

The total number of links coded was 2,087, with 1,180 links on progressive blogs and 907 links on conservative blogs coded. Links to advocacy organizations were summarized by category as number (N), percent (Pct) and 95% confidence interval (CI). The 95% CI was calculated and the comparison between progressive and conservative blogs was undertaken to account for the clustering within the seven posting days and six blogs using an over-dispersed binomial model that inflates the standard errors.

As a check on the coding, the six blogs were randomly sampled without replacement to be coded by a second coder on one of the seven days in the studied time frame. This assumes

that the ability to categorize links on the days on which each blog was double-coded was representative of the studied time frame. So the linking patterns of a blog on a particular day may not have been representative, the coders assume the ability to code the links was not affected. If Scott's pi for intercoder agreement was above 0.75, the data gathering would continue; if it was below 0.75, the data gathering would cease and begin again at a later time with more extensive training for the second coder. The second coder categorized 78 links. Scott's pi determined an intercoder agreement of 0.808, so the data gathering continued.

### Results

RQ1 asked at what rate bloggers use hypertext links to direct their readers to the Web sites of organizations advocating — and recruiting volunteers and donors — for candidates and issues.

Table 2 summarizes the coding of the 2,087 links found on the main page of each blog, including the total number of links to advocacy organization and a 95% CI. Only 5.7% of links were to advocacy organizations.

Table 2

*Percentage of Links To Advocacy Organizations*

	Total	Advocacy Organizations		
	<i>N</i> (links)	<i>N</i> (links)	Pct.	95% CI
Progressive Blogs	1180	100	8.5%	6.3%-11.3%
Conservative Blogs	907	19	2.1%	1.1%-3.9%
Total	2087	119	5.7%	4.2%-7.7%

RQ2 asked whether progressive and conservative blogs link to advocacy organizations at different rates.

Progressive blogs linked to the Web sites of advocacy organizations at a significantly higher rate than conservative blogs: 8.5%, 95% CI [6.3%, 11.3%] to 2.1%, 95% CI [1.1%, 3.9%] ( $p < .001$ ). As stated earlier, the netroots has so far been primarily a progressive movement, although Republicans have begun to organize their own netroots movement.

The blog Daily Kos, founded and operated by Zuniga, linked to advocacy organizations far more ( $n = 71$ ) than any of the six blogs studied, with Crooks & Liars linking to advocacy organizations 28 times. No other blog linked to advocacy organizations more than six times. Of the progressive blogs, only about half ( $n = 52$ ) of the 100 links to websites of candidates, fundraising groups, voter registration organization or political parties.

Table 3

*Links to Advocacy Organizations by Blog and Category*

	N (links)	Pct.	Candidate	Fundraising	Voter Registration	Political Party	Other <sup>1</sup>
<b>PROGRESSIVE</b>							
Daily Kos	71	11.5%	22	19	1	1	28
Crooks & Liars	28	8.1%	4	3	1	0	20
Talking Points Memo	1	1.8%	1	0	0	0	0
Total Progresssive	100		27	22	2	1	48
Pct. Of All Links	8.47%		2.28%	1.86%	0.02%	0.01%	4.06%
<i>n</i> = 1,180							
<b>CONSERVATIVE</b>							
	N (links)	Pct.	Candidate	Fundraising	Voter Registration	Political Party	Other*
InstaPundit	6	1.3%	3	0	0	0	3
Michelle Malkin	6	1.9%	0	0	0	0	6
Power Line	5	3.6%	1	0	0	0	4
Total Conservative	19		4	0	0	0	13
Pct. Of All Links	1.87%		0.44%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.43%
<i>n</i> = 907							

<sup>1</sup> *Other* = single-issue, legal, think tank, human services, union, anti-candidate, general politics

### Discussion

Whatever role the top political blogs — particularly the progressive blogs — play in the netroots movement, this analysis of their hypertext linking patterns makes it clear they seldom play the role many have claimed for them: urging their readers, by using links to direct them to candidates of fund-raising Web sites, to get directly involved in political campaigns by volunteering or donating. Of the 1,180 links on the three progressive blogs coded, fewer than 1 in 12 directed readers to political advocacy organizations; about 1 in 43 links directed readers to candidates' Web sites, and fewer than 1 in 50 links led to a Web site where reader could make donations to the campaign committees of Democratic candidates. Of the 907 links coded on the three conservative blogs, none directed readers to a website for campaign donations to



Republican candidates, and only four links directed readers to candidates' website. But Republicans have begin to become more active in trying to create a netroots movement of their own. By the summer of 2009, as 1,800 Democratic activists met in Pittsburgh for a "Netroots Nation" convention, Republican activists held the first "RightOnline" convention in the same city, with about a fourth of the conventioners the Democratic activists drew (McNulty, 2009, para. 4). Savvy use of Web tools such as Facebook, Twitter, targeted online ads and fund-raising helped Republican Scott Brown win a U.S. Senate seat in Massachusetts in January 2010 (Finn & Ruffini, 2010, para. 1).

Partisan political blogs may help drive the netroots movement in ways other than the traditional political grassroots function of convincing voters to volunteer for and donate to campaigns, at least in the use of their hypertext links. Perhaps political blogs' most important function is to disseminate a form a partisan propaganda. Sunstein (2007) wrote, "What we know about both links and individual behavior supports the general view that many people are mostly hearing more and louder echoes of their own voices" (p. 55). Davis (2005) argued the goal of many bloggers is "expression and reinforcement, not interaction and exchange" (p. 124).

If netroots, as the neologism implies, is supposed to resemble traditional grassroots organizing, political office-seekers and their campaigns have recognized it and moved with alacrity and sophistication to assert control over the fruits of the netroots movement. In a 1999 book, Davis wrote: "At each innovation in the history of mass communications, existing media and other actors adapted to the new technologies and incorporated them. Rather than losing power, they retained it" (p. 30). That appears to be the case with electronic communication.

Although Obama, as president, has maintained an alliance with political bloggers, it is a wary alliance. A Washington journalist reported in 2009 that Obama not only did not rely on

bloggers for political help, he did not like or trust them. Instead, the White House created its own netroots movement, including blogs, from scratch (Farrell, 2009, para. 2).

What has happened since the rise of netroots, in the 2004 election cycle, is manifest in both the vast number of voters who participated in Obama's campaign through his campaign website and President Obama's disdain for bloggers. Candidates' websites have assumed the functions that were, in early days on the netroots, the province of bloggers. Candidates' websites have become "a virtual home for online supporters" and a "vehicle for fund-raising, message dissemination and voter mobilization" with a plethora of links (Kerbel, 2009, pp. 138-139). Where the 2004 presidential campaign of Howard Dean, generally recognized as one of the key events in the emergence of the netroots, was driven by bloggers and such independent websites as Meetup.org, by 2008 the Obama campaign's website used links to drive readers to events organized and run by the campaign itself "so that the campaign could keep track of what people were doing" (Kerbel, 2009, p. 140). When he took office, according to one newspaper report, President Barack Obama retained a database from his campaign of information of 13 million American who signed to receive electronic news from his campaign. Of that 13 million — about 19% of the 67 million American who voted for Obama — electronically participating in the Obama campaign, 3.1 million Americans contributed a total of \$700 million to the campaign (Bleifuss, 2009, para. 1).

Although bloggers see themselves at the center of the netroots, political campaigns and elected officials have quickly adopted the technology — and the reach — of the Web, e-mail, and instant messaging. Campaigns are now the driving force of the netroots movement not, as this study's data show, political bloggers. The netroots movement, birthed by bloggers, has been taken over by political professionals.

### Limitations and Future Studies

This study chose as its sample six of the most heavily trafficked and widely read political blogs. A random sample of a similar number of blogs may have produced slightly different results, but given that hyperlinking patterns in networks such as the blogosphere follow a power law distribution (Barabasi & Albert, 1999), examining the most heavily linked-to and trafficked blogs allows this study to gather data on blogs that are opinion leaders and serve other bloggers as exemplars of how a blog should be organized and written. The power law distribution also suggests that a more robust sample would have produced similar data.

Future studies may want to examine a larger sample size, or may want to conduct ethnographic or survey research among political bloggers and blog readers to determine if and how, specifically, political blogs spur their readers to political activism, making campaign contributions, and voting. Data for link click-through rates in political blogs is proprietary and was thus unavailable for this study. Survey research querying political bloggers about which links in their blogs receive the most click-throughs could be a fruitful inquiry for future studies.

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