

Canadian Political Blogs: Online Soapboxes or Forums for Democratic Dialogue?

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Once an obscure technology used by particularly savvy Internet users, weblogs (blogs) have become a mainstream form of communication on the Internet. There are millions of weblogs on-line in which Internet users post their thoughts on all kinds of topics, from their families to their hobbies to celebrity gossip. Some Internet users, however, use their blogs to post their views on politics, and may engage other bloggers in debate. It is these political weblogs that we are interested in here.

With their low cost and relative ease of use, political weblogs have the potential to open up political debate. In contrast to traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television, weblogs could allow people to have a political voice and engage in debate and discussion with others. On the other hand, weblogs could also end up being soapboxes, where users can post anything they want, with little thought or deliberation. Furthermore, there is also the potential that real debate between people of different perspectives could be inhibited by weblogs. An Internet user could potentially read only those weblogs with which he or she agrees. Furthermore, weblogs themselves could only engage in dialogue with weblogs that share a similar ideological persuasion. In this way, both bloggers and their readers could avoid having contact with ideas and perspectives that challenge their ideological beliefs. If democratic debate involves addressing arguments other than your own, weblogs could be seen as an unhealthy development.

In this paper, we seek to address this question through an empirical analysis of Canadian political weblogs. We begin by describing both the political weblog and blogroll phenomenon in Canada. Then, building on our previous work on Internet discussion boards (Jansen and Koop, 2005), we analyze the patterns of political blog posts over a one week period. We then try to assess the ways in which blogs could be seen as a forum for political deliberation, examining in particular the equality of participation and the patterns of agreement and disagreement.

Blogs and Blogrolls

A weblog, or blog, may be defined as a web page that hosts a personal diary. Entries to blogs, like those of a diary, are ordered in reverse chronological order and oftentimes contain hyperlinks to other online sources (Blood, 2002). Blogs came into being in the mid-1990s when programmers posted journals online and linked to one another (Keren, 2004). By 2000, free and accessible blogger software was easily available to anyone with an internet connection (Drezner and Farrell, 2004: 6; Bedell, 2000: 8) and, partially as a result, blog use has grown dramatically. Technorati, arguably the most respected search engine for weblogs, tracks 37.7 million weblogs. The number is growing steadily: Technorati estimates that 75,000 new blogs are started each day (Technorati.com, 2006). By the end of 2004, the Pew Internet & American Life project estimated that 7% of American Internet users had established blogs, while 27% of American Internet users (32 million people) read blogs (Rainie, 2005). Although comparable statistics are not

available for Canadian Internet users, there is no reason to expect that there are significant differences in this respect north of the border.

Just as the number of blogs has proliferated, so too have the number of academic studies of blogs. Drezner and Farrell report a steady increase in academic studies that contain references to blogging, from 11 in between 1995 and 1999 to 647 in 2003 alone (2004: 5). These studies have examined blogs from predominantly four theoretical perspectives: Blogs as challenges to the traditional media, blogs as autobiographical artifacts, blogs as the building blocks of online communities, and blogs as forums for democratic deliberation. We examine political blogs from the third and fourth perspectives. Using a variety of measures, we assess the extent to which the blogs present in our sample act as forums for political deliberation and the potential for blogrolls to become meaningful online communities within which deliberation between bloggers can take place.

The academic study of blogs is a strange fit with traditional research methods employed in political science. Keren (2004) notes that the populations of such studies may be skewed as a result of the fleeting nature of blogs. In addition, we know little about the bloggers themselves, other than their “handles” and any other information they care to post about themselves. We address these problems in two ways. First, this study’s unit of analysis is the blog itself. What is of interest here is the content of the blogs and their posts, not the person(s) writing that content. Second, this study defines its population solely on the basis of membership in one of three partisan blogrolls that exist within Canada.

A blogroll is defined simply as a list of hyperlinks on a blog to other blogs (McKenna and Pole, 2004: 2), a practice that originated with programmers linking to each other’s online journals in the mid-nineties.¹ Inclusion on blogrolls is valued by bloggers because it represents more links to and therefore visits to their blogs. The advent of automated blogrolling software, such as that provided by blogrolling.com, has allowed bloggers to create unique blogrolls tailored to different identities. The “Blogs for Bush” blogroll, to provide a prominent example, was explicitly created to coordinate pro-Bush sentiments during the 2004 election and included over 1700 individual blogs in January 2006.

Although blogrolls are important in the United States, they are even more important in Canada. Almost all Canadian political blogs are part of a blogroll. At the time of our analysis, Canadian blogrolls existed for residents of B.C., Alberta, and Ontario, social conservatives, “progressive” bloggers, and non-partisans. Of particular interest in our study, however, is the phenomenon of partisan blogrolls. There are three major blogrolls, organized around the three major political parties in (English-speaking) Canada. This phenomenon appears to be unique to Canada. In our examination of blogs and blogrolls in the United States and the United Kingdom, we could find nothing similar.

Blogrolls are important, because they form a potential basis for an online community. Blogrolls are generally hosted on their own sites and will be visited by members of that

¹ The term may have derived from the slang “bog roll,” which refers to a roll of toilet paper.

blogroll, although they are open to anyone to visit. On the host sites, an aggregator summarizing the most recent blog posts can usually be found, as well as other links and stories of interest. The Blogging Tories host site contains RSS feeds for press releases from the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, the National Citizens Coalition, and, most prominently, the party itself. Bloggers may also schedule social events and “blog parties” through the blogrolls, adding a more tangible sense of community to the blogroll.

Canadian political blogs began to coalesce around individual blogrolls in late 2004. The Blogging Tories (<http://www.bloggingtories.ca/>) community began as the “Blogs for the CPC” list which was hosted on the Canadian blog “Conservative Life.”² Coverage of the new group demonstrates the influence that the “Blogs for Bush” blogroll exercised over its creation:

‘Blogs for Bush’ was an important blogroll that helped spread the conservative message across America. Despite the fact that we have many great conservative bloggers, Canada's blogosphere lacks the depth and organization of our American cousins. “Blogs for the CPC” is an attempt to centralize conservative Canadian blogs into one central list... Many speculate that the current minority government will fall after the upcoming budget in March. If this happens it is imperative that Canadian bloggers band together to form a comprehensive and organized alternative to the liberal mainstream media.³

In response to the success of the Blogging Tories, the Lib Logs (<http://liblogs.freethought.ca/>) and Blogging Dippers (<http://dippers.myblahg.com/>) sites were created in May and April of 2005, respectively. The administrators of these blogrolls have developed the concept far beyond that of a list of links to other blogs. The Blogging Tories website, for example, now acts as a repository of partisan video and the administrator of Lib Logs is working to convert the blogroll into a non-profit corporation.⁴

We restrict our analysis to blogs enrolled in one of these three partisan blogrolls because this helps us to limit our population of blogs in a meaningful way. Furthermore, since our primary interest in this paper is to examine how bloggers from different ideological perspectives interact with one another, the use of partisan blogrolls allows us to categorize blogs into one of three partisan and, to the extent that Canadian political parties represent distinct ideological positions, ideological categories. Rather than having to assign blogs arbitrarily to one position or another, the use of blogrolls in our analysis essentially permits bloggers to identify their blogs with one of three positions.

² <http://conservativelife.com/>

³ <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1309958/posts>

⁴ There is also a Green blogroll as well. It is relatively new, however, so we excluded it from our analysis.

Methodology

In this article, we build upon our methodology previously used to assess the potential of online message boards to be vehicles of political deliberation (Jansen and Koop, 2005). That methodology consisted of a content analysis of either a population or sample of posts on a single message board. This approach allowed us to draw broad conclusions about the message board that were easily comparable to other studies. In particular, we found that the message board studied was dominated by a small group of users and that these users preferred to take the role “amateur pundits” in their emphasis on parties and leaders, rather than issues. Such a methodology is easily transferable to this study of political blogs.

For each day in the period of October 1 to October 7, 2005 (inclusive), we coded each post in each blog on the three partisan blogrolls for certain characteristics. This period, in contrast to, for example, the highly charged atmosphere of an election campaign, was selected in order to acquire a relatively normal picture of discussion on blogs. In total, we coded 998 posts to 299 blogs. Because Internet users abandon weblogs quite frequently (the blogs are typically not deleted, but are rather left dormant), we decided to restrict our attention to those blogs that had demonstrated some staying power. In coding blog posts, we disqualified blogs that had not posted any messages a month before September 1 or any messages a month after October 7.

Table 1 summarizes the number of blogs, posts, and average number of posts per blog for each of the three partisan blogrolls. It is important to note that there are more blogs than this enrolled in these blogrolls. These numbers represent those blogs that were active in the month preceding and following the period of study.

Table 1
The Blogrolls

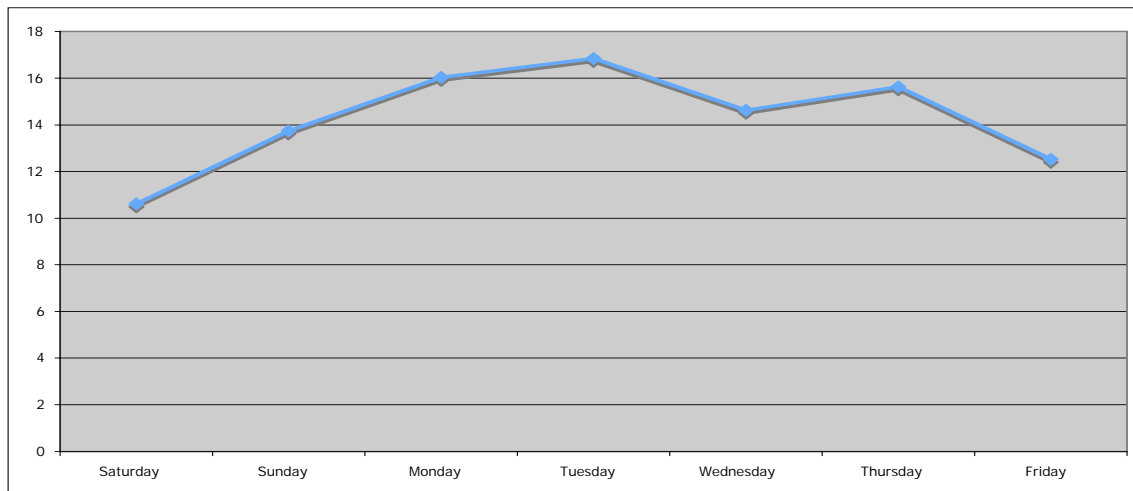
	Total Blogs	Total Posts	Average posts per blog
Blogging Tories	165	717	4.4
Lib Logs	38	123	3.2
Blogging Dippers	26	157	6.0
Totals	229	997	4.4

Of the three blogrolls, the Blogging Tories boast the largest number of affiliate blogs. The Lib Logs and Blogging Dippers blogrolls fall well behind the Blogging Tories on this score. Although this may reflect the fact that the Blogging Tories were organized first and thus have a headstart over their counterparts, this finding is also consistent with the observation that right-wing discussants on the internet are more prevalent than left-wing users (Hill & Hughes, 1997: 12; Davis, 1999: 156).

Bloggers posted an average of 4.4 posts a week. Differences, however, exist between the blogrolls. The Blogging Dipper blogs posted on average the highest number of posts. The Lib Logs blogs, on the other hand, posted less frequently than the Blogging Dippers and the Blogging Tories. An interesting parallel to this finding exists in the organizational literature on Canadian political parties (see: Duverger, 1955: 63). In this literature, the Liberal Party's cadre organization shrinks and party activism becomes sparse between elections while the NDP's mass organization maintains its activist base between elections (Carty, 1994: 138). Given that the period of observation for this study was outside an election campaign, our finding of high online activity for the NDP and low activity for the Liberals provides an online substantiation of sorts to this organizational view of the two parties.

Variation also exists in the number of posts by day of the week. In our analysis of message boards, we observed that users were less likely to participate on weekends than they were on weekdays (Jansen and Koop, 2005: 617). The same can be said of blogging, with bloggers less likely to post on Fridays or weekends than on weekdays, as can be seen in Figure 1. This finding, while not particularly strong, challenges the stereotype of bloggers as anti-social hermits who spend every non-working hour communicating with others online. In other words, it suggests that bloggers do have "lives."

Figure 1
Percentage of posts by day



While our selection of partisan blogrolls ensures that most of the blogs examined will give some attention to political issues, this is not always the case. Bloggers whose primary interest is politics may also use their blogs as online diaries or forums for discussion on random issues, which would decrease the likelihood that blogs could contribute to a meaningful political discussion online (Carl, 2003: 66). Table 2 summarizes the percentages of blog posts that addressed political issues by blogroll:

Table 2
Political and Non-Political Posts

	Blogging Tories	Lib Logs	Blogging Dippers
Political	496 (69.2)	76 (61.8)	104 (66.2)
Non-Political	221 (30.8)	47 (38.2)	53 (33.8)
Totals	717	123	157

On average, roughly a third of all blogs posts in the period analyzed were non-political in nature. Members of the partisan blogrolls focused largely on politics but also used their blogs to discuss personal issues as well as non-political issues such as music or Hollywood celebrities. Overall, however, these blogs were dedicated to politics. The total number of non-political posts is not, in our view, high enough to detract from blogs' abilities to act as forums for meaningful political discussion online.

Equality of Participation

In contrast to other forms of political communication through mediums such as television and radio, online political communication is open to a greater number of participants and allows for greater interactive discussion between participants. This is particularly true for blogs because the cost of blogging is very low (especially since the advent of free blogger software) and interactions between bloggers are made possible through commenting on blog posts. As such, blogging may rectify two of the characteristics of mass society identified by C. Wright Mills: "In a mass, (1) far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the community of publics becomes an abstract collection of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media. (2) The communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect" (Mills, 1965: 304). This raises the question of equality of participation. The extent to which equality of participation exists in and among blogging communities therefore affects the extent to which bloggers can, through their blogs, engage in democratic deliberation with one another.

Studies of political discussion on Usenet forums found that this discussion tends to be dominated by a relatively small cadre of users. Both Schneider (1996) and Davis (1999) found that discussion on the Usenet forums they analyzed was dominated by a small group of regulars who drowned out contributions from other participants. Our study of web-based discussion boards in the 2000 Canadian federal election and the 2001 British Columbia provincial election replicated these findings. Four users accounted for roughly a third of the messages posted to the BC Votes board during the BC election campaign, while six users accounted for nearly half of the messages posted to the Bourque Board during the period analyzed (Jansen and Koop, 2005: 618, 627). These findings suggested that the inequality of participation present in Usenet discussions may be a phenomenon associated with online discussion in general.

Our analysis of blogs, however, suggests that blogs and blogroll communities exhibit more equality of participation than do Usenet forums or online message boards. Table 3 summarizes the total number of posts on blogs by user class, a term which refers to the frequency with which users post messages (Jansen and Koop, 2005: 618). The number of users column includes only bloggers who posted during the period analyzed.

Table 3
Users and posts by user class

User Class	Blogging Tories		Lib Loggers		Blogging Dippers		Total	
	Users	Posts	Users	Posts	Users	Posts	Users	Posts
0 posts	60	0	17	0	9	0	83	0
1-5 posts	68 (64.8%)	175 (24.4%)	11 (52.4%)	30 (24.4%)	7 (41.1%)	11 (7.0%)	86 (60.1%)	216 (21.7%)
6-15 posts	26 (24.8%)	241 (33.6%)	9 (42.8%)	77 (62.6%)	7 (41.1%)	71 (45.2%)	42 (29.4%)	389 (39.0%)
16-30 posts	7 (6.7%)	155 (21.6%)	1 (4.8%)	16 (13.0%)	3 (17.6%)	75 (47.8%)	11 (7.7%)	246 (24.7%)
31+ posts	4 (3.8%)	146 (20.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (2.8%)	146 (14.6%)
Total*	105 (100%)	717 (100%)	21 (100%)	113 (100%)	17 (100%)	157 (100%)	143 (100%)	997 (100%)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages, excluding blogs that had no posts in the period under study.

* - Total excludes blogs that had no posts in the period under study.

It is clear from Figure 3 that blogging communities do exhibit a certain inequality of participation. Taken as a whole, the partisan blogging community in Canada is dominated by a handful of bloggers. 15 of the 226 blogs were responsible for almost 40% of the messages in the partisan blogging community. That pattern of inequality is replicated within each blogroll as well. While these heavy users were responsible for a disproportionate share of the total blog posts, this concentration is much less pronounced than found in previous studies of web-based discussion boards or Usenet. This suggests that, by allowing each blogger her or his own space to air their views, blogging as a forum for expression may encourage somewhat greater equality of participation than older forms of Internet-based political discussion.

Issues, Parties, and Leaders

The unidirectional communication of information from media to viewers in traditional mediums necessarily means that the media determines which issues, parties, and leaders to focus on. One appeal of new mediums such as the Internet is the potential for greater interactive communication between participants. This is particularly true for bloggers, who may use their blogs to focus on issues and parties that the media is seen to ignore. Indeed, one of the favorite topics of many bloggers is to deride the “MSM” – the

mainstream media. This may be particularly true with regards to parties and leaders where the media, taking its cue from the single-member plurality electoral system, focuses on only the major parties (Trimble and Sampert, 2004: 61-63).

Bloggers exhibited diversity in the topics addressed in their posts. Table 4 organizes these topics into three groups: party politics, Canadian issues, and international.

Table 4
Post Issues

Issue Group	Issue	Blogging Tories	Lib Logs	Blogging Dippers
Party Politics	Party Matters	88 (17.7)	14 (18.2)	10 (9.7)
	Leaders	13 (2.6)	0	3 (2.9)
	Scandals	80 (16.1)	5 (6.5)	1 (1.0)
	Total	181 (36.5)	19 (24.7)	14 (13.6)
Canadian Issues	Finance	29 (5.8)	7 (9.1)	14 (13.6)
	Institutional Reform	9 (1.8)	0	1 (1.0)
	Legal/Law & Order	18 (3.6)	1 (1.3)	4 (3.9)
	Media	28 (5.6)	7 (9.1)	9 (8.7)
	Moral Issues	30 (6.0)	6 (7.8)	5 (4.9)
	Provincial or Local Issues	16 (3.2)	8 (10.4)	2 (1.9)
	Social Issues	33 (6.7)	5 (5.6)	6 (5.8)
	Total	163 (32.9)	34 (44.2)	44 (39.8)
International	International Issues	44 (8.9)	3 (3.9)	16 (15.5)
	Terrorism	16 (3.2)	0	0
	US Politics	49 (9.9)	12 (15.6)	23 (22.3)
	Total	109 (22.0)	15 (19.5)	39 (37.9)
Other		43 (8.7)	9 (11.7)	9 (8.7)
Total		496	77	103

Blogging Tories bloggers posted the most entries in the party politics category. Only 13.6% of posts by Blogging Dippers, on the other hand, addressed party politics. While Blogging Tories and Lib Logs discussed party matters in almost equal proportions, the Blogging Tories posted by far the most messages (16.1%) on government scandals. As

could be expected, Liberal bloggers were less likely to write about the ongoing scandals of the troubled Liberal government. Interestingly, Blogging Dippers rarely approached the topic. It appears that the Blogging Tories took their role as opposition against the government seriously whereas the Blogging Dippers' attentions were directed elsewhere.

In contrast, Liberal bloggers discussed substantive issues more often than the other partisan bloggers. Blogging Dippers were also focused on issues, whereas Blogging Tories were the least likely to address issues. This tendency on the part of the Blogging Dippers reinforces the perception held of the NDP as an ideological party and challenges the perception of the Liberal Party as a group of individuals more interested in brokering interests than in discussing and developing policies. Liberal bloggers are one sector of the party that takes the function of policy development seriously.

While Blogging Tories were the only bloggers to post messages concerned primarily with terrorism, the Blogging Dippers posted the most messages related to international issues (37.9%). This dominance of the international category was reinforced by these bloggers' interest in American politics, an interest that was oftentimes characterized by a dislike of the Bush Administration.

Our analysis of the BC Votes message board during the 2001 BC provincial election found that users there were preoccupied with BC's political parties. In total, 57.1% of the messages posted to the board mentioned one of these parties by name. This preoccupation contributed to our characterization of message board users as amateur pundits. In contrast, leaders were paid comparatively little attention on the board. They were mentioned by name in only 17.1% of the messages posted (Jansen and Koop, 2005: 621). Is the same pattern seen on weblogs? Table 5 summarizes the total number of blog posts which specifically mention a party or leader and presents this data as a percentage of all posts and political posts only:

**Table 5:
Party and leader mentions**

	Posts	% of all posts	% of political posts
Party Mentions	320	32.1	47.3
Leader Mentions	135	13.5	20.0

Roughly 32% of all posts explicitly mentioned political parties while 13.5% mentioned parties. This represents significantly fewer mentions than on the BC Votes Board. Users of the BC Votes board and members of these partisan blogrolls, however, faced differing incentives to discussion of parties and leaders. BC Votes was a message board designed to last only for a specific election campaign. Users were encouraged to address issues relating to the day-by-day occurrences of the campaign. The period of analysis for the partisan blogrolls, on the other hand, fell outside an election campaign. It is to be

expected that parties and leaders would be more widely discussed during an election campaign.

Where bloggers did mention parties and leaders, what differences existed between the different partisan blogrolls? Table 6 summarizes the number of mentions of parties and leaders by blogroll.

Table 6
Mentions of Parties and Leaders

	Blogging Tories	Lib Logs	Blogging Dippers		Blogging Tories	Lib Logs	Blogging Dippers
Liberal	137 (56.8)	15 (39.5)	17 (41.5)	Martin	55 (57.3)	12 (54.5)	5 (29.4)
Conserv	66 (27.4)	18 (47.4)	10 (24.4)	Harper	33 (34.4)	9 (40.9)	7 (41.2)
NDP	29 (12.0)	4 (10.5)	13 (31.7)	Layton	7 (7.3)	1 (4.5)	4 (23.5)
BQ	9 (3.7)	1 (2.6)	1 (2.4)	Duceppe	1 (1.0)	0	1 (5.9)
Totals	241	38	41	Totals	96	22	17

Table six suggests that partisan blogs are not echo chambers where like-minded partisans go to compliment one another, their party, and their leader. To the contrary, bloggers in all three groups were most likely to mention parties other than their own. Blogging Tories and Blogging Dippers were most likely to mention the Liberal Party while Lib Logs were most likely to mention the Tories. This anticipated the dynamics of the 2005-2006 federal election, where the Conservatives and NDP spent their time attacking the Liberals and Paul Martin, while the Liberals focused their attention on their major electoral threat: the Conservatives.

Table 7 reinforces the view that partisan bloggers were following their leaders in attacking other parties. We coded each party and leader mention as positive, negative, and neutral. Table 7 presents the averages of these responses where a positive response is 1, a negative response is -1, and a neutral response is coded as 0:

Table 7
Positive and Negative Mentions of Parties and Leaders

	Liberal	Conserv	NDP	Martin	Harper	Layton
BT	-.72	.17	-.48	-.79	.24	-.57
LL	.47	-.56	0	-.17	-.89	0
BD	-.41	-.6	.62	0	-.86	.75

In total, the average across all blogrolls for parties was -.34 and the average for leaders was -.39. This reinforces the reputations that blogs have for negativity. It is also consistent with the predominant negativity we found in on-line message boards (Jansen & Koop, 2005: 623). It further reinforces a predominant impression of Internet users as excessively critical (Marzolini, 1999).

As is to be expected, the partisan blogroll that a blog belongs to helps to determine that blog's treatment of the parties and leaders. In all cases, blogrolls gave their own parties a positive average score and negative average scores to the other parties. The same can generally be said about leaders, with the exception of Lib Log bloggers on Paul Martin. The Prime Minister's poor performance evidently made it difficult even for partisan bloggers to say much good about him. It may also reflect the lingering divisions among Liberals in the aftermath of Martin's lengthy and divisive struggle to gain the leadership of the party. In addition, the negativity appears to have been deeply personal, as the negativity of bloggers' criticisms was sharper for leaders than it was for parties. Despite Stephen Harper's revitalization of his personal image during the course of the campaign, Lib Logs and Blogging Dippers bloggers returned an extremely negative average score for him. The Blogging Tories were not far behind in their assessments of Paul Martin. Jack Layton emerged as the least criticized leader.

Ideology and Patterns of Agreement and Disagreement

Communities that are characterized by extreme agreement and reinforcement of ideological positions are not conducive to democratic deliberation. Critics of online deliberation point out that a public forum requires access to conflicting and divergent opinions (Sunstein, 2001: 39). The diversity of online communities, however, allows users to immerse themselves in a community where their ideological opinions will be reinforced rather than challenged. Online communities should be characterized by ideological diversity and a certain degree of disagreement among participants in order to provide forums for democratic deliberation.

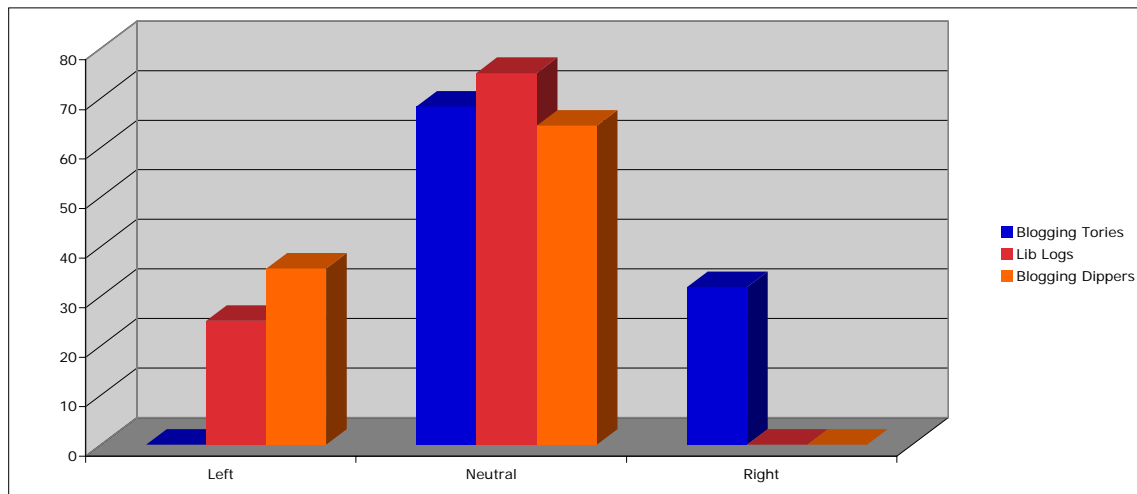
Our coding of partisan blogs involved judging the ideological character of posts as either left-wing, right-wing, or neutral, which was applied only to posts that were political in nature. In total, 674 blogs were coded for ideology. Of these, 461 were neutral, 157 were right-wing, and 56 were left-wing in nature.

There were almost three times as many right-wing as left-wing posts on partisan blogs in the period analyzed. This finding is consistent with other studies that found that the right is over-represented in online discussion and deliberation (Hill & Hughes, 1997: 12; Davis, 1999: 156). Interestingly, the blogs analyzed were generally less ideological than other studies have indicated Usenet discussions are. Hill and Hughes determined that 42% of the Usenet posts they analyzed were non-ideological in nature, as compared to the 69% of non-ideological posts we observed on political blogs. The blogs are more similar to the BC Votes Board in this regard, where a similarly high percentage of posts (70.5%) were non-ideological. It appears to be the case that the move away from Usenet

and towards online message boards and blogs has seen a relative decline of ideology in online discussion, although this may also reflect a political culture difference between Canadian political discussion on-line and American-dominated Usenet discussions.

Differences in the ideological nature of posts can naturally be explained by partisan blogrolls that blogs are in. We would expect that the membership in the Blogging Tories would contribute to more right-wing posts and membership in the Blogging Dippers to contribute to more left-wing posts. Figure two illustrates the total percentage of political posts in each blogroll that were coded for ideology:

Figure 2
Ideological Posts



Ideological balkanization is apparent between the blogrolls. Not a single post by a Blogging Tories blog was coded as left-wing and no Lib Log or Blogging Dipper blog posted a right-wing message. The creation of these blogrolls was intended to separate the Canadian blogging community by partisanship, but it effectively separated that same community by ideology. The extent of this balkanization, however, should not be overstated: the majority of political posts in each blogroll could not be coded for either a left or right-wing orientation.

Although this ideological balkanization is to be expected, we are also interested in the extent to which bloggers engage one another in debate. We would argue that democratic deliberation on-line would require bloggers to deal with the arguments proposed by other bloggers, particularly those with whom they might disagree. On message boards, agreement and disagreement is signaled by responding to a previous message. In blogs, this takes a different form, because of the structural differences that exist between the two online forums. For blogging communities, we are concerned with the extent to which bloggers integrate their blogs with one another by a) linking to other blogs in their own posts and b) commenting on one another's blogs.

Linking, a hypertext link from one blog to another, represents a disjointed conversation between bloggers. As an online reference, links enable bloggers to direct their readers to other blogs before affirming or passing judgement on the linked-to post. A high degree of linking would therefore indicate a blogging community that is well-integrated, whereas a low degree of linking would substantiate the view of bloggers as atomistic and, indeed, would call into question the existence of a blogging community. If bloggers do not link to another blog, the next best thing they can do is visit another blog and leave a comment on that blog regarding a specific post. A high degree of commenting indicates that bloggers are visiting and interacting with one another, revealing a community among bloggers.

For each blog post, we coded for whether that post linked to another blog and, if so, which blogroll the blog linked to. We also coded for the number of comments on the posts. Table 8 summarizes the total number of posts with links and the average number of links that were contained within those posts by blogroll:

Table 8
Linking Behavior

	Posts with links (%)	Average links (in posts with links)
Blogging Tories	181 (25.2)	1.2
Lib Logs	27 (22.0)	1.8
Blogging Dippers	39 (25.0)	1.2
Total	247 (24.7)	1.2

In total, roughly a quarter of all the blog posts in the period analyzed contained links to other blogs. The average number of links within these posts was 1.2, and most posts with links had only a single link. Interestingly, there were no significant differences between the blogrolls on either of these measures. While Lib Logs blogs posted fewer posts with links, the posts with links tended to have more than those on the other blogrolls.

We also coded where blogs link to in their posts, or to which blogrolls posts link. A significant proportion of linking within blogrolls would suggest that a community has developed around the blogroll and that members of the blogroll engage in online conversations with one another. A significant number of links to members of other blogrolls, on the other hand, would signal a lack of insularity among the blogrolls and indicate that bloggers are capable of reaching beyond their communities in order to engage partisan opponents. Arguably, this reflects a greater degree of democratic deliberation. Table 9 summarizes where bloggers in the different blogrolls linked:

Table 9
Direction of Links

	Link to BT	Link to LL	Link to BD	Link to Other
Blogging Tories	101 (51.8)	7 (3.6)	5 (2.6)	82 (42.1)
Lib Logs	8 (24.2)	14 (42.4)	3 (9.1)	8 (24.2)
Blogging Dippers	4 (10.0)	2 (5.0)	12 (30.0)	22 (55.0)

Blogging Tories and Lib Logs blogs were most likely to link to other blogs within their blogrolls, whereas Blogging Dippers blogs were less likely to do so. To a much more limited extent, blogs in all three blogrolls demonstrated a willingness to engage partisan opponents on other blogrolls by linking to them. A significant number of links were also directed to blogs that were not included in any of the three partisan blogrolls. The highest average in this regard was for the Blogging Dippers blogroll, where more than half the posts linked to blogs not included on any of the three blogrolls. Given the enormous number of blogs that exist, it is remarkable that the percentage of links to other blogs was not higher.

The linking behavior of partisan blogs demonstrated that partisan blogrolls have begun to assume a meaningful role as community for their member blogs, creating a context within which bloggers communicate with one another through their hypertext links. Partisan blogrolls play a role in stopping blogs from becoming atomistic and self-congratulatory. Differences exist in this regard: The Blogging Dippers, the newest and smallest of the blogrolls, is less integrated than the other two blogrolls. There is evidence, however, that blogroll communities can be accused of being somewhat insular. There appears to be little attempt to engage members of other blogrolls. The Liberal bloggers appear somewhat more likely to do this than their counterparts in other parties. It is notable, however, that the blogroll communities rather than the individual blogs themselves are insular.

Finally, we coded the number of comments that appear on each post. In addition to links, comments make blogging a less atomistic enterprise and encourage discussion of the issues bloggers are concerned with. Table 10 summarizes the average number of posts with comments by blogroll.

Perhaps reflecting the more integrated Blogging Tories community, BT blog posts were most likely to receive comments. Over half of the posts by Blogging Tories received at least a single comment. Posts by Blogging Dippers, on the other hand, saw the largest average number of comments. Whereas BT posts were most successful in sparking discussion, BD posts provoked the longest discussions in the comments sections.

Table 10
Numbers of Comments

	Posts with comments (%)	Average comment per post
Blogging Tories	391 (54.5)	6.7
Lib Logs	41 (33.3)	6.9
Blogging Dippers	64 (41.0)	8.7

This reinforces the conclusion that weblogs do not exist in isolation. People read and take the time to comment on posts. A significant proportion of blog posts generate comments and often there are lengthy strings of comments after blog posts. Unfortunately, we did not have the resources for a more detailed analysis of comments, including patterns of agreement and disagreement.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have tried to assess the extent to which weblogs and blogrolls provide the possibility or even the reality of democratic deliberation. Our analysis has found that, like other forms of on-line political discussion, there is certainly some problem with equality of participation. The partisan blogging community as a whole, as well as each individual blogroll, tends to be dominated by a relatively small number of bloggers. Although these bloggers are people who presumably would not have a voice on their own and in that sense blogging can be seen as equalizing the expression of political views, clearly a small number of bloggers tend to dominate the conversation. The encouraging thing is that we found greater equality of participation among bloggers than has been found in previous studies on on-line political discussion.

We also found that, unlike the media, the discussions of bloggers are not dominated by major political parties and leaders. Bloggers talk about a lot of political things, and only some of them are about parties and leaders. When they do discuss parties and leaders, however, that discussion is decidedly negative. Partisan bloggers tend to spend their time attacking other leaders and parties rather than saying positive things about their own.

Finally, we examined the patterns of ideological agreement and disagreement. We did find some evidence of ideological balkanization. Conservatives simply did not post messages that could be construed as “left wing” and New Democrats correspondingly did not post “right wing” messages. That said, we did find some willingness of bloggers to engage others on-line and in some cases, that engagement crossed partisan lines. The record here is somewhat mixed, however, as in many cases, relatively few links crossed partisan lines. It seems clear, though, that weblogs (at least those that enroll in a blogroll)

are not simply soapboxes for people to spout off. People's ideas are read, debated, and discussed.

The study of political weblogs in Canada is in its infancy and, clearly, there is much more work that needs to be done. Future research needs to analyze blogs over a longer time period in order to get a more representative sample of blog posts. Furthermore, the nature of discussion through comments needs to be analyzed. A more complete picture of the political blogging community in Canada would also require an analysis of some of the larger non-partisan blogrolls, such as the non-partisan blogrolls and the Progressive bloggers. As Internet technology continues to evolve, it provides more opportunities and challenges for democratic deliberation. Understanding these is increasingly critical to understanding democracy in 21st century Canada.

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