Introduction/Lit Review/Research Design

Introduction

In my research, I will be attempting to answer the following question: what impact, if any, did the rise of political activity on the Internet have on Democratic victories in the midterm elections of 2006? And, if it did, how can this impact be understood in terms of new means of political participation? In the objective analysis of the election, I will be focusing on the impact of left-wing political websites in fundraising and voter mobilization in various Senate and House races. In my explanation of this potential phenomenon, I will attempt to understand political participation over the Internet in terms of three major concepts: individually-motivated participation, externally-motivated participation, and modern developments in information dissemination and participation (social epidemiology, participatory and collaborative websites, etc.).

Few could doubt the rising impact of the Internet on all aspects of our lives. It makes sense then, that the realm of politics is not exempt from this transformation. Over the past few election cycles, a class of political websites, or "blogs", has emerged as a powerful force in American politics. Through fundraising and ground work, Daily Kos, the pre-eminent left-wing political blog, single-handedly guided an unknown, Ned Lamont, to a victory over the incumbent, Sen. Joe Lieberman, in the Connecticut Democratic primary. The list of successful candidates who found their start on Daily Kos includes Senators Jon Tester and Jim Webb, and Representatives Tim Walz, Jerry McNerney, and Joe Sestak, among others. Were the Netroots, the left-wing blogosphere, the driving movement behind the Democratic resurgence of 2006, or were they simply in

the right place at the right time? The answer to this question will likely enlighten us to the future role of the Internet in politics. The nature of this role will dictate change on a number of fronts in American electoral politics: common qualities of successful candidates, strategies and effectiveness of political campaigns, accountability of politicians (both within their local constituency and to the national party), and regulatory campaign law. Thus, my inquiry addresses the future of politics in the light of new technological development. As communication grows ever faster and more comprehensive, the American political system will undergo great change. An examination of our most recent elections may shed some light on how that great change will manifest itself.

Review of the Literature

There has been some scholarship on the Internet and its effect on political participation, but little has been written specifically about the effect of blogs. As these blogs grow in influence and number, it will become increasingly necessary to account for their existence in any comprehensive examination of political participation. Assessing their current level of influence and investigating how they fit into the larger context of political participation literature is a good and necessary first step in incorporating them fully into our academic understanding of politics.

In this review, I will begin by summarizing the classical view of political participation, without reference to the impact of the Internet. Next, I will examine the more recent scholarship on the impact of the Internet on participation theory, in particular examining the radically changed cost/benefit model for individual participation and the potential for change in direct and indirect mobilization. I will also attempt to reconcile the work of one particular thinker, Malcolm Gladwell, with both traditional participation theory and newer models of participation. Finally, I will assess where my research may fit in the larger context of scholarship on the topics of participation and politics on the Internet.

I.   **Political Participation**

Scholarship in the field of participation has a fairly singular focus. Why do people participate in politics, when do they do it, and how do they do so? Literature on the subject tends to begin with a distinction between individually-motivated political participation and externally-motivated political participation. In general, individually-motivated political participation falls under the category of *why* people participate. It

identifies certain characteristics or tendencies that lend themselves to political participation. On the other hand, externally-motivated participation tends to fall under the category of *when* people participate and *how* they do so. The ways in which individuals are approached to participate politically go a long way to defining when they will do it and how they will do so.

Examinations of individually-motivated political participation focus on those personal characteristics that might make one more or less likely to participate in politics. These characteristics include personality traits, such as a sense of citizenship, specific circumstances, such as strong identification with a candidate, and cultural or socioeconomic labels, such as ethnicity or income level. Additionally, an individual-level approach to participation may be seen through the lens of a cost/benefit analysis. As suggested by Rosenstone and Hansen, individuals generally participate when the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs.[1] Clearly, however, the context for participation is quite important, as the level of participation varies despite the relative consistency of the personal characteristics of the potential participants.

Thus, examinations of external motivations for political participation are crucial in aiding our understanding of when those people who are primed for participation by the aforementioned characteristics do actually act, and in what context they do so. Examinations of political mobilization, defined as "the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate," focus on ascertaining *who* is targeted by mobilization efforts and *when* mobilization efforts occur.[2] Scholars tend to view externally-motivated participation as the product of political strategy. The

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[1] Rosenstone, S., and Hansen, J. M. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan, 1993.
[2] Rosenstone and Hansen. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, p. 25.

specific targets and the timing of the targeting reflect an attempt by the political actor to most efficiently generate political action toward its desired end. Thus, political actors attempting to induce participation may engage in "rational prospecting," a process by which recruiters "seek individuals with characteristics that predispose them to political activity."[3]

Without doubt, individual and external motivations for political participation are inextricably linked. A group of individuals may be ripe for participation, but without the proper prompting from an outside source, they may never realize this potential. On the other hand, political mobilization strategies rely heavily on understanding the conditions necessary for individual participation. Much of the debate in participation scholarship, then, is focused on how to weigh these two major factors. Jack Nagel, for example, suggests that "people initiate little of what we normally call participation . . . Acts of participation are stimulated by elites—if not by the government, then by parties, interest groups, agitators, and organizers."[4] The authors of *Voice and Equality*, on the other hand, suggest that the two main factors in likelihood of participation are the "motivation and the capacity to take part in political life," with "networks of recruitment" mentioned later as a third, minor factor.[5] Different interpretations of this interaction between internal and external factors are not entirely at odds. Instead, they reflect a diversity of focus, which ultimately fleshes out the body of scholarship rather than attempting to refute or rebut what has been written from a different perspective.

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[3] Brady, H., K.L. Schlozman, and S. Verba. "Prospecting for participants: Rational expectations and the recruitment of political activists." *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 1 (1999): 153-168.
[4] Nagel, J. *Participation*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987, p. 3-4.
[5] Verba, S., K.L. Schlozman, and H. Brady. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 3.

II.   **Costs and Benefits**

An important aspect of participation theory is the examination of an individual's cost/benefit analysis. The costs of participation are diverse, described as "some combination of money, time, skill, knowledge, and self-confidence."[6] For example, volunteering on a campaign takes the time to perform the job, the money lost by working without pay, the skill necessary to be an effective volunteer, the knowledge to choose who to volunteer for, and the self-confidence to follow through on volunteering. Each of these costs has traditionally meant that political participation is an easier and more likely choice for those of higher income, education, and socioeconomic status. This generalization is not only a logical conclusion but is also statistically confirmed by Verba and Nie.[7] Those with an abundance of wealth can withstand the financial cost of participation with little to no effect. The highly educated have an abundance of skill, knowledge, and self-confidence from years of instruction in the field of politics and the virtues of civic participation. These two qualities (wealth and education) are fairly good predictors of socio-economic status, further reinforcing the inequities inherent in political participation.

The thinking on the benefits of participation is fairly simple and straightforward. Though there are numerous classifications for the types of benefits received (such as James Wilson's categorization of material, solidary and purposive benefits[8]), there is a strong underlying definition to the types of benefits that induce political participation. Individuals tend to participate when they have "more at stake in politics—because

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[6] Rosenstone and Hansen. Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America, p. 12.
[7] Verba, S. and N. Nie. *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
[8] Wilson, J. *Political Organizations*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973. p. 33-34.

policies affect them more, politicians draw them in, options appeal to them more, or duty calls them more."[9] Potential for benefits can only be a compelling reason to participate if those benefits have a clear and direct effect on the individual in question. An organization backing a particular issue will likely find its constituents and participants to be those directly affected by the issue, or those who have such a strong psychological connection the issue that its realization has a very clear and direct benefit to them. This understanding of benefits is fairly intuitive and is met with little, if any, debate or dispute.

The Internet presents a serious challenge to accepted theories of political participation. By dramatically reducing the costs of political action, the Internet may have rendered notions of participation which rely on an individual weighing costs and benefits outdated. Financial costs to participation have been diminished in a number of significant ways. Firstly, the system of political donations has been somewhat democratized. Online donation sites have eased transaction costs and broadened the scope of available candidates, and campaign finance reform has placed a greater emphasis on small donations. Secondly, blogs provide open and free access to political information and discussion, weakening the skill and knowledge advantage of the highly educated. Thus, the costs of individually-motivated political participation have been radically reduced by the free and open nature of political content on the Internet. This development likely has a significant impact on the type of person who participates. As little has been written on the topic, it is a hole in the literature that I would like to fill.

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[9] Rosenstone and Hansen. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. p. 20.

III.   The "When" of Political Participation – Mobilization

An understanding of the individual's cost/benefit analysis is crucial to the traditional mobilization strategies of politicians, parties, or interest groups. As noted earlier, mobilization is an attempt by an external actor to induce political participation in a group or individual. Mobilization can be further subdivided into *direct* mobilization and *indirect* mobilization. Direct mobilization previously served a similar function to what the Internet does today, diminishing costs to participation by driving voters to the polls, supplying information, or generally easing the process of participation.[10] Indirect mobilization is not the opposite of direct mobilization, rather it is a means of spreading the effects of direct mobilization. Indirect mobilization utilizes social networks to encourage participation. An example would be a politician contacting the leader of the union and offering benefits or diminishing costs in exchange for the support of his organization, a strong social network. The strength of social networks maintains the benefits of direct mobilization while providing further encouragement to participation through social pressures.

Given that mobilization generally lowers costs to participation and increases benefits, one might assume that it also serves to democratize political participation. The reality is quite the opposite. Scholarship from the pre-Internet era consistently found that "rather than encouraging politically disengaged individuals, mobilization efforts disproportionately reach the politically engaged, the civically skilled, and the socioeconomically advantaged."[11] The process of rational prospecting results in a disproportionately educated, wealthy, and politically inclined pool of mobilization

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[10] Rosenstone and Hansen. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, p. 26.
[11] Krueger, B.S.. "A comparison of conventional and Internet political mobilization." *American Politics Research* 34, no. 6 (2006): 759-776.

targets. This serves to further reinforce, rather than combat, the inequality that results from individually-motivated participation.

Can the Internet, that great democratizer, change this fact? There has been some work done on the subject, the most relevant work being Brian Krueger's. Krueger examined the online mobilization done by politicians and organizations and found, contrary to his initial assumptions, that "Although most of the long-standing determinants of offline political mobilization fail to predict online mobilization, political interest and Internet skills powerfully determine online mobilization [and] . . . because socioeconomic status, civic skills, and political interest directly predict online skills, these factors indirectly influence the likelihood of online mobilization."[12] Krueger, however, only examined online mobilization that operates through e-mail lists, the variability of which played a large role in his findings. My first instinct would be that pleas for donation or participation sent through massive e-mail lists would account for a fairly small percentage of the full mobilization done on the Internet. There has been no research done on the ability of *websites* to directly and indirectly mobilize through the content posted on their website, rather than that sent to e-mail inboxes. The question of the Internet's effect on mobilization, then, remains quite open to debate and investigation.

IV.   **Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen**

In his popular and influential work *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell proposes a new model for the dissemination of information and the process of convincing people to participate, whether that participation is buying a certain type of shoe, refraining from committing a crime in a crowded city, or, perhaps, political action. In fleshing out his theory, Gladwell suggests there are three types of people primarily responsible for the spread of an idea or action: connectors, mavens, and salesmen. Connectors are people

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[12] Krueger, B.S.. "A comparison of conventional and Internet political mobilization," p. 759.

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with unusually large social circles, capable of spreading information by virtue of their large number of acquaintances. Mavens are individuals with an uncommon level of knowledge of any given topic, predisposed to distribute this high level of information to their own social circle. Finally, salesmen are those with the ability to influence others, exerting influence over their peers on the strength of their own charisma.[13]

Gladwell's modeling of social interactions bears a strong resemblance to two classic aspects of political participation literature. The first is the concept of "rational prospecting." Political mobilizers seek a certain type of individual in their recruitment efforts. One common type is the individual who is "centrally positioned in social networks."[14] This description immediately calls to mind Gladwell's connectors, who use their central position in large-scale social networks to disseminate information many times more effectively than does the average person. The second is the concept of social networks as a key factor in the dissemination of information and the actualization of political participation. Political information is "conveyed not only through speeches and media reports but also through a variety of informal social mechanisms."[15] Given the primacy of these informal social interactions over formal political mobilization in an individual's life, "political behavior may be understood in terms of individuals tied together by, and located within, networks, groups, and other social formations that largely determine their opportunities for the exchange of political information."[16] This understanding of political behavior fits quite nicely with Gladwell's understanding of

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[13] Gladwell, M. *The Tipping Point*. New York: Little Brown, 2000.
[14] Rosenstone and Hansen. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, p. 25.
[15] Huckfeldt, R. and J. Sprague. "Networks in Context: The Social Flow of Political Information." *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 4 (1987): 1197-1216.
[16] Eulau, H. *Politics, Self, and Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986 paraphrased in Huckfeldt and Sprague, "Networks in Context."

social interaction. In Gladwell's model, the products we buy, the songs we listen to, and the mannerisms we adopt can often be traced back to our social network, dominated by connectors, mavens, and salesmen. In Huckfeldt and Sprague's model of political behavior, political participation must be understood in the context of social networks, which exert great influence over the degree, type, and timing of participation in politics. The similarities are striking.

There has been no scholarship on the specific topic of Gladwell's thinking as applied to political participation. This is a gap in the literature that I hope to fill. How, then, can Gladwell's thinking be applied to the effect of the blogosphere on political participation in 2006? Bloggers can be seen as connectors, mavens, *and* salesmen. As connectors, they can use the huge network of their personal blog and the greater blogosphere to disseminate information (a good example is Markos Moultisas of DailyKos). As mavens, bloggers can use their specific expertise to spotlight a specific issue or call attention to the mainstream media's informational failings (a good example would be Brad DeLong, an expert in the field of economics). As salesmen, bloggers can use their position and writing ability to sell their audience on a specific candidate, issue, or action (a good example is the group of Connecticut bloggers who sold the DailyKos community on a primary challenge to Senator Joe Lieberman, and specifically on future candidate Ned Lamont). Viewing the blogosphere in these terms may shed light on its seeming ability to change minds, affect change, and remodel the political landscape.

V.   The Modern Internet

The existing literature sheds light on important aspects of political participation and provides the framework for how I will approach my research. However, the game has undoubtedly changed significantly. Easy and cheap access to the Internet, and to blogs specifically, undermines previous theories that rely on notions of cost and benefit, as the costs to political participation have been radically downsized. The openness of the blogosphere may also serve to democratize the mobilization strategies of political actors. My thesis will investigate if these reduced barriers to participation have changed the nature of *who* participates and *when* they do so, or if it has changed *how* people participate in politics. Another important aspect of my research will be the apparent gap in fundraising by the right-wing and left-wing blogospheres, respectively. Given that advantages in fundraising have traditionally favored Republicans, it seems likely that there has been some significant change in the sources of individually-motivated participation, externally-motivated participation, or, perhaps, both.

There has been surprisingly little work done on the impact of the Internet, and much of the work done is focused on the structure of the Internet as of 1998 or 2002. In recent years, a notion has developed that was coined "Web 2.0" by Internet entrepreneur Tim O'Reilly. The Web 2.0 idea suggests that the Internet has undergone a significant change from its initial composition, shifting from top-down information dissemination to interactive, collaborative compilation of information. Instead of Encyclopedia Britannica, we now have Wikipedia. Instead of mp3.com, we now have interactive, file-sharing programs like Limewire.[17] Interactive blogs, like DailyKos, are sterling examples of this new development. Where heads of powerful interest groups and Washington

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[17] O'Reilly, T (2005, Sept. 30). What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software. Retrieved March 21, 2007, from O'Reilly Media Web site: http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html

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insiders once controlled the national dialogue, we now find the open forum of the

blogosphere. Where wealthy donors once dominated the landscape, we now find the

financial clout of ActBlue.com. This shift from the World Wide Web of the 1990s to the

Web 2.0 of 2007 is one that has been largely ignored in political science literature,

despite its undeniable relevance to the practice of modern politics. This gap is where my

research will hopefully fit, examining the impact of this significant shift on the process of

political participation and the outcomes of our elections.