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Digital Democracy: Reimagining Pathways to Political Participation

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ABSTRACT. Recently, research revolving around blogs has flourished. Usually, academics illustrate what blogs are, motivations to blog, and, only to some extent, their role in politics. Along these lines, we examine the impact of digital politics by looking specifically at blog readers. Although blog readers might be considered at the forefront of a new technological revolution, and people have speculated about their participatory habits both online and off, little research has specifically looked at this growing proportion of the population. This article models factors that predict traditional and online forms of participation, presenting a portrait of a new type of political advocate.

KEYWORDS. Blogs, digital democracy, political participation

During the 2004 presidential campaign, blogs erupted onto the national scene by contesting claims made on *60 Minutes II* about George W. Bush's National Guard service. Reacting quickly to the story's initial airing, members of several conservative blogs such as Powerline and Little Green Footballs presented critiques of the documents used to support the report, while liberal blogs such as Daily Kos offered their own counter-critiques. The controversy spurred an internal investigation that led to firings and resignations, including the departure of lead correspondent for the piece, Dan Rather, who had anchored the evening news for

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24 years (Perlmutter, 2008; Perlmutter & McDaniel, 2005).

Yet despite this show of coordinated effort and influence, many in the traditional media did not take note of the growing power of this type of online activism, resorting instead to the common stereotype of the fringe blogger operating in lonely isolation. In fact, former CBS executive Jonathan Klein stated: "You couldn't have a starker contrast between the multiple layers of checks and balances [in traditional media] and a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas writing" (Kurtz, 2004). Klein's conception of the blogger's writing as a solitary act, disconnected from group participation, is one we seek to challenge in this article. Rather, we provide a portrait of new paths to democratic involvement spurred by bloggers through online channels that complement and reactivate conventional forms of political expression and engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, 2009; Shah et al., 2007).

In this study, we examine the impact of emerging digital platforms and outlets on politics by looking specifically at blog readers. Although blog readers have been described as on the forefront of a new technological revolution and people have speculated about their participatory habits both online and off, little research has specifically looked at this growing proportion of the population (e.g., Coleman, 2005; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Our analyses do just that by using survey data collected from more than 3,900 readers of 40 leading political blogs. We use these data to model factors that predict traditional and online forms of participation, presenting a portrait of a new type of political involvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Expression and Participation

American politics has always been a mixture of talk and action: In his classic painting illustrating the New England town hall, Norman Rockwell pictures a man standing up among his neighbors to speak his mind before the community votes on a proposal. In the seminal study of urban politics, *Who Governs?*, Robert Dahl and his colleagues found that public meetings by civic groups were a vital wellspring of popular sovereignty (1961). Contemporary research has consistently found a connection between political talk and political participation, with those who talk about public affairs with family and friends showing a greater predisposition to engage in politically oriented activities (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Pan, Shen, Paek, & Sun, 2006).

Recent studies indicate that the kind of talk that occurs online does not differ from face-to-face discussions in its participatory influence and effectiveness (Castells, 2007; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Trammell & Kaid, 2005). Although many researchers have studied the potential for the Internet to influence citizens' participatory levels both online and offline (Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001; Yamamoto, 2006), few have dealt with the notion that blog communities present avenues for individuals to be part of traditional political participation activities while also providing new online opportunities for the exchange of political perspectives and mobilization into action (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, 2009).

The nature of the Internet as a discursive medium with newer technologies such as podcasts[1] and blogs makes the relationship between political talk and online participation all the more interesting, particularly as increasing numbers of people begin to use blogs. A 2008 study from Zogby International (Nachison, 2008) found that 38 percent of American adults view blogs as an important source of news, while another study identified that around 22 percent of U.S. Internet users read blogs regularly (Corso, 2008). Despite the fact that the majority of the public never reads a political blog (Corso, 2008), this statistic may underestimate the actual influence of blogs. Journalists writing blogs is not surprising; however, over 83 percent of journalists also read blogs, and 43 percent use them on a weekly basis (Farrell & Drezner, 2008), suggesting that blogs may play an important role in contributing to mainstream media coverage of political events (Drezner & Farrell, 2008). Likewise, a study of blogging in various countries, including the U.S.

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and Japan, found that public opinion "influencers" read blogs at a much higher rate than the general population (Edelman Group, 2007).

Notably, the Internet has experienced a large jump in the last four years as a place where individuals, especially young, highly educated people regularly get campaign news (Pew, 2008). These technologically oriented citizens spend a considerable amount of time online, with a high proportion reporting that they are blog readers (Schadler & Golvin, 2005). Thus, the Internet—with the addition of the blogosphere—has the potential to provide more politically oriented expressive platforms, as well as to serve as an additional conduit for political participation. This only becomes more salient as usage rates continue to rise. This article intends to put all these claims into an empirical test.

Traditional Versus Online Participation

In the influential writings of Verba and his associates (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), political participation has four dimensions: voting, campaign activity, contacting officials, and collective activities. Many studies have used these traditional measures of campaign participation to make arguments about levels of engagement in the American population (Brady, Verba, & Scholzman, 1995; Jones-Correa & Leal, 2001; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999).

But these traditional measures of political participation may no longer cover the range of political activities available to the public. With the rising role of the Internet among the American public, participation has taken new forms. For example, Gennaro and Dutton (2006) explain this pattern by arguing that the Internet's level of interactivity, coupled with the proliferation of alternative channels, may now circumvent traditional gatekeepers and exemplify a new form of political engagement. Similarly, other scholars have reflected on the potential of the Internet to promote distinct informational and interpersonal dynamics that may reinvigorate the democratic process online and offline (Graber, Bimber, Bennett, Davis, & Norris, 2004; Krueger, 2002; van Dijk, 2000). Nevertheless, most studies of online participatory behavior fail to take into consideration that "the context provided by the Internet means that the activities take on new dimensions and forms that are at once more visual, immediate, self-selected and impersonal" (Gennaro & Dutton, 2006, p. 566). Current conceptualizations of online political participation typically do not consider behaviors such as displaying campaign slogans on personal Web sites, signing up for a political newsletter, or signing and forwarding an online petition.

Even less explored in the current literature is the conceptualization of the dimensions of online political participation. On the one hand, the ease of using and creating new communication channels, such as blogs, videos, and Web sites, has spawned an explosion of grassroots, bottom-up participation. Individuals can build a more active and significant relationship to official institutions as they feel empowered to express their opinions more openly and freely. At the same time, the Internet may also bring elites and the public closer together, making it easier to express views to elected officials and established journalists. Thus, the ease of communication on the Internet has especially lowered the cost of online expressive participation, a construct we define as communication that describes an active means of verbal political engagement, such as sending an e-mail to a politician, signing a petition online, etc. People write e-mails to elites with the expectation that their political messages will get to the recipient. They also create political messages and post them to YouTube, sometimes generating audiences in the millions.[2] At minimum, the Internet facilitates many-to-many, one-to-many, and many-to-one types of communication, which combined may take the behavior of expressive participation to a place not easily achieved by more traditional means (Castells, 2007; Silverstone, 2005).

These developments do not enfeeble collective forms of political participation in which an individual interacts with others in an attempt to collectively influence politics. On the contrary, online and offline forms of political participation appear to be blossoming simultaneously. A range of online activities has contributed to the convenient coordination of in-person political activities and swift mobilization of political activists, thus complementing offline efforts

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(Bennett & Givins, 2006; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002; Shah et al., 2005). A prominent example is Howard Dean's Blog for America, which served as a forum for people from all walks of life to get involved and coordinate events in the 2004 election (Cornfield, 2004; Trippi, 2004).

Online expressive participation does not take away from the more traditional offline activities commonly discussed, such as attending a political rally or working for the presidential candidates. But online expressive participation may open a different pathway to participation, as some of the costs associated with this online expressive participation may not be so high. These costs, which can put traditional offline participation out of reach for many people (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995), may encourage a different set of people to engage in online expressive participation and open the political process to a wider range of behaviors.

Interpersonal Communication: Talk Versus Messaging

Recently, researchers devote increasing efforts to clarify citizens' interactive modes via the Internet (Correa, Willard, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010). Research has found that news consumption and interpersonal political discussion work in concert to encourage various forms of participation (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). News use promotes increased political knowledge, encourages media reflection and elaboration, and fosters a sense of political efficacy (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005; Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003). These effects have been observed for consumption of hard news through newspapers, television, and the Internet. Consumption of public affairs content can also provide a resource for political discussion and create opportunities for exposure to viewpoints unavailable in one's social network (Mutz & Martin, 2001), encouraging discussion and dialogue that might not otherwise occur. In turn, political discussion may raise awareness about collective problems, increase tolerance, and highlight opportunities for involvement, thereby encouraging engagement in civic and political life (Mutz, 2006; Walsh, 2004).

But the political environment may be changing the relationship between political talk and participation, as more and more activities move online. As such, political messaging via the Internet may be particularly important to this dynamic. Previous research has found that communicating about politics over the Internet complements face-to-face political talk (Shah et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2007). Interactive messaging technologies, such as e-mail, instant messaging, online chat, and comment boards, all permit the sharing of political perspectives (Price & Cappella, 2002). The Internet allows people to "post, at minimal cost, messages and images that can be viewed instantly by global audiences" (Lupia & Sin, 2003, p. 316).

As evidence accumulates that political messaging via e-mail—that is, sharing political information or a news story via the Internet—contributes directly to civic and political participation, there is growing attention to the wide range of ways people communicate about politics in online settings. Those who have conducted content analyses of online political discussion in chat rooms and discussion boards have been less sanguine about the mobilizing potential of such expression (e.g., Hill & Hughes, 1998; Wilhelm, 2000). Bloggers and blog visitors may force a rethinking of these findings given the robust nature of political expression within these communities. We suspect that online expression among blog readers will spur various forms of participation such as letter writing and petition signing, as well as attending speeches and working on campaigns (Corrado & Firestone, 1996).

Our research addresses a number of core questions:

(a) Does face-to-face political talk remain a robust pathway to participation among those who frequent political blogs or do they exclusively rely on online forms of communication?
(b) Is online citizenship at odds with conventional modes of political participation?
(c) Does visiting political blogs spur participation or simply satisfy the motive to feel involved in politics absent online or offline political action?

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THEORETICAL MODEL

Although research on communication and civic participation has begun to clarify the linkages between patterns of media use, citizen communication, and public engagement, few studies have considered how these factors operate across a range of participatory political activities (Gil de Zúñiga, 2009; Rojas, 2008; Shah et al, 2007). In this research, we particularly contrast traditional offline activities with online expressive activities. This is important given our focus on active blog users, whom many assume may be more inclined to participate online (Hindman, 2007; Meijer, Burger, & Ebbers, 2009), thereby ignoring more traditional forms of participation. We do not share this assumption and plan to test this argument by looking at (a) whether blog readers participate in both settings and (b) whether the pathway that stimulates this participation remains the same.

Specifically, we look at the influence of different types of news consumption, such as newspaper reading, broadcast news viewing, and online news seeking on public engagement through their effects on political messaging and political talk. We further consider political efficacy and media reflection as mediating variables in this process. This model builds off previous research looking at the communication mediation model among the general public. McLeod et al. (1999) introduced a model by which media use, mediated through interpersonal communication channels, predicted political participation (Shah et al., 2005; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). We expect that efficacy and reflection are particularly important to examine among blog users, and contend that they spur greater political messaging and political talk among this group. This citizen communication, online and offline, will in turn encourage greater political participation, both in traditional and new online environments.

This approach highlights the role of the Internet in participatory action while also accounting for a much broader range of communication behaviors and political attitudes. We assert that these online and offline communication behaviors are complementary such that (a) newspaper, television, and online news use can lead to online political messaging, and (b) online news consumption can foster greater political talk. Also, we predict that efficacy, noted for its importance in traditional offline participatory activities (Finkel, 1985; McLeod et al., 1999) will be less important in predicting online expressive activities among these active blog users.

METHODS

Gaining a representative sample from within the blogosphere is a qualitative and quantitative proposition. The total number of blogs, which by some accounts includes a two to eight percent proportion of fake or spam blogs, may be in the hundreds of millions, and many blogs wither away in a matter of weeks or months (Henning, 2003). By traditional measures, some blogs have huge ratings. Sites such as the Huffington Post, Redstate, Powerline, or MyDD are also frequently "blogrolled," or listed, in the blogs of affiliation lists of other blogs as well as repeatedly mentioned as "kings and queens" of the blogosphere by mainstream media. Thus, any survey of bloggers must take into account that some bloggers receive much more attention than others. In response, we began with the list of the top 300 most-linked-to blogs according to blogpulse.com as of autumn 2006. These data were collected during the first week of December 2006.[3] Blogpulse was one of several blog ranking sites available at the time, all of which used unique proprietary methods to rank blogs. Blogpulse was since purchased by the A.C. Nielsen Company, the leading media information and ratings provider.

We narrowed this list of 300 blogs down to "political" blogs, or those that have mostly political content. To do so, each of the 300 blogs was evaluated by a member of the research team for the presence of political content. If a blog did not exclusively or mainly focus on politics, it was excluded from our list. We further culled blogs that had not been in operation by the same blogger or groups of bloggers for at least two years in order to focus on (a) experienced bloggers and (b) veteran audiences familiar with the blog's content and style.

On the basis of this selection process, our solicitation was e-mailed to 154 political blogs.

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This solicitation produced 66 complete responses from blog authors. Although this represents less than 50 percent of those contacted, the completed surveys included a range of political bloggers. Of these, 40 bloggers also posted a visitor survey on their blog, which produced 3,909 responses from the readers of these political blogs. Of the total reader respondents, 26.2 percent were women and 73.8 percent were men. The mean age of the respondents was 46 years (SD = 12.3). Ethnic distribution of the sample was 90.1 percent white. The median educational level was some graduate education, and the median annual household income range was $80,000–$100,000. The demographic characteristics observed in the data are consistent with previous research on blog readers (Pew, 2008). Notably, this procedure also produced a very diverse partisan sample, with 43 percent describing themselves as Democrats, 31 percent as Republicans, and 14 percent as Libertarians. (Please note that an Appendix with the specific wording of all survey questions used in this investigation has been added at the end of the article.)

MEASURES

Control Variables

Predispositions and Motivations

Three control variables dealt with respondents' predispositions about and motivations for their use of the news. One variable is a surveillance motivation for news use, operationalized through an index constructed with two measures of use of the news to stay informed and learn new ideas (r = .73, M = 4.66, SD = 2.67). A second control variable tested partisanship. Respondents answered a question asking whether they were Democrats or Republicans, or members of another party. Respondents then ranked the strength of that identification on a three-point scale from weak to strong. These items were coded together for Republicans and Democrats, giving party identification and strength. Respondents with an answer other than Democrat or Republican in the first question were grouped together as "Independents" on the seven-point scale (M = 4.31, SD = 2.03). We also included a control variable of issue extremity. Issue extremity was constructed using six items that asked respondents to rate their agreement on an 11-point scale with various current political debates such as stem cell research, same sex marriage, and the 2006 election outcome (α = .93). This scale was folded to create the measure of extremity (M = 3.00, SD = 1.39).

Online News Use

This measure was constructed from six items tapping various types of Internet use to gain political and current events information. Each item was measured using an 11-point scale asking about the frequency of use of various online tools. These items were averaged to create an index (α = .63, M = 5.76, SD = 1.86).

Print News Use

To measure this construct, we averaged four items that asked respondents how frequently, on an 11-point scale, they read local, national, and international newspapers, as well as news magazines (α = .73, M = 4.87, SD = 2.71).

Television News Use

For television news use, we took the mean of three items tapping how frequently, on an 11-point scale, respondents watched local and national television news programs, and news magazine programs (α = .79, M = 3.66, SD = 2.87).

Political Efficacy

Another key variable is political efficacy. For these analyses, we measured efficacy by creating an index of two items, which asked respondents to rate on an 11-point scale their agreement with the statements about their ability to affect government. Both items were reverse-coded so a higher number indicated a greater political efficacy. The items were averaged to create an index (r = .40, M = 5.97, SD = 2.22).

Media Reflection

People are not merely exposed to media content, but often choose to reflect on what was portrayed and to integrate this knowledge into

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their understanding (Eveland et al., 2003, 2005). Four items asked respondents to rate on an 11-point scale whether they thought about what they saw in the news or related it to their personal experiences. These items were averaged to create an index (α = .80, *M* = 7.42, *SD* = 1.58).

Political Talk

Previous research has demonstrated that political talk explains differences in participation (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Political talk was measured using one variable that asked respondents how many people they have talked with about politics or public affairs in the last week. This open-ended response was compressed, so everyone who answered 20 or greater was entered into the same group, creating a continuous scale from 0 to 20 (*M* = 5.69, *SD* = 4.81).

Independent Variables

Online Political Messaging

One important variable that could predict participatory outcomes is use of the Internet to facilitate the spread of information. We conceptualized online political messaging as using the Internet to facilitate communication about politics and current policy. It was operationalized with two items that asked respondents to rate on an 11-point scale how often they sent a political e-mail or a news story to friends. These items were averaged to create an index (*r* = .65, *M* = 4.91, *SD* = 3.16).

Additionally, each of our dependent variables—online expressive participation and offline political participation—was included as an independent variable predicting the other, in order to account for the effect of one's overall propensity to participate.

Criterion Variables

Online Expressive Participation

The first criterion variable was built using three items, asking respondents to rate on an 11-point scale how often in the past 12 months they engaged in the following activities: "Sent an e-mail to an editor of a newspaper/magazine," "Used e-mail to contact a politician," and "Signed an online petition." These items were averaged together to create an index (α = .78, *M* = 3.58, *SD* = 2.71).

This variable is central to our study, as it creates a new construct that deals with online participatory activities that may indicate new paths to political participation. Nevertheless, an avid reader of this article may realize that none of our measures specifically captures the level of active engagement blog users may have with respect to the political blogs they read. That is, our measures do not discern between a more active engagement such as posting and a more passive engagement as, for instance, only reading posts. Furthermore, a recent study by Gil de Zúñiga (2009) showed that although an active role in political blogs is a stronger predictor of offline political participation than a passive role, both uses of political blogs are highly correlated (*r* = .471, p < .001). In any case, our goal remained to generally measure the overall level of expressive participation blog readers may have.

Offline Political Participation

Similar to expressive participation, we constructed this criterion variable by taking the average of three items, which asked respondents to rate on an 11-point scale how often they engaged in the following activities over the past 12 months: "Attended a political meeting, rally, or speech," "Worked for a political candidate or party," and "Contributed money to a political campaign" (α = .82, *M* = 2.24, *SD* = 2.68).

RESULTS

First, based on a zero-order correlation, we tested the relationship between the key criterion variables—online expressive participation and offline political participation. Blog readers who tend to express their views online also tend to participate offline (*r* = .543; p < .001). This article argues that although these two variables are related, they ought to be treated as separate independent variables. Further factor analysis was performed in order to empirically establish this conceptual distinction (see Table 1).

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TABLE 1. Factor Analysis Participatory Criterion Variables

	I	II
	Offline political participation	Online expressive participation
Attended a political meeting, rally, or speech	.864	.216
Worked for a political party or candidate	.889	.170
Contributed money to a political campaign	.705	.319
Sent an e-mail to an editor of a newspaper/magazine	.204	.788
Used e-mail to contact a politician	.282	.840
Signed an online petition	.195	.777
Eigenvalues	3.326	1.016
% Variance (Total = 72.3%)	55.4%	16.9%

Note: Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Primary loading of a variable on a factor is indicated by boldface type. N = 3,446.

To examine the relationship of media use, political efficacy, online messaging, and political talk with these different forms of participation, we ran a series of hierarchical regression models. These analyses allow us to test the predictive power of our key independent variables, while controlling for the role of demographics and motivations. Also, this analysis allows us to test each relationship independent of the others, building a more nuanced understanding of what is driving the motivation to participate among highly engaged blog users.

The first regression model tests predictors of online expressive participation. It accounts for 46.1 percent of variance (see Table 2). Each block significantly adds to the amount of variance explained, with the two most important blocks being media and political motivations, as well as political messaging, political talk, and offline political participation. The only demographic variable that did not predict online expressive participation was gender. Age, with older people participating more, and education and income, with less educated and more prosperous people demonstrating greater

TABLE 2. Regression Analyses on Online Expressive Participation

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age	.229***	.206***	.199***	.198***	.146***
Education	–.026	–.065***	–.051**	–.053**	–.050**
Income	–.038	.008	–.003	–.001	–.042**
Gender (male)	–.130***	–.078***	–.066***	–.064***	–.031
R^2	7.2%				
Surveillance motivation		–.008	–.072***	–.083***	–.030
Party identification (Dem)		.143***	.132***	.126***	.068***
Issue extremity		.243***	.263***	.239***	.141***
R^2		17.4%			
Print news use			.067***	.060**	–.015
TV news use			.073***	.069***	.021
Online news use			.200***	.184***	.089***
R^2			23.5%		
Political efficacy				.040	–.032
Media reflection				.116***	.052***
R^2				25.0%	
Political talk					.052**
Online political messaging					.267***
Offline participation					.350***
R^2					46.1%

Note: Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients.
**p < .01, ***p < .001.

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participation, were all statistically significant. Two of the political motivation variables are significant predictors of online expressive participation, with Democratic Party identification and extreme issue positions related to online expressive participation. Together, these demographic and motivational variables account for 17.4 percent of variance in the model.

Of the news media use variables, both print and television news use are reduced to nonsignificance in the final model. Only online news use positively and significantly predicts online political participation. Media reflection also provides a significant influence when entered into the model. However, political efficacy fails to significantly predict online expression, suggesting that this pathway to participation does not rely on the same internal attitudes as traditional political participation (i.e., Brady et al., 1995; Finkel, 1985).

However, one of the most interesting findings is the large contribution of political talk, online messaging, and especially offline political participation. Providing large independent contributions to online expressive participation, the effects of online political messaging and offline political participation resemble each other very closely. In total, this block explains 21.1 percent of variance. Ultimately, this model suggests that while many factors predict online expressive participation, the role of online news use, online political messaging, and offline political participation are paramount in predicting and encouraging online expressive participation among blog readers.

We used the same hierarchical regression model to test the variables against offline political participation (see Table 3). The same model performed well, explaining 40.4 percent of total variance for offline political participation. Demographic controls show significant predictive power in income and gender, but not in age or education. The media use and political motivational variables demonstrate a pattern largely consistent with the previous model, as all three variables in this block are significant positive predictors of offline political participation. Together these control blocks account for 12.7 percent of variance.

Among the news use variables, only print and TV news use predict offline political participation; online news use does not, making the

TABLE 3. Regression Analyses on Offline Political Participation

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age	.114***	.096***	.077***	.084***	.017
Education	.045	.000	.008	.001	.026
Income	.040	.086***	.077***	.062**	.056***
Gender (male)	–.131***	–.081***	–.070***	–.064***	–.041**
R^2	3.9%				
Surveillance motivation		–.007	–.078***	–.092***	–.042**
Party identification (Dem)		.185***	.169***	.166***	.107***
Issue extremity		.180***	.201***	.166***	.047**
R^2		12.7%			
Print news use			.118***	.114***	.060***
TV news use			.087***	.078***	.042**
Online news use			.142***	.128***	.022
R^2			18.4%		
Political efficacy				.165***	.130***
Media reflection				.065***	–.007
R^2				21.5%	
Political talk					.197***
Online political messaging					.039
Online expressive participation					.387***
R^2					40.4%

Note: Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients.
**p < .01, ***p < .001.

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results in this block the opposite of what was seen in the previous model. Specifically, for online expressive participation, only online news use predicted participation, while only print and TV news use predict offline political participation. Political efficacy also emerges as a significant positive predictor of offline political participation, while media reflection does not contribute to offline political participation among blog readers. Finally, as in the online expressive participation model, political talk, online expression, and offline participation account for a significant amount of variance—this block alone explains 18.9 percent of variance. Unlike the previous model, only offline political talk, but not online political messaging, contributes to offline political participation. It is again worth noting that the strongest predicting relationship on offline political participation comes from online expressive participation, which is even more powerful than political talk.

DISCUSSION

Our results provide what we feel is a revealing analysis of a segment of the population that may be increasingly relevant to the political discourse in the near future—blog readers. While our research supports many previous findings, it also adds interesting new insights to the literature examining different types of participation and their antecedents. Indeed, these findings strongly suggest that blog readers are involved in a range of participatory activities, both online and offline, and that these two spheres are highly complementary and mutually supportive. We view these findings as evidence of the emergence of a hybrid participation that combines the virtual and real world realms of political engagement and action—a new digital democracy.

One of the largest contributions of this article lies in the way it advances and conceptualizes the differences between online and offline forms of participation. Previous research has found that communication about public affairs is an important predictor of political participation—political talk, television and print media use, and issue-specific media use have positively predicted political participation (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Kim et al., 1999; McLeod et al., 2001). However, prior research has conceived of participation as an offline phenomenon, failing to consider how the Internet is creating new ways that people can engage in politics. Our results provide a distinction between offline forms of participation and online forms of participation, and consider them both legitimate outcomes in their own right. We also elaborated on the construct of an expressive form of participation, which reflects the more diverse range of participatory opportunities that now exist.

While the traditional media use variables included in our analyses—print and television—are significant positive predictors of offline participation, online news use is the only media use predictor for online expressive participation. If blog readers are digital vanguards, as we suspect, then the movement into a world where more and more people get their information from online news sources may encourage new forms of participation. For those who prefer using online methods to participate in politics, such as the blog readers who are the focus of this study, online news use may replace traditional news media in terms of direct effects on online participation. Yet this study also provides an optimistic view for the continuing importance of offline media such as print and television news; even among blog readers, it contributes significantly to participation in more conventional offline settings.

Perhaps one of the most notable contributions of this study is the overwhelming importance of political talk and online messaging to facilitate political participation (Shah et al, 2005, 2007). Both political talk and online political messaging have significant effects among blog readers for online expressive participation, while political talk, but not online political messaging, appears more important for offline political participation among this population. Again, this result highlights both the similarities and differences in online and offline forms of participation.

It is noteworthy that political talk remains a viable pathway to participation among this population. Frequent blog users do not only rely on

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virtual mechanisms alone to engage into political conversation, but also talk politics in face-to-face settings. This suggests that blog readers view these two modes of citizen communication as complementary, and that political messaging is not displacing conventional political talk, but instead creating additional opportunities for expression. This is consistent with what has been observed among a population cross section (Shah et al., 2005), further calling into question the notion that bloggers and the communities they build are distinct or separate from other citizens. In short, political blog talk does not preclude but rather accompanies political face-to-face talk.

Also notable is the influence of demographic variables within our analysis of blog readers. Many of these findings support previous research, as older blog readers are more likely to express themselves, and more well-off readers are more likely to participate in traditional activities, even after controlling for other factors. However, a finding that may run counter to previous research is the effect of gender, with women expressing greater levels of participation. Research has been contradictory about the role of gender in participation, especially as it relates to the Internet. Some studies find that gender matters differently depending on the type of participation (Kim et al., 1999), whereas other studies indicate males are more likely to engage in politics via the Internet (Pew, 2008). Our results from a sample of blog readers consistently indicate that women participate more. This could, of course, be an artifact of our sample—female blog readers were a minority of the sample, yet are likely to be among the most motivated and politically interested women.

We also find that, among blog readers, political efficacy is a significant and direct positive predictor of offline participation but not of online expressive participation. However, online expressive participation is uniquely predicted by education, but in the opposite direction as previous research suggests. Instead, it is those with less education who demonstrate more online expressive participation. This suggests that even the politically cynical or disenfranchised may be using the Internet to express their concerns, potentially offering a pathway to participation for those who feel politically disempowered. Again, the ease of use of the Internet, as well as its potential anonymity, may allow those disengaged from conventional politics to begin to close this gap and allow for a more democratically equal society.

Our findings suggest that online citizenship does not hamper other conventional styles of political participation. The inclusion of blogs in people's media carte du jour not only seems to satisfy a motive to be involved in discussion and politics but also constitutes a clear extension into the political arena, both offline and online. That is, online participation seems to serve not as an endpoint of participation, but fosters greater participation in a variety of settings. As such, blogs and bloggers may counter fears expressed by scholars such as Putnam (2000), who suggest that electronic media decrease social capital and inhibit participation. Frequent Internet use, at least for those reading blogs, appears to promote greater political talk and participation.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations of our research. Our purposive sample of blog readers does not allow us to generalize these results to the rest of the population, though we do think these data provide a robust snapshot of readers of top political blogs. The blog readers in our study reported systematically high levels of news media consumption, restricting variance in these predictors and making clear that we were dealing with an extraordinary slice of the population. However, this sample is also a strength of our study. Blog readers may emerge as a new and significant force in the political world, and may be difficult to reach in large numbers via conventional sampling methods. By sampling the visitors to key political blogs, our research provides an overview of participatory influence; however, expanding these findings to the general population remains a question for future research.

This investigation may well serve as an addendum to the extant literature that goes along the lines of the communication mediation model. The inclusion of new virtual arenas and the use of newly available political mechanisms such as political online messaging seem to work in concert with previous findings of

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communication mediation model research on news consumption, interpersonal discussion, and media reflection. This research is a further step in that direction and provides insights into a leading edge of digital media: blogs. As the growth of interest in blogs has shown, blogs and their readers are only likely to become more influential in the coming years. As such, discerning what leads blog readers to participate allows us a greater understanding of their motivations. If we understand political participation to be at the heart of a healthy and well-functioning democracy (e.g., Davis, 1999; Mutz, 2002), our findings indicate that as the number of blog readers increases, and given they remain as politically active as this study shows, they may help encourage a more engaged public and a better functioning democracy.

NOTES

1. A podcast is a digital audio or video file that is episodic, downloadable, and program-driven, mainly with a host and/or theme; and convenient, usually via an automated feed with computer software.

2. For example, see "Obama's YouTube Bounce." http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0307/3342.html.

3. Although the data employed in this study are not freely available to the general public, to comply with *JITP* replication policy, the authors have facilitated the release of the data to any scholar solely interested in pursuing such endeavors via *JITP* Editor or requesting the data to the first author of this manuscript at hgz@mail.utexas.edu. Different uses of this data are not permitted without the explicit consent of the authors of this paper.

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APPENDIX

Question Wording

Online Expressive Participation

I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please choose the appropriate button to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself, have engaged in this activity. (If you have not taken part in one of the listed activities during the past year, choose the "None in the past year" button for that activity.) Please make sure that you answer each activity. [Response categories range from 0, "None in the past year," to 10, "Very frequently."]

(a) Sent an E-mail to an editor of a newspaper/magazine
(b) Used E-mail to contact a politician
(c) Signed an online petition

Offline Political Participation

"I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an "X" in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity."

(a) Attended a political meeting, rally, or speech
(b) Worked for a political party or candidate
(c) Contributed money to a political campaign

Online Political Messaging

I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an "X" in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity.

(a) Forwarded a political e-mail to friends
(b) Forwarded a news story to friends via e-mail

Political Talk

How many people have you talked with about politics or public affairs during the past week?

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Political Efficacy

In this section you will find a number of statements about a range of interests and opinions. For each statement listed, I'd like to know whether you personally agree or disagree with this statement. After each statement, there are numbers from 0–10. The higher the number, the more you tend to agree with the statement. The lower the number, the more you tend to disagree with the statement. For each statement, please choose the number that best describes your feelings about that statement. [Response categories range from 0, "Strongly disagree," to 10, "Strongly agree."]

(a) People like me don't have a say in government decisions
(b) No matter whom I vote for, it won't make any difference

Media Reflection

(a) I often find myself thinking about what I've encountered in the news
(b) I often find myself thinking about what I've encountered on the blogs I tend to visit
(c) I often try to relate what I encounter in the news to my own personal experience
(d) I often try to relate what I encounter on blogs to my personal experience

Online News Use

I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please choose the appropriate button to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself, have engaged in this activity. (If you have not taken part in one of the listed activities during the past year, choose the "None in the past year" button for that activity.) Please make sure that you answer each activity. [Response categories range from 0, "None in the past year," to 10, "Very frequently."]

(a) Visited a news Web site (e.g., CNN.com; NYTimes.com)
(b) Used a news portal site (e.g., Google News, Yahoo News)
(c) Used an online news site which you have personally customized
(d) Used a blog index site (e.g., Technorati, Blogdex)
(e) Visited a blog you disagreed with
(f) Followed a link from a blog to a story at a news site

Print News Use

(a) Read a local daily newspaper
(b) Read a national daily newspaper
(c) Read an international daily newspaper
(d) Read a news magazines (e.g., Time, Newsweek)

Television News Use

(a) Watched national evening news
(b) Watched local evening news
(c) Watched news magazine programs (e.g., 20/20, 60 Minutes)

Surveillance Motivation for News Use

In this section you will find a number of statements about a range of interests and opinions. For each statement listed, I'd like to know whether you personally agree or disagree with this statement. After each statement, there are numbers from 0–10. The higher the number, the more you tend to agree with the statement. The lower the number, the more you tend to disagree with the statement. For each statement, please choose the number that best describes your feelings about that statement. [Response categories range from 0, "Strongly disagree," to 10, "Strongly agree."]

(a) I use mass media to stay informed about what is happening in the world
(b) I use mass media to learn new ideas

Partisanship

Which one of the following best describes your political affiliation (Dem=1, Rep=2, Lib=3, Green=4, other=5)

How strong is that affiliation (strong=3, moderate=2, weak=1)

Issue Ideology Extremity

In this section you will find a number of statements about a range of interests and opinions. For each statement listed, I'd like to know whether you personally agree or disagree with this statement. After each statement, there are numbers from 0–10. The higher the number, the more you tend to agree with the statement. The lower the number, the more you tend to disagree with the statement. For each statement, please choose the number that best describes your feelings about that statement. [Response categories range from 0, "Strongly disagree," to 10, "Strongly agree."]

(a) I am pleased with the outcome of the 2006 midterm elections
(b) I approve of the way George Bush is handling his job as President
(c) I oppose same sex marriage
(d) I support the immediate withdrawal of American troops from Iraq
(e) I support embryonic stem-cell research
(f) I am in favor of the death penalty

Age

What is your age?

Education

What is your education level? (Some HS=1, HS=2, Some college=3, Bachelor's=4, Some grad=5, Master's=6, Doctoral=7)

Income

What is your annual income level? (Less than $20K=1, Over $20K - less than 40K=2, Over $40K – less than 60K=3, Over $60K – less than 80K=4, Over $80K – less than 100K=5, More than $100K=6)

Gender

What is your gender? (Female=1, Male=2)

Race

What is your race? (check all that apply) (Black/African-American, Arab-American, Asian-American, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Other)

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