Doctoral Dissertation Research in Political Science:  
What Theories of Political Participation Can Teach Us about the Blogosphere, and Vice Versa

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This project taps one of the richest sources of political data in all history—the political blogosphere—in order to understand timeless aspects of human interaction: attention, opinion, disagreement, persuasion, and participation.

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Few venues span the spectrum of political ideas better than the blogosphere, the sprawling online network of "web-logs" and their authors. Roughly 1.3 million Americans blog at least occasionally about politics, with aggregate daily readership exceeding that of major newspapers, and daily aggregate word counts in the tens of millions. This incredibly diverse medium captures the daily thoughts of people from all walks of life, from Senators to army wives to Naderites to conspiracy theorists, all lending their voices to a public forum that was almost unimaginable a generation ago.

Previous research has focused primarily on how blogging is different, especially how blogging is different from traditional journalism. In contrast, I show how political blogging is strikingly similar—to political activism. The same social forces that lead people to vote, protest, or write their Congressmen can also lead them to blog about politics. Thus, bloggers are not journalists. They are activists, which means that classic theories of political participation can inform the study of blogging. The first part of my dissertation explores these similarities. I detail the forces that drive participation in the political blogosphere, and show where the blogosphere represents—and distorts—the voice of the electorate.

Conversely, data from the blogosphere can open new avenues of research into political participation. Unlike most forms of communication, blogging leaves a permanent data trail. Archives of thousands of political blogs exist online, complete with text, dates, links, and comments. My dissertation taps this wealth of social data using a combination of techniques from social and computer science: survey research, content analysis, web crawling, and automated text classification. Using this interdisciplinary mix of tools, I survey hundreds of bloggers and analyze over a million blog posts. In the process, I build methodological bridges between social and computer science, making software and data available for future research.

These data provide clues into behaviors that are hard to observe in other contexts, but matter deeply for society and for democracy. Most past studies in this area have focused on explaining levels of participation: how much is one likely to get involved in politics? Rich data from the blogosphere enable me to investigate the timing, topics, and tone of political blog posts. Bloggers' timing and choice of topics reveal patterns in information flow, public opinion, and social allocation of attention. Constructive tone of discourse is the key element in rational, civil discourse. The second half of my dissertation investigates these aspects of political participation in fine detail at unprecedented scale. By carefully analyzing these aspects of participation together, I hope to bring together strands of social science that have been separate in the past, leading to better understanding of the complex and interconnected world we live in.

Broadly speaking, this project stands to make contributions to the study of three vital and rapidly changing aspects of American society: journalism, political participation, and civic discourse.

**Journalism:** The technology, economics, and culture of American journalism are in a state of rapid transition. By illuminating the ways bloggers are different from traditional journalists, this project will shed light on the directions new media and journalism are headed.

**Participation:** Since the classic studies of citizen activism in the 1990's, new modes of communication and participation have made a dramatic entrance into politics. By investigating blogging as an act of civic participation, this project will advance the study of how campaigns, agencies, interest groups, and individual citizens are using these new outlets to reshape participation and the outcomes of government.

**Civic discourse:** Many observers have commented that American civic discourse has made a sharp turn towards divisive partisan polarization in the last two decades. The extent, causes, and consequences of this shift remain poorly understood. Studying discourse through the lens of blogging may give us insight into the recent acrimony and divisiveness of politics.