

Antoinette Pole, **Blogging the Political: Politics and Participation in a Networked Society**, Routledge, 2010, 162 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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Antoinette Pole asserts that “Blogging has changed the political landscape in the United States, fundamentally transforming politics and civic engagement” (p. 1). In *Blogging the Political*, the author makes an argument for the substantial mobilizing potential of the political blog and profiles a diverse sample of the U.S. political blogosphere, including groups largely ignored by other research. Unlike most studies, many of which assess the blog as new media form, *Blogging the Political* is concerned with how the blogosphere “affects politics and civic engagement on a day-to-day basis” (p. 3). By considering an array of blogger demographics, analyzing both citizen and politician blogs, as well as conducting extensive interviews and content analysis, Pole shows that for many Americans, blogs may be one of the most important forms of political participation in the digital age.



Notable examples of bloggers' ability to mobilize on behalf of a cause are widely known. Pole introduces the text by recounting several, including the swift case of the 2007 firing of CBS radio “shock jock” Don Imus after his racist comments about the Rutgers University women's basketball team. The evening Imus made the comments, a *Media Matters for America* researcher blogged about the broadcast. By the next day, no mainstream media outlet had covered the story, but the researcher's blog post had garnered 80 comments. While the mainstream media took two days to cover the incident, bloggers created a firestorm of posts and comments calling for Imus' dismissal. Imus was fired within a week of the political blogosphere taking up the matter.

Blogging the Political's first section details under-researched citizen bloggers and their impact on civic participation. Pole draws upon 80 interviews conducted between December 2005 and August 2007 with bloggers who are either black, Hispanic, women, or lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). Here, Pole considers together two often marginalized racial groups—blacks and Hispanics—for whom there are a number of meaningful political blogging similarities. Few members of either group indicated a belief that blogging yielded much influence, but both groups voiced frustration at being pigeonholed—that is, as offering either a “Latino perspective” or a “black perspective.” Pole also highlights important differences in these two groups. Black bloggers, for instance, tended to focus their posts on electoral politics and general political issues, while Hispanic bloggers focused more on issues related to legislation and to Hispanics, specifically. There is also fragmentation among Hispanic political bloggers and readers according to their places of birth. The Spanish language may unite Hispanics, but they appear to “lack a cohesive identity that might bolster collective action of sorts” (p. 47). As a consequence, Pole concludes that for black bloggers, “The future is strong, whereas the prospect for Latinos is weak” (p. 49).

The study provides much needed insight into two growing and politically influential racial groups' use of the political blog. Pole's consideration of black blogging cohesion versus Latino ethnic fragmentation, as well as these groups' choices of different political issues around which to mobilize, make clearer these bloggers' ability to influence and the sometimes daunting obstacles they face. However, given the stated aim to examine blogging's day-to-day effects on civic life, Pole makes a puzzling choice: she dispenses altogether with an extended discussion of white male political bloggers. Scholars may have paid more attention to this blogging majority, but there is still much to uncover about the participatory effects of all citizen bloggers' efforts.

Pole continues the citizen profile by examining together two other minority political blogging populations—women and LGBT individuals. These groups exhibit similar characteristics, including one of particular import: women and LGBT bloggers expressed a degree of flexibility and freedom that often does not exist offline. For these civic members, "Blogging is a medium that affords participants a level of equality not present elsewhere" (p. 67). LGBT and women political bloggers also experience unique challenges. Members of both groups reported having to deal with exclusion and discrimination. LGBT bloggers stressed that their topics lacked universal appeal to the public. Women often faced sexism, most commonly as "invectives and insults" (p. 67), as well as sexual advances and even physical threats. Nonetheless, Pole maintains that for LGBT individuals and women, "Compared to other media, blogging is more egalitarian" (p. 72).

The finding that for women and LGBT individuals, blogging presents a singular level of equality is particularly striking; the blogosphere appears to present to these ordinary citizens participatory opportunity that is much less encumbered by discrimination than are traditional pursuits. However, by considering all LGBT bloggers together, potentially important gender distinctions within that group are lost. Also, as Pole points out from her interviews, neither "discrimination" nor "exclusion" was defined for respondents. While this allows freedom of interpretation, the lack of provided definitions makes it difficult to identify trends within the sample. Finally, when discussing citizen blogs, Pole might have distinguished more clearly between lucrative "superstar" political blog sites (such as *The Huffington Post* or *Michelle Malkin*) and "average citizen" blogs.

The second half of the study focuses on political elites. These bloggers are not interviewed. Instead, Pole undertakes content analysis at four intervals:

1. 27 U.S. House of Representatives members' congressional blogs in August 2006;
2. 14 presidential candidate blogs (from both parties) in January 2008;
3. Blog posts from Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama's primary campaigns between August 2007 and February 2008; and
4. Blog posts from presidential nominees Barack Obama and John McCain between June and September 2008.

Pole finds numerous differences between the citizen and congressional blogs. Congressional bloggers posted much less frequently than did citizen bloggers, and while common among citizen blogs, only two-fifths of congressional blogs archived posts or accepted comments. Pole also notes a telling

geographic component—many actively blogging congress members, especially those with established blogs (running for six months or more) were from the Midwest, suggesting the use of blogs as an effort to supplement a relative dearth of mainstream media coverage.

Pole pays great attention to Georgia Representative Jack Kingston's (R) blog. This "Mercedes of Congressional Blogs" (p. 85)—along with the accompanying interview of Rep. Kingston—illustrates the potential of a well-attended and prioritized elite political blog. Unlike the other congressional blogs, Kingston's was nearly identical to the citizen blogs described earlier; his blog was graphically advanced, highly organized, and contained features such as podcasts, a blogroll and an active comments section. Pole concludes that if astutely employed, a blog can allow a politician to shape a message without depending on the mainstream media. Net-savvy politicians have a tremendous opportunity to communicate with their constituents. Further, elite blogging might enhance civic participation by bringing "representation closer to the public" (p. 94).

Finally, the study turns to presidential campaign and election blogs. Pole argues their significance was apparent by 2007, when 14 out of 17 presidential candidates had blogs. In 2008, the Democratic and Republican parties also exponentially increased the number of their credentialed national convention bloggers. Pole cites evidence that campaigns deployed blogs as a motivational tool, a use Howard Dean pioneered with his *Blog for America*, which at its apex attracted 30,000 visitors daily. Candidates may also use blogs to deploy strategies they wish to keep out of the mainstream media. For example, in the 2008 Democratic primary, Barack Obama actually ran seven times as many blog attacks against Clinton than she did against him. Still, many believed that Obama generally ran the less negative campaign. Finally, Pole details the staggering differences in the political blogs between candidates Obama and McCain. In the three months following their 2008 party conventions, Obama outblogged candidate McCain 18-fold. Obama clearly embraced the mobilization potential of the blog far better than did McCain.

Pole's thorough investigation of a wide range of elite blogs by congress members, convention attendees, the presidential primary candidates as well as general election candidates, bolsters her argument for the growing salience of the elite political blog and its potential to mobilize. The inclusion of Barack Obama's recent and popular 2008 candidate blog also strengthens the analysis. Pole does not, however, address elites' use of other technologies, such as Twitter or Facebook, in comparison to "traditional" blogs. Future studies should also explore effects on blogging of technological advancements, such as the ubiquity of laptops, the explosion of Internet-capable mobile data devices, and the arrival of the iPad.

Researchers have work to do—blog readership is not well understood, the staying power of the political blog is unproven and the mechanisms that transform readership into participatory action remain obscure. Accordingly, the strength of Pole's study is its scope and examination of disparate bloggers rather than its evidence of the political blog as mobilizing agent. Nonetheless, scholars, political operatives and observers of civic engagement in the era of Web 2.0 will find that this concise and ambitious book provides the context, tools, motivations and framework that have elevated the blog to key player in U.S. politics. In response to accounts of declining civic participation popularized by Robert Putnam's "bowling alone" hypothesis, some might hope, more than declare, as Pole does: "Nothing could

be further from the truth. Instead, Americans are bowling “differently” and political blogging is illustrative of this change” (p. 133). Still, *Blogging the Political* shines light on an impressive section of the political blogosphere, and affirms that any serious consideration of contemporary U.S. political discourse and civic mobilization must now include the political blog.