Blogs in American Politics: From Lott to Lieberman

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Abstract

Purpose:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the rhetoric and reality of the impact of political blogs in the specific context of American politics, where online, mainstream media and academic accounts suggest blogs have had significant impacts on political communication.

Design/Methodology/Approach:

This paper examines three high profile events in which blogging has been implicated as particularly influential, and re-evaluates them in the context of established political science approaches. These events are the resignation of Trent Lott in 2002; Howard Dean's presidential campaign of 2003-4; and the Connecticut primary challenge to Joe Lieberman in the 2006 Senate mid-term elections.

Findings:

Re-evaluating these cases in the context of established theories of American politics suggests that the perception of blogs as a progressive new force, that can be decisive in a politician's success or failure, is an over-optimistic and over-simplified interpretation of the nature and consequences of this new form of political communication.

Originality/Value:

This paper provides a much needed first step in integrating the rhetoric of commentary on blogs in American politics with established political science, allowing for a more balanced and contextual consideration of the political roles of blogs than that provided by the blogosphere and its proponents to date.

Keywords: Blogging, political communication, political science

Article Type: Viewpoint

Introduction

As new media technologies have developed an absolutely central point of debate has been their capacity or otherwise to be 'transformative' (Graham, 1999: 21). Early proponents of the internet, and many commentators and scholars, expressed significant optimism over the potential for the new medium to overcome many of the technological, economic and political barriers that were inherent to, imposed upon, or had emerged in traditional mass media limiting their idealised functioning in democratic communication. This 'cyber-optimism' (Zittel, 2004: 231) has often used broad conceptualisations of the case for the pro-social consequences of the internet for democratic communication, using terms like 'electronic democracy' (ibid.: 231), or 'virtual democracy' (Youngs, 2007). However, in opposition to this position, a number of scholars have argued that the impact of new media will be limited by their incorporation into existing structures and processes in political communication, exemplified by the 'politics as usual' model of Margolis and Resnick (2000). Beyond a few specific examples of deliberate attempts at using new media for democratic communication, often on quite small, highly localised scales (e.g. Dahlberg, 2001; Albrecht, 2006), an emergent focus of attention has been the increasing prevalence of blogs in number, content, and apparent impact on political communication. A significant amount of attention has been paid to blogs by scholars in a variety of disciplines, and the findings of these studies have been mixed. In some developed democracies, the existence of vibrant and extensive political blogging networks is demonstrable, but their impact on wider political communication, even in election campaigns, is less so. For instance, a study of blogs in the New Zealand general election

of 2005, found little impact of the blogs on that campaign (Hopkins and Matheson, 2005). Studies of blogging in the 2005 British general election, similarly, found little evidence of a distinctive contribution made by blogs to the content or conduct of the campaign (Stanyer, 2006). Another study on that election concluded that the 'UK blogosphere did grow in profile... but its political importance remains (and is likely to continue to remain for the foreseeable future) extremely marginal in comparison to political blogs in the US' (Downey and Davidson, 2007: 106).

The reference to the USA in the above study is indicative of claims in research and commentary that suggests blogs have come to play an increasingly significant role in American politics. The extensive literature on blogs in American politics has tended to focus on several different possible consequences, with proponents going as far as to suggest that blogs have initiated 'an important shift in the American political landscape' (Hindman, 2007: 200). These claims have been made in relation to a number of different types of impact, for instance about their agenda-setting capacity, as in journalist and blogger Andrew Sullivan's comment of the 2004 US presidential election that blogs had 'supplanted the network news, mainstream newspapers and political parties as the critical arbiters of the course of [the] election' (in McNair, 2006: 134). Others suggest that research showing American audiences regard blogs as having high credibility when compared to mainstream media additionally means 'blogs have the potential to play a significant informational and *persuasive* role in political campaigns' (Trammell, 2006: 136, emphasis added). Most typically, though, the rhetoric surrounding American blogs' impact focuses on the idea of enhanced participation, such as Kline and Burstein's claim

that ‘bloggers are transforming the political process itself- and more important, the ordinary citizen’s relationship to it- in ways that seem likely to lead to a more representative and participatory American democracy’ (2005: 5). Similarly, Kerbel and Bloom argue that the participatory capacity and appeal of political blogs means they can be ‘system affirming in a way that conventional media are not’ (2005: 4).

The principle drivers for much of this rhetoric evident in American media and academic commentary on political blogs are a small number of key blog-related events that have come to exemplify and illustrate the claimed influence of blogs on American politics. This propensity in debates to generalise across the whole of American politics on the basis of a few key events, demands greater critical scrutiny of some of these specific events, in particular to consider whether the role of the technology of blogs is incontrovertibly the key explanatory factor, or whether other explanatory frameworks, such as traditional models and theories of political communication and political processes, might apply. This article does this in relation to three high profile events in which blogs are claimed to have played a decisive role. The first of these is the resignation of Trent Lott in 2002, claimed by the blogosphere and some commentators as being caused by blogs. The second case is the presidential campaign of Howard Dean, credited with uncovering a significant new route of candidate fund-raising via blogs in the presidential primary race of 2003-4. Finally, the paper considers the mid-term senate election race of 2006, in particular the role of blogs in the primary challenge to Joe Lieberman in Connecticut. Re-evaluation of these cases looking beyond their purely

technological aspects, may enable a more realistic appraisal of the role of blogs in American politics.

The Resignation of Trent Lott, 2002

The case of the resignation of Trent Lott is certainly not being suggested as the beginning of blogs, which go back at least to 1997 and possibly earlier (Blood, 2002: 7; Allan, 2006: 44), or of claims of new media's impact on American politics which were being made in the mid-1990s (e.g. Rash, 1997) even before the Monica Lewinsky scandal of 1998 which showed how the internet, in the form of the Drudge Report, could shake up the political news agenda (for good or ill). The Trent Lott affair, however, stands out as a key moment in which blogs have been the focus of a specific claim of having garnered 'the internet's first scalp' (*New York Post* in Allan, 2006: 78; see also Trippi, 2006: 228).

The Lott affair began at a commemoration for long-serving Republican senator, and one time segregationist, Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday in early December of 2002.

Amongst big name republicans who gave speeches at the event, broadcast live by C-Span, and attended by several journalists, was Lott, a Senator for Mississippi, and the Senate Minority Leader (due to become Senate Majority Leader given the Republicans' mid-term successes the previous month). He gave a speech in which he appeared to implicitly support Thurmond's segregationist views, and to blame race for problems in America today, when he said:

I want to say this about my state. When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either. (in Ashbee, 2003: 361)

The comments were given marginal coverage by some parts of the mainstream media, and ignored completely by others. ABC's Ed O'Keefe, for instance, attended the event but couldn't convince his newsroom that there was a story there, although a piece was written up around O'Keefe's account by Mark Halperin and colleagues, and posted onto ABC's 'The Note' blog (Allan, 2006: 79-80). 'The Note' was a well known "insider" media blog, visited regularly by other journalists and knowledgeable bloggers. As such the Halperin story was spotted by a number of bloggers and blog-using journalists, including former *American Prospect* correspondent Joshua Micah Marshall, former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan (Ashbee, 2003: 362), and *Washington Post* reporter Tom Edsall (Grann in Allan, 2006: 80). Figures such as these began to generate some commentary and interest in the story, which in turn fed back into mainstream media, both directly through mainstream media bloggers, and indirectly through mainstream media monitoring of blogosphere coverage. Within a couple of weeks, the story had grown to become a leading news item, with senior Republicans and the White House switching from avoiding commenting on the affair, or offering tentative acceptance of Lott's apologies, to explicitly criticising Lott's remarks. Despite efforts by Lott to qualify his remarks, and pledge support for affirmative action policies, the lining up of a replacement for Senate Majority Leader in Bill Frist was the writing on the wall, and Lott resigned on December 19th 2002.

Like the Lewinsky scandal, the Trent Lott affair is a classic example of what Thompson has called the *mediated scandal*, where media and communication technologies are key to the creation and maintenance of political scandal (2000). He states:

The political field was increasingly constituted as a mediated field- that is, a field in which the mediated visibility of political leaders became increasingly important and in which the relations between political leaders and ordinary citizens were increasingly shaped by mediated forms of communication. (Thompson, 2000: 108)

Thompson's argument points to how mass media and communication technologies have extended the scope of surveillance and scrutiny political leaders are exposed to (ibid.: 109). The Lott scandal readily fits into this identified general trend for mediated scandal, clearly adding blogs to the battery of communication channels both new and old which are recording, monitoring, surveilling and reacting to every word and gesture political leaders make, and in turn increasing the risks of political scandal.

The distinction in the contribution of blogs that would merit their singling out as the key causal factor in Lott's resignation is more problematic, however, especially when the causal flow of communication in the affair is more closely examined. After all, this was not a case of blogs originating a news event that had not been considered, or covered by mainstream news media, but it was a case of blogs 'resuscitating' (Campbell et al. 2007: 10) a story deemed of little news value by mainstream media. This initial judgement became something of a club with which to beat the mainstream media, Paul Krugman of

the *New York Times* for instance, accusing the mainstream media of having ‘buried’ the event along with Lott’s long term track record for controversial views on race relations (in Allan, 2006: 81). Yet judgements about newsworthiness are always relational, and at the same time as the Lott remarks a number of other political events were vying for news attention, such as the Louisiana senatorial election run-off, and the sacking of Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill (Ashbee, 2003: 362) making the accusation of burying the story something of a misrepresentation.

A second key qualification of blogs’ role, is that several of the key bloggers who picked up the story from The Note were seasoned mainstream media professionals themselves, who therefore had the professional contacts, writing skills, and in some cases also mainstream media channels for communicating their views alongside their blogs, such as Andrew Sullivan, far from the idealised image of ‘highly opinionated loudmouths blogging from their kitchen tables while still in their pyjamas’ (Klam, 2005: 63). Moreover, the returning of the story to lead mainstream news was only sustainable because mainstream media had their own resources to draw on to keep the story alive, such as the C-Span footage, and the accounts of journalists who witnessed the speech and were able to comment on it. In other words, the relationship between new and old media in this case was essentially symbiotic, and involved reciprocal attention being paid on both sides to what the other was up to. Whilst the speech might never have become a scandal without the blogs, the blogs would have never found out about the speech without the mainstream media, and even once the blogs had focused on it, it couldn’t

become a full blown scandal without the reach and resources of mainstream news media to push it to the top of the political agenda.

More pressing though, for claims about blogs' impact on American politics in this case, is the outcome of the scandal. As Thompson points out, whilst scandals have recognisable stages there is nothing, even in the midst of the scandal proper, to indicate how it will turn out (2000: 75). Scandals have an 'open-ended narrative structure' (ibid.: 76-7) and whilst they may lead to resignations, inquiries, criminal proceedings and the like, they may also end without clear resolution, or simply peter out. A key point here then, is that whilst blogs might take some of the credit for being key to the generating of Lott's comments as a mediated scandal, there is no causal connection between the medium through which scandals originate and their outcome. Just because the Lott affair broke in the blogosphere, it doesn't follow that it's because of that Lott resigned.

One of the key questions about the Lott affair rested on why it was at this particular point in time that Lott's sympathies for segregationist views resulted in his fall from grace.

The inference that the difference this time was the blogosphere's refusal to bury the issue, as the mainstream media had done, is insufficient to explain how Lott's political fortunes shifted so dramatically, given that his position on these issues remained highly consistent. For instance, explicit support for the Council of Conservative Citizens, a right wing group with segregationist origins, did not prevent him becoming Senate Majority Leader in 1996 (Ashbee, 2003: 362), yet much the same kind of position ended up with his resignation in 2002. The key difference was not so much the changing media landscape

over the interceding years, but rather ‘changes in the character of Republican politics and American conservatism during the 1990s’ (ibid.: 363). Ashbee highlights, for instance, the emergence of the ‘compassionate conservatism’ approach advocated by George W. Bush, a response in part to Republican mid-term losses, and the contentious and moralistic clashes between the Republican controlled Congress and the Clinton administration in the late 1990s (ibid.: 393-4). Some of this shift was electoral pragmatism, as the Republicans under Bush began to recognise the importance of changing electoral demographics, such as the growing importance of the Latino vote, and the need to address such changes in terms of both communication and policy. By contrast, Lott’s attachments to more traditional moral conservatism, and his image and language reflecting that more traditional position, left him looking increasingly anachronistic (ibid.: 365, 366). Ashbee also highlights how Lott had ruffled the feathers of his party colleagues with his record as Senate Leader, with questions over his performance in Congress, not least of which was being blamed for failing to maintain relations with Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords, who subsequently became an independent, losing the Republicans Senate control in 2001 (2003: 365). In this sense then, the Lott resignation is much better understood as reflecting significant changes in the political culture of the Republican party (ibid.: 368) than as a causal consequence of the new medium of blogs. As Thompson points out, the ‘existence of new technologies does not *by itself* explain how and why they are used’ (2000: 109, emphasis added). Key additional contributing factors in mediated political scandals are the culture of journalism and changes in the ‘broader political culture’ (ibid.: 111). In this case, whilst criticism of Lott’s views from the political centre and left may have found a new platform through

blogs to push the event to the top of the political news agenda, it was the changes within the Republican party itself that ultimately led to Lott's demise.

The Dean Presidential Campaign 2003-4

Re-appraising the Trent Lott affair highlights the importance of the context of political processes and trends within which new communication technologies emerge thus shaping their potential role and impact in any particular event. Considerations of the case of Howard Dean's campaign for the Democratic nomination as presidential candidate for the 2004 election, however, focus precisely on blogs' impact on the conventions and routines of internal party practices. The Dean campaign, on first inspection, would seem to offer concrete evidence for the political significance of blogs in American elections in a number of respects. Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager, indicates just how dramatic the shift in Dean's fortunes were, and places the Dean blog 'Blog for America' at the centre of this shift. In January 2003, Dean had a staff of just six people, and had raised only \$315,000 in campaign funds (Trippi, 2004: 76) which, even at this very early stage, left him lagging massively behind the multi-million dollar, heavily staffed operations of the major contenders for the Democratic nomination. By the end of 2003, however, Dean had raised over \$50 million, making him the leading fundraiser amongst the Democratic candidates, and he was also leading the opinion polls, with some 600,000 declared supporters, donors and activists (ibid.: xi-xii). In the actual primaries, Dean won none of the early contests, and withdrew after barely a month, in part unable to maintain the level of fund-raising necessary to match his rivals' campaign spending, and undermining

himself through poor public performances whilst canvassing, most notoriously the “Iowa scream”, an aggressive, almost hysterical campaign speech that was widely derided.

Nonetheless, the shift from complete outsider to front runner in barely a year meant that the Dean campaign has been heavily scrutinised for its possible implications and lessons for future campaigns.

With hindsight, key to this shift was the quite deliberate campaign strategy by the Dean team to use the internet, a tactic later referred to by Trippi as running an ‘open source campaign’ (2004: 135). The Dean team reasoned, in early 2003, that there was simply not the time to utilise the conventional fund-raising techniques, such as dinners for the great and the good, to finance a presidential election against incumbent George W. Bush, likely to cost around \$200 million (ibid.: 82). What was needed was a decentralized campaign, with many avenues of political activism and fund-raising, for which the internet was regarded by Trippi as a potentially viable tool. For instance, a link to ‘Meetup’, an internet site used by people to arrange social gatherings around topics of communal interest, was added to the Dean website, and over several months was used by tens of thousands of people to arrange meetings linked to Dean’s campaign (ibid.: 86). Trippi’s regular reading and contribution to Democrat-oriented blogs, such as ‘MyDD’ and ‘The DailyKos’, fostered links to the Democract blogosphere, from which consultants and staff for Dean’s own ‘Blog for America’ were recruited, figures like Matthew Gross, Jerome Armstrong and Marcos Moulitsas (Armstrong and Moulitsas, 2006: 115-6). As Trippi acknowledges, however, at the outset this campaign strategy was something of a stab in the dark- with no other options it was worth a try, but even he

didn't think it would be successful (Trippi, 2004: 83). So, perceiving the Dean campaign as a deliberate, visionary campaign strategy rather flatters the Dean campaign team.

Academic analyses of the campaign have focused on more systemic factors that might have contributed to the successful aspects of the campaign, notably fund-raising, participation and news media agenda setting. In terms of participation, the takeup of Dean's openness to public involvement in his campaign reflects the existence of a significant, untapped public looking online for routes into greater party political participation (Lawson-Borders and Kirk, 2005: 554). Armstrong and Moulitsas, for instance, argue forcibly for the desire amongst Democrat party supporters to have more of a say in the party's policies, strategies and campaigns, feeling closed out by a 'beltway mafia' of party chiefs, and professional campaign consultants controlling party campaigns in a manner deemed detrimental to mobilising the party faithful (2006: 75). Research into the political partisanship amongst American web-users at the time indicates there was a greater usage of the internet for politics amongst liberals, suggesting there was a latent audience there that a progressive Democratic candidate was better positioned to take advantage of than other candidates (Hindman, 2007: 194).

Although this suggests that 'Blog for America' like many forms of campaign communication was targeted more towards existing, active party supporters, evidence suggests that the use of new media did make a measurable difference in terms of turning Dean supporters into Dean volunteers, activists and donors (ibid.: 2007: 198). By the start of the primaries, over 300,000 people had contributed money to Dean, with some

61% of his funds coming from people donating \$200 or less (ibid.: 196). This was such a reversal of the conventions of candidate fund-raising, assertions that researchers will have to re-examine ‘the relationship between money and politics’ (ibid.: 197) are understandable. Kerbal and Bloom’s analysis of Blog for America identifies in the tone and content of postings some possible reasons why both participation and donations were on such an unexpected scale, with supporters even asking the campaign team to make demands for more donations and more funds from supporters (2005: 14). They suggest that giving ‘money became a cathartic experience for bloggers who felt attached to the Dean campaign through their membership in the virtual community’ (ibid.: 14). Much of the blog contents were about the blog and the blog participants, a self-reflexive (and self-important) discussion, routinely re-inforcing participants’ feeling of value in their activities, leading Kerbal and Bloom to claim that ‘Blog for America turned tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of people into political activists and united them in collective action that extended beyond cyberspace to inter-personal activities’ (ibid.: 21).

Certainly, the unexpected levels of participation and fund-raising had a knock-on effect in terms of news media agenda-setting, as the novelty of the Dean campaign generated a level of early press coverage, and positive coverage too, that a marginal candidate like Dean would not have generated otherwise, and gave him some useful additional momentum in the build-up to the primaries (Hindmand, 2007: 195). But the rhetoric of bloggers, campaign strategists, political journalists and some academics here seem deliberately at odds with the actual outcome of Dean’s candidacy. In no election since 1980 has a candidate gone into the primary leading in terms of both poll ratings, and

fund-raising, and then gone on to lose the nomination (McSweeney, 2007: 110), so questions have to be asked over what it was about Dean that saw his campaign flounder so spectacularly. Although the candidate-centred nature of American politics makes elections inherently unpredictable, research has shown that there are typical characteristics of candidates who end up as front runners, and are thus likely determinants of electoral success, with leading national polls and fund-raising being the two most significant over the last 20 years or so (McSweeney, 2007: 111). McSweeney's analysis of the Dean candidacy in comparison to previous front runners going back to the 1980 presidential campaign, found a number of common elements underpinning front runner successes that Dean uniformly lacked (2007). Successful front runners in this period not only had a lead in the polls, but the nature of their polling was significant too. For instance, front runners in previous campaigns tended to have high levels of name recognition (in other words voters knew of them before the campaign), favourable opinion ratings, at least a 40% share of party support and at least a 10% lead over their rivals (ibid.: 112). Indeed, to highlight just one of these features, prior to 2004 only one candidate from either party, lost the nomination going into the primaries leading in the polls, Gary Hart, whose support stood at just 28% (ibid.). Looking at Dean's poll leading position at the beginning of 2004, on all these counts he came up short. His support stood at 26%, lower even than Hart's had been, he had the lowest level of name recognition amongst the candidates, had a lead of less than ten percent and again similar to Hart, was viewed more unfavourably than favourably by the public (ibid.: 115). What these details of polling position arguably highlight is the subsequent vulnerability or otherwise of a candidate to the rigours of the primary campaign itself. Candidates with a

reasonably large share of support, favourability, and a clear lead over their rivals can weather the storm of potential setbacks, and halting of momentum that can occur in the early primaries (ibid.: 116). Whilst many front runners have lost support in the early contest, they have been able to retain a lead over their rivals, whilst Dean's poll support halved after the first primary, leaving him 35% *behind* John Kerry (ibid.). Compounding this, the capacity of the Dean campaign to react to setbacks was undermined partly by the level of support and donations via Blog for America flattening out, and press coverage becoming increasingly hostile as his rival candidates went negative (ibid: 116-7). Some Dean supporters argue that a key factor was the Democratic party establishment objecting to Dean's candidacy (Armstrong and Moulitsas, 2006: 145), but equally as problematic, and acknowledged even by his own campaign manager, Dean's campaign performances were turning him into 'an unmitigated disaster on the road' (Trippi, 2004: xii).

Alongside these problems, another aspect of front runners has been identified as crucial to their eventual success related to their wider party appeal beyond their core support (ibid.: 112). Arguably the very thing that attracted people to Dean in the first place, his self-styled positioning as the candidate from the 'democratic wing of the democratic party' (in Armstrong and Moulitsas, 2006: 139) was a big part of his eventual downfall. This is because candidates have to be successful across the different sections of their parties, and in the case of the Democrats, no 'nominee since McGovern in 1972 has mounted a winning campaign running from the party's liberal wing' (ibid.: 119). The problem is finding support amongst party moderates, and here Dean performed particularly badly in the early primary contests (ibid.). This failure of the supposedly

“open-source” campaign, where party supporters played a highly active role in a variety of aspects of the Dean Campaign, to accommodate and adapt to a wider body of potential supporters raises real issues about the reality of just how open and participatory it actually was. Contrasting markedly from the Kerbal and Bloom study mentioned above, Stromer-Galley and Baker’s analysis of Blog for America postings suggests that far from providing a genuine interactive campaign, the Dean machine offered what they call a ‘façade of interactivity’ which ‘promoted a sense of interaction without actually moving to genuine interaction between the campaign and the citizens’ (2006: 120). Others have noted how blogs might be used manipulatively to foster a sense of momentum, mobilisation and motivation amongst potential supporters through the features, tone and style of the blog (Lawson-Borders and Kirk, 2005: 554). In the Dean case, a highly strategic use of contributions to the blog from Dean and key campaign staffers worked to inculcate a sense amongst its users that the campaign was listening and responding to them directly, and giving them in effect insider information on the conduct of the campaign, creating a parasocial interaction between the campaign and their supporters (Stromer-Galley and Baker, 2006: 123). This seemed to work well until the primaries began, and dissatisfaction amongst supporters about campaign strategy and attempts from supporters to get endorsements for Dean from key Democratic figures were either met with silence from the campaign team or explicit instructions to stop activities deemed inappropriate by the campaign controllers (ibid.: 128). Stromer-Galley and Baker conclude that ultimately ‘the campaign was interacting *at* citizens rather than interacting *with* citizens’ and that many participants came to see that towards the end of the Dean campaign (ibid.: 129). Far from the system-affirming rhetoric of some accounts, then,

the Dean campaign reflects established patterns of success and failure in presidential primaries, and highlights tensions in the use of new media in campaigns between increased public participation, to foster fund-raising and volunteer activity, and the desire of candidates and their strategists to retain overall control over the conduct and content of campaigns.

The Connecticut Senate Primary Challenge & Election 2006

Dean was an early adopter of blogging as a campaign tool, but at the time of writing this has already been normalised into candidate campaigns, becoming part of ‘politics as usual’ (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). The deeper question of whether this is a new kind of citizen-led campaigning that can have clear electoral impact in terms of results is not resolved in the case of Dean. The Connecticut primary challenge in the run up to the 2006 Congressional elections, on the other hand appears to take the case for the political blogs’ influence a stage further on, as the bloggers seemed to have won a partial victory in Joe Lieberman’s deselection as the official Democratic Senate candidate for Connecticut. Here too, however, a closer examination of the Connecticut campaign, including the eventual senatorial election, again reveals significant problems and limitations on the claims of the power and influence of the blogosphere.

The Connecticut mid-term Senate race of 2006 offers elements of both the Lott and Dean cases. Like Lott’s tribulations, the Connecticut Senate race was focused on internal party dissatisfaction with one of the Democrats’ leading figures, Senator Joe Lieberman.

Having been popular enough to be Al Gore's running mate in the 2000 Presidential election, Lieberman's position on the subsequent Iraq War and perceived closeness to the Bush regime as a result (evidenced by an embrace from Bush at a State of the Union address that was so close as to appear to many as if Bush had kissed him) left him increasingly unpopular with sections of the Democrat Party rank and file by early 2006. Like the Dean case, Lieberman's problems were exacerbated by a vociferous and active grassroots (and netroots) campaign focused around a challenger for Lieberman's previously highly secure senate seat, Ned Lamont, who was more than open to utilising a variety of communication channels to try and unseat a heavyweight of the Democratic Party establishment. Also like Dean, early success was not sustained in the longer term, as despite forcing and winning a primary challenge against Lieberman, the state-wide election saw Lieberman, standing as an independent, returned to office with a clear margin of victory.

Some proponents of blogging's impact on political communication and electoral fortunes have suggested that they 'can have their maximum influence in a time of a closely and evenly divided electorate. Like other media, their role is important but actually marginal. It's when marginal matters that blogs can be most influential' (Burstein, 2005: xxv). The Connecticut contest would initially seem to be a good example of precisely this kind of close contest, in which the blogs played a key role at least in the stages of the Democratic caucus, and then the primary challenge, before the contest widened to the whole of the Connecticut electorate where their impact was apparently marginalised. However, the problem with isolating blogs as a causal factor in this case is that, as acknowledged by

Burstein, given the right context, the normally marginal or minimal effects of a range of campaign communication strategies might become influential.

In the Connecticut case, there are three important contextualising factors to include in any attempts to understand what occurred there. First, and most simply, the demographics of the state inherently create circumstances in which the typically marginal influences of campaign communication techniques and activities might be electorally consequential. Connecticut is a small state with around 2.4 million eligible voters (in a population of around 3.4 million), around 650,000 of whom were registered Democrat party members eligible to vote in a primary (Connecticut Secretary of State, 2005). To force a primary challenge, Ned Lamont only needed either a voter petition of 15,000 signature or 15% of the 1,600 or so caucus votes at the state party convention, a few hundred people which he achieved comfortably (White, 2006). In the primary contest around 280,000 people voted, and the difference between Lamont and Lieberman was about 4%, or around 10,000 people in Lamont's favour (Balz and Murray, 2006). These kinds of numbers certainly create the opportunity for blogs to play a role in how the campaign unfolded, but it also meant that the role of conventional campaigning practices, such as personal contact with the candidate, let alone the usual raft of media-oriented campaign strategies, such as political advertising, might also have been more important than in a typical, larger scale contest. Also it brings into play local news media, and competition between the candidates for news access, participating in a televised debate for instance, and also for endorsements from key local newspapers. Whilst the Dean presidential campaign utilised Blog for America to coordinate fund-raising and supporters' activities in a way

that other forms of campaigning might not have been able to do on the national scale, this was clearly not the case in Connecticut where with such small numbers of voters needed to win, personal contact through candidate canvassing was as potentially important as blogs, television advertising, or any other campaign technique. So, isolating any one channel of campaign communication is difficult because the size of the electorate in this case potentially amplified the role of all kinds of campaign communication. Currently there is no real body of empirical research to indicate which, if any, communication strategy is more or less influential in this way (Kenny and McBurnett, 1997: 75-6; Gerber and Green, 2000: 654), so there's nothing to indicate blogs were more or less responsible than any other medium in this case.

The demographics of Connecticut also contributed to two other features which impact on campaign and election outcomes, namely the nature and consequences of divisive primaries, and partisan mobilisation. The 'divisive' primary hypothesis refers to the consequences, both practical and conceptual, for parties and candidates in elections when a primary race is close, as in the four percent margin of victory for Lamont in the Connecticut primary (Kenney and Rice, 1984: 905). Essentially the concern is that a divisive primary 'reduces a candidate's prospects for winning the general election' (Bernstein, 1977: 544). The possible reasons for this include: the depletion of the winning candidate's financial resources to compete in the general election due to heavy spending in the primary; reduced support from party activists who campaigned for the losing primary candidate; abstentions or voting for the opposition party candidate by disgruntled party followers of the losing primary candidate; and the loss of potential

supporters amongst independents and opposition voters put off by a divisive primary campaign (especially if it turns nasty) (Bernstein, 1977: 540; Kenney and Rice, 1984: 904; Hogan, 2003: 27). The empirical support for this hypothesis is mixed, with different studies finding evidence both for and against the idea of consequences for general election outcomes, and indeed variations between negative and positive outcomes for candidates (see Hogan, 2003: 28-9).

The Connecticut Democratic primary, however, was arguably divisive from the outset, in that Lamont forced a primary challenge to a three-term senator, former vice-presidential candidate, and an incumbent with a large majority in the last senate race. This is a relatively rare situation for a primary challenge to occur and was a consequence, in part, of the vulnerable position of the incumbent, Lieberman, an important factor for any prospective challenger (Squire, 1989: 531). Evident Democrat supporters' dissatisfaction with Lieberman over his support for the Iraq War not only fostered the challenge, but then became a central issue which in turn contributed to the campaign's rapid descent into negative and attacking material both from the candidates themselves, and outside (including the blogosphere). Where the case diverges from the established literature, and perhaps the primary's divisiveness can be more persuasively argued, is in the decision of Lieberman to continue into the general election standing as an independent candidate. This meant not only that many of those who had campaigned and voted for him in the primary would not be campaigning or voting for Lamont, but would continue to be actively campaigning and voting against him. Moreover, independents and Republican voters would still have the opportunity to vote for a candidate who, through the high

profile of the primary campaign, they might have come to support, particularly given the weakness of the Republican Party in the state (and their candidate as a result), and the core issue of supporting the Iraq War being something many Republican voters still did in large numbers. So, whilst the primary challenge might not have damaged Lamont's chances had Lieberman withdrawn, it arguably clearly did when Lieberman decided to stay in the race. Thus, if the blogosphere is to be credited with getting Lamont onto the ballot, and for defeating Lieberman in the primary, then it must concomitantly take the blame for Lamont's loss in the general election by generating and fostering a highly divisive primary that contributed to independent and Republican voter support for Lieberman. Indeed, Lieberman not only retained his senate seat, but did so without having to take the Democrat whip freeing him to be even more out of step, if he so chose, with Democrat voters' ideas [1], so if the blogosphere was a strong causal factor in this case, which as mentioned there's no substantial empirical evidence to indicate this (or for any other form of campaign contact for that matter) then arguably its influence was far from the progressive, positive, enhancement of public participation and engagement in contemporary politics claimed by authors like Kline and Burstein (2005).

The third feature of this case is the nature of the relationship between campaigns and partisan voter mobilization. Whilst there is only a small body of empirical investigation into the specific effects of different types of campaign contact on mobilization, some general features of factors in mobilization have been proposed that again throw new light on the Connecticut contest. Research in this area in the US context identifies as two key elements the importance of 'high stimulus' campaigns in getting the vote out (Jackson,

2002: 827), and the predominant nature of campaign mobilization occurring amongst established party supporters (or partisans) (Holbrook and McClurg, 2005: 689). Divisive primaries, like that of Connecticut 2006, fit Jackson's definition of high stimulus campaigns- those with high campaign spending, clear competition within a party, which are closely-run contests where a high profile challenger to a well established incumbent 'injects more "novel" information and activating stimuli into a contest' (2002: 839). Key to this, as with the importance of Presidential candidate quality in the Dean campaign, is the quality of the challenger, and alongside the vulnerability of the incumbent mentioned above, challenger quality at state level is typically defined in relation to their previous political experience and capacity to raise the funds 'to run a competitive campaign' (Squire, 1989: 533). Whilst Lamont had no previous political experience, weakening his candidacy, he did have access to substantial financial resources. According to Federal Election Commission statistics, Lamont spent \$20.5 million across the 2005-6 cycle, just under \$14 million of which was his own money, making him the second highest spending candidate in the 2006 senate contests (behind Hillary Clinton in New York), and Lieberman raised just under \$19 million dollars, spending just over \$17 million, making him the fourth highest spending candidate (just behind Robert Casey in Pennsylvania who spent around \$17.5 million) (FEC, 2006). The point here is not that candidate's campaign spending is a simple and powerful determinant of electoral outcome, as empirical research in this area is also rather scarce and has produced mixed results (Kenny and McBurnett, 1997; Gerber, 2004). Rather, it is that across all forms of campaign communication and activity, this was an exceptionally high stimulus campaign in the context of the other mid-term senate races in 2006. Attention to traditional

techniques of campaigning was extremely high, as evidenced through the high spending levels of both Lamont and Lieberman, such that the role of blogs does not stand out as a site of partisan mobilisation over and above other tactics. Even in the narrow sense of the Dean campaign's identification of a new route of funding campaigns through blogs, there's little evidence here of a substantial differential contribution being made through blogs in the Connecticut race. This is particularly in light of the fact that Lamont, who actively courted Democratic bloggers due to his outsider status within the Democratic Party hierarchy requiring him to try and access the networks of the party's rank and file, in the end dug deep into his own pockets for most of his campaign funds. Moreover, the targetting of party activists and highly motivated partisans to force the primary challenge, was followed by Lamont (and Lieberman) spending more money and attention on those media theorised to have a wide reach but typically less return (in terms of mobilization), principally large reach "push" media, such as advertising (Holbrook and McClurg, 2005: 691). This is partly because reaching non-partisan, independent, and undecided voters by what are intrinsically highly partisan, "pull" media, like political blogs is arguably likely to have an even lower return in terms of non-partisan mobilization.

Conclusion

Discussions of the impact of blogs in American politics have, as indicated in this article, on occasion veered into hyperbole, not only amongst bloggers themselves, but also amongst mainstream journalists, political campaigners, and even some academic accounts. A central problem with such accounts is their reliance on a series of example events, interpreted in particular ways to make a case for a distinctive and consequential

contribution of blogs to political communication and political processes over and above other forms of media. As this article has shown through a re-examination of some of these cases, their dissonance with the conventional understanding of political communication processes is not necessarily as clear cut or demonstrable as some commentators claim. In fact, these cases reaffirm that isolating the causal role of any particular communication medium, new or old, remains an extremely difficult task to empirically demonstrate within specific cases, let alone in terms of general impacts on political processes. Furthermore, the capacity of existing models and theories of political science to provide broader explanatory frameworks in these cases, frameworks which are not dependent upon technological explanations, suggest that proponents of the impacts of blogs on American politics have yet to offer systematic and uncontrovertible empirical evidence to match their rhetorical claims.

[1] At the time of writing, for instance, Lieberman has publicly endorsed Republican John McCain's presidential candidacy bid rather than any of the Democrat candidates.

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