

The Audience for Political Blogs

NEW RESEARCH ON BLOG READERSHIP

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IPDI is the premier research and advocacy center for the study and promotion of online politics in a manner that encourages citizen participation and improves governance – in short, to “democratize democracy.” IPDI is non-partisan and non-profit and is housed in GW’s Graduate School of Political Management.

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INTRODUCTION

Political blogs have barnstormed into American politics. In just a few years they have become a finger in the eye of the mainstream media and a closely watched forum of political debate. Political blogs have exposed lapses in mainstream media coverage, chastened reporters with the fear of an angry online response to sensitive stories, and at times set the media agenda. Political blogs have also been influential in raising money for political candidates and pushing select races into the national spotlight.¹

An overload of bandwidth has been spent talking about blogs but little research. The ephemeral nature of electronic communication makes tracing content like finding a needle in an Internet-sized haystack. Studying the audience for blogs is scattershot, generally confined to online surveys from specific blogs. Tracking down blog readers by other means is hard because, relatively speaking, there are so few. Telephone survey researchers have to call a dozen people before they reach one who reads a blog regularly. And then, you have found a blog reader, not necessarily someone who reads *political* blogs.

This project of the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet (IPDI) focuses on the audience for political blogs. There is a lot of conjecture about that group but not much careful consideration.

THE POLITICAL BLOG PROJECT

Most people have heard about blogs, and many Internet users have seen them. The best estimate is that about 12 million American adults, or 8% of Internet users, keep a blog and 57 million adults, or 39% of Internet users, have read a blog.²

The regular, daily audience for *political* blogs is fairly small. We estimate in the millions of readers, not tens of millions. This audience is hard to track

1 Some recent commentary is found at Michael M. Grynbaum, "Bloggers Battle Old-School Media for Political Clout: Online Journals Gaining Greater Influence, Scrutiny," *The Boston Globe*, 6 July 2006, Daniel Henninger, "When Blogs Rule We Will All Talk Like ----," *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 2006. An example of blog influence for a candidate is Paul Hackett, candidate for Ohio's 2nd Congressional District in 2005, see Dan Balz, "Gop Says It Will 'Bury' Name-Calling Candidate," *The Washington Post*, 31 July 2005.

2 Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, *Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers* [Report] (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 19 July 2006 [cited 2006 6 August]); available from www.pewinternet.org. This estimate does not count those under age 18.

down. Because of that, IPDI collaborated with the political consulting firm @dvocacy Inc. in an online survey that sampled a large state (California) in order to reach as many dedicated political blog readers as possible. That required casting an enormous net.

In the summer of 2006 @dvocacy Inc. granted IPDI access to a list of registered voters in California which had been matched with e-mail addresses. This database (assembled in accordance with federal spam and privacy laws) allowed IPDI to send an e-mail to more than 2.3 million registered voters in an effort to find dedicated political blog readers.³

The result was a sample of 7,863 people who took an online survey. A large minority of our sample has at least seen a political blog. About 40% of everyone we sampled said they had looked at a blog "that discusses politics or current events" at least once in the past month.⁴ Another 7% said they visited "several times a week." However, only 9% of our sample respondents said they visited political blogs "almost every day."

This latter group is what journalists and politicians are talking about - this select group of people who visit a political blog nearly every day. It is this small group (hereafter referred to as "daily readers") to which we will turn our attention.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Our findings expand our understanding of daily blog readers and why they look at political blogs.

Among our findings:

- While many Internet users have seen blogs, a much smaller proportion of them are regular readers of political blogs. Of the sample gathered here, 9% said they look at a political blog "almost every day."
- Daily readers of political blogs see blogs as a news source and an alternative to the mainstream media, which they despise. Daily blog readers get almost all of their news online.
- The audience for political blogs appears to be fairly concentrated across dozens of blogs, not thousands. Daily readers

3 Additional methodological information is found at the end.

4 We believe our sample is generally a bit more engaged in politics online. Random national surveys have found that about 27% of respondents read blogs (of all types). See Susannah Fox and Mary Madden, *Generations Online* [Data memo] (Pew Internet & American Life Project, December 2005 [cited 7 August 2006]); available from www.pewinternet.org.



visit the most popular blogs.

- Daily readers are disproportionately men, are *not* younger than other Internet users, but claim greater household income than other Internet users.
- Daily readers are more likely to place themselves at the ends of the political spectrum. They are also more likely to take strong positions on social issues, especially those who consider themselves Democrats.
- Daily readers are heavily involved in politics, and they respond to efforts by bloggers to participate. Daily readers forward news stories, sign petitions and e-mail politicians at the prompting of political blogs.
- Daily readers think that blogs encourage and improve political discussion.

WHO ARE POLITICAL BLOG READERS?

Our general approach in this project is to compare the daily readers with the rest of our sample. We are not interested here in characteristics of the daily readers, but rather broad tendencies that we find when comparing them to others who took our survey. This limitation to our findings is largely because of the methodological constraints within which we have to work. (We discuss this issue in a note at the end of the report.)

Demographics

Daily readers are more likely to be male than female. This dovetails with some earlier findings.⁵ A national random survey of people who keep blogs – political or otherwise – suggested that bloggers (those who keep blogs) were more likely to be young men.⁶ There has been some evidence from

national surveys that men may be slightly more likely to read blogs.⁷

Daily readers are not as young as we might expect. The assumption that people engaged in online politics are disproportionately young appeared when the Howard Dean phenomenon first took root. But even then, prior to the 2004 election, “online political citizens” were found to be older than Internet users in general.⁸ Some surveys of political blogs have suggested that political blog readers are older than expected, and our results suggest that as well. The key observation here is that daily readers appear *no older or younger* than everyone else in the survey sample. The median age for all our respondents was 49, and daily readers are no older than that. The distribution of ages between the two groups (daily readers vs. everyone else) is also very similar.

Demographic comparison of daily political blog readers and all others

	Daily political blog readers	All others
Male	75%	60%
Female	25%	40%
18-24	7%	5%
25-34	14%	13%
35-54	41%	41%
55-64	23%	25%
65 and up	16%	16%
High school graduate	3%	4%
Some college	23%	27%
College graduate	45%	41%
Post-graduate degree	30%	28%
Religious faith is “not at all important” in my life.	32%	20%
I “seldom or never” attend religious services.	75	66
	<i>n</i>	
	723	7,140

5 Blogads, which is a blog advertising firm, posted surveys on its clients’ blogs 2006 as part of its yearly surveys of the blog audience. While the sample is self-selected from a narrow universe of political blogs, it nonetheless helped guide our thinking. Political blog readers who responded to the Blogads survey were disproportionately men – 72.4%. (This includes both regular and intermittent blog readers.) Sixty-two percent of respondents were age 41 or up, and 35% were at least age 51. See Blogads, *Political Blogs Reader Survey 2006* [Online survey report] (26 April 2006 [cited 6 July 2006]); available from www.blogads.com/survey/blog_reader_surveys_overview.html.

6 See Lenhart and Fox, *Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet’s New Storytellers* ([cited]). Pew found that people who started blogs of any kind were younger than Internet users in general and slightly more likely to be male.

7 Deborah Fallows, *How Women and Men Use the Internet* [Report] (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 28 December 2005 [cited 7 August 2006]); available from www.pewinternet.org.

8 See Joseph Graf and Carol Darr, “Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign,” (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, The George Washington University, 2004).



Our survey sample is from a higher income bracket than the general public. And daily readers report an even higher income. So while 42% of daily readers reported an annual income of \$100,000 or more, only 37% of everyone else in the sample did so. This suggestion that readers of political blogs have a high socioeconomic background has appeared elsewhere, but we should remember that in both cases the samples are self-selected.⁹

The respondents in our survey are highly educated, and daily readers are as well. This is a typical finding from earlier IPDI research. Daily readers are more likely to report having a college degree, but the difference is not dramatic (75% of daily readers with college degrees compared to 69% of everyone else).¹⁰ They likewise appear as likely as the rest of the survey sample to be married.

Finally, in general our sample is less religious than average Americans and daily readers are even less so. They are less likely to say that religion is important in their lives and to attend religious services.¹¹

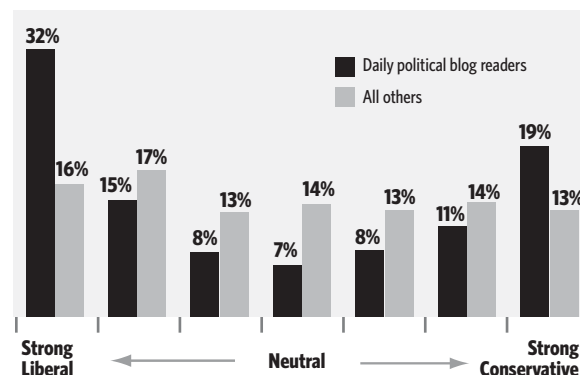
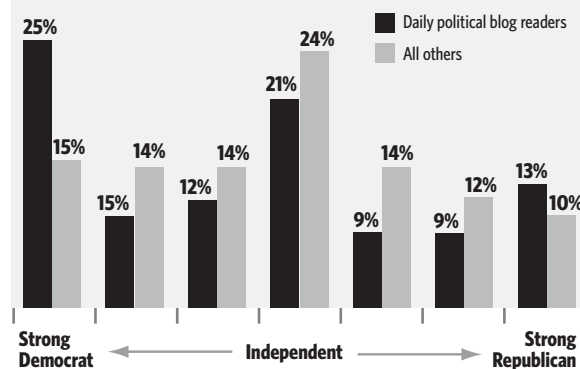
Attitudes and opinions

Daily readers are clearly politically active, and they are more partisan in their views than those who do not visit political blogs, although we think the picture is more complex than that.

A greater proportion of daily readers put themselves at the ends of the party continuum – more say they are a “strong Democrat” or a “strong Republican.” At the same time, about the same proportion of daily bloggers put themselves squarely in the middle and call themselves independents. The difference comes in the fuzzy areas just to the left or right of the independents, where moderate Democrats or Republicans reside. Fewer daily readers place themselves in this middle area.

We see this again when we ask respondents where they place themselves on a partisan scale. Here we can see a greater proportion of daily readers put themselves at the far ends, especially in the category of “strong liberal.” Fully a third of those respondents who said they read political blogs every day consider themselves strong liberals.

Keeping in mind the limitations of our sample, our findings nonetheless support the picture that the blogosphere is more heavily liberal than con-



servative. The list of high traffic political blogs is disproportionately liberal. Some observers have pointed out that conservatives appear to dominate in talk radio while liberals have a greater presence in political blogs. Our findings offer some support for this picture of American political media.

We asked respondents whether they agree or disagree with a set of statements about several social issues – health insurance, poverty, the death penalty and gay marriage. The results in the table shown suggest that daily readers who consider themselves Democrats feel more strongly about the issues than the remaining respondents. In other words, daily readers who are Democrats were more likely to place themselves at the far extreme as someone who “strongly agrees” or “strongly disagrees.” Daily readers who consider themselves Republicans were less likely to do so.

9 Blogads, *Political Blogs Reader Survey 2006* (cited).
 10 Difference statistically significant at $p < .01$.
 11 For data on all Americans see Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics* (The Pew Research Center For The People and The Press, 24 August 2006 [cited 1 September 2006]); available from people-press.org/.



Responses on social issues of daily political blog readers and all others

Percent who "strongly agree" with the following statements	Democrats		Republicans	
	Daily political blog readers	All others	Daily	All others
"Government should provide health insurance for the uninsured"	72%	53%	5%	6%
"Government should spend more to reduce poverty in the U.S."	68%	53%	5%	7%
"Mandatory death penalty for murder should be the law"	3%	9%	34%	38%
"Government should enact laws to restrict gay marriage"	2%	6%	50%	46%
n	287	2,709	198	2,284

Attitudes toward the news media

Daily readers get most of their news from the Internet. Two-thirds (66%) said they got most of their national and international news online, compared to just a third (33%) of everyone else we surveyed. By contrast, polls of average Americans consistently find that most people get their news from television.

One of the tropes of blog readers is their dislike and disdain for the mainstream media (or MSM). As expected, we found a great deal of dislike for the media, especially broadcasting, and daily readers are consistently more likely to say they dislike the media than others. The daily newspaper "you are most familiar with" elicited the most favorable reaction. Overall, daily readers were much more unfavorable toward the press than the rest of the sample. And, if we compare our data to several nationally representative surveys, we can see that daily readers are much more unfavorable toward the news media than the general public. Generally speaking, the gap between daily readers and

the general public is 30 to 40 percentage points.¹² The rest of our sample is much closer to the general public.

Attitudes toward the media of daily political blog readers

	Favorable	Unfavorable
Broadcast networks such as ABC, NBC and CBS	32%	68%
Local television news	37%	63%
Cable news networks such as CNN, FoxNEWS or MSNBC	39%	61%
National influential newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post	47%	53%
The daily newspaper you are most familiar with	51%	49%

Political involvement of bloggers

Many writers of political blogs exhort their readers to political action, such as writing members of Congress or donating money to campaigns. In a few cases these efforts seem to have been successful, such as the movement to raise money for Paul Hackett, who was a largely unknown challenger for the 22nd Congressional District in Ohio in 2005, and Ned Lamont, the Democratic Senate primary challenger to Sen. Joe Lieberman in Connecticut in 2006.

Daily readers scored high on nearly all measures of political involvement, but it is important to remember that the sample we studied scored high. This reflects the greater political involvement of people online, but especially the vagaries of our sample. People who took this online survey were much more likely to report political involvement of all kinds, such as writing letters to their representative or serving on a local school board. Nonetheless, even in our active sample, daily readers were more likely to have (1) contacted a politician, (2) contacted the media, (3) been a member of a group that tries to influence public policy and (4) attended a political speech or rally.¹³

12 For data on attitudes toward the press see The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Public More Critical of Press, but Goodwill Persists* (The Pew Research Center For The People and The Press, 26 June 2005 [cited 1 September 2006]); available from people-press.org/.

13 All differences statistically significant at $p < .001$.



Political involvement of daily political blog readers and all others

In the past year, have you ...	Daily political blog readers	All others
Contacted a politician?	77%	61%
Written a letter to the editor or called a radio station?	48%	31%
Been a member of a group that tries to influence public policy?	44%	28%
Attended a political speech or rally?	40%	22%
Attended a local public meeting?	35%	33%
Made a speech?	29%	28%
Served on a local committee?	23%	24%
Served as an officer for an organization?	22%	26%
	<i>n</i> 723	7,140

Political involvement for daily readers is more likely to take the form of partisan communication. Specifically, daily readers were defined by their willingness to (1) attend a political rally, speech or protest; (2) become an active member of a group trying to influence public policy; and (3) write or call a politician. IPDI research saw this pattern before among *Online Political Citizens* a year before the 2004 election.¹⁴ Online Political Citizens, or people generally involved in politics online (but not necessarily blog readers), were more likely to have their political involvement defined by these forms of political activity and less likely to be engaged in activities that were local and that reflected a deeper connection to the community. Those activities include making a speech, attending a public meeting, or serving as a club officer or committee member for a local organization.

Daily readers are highly engaged in online political activity, including forwarding political material to others and contacting their representatives online. A large proportion said they have forwarded political news stories (84%), forwarded political e-mail (75%) or forwarded links to blogs (70%). In addition, a large proportion of daily readers have also taken political action at the *specific suggestion of a political blog*, such as signing an online petition (63%), e-mailing a public official (57%) or making a political contribution (31%).

Daily readers are more likely than non-readers

14 Graf and Darr, "Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign."

to say they make political donations. Of daily readers, 40% said they gave to a state or local candidate in the past year and 61% gave in the presidential race in 2004. Of the remaining sample, 26% gave in a local race and 42% gave in 2004. Prior IPDI research has shown that donors are generally more likely to look at political blogs.¹⁵

THE BLOG AUDIENCE

We have generally had to surmise about the distribution of the audience for blogs. The assumption has been that despite the incredible number of political blogs on the Internet, the distribution of the blog audience across these is like the distribution of the audience for the mainstream media. Most of the audience is congregated among a small group of immensely popular blogs that dominate the blogosphere.¹⁶

Our data support the conventional wisdom that the audience for political blogs is generally concentrated across dozens of blogs, not thousands. Our sample of regular blog readers was fairly concentrated on a relatively small number of blog sites. We asked respondents if they had "regularly" visited any of 11 of the most popular political blogs. About half (52%) of daily readers of political blogs said they regularly visited at least one of this small group of blogs. Three-quarters (75%) said they visited one of these blogs at least "once in awhile."

BLOG READERS ON BLOGS

One of attractions of blogs is the community of readers. A huge proportion of daily readers say they read comments others post on the blog - 84% said they "very often" or "sometimes" read such comments. A much smaller percentage will post comments. About 11% said they "very often" post comments and 30% said they "sometimes" do so.

Daily readers "strongly agree" that political

15 See Joseph Graf, Grant Reeher, Michael J. Malbin and Costas Panagopoulos, "Small Donors and Online Giving: A Study of Donors to the 2004 Presidential Campaigns," (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, The George Washington University, 2006).

16 Network analysis of links between blogs shows that a small number of blogs are focal points where many links (and many readers) converge. Other blogs link to and contact the central blogs as a way to build their audience. See Daniel W. Drezner and Henry Farrell, "The Power and Politics of Blogs" (paper presented at the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 2004).



blogs enhance political discussion (56%) and are good for democratic debate (54%). Hardly any regular blog readers (less than 3%) *disagree* with these statements. Daily readers are also likely to believe that blogs are an important information resource – 51% “strongly agree” blogs offer alternative viewpoints and 58% “strongly agree” blogs give them information unavailable elsewhere.

Generally, people who have seen political blogs but are not daily readers are more sanguine. Large majorities agree that blogs enhance political discussion and are good for democratic debate, but less strongly. Likewise with their views about blogs as an information resource. As we said earlier, our sample is an unusual one – active online and engaged in politics – but respondents generally agreed that blogs offered alternative information and enhanced democratic discussion.

The question of partisanship garnered a more unusual response. Opinions were more closely divided. Daily readers were slightly *more* likely to say that blogs make readers “more partisan.” People less experienced with political blogs were less likely to believe that was the case. About 43% of daily readers agreed that blogs make people more partisan, but 37% had a neutral response and 20% disagreed.

Finally, we asked a series of questions about why people read political blogs. The responses fall into three categories, each category a way someone uses a political blog – as a news source, a means of political expression, or as a diversion or form of entertainment. By far the most cited “use” for political blogs was as a news source. The second most popular was as a means of political expression. Daily readers were much less likely to say reading blogs was just a diversion or entertainment.

Among people who read political blogs less frequently, a political blog as a means of political expression is less important. Blogs remain important as news sources for these infrequent readers. Perhaps someone sees something in the news and is prompted to learn more from a political blog. They are people who check blogs a few times a month or less. On the other hand, these infrequent readers did not use blogs for political expression. The single biggest difference between frequent and infrequent blog readers was seeing their use of political blogs as a means of political expression.

Why do you read political blogs?

	Daily political blog readers	All others
Blogs as a news source		
I am very interested in politics	93%	75%
They provide news the mass media ignores	92%	71%
I enjoy reading the news	92%	79%
They give a different perspective on the news	92%	82%
They are interesting or funny	84%	76%
Blogs as political expression		
As a way to express my political beliefs	67%	38%
As a way to support my political party	45%	28%
Blogs as diversion/entertainment		
They are a diversion during my downtime	44%	45%
I read blogs as a break during the workday	42%	24%
n	723	7,140

Cells are percent who “strongly agree” or “agree.”



NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Studying the audience for political blogs is very difficult. This is illustrated by one of the most ambitious recent efforts, conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. Pew conducts large nationally representative telephone surveys and used data from two surveys in 2005 and 2006 to find anyone who wrote a blog. After reaching more than 7,000 people by phone, Pew was able to find just 233 blog writers. This is just the nature of trying to find members of a small group in a large population with random sampling techniques.

At IPDI, we study the influence of the Internet on political life. We are interested in the readers of *political* blogs. Even more specifically, we are interested in the avid, daily reader of political blogs. When journalists or politicians talk about blog readers and the effects of blogs on politics, this is the group they are talking about.

Until now, our knowledge about this group has been drawn from the knowledge of blog writers about their audience and a close reading of political blogs. Both of these are valid sources of data, but we still sought to interview daily readers of political blogs for a look at the group as a whole. We are thus forced to discard random sampling because of the exorbitant cost necessary to obtain the sample size we desire.

With the partnership of @dvocacy Inc. we were able to use an enormous database of registered voters in California which had been matched e-mail addresses to send an e-mail survey to almost 2.4 million e-mail addresses.¹⁷ @dvocacy Inc. estimates that about 1.6 million of those addresses were functioning (and did not bounce back to the sender). Of those, about 7%, or 117,000 e-mails, were opened by the receiver. The remainder were caught in spam filters, ignored by the receivers or otherwise lost. We received 8,347 responses, which means about 7% of all those who opened the e-mail tried to complete the survey. Of those who took the survey, 7,863 were considered valid responses because they completed at least two-thirds of the questions, and 723 of those reported they looked at political blogs "almost every day." Our main comparison in this project is between these daily readers and the remaining valid responses.

17 This project was conducted in accordance with state and federal spam laws.

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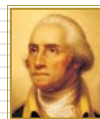
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