

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

Abe Gong, *University of Michigan*

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.

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 community activists to business owners 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 letters to public officials 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 this project 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. This project 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 this project 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.