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Participation and Polarization in the Networked Public Sphere

Essay by Henry Farrell, December 9, 2008 in response to Internet and Politics 2008: Moving People, Moving Ideas

Additional responses include: *The New Activism: Why Volunteering Declined in Campaign 08*, by Ari Melber, *A Response to Working Hypothesis for Internet and Politics 2008*, by Sunshine Hillygus, *The Revolution of the Online Commentariat*, by Peter Daou, *Not the Digital Democracy We Ordered*, by Matthew Hindman, and *From the Bottom-Up: Using the Internet to Mobilize Campaign Participation*, by Dana Fisher.

Public intellectuals interested in American politics have spent much of the last two decades agonizing over low participation and the poor state of public debate among Americans. Their arguments have been transformed by the advent of the Internet. Some – such as Yochai Benkler – have argued that the Internet offers the potential to transform participation and debate in America, by creating a 'networked public sphere' of civic argument and activity. Others – most prominently Cass Sunstein – have been more skeptical, claiming that new forms of debate on the Internet are liable to problems such as erroneous information cascades and balkanization of different groups into separate universes of discourse.

This debate began before the data had properly begun to come in; the wheels of social science research grind exceedingly slowly in Internet time. But we are now beginning to assemble a clearer picture of how the networked public sphere may work – and how it may indeed be transforming American society. The best data we have is on blogs – both how blogs connect to each other through hyperlinks, and what kinds of people read blogs.

At first, this data seems to support Sunstein's view. We see good evidence of balkanization among blogs. Left wing blogs tend overwhelmingly to link to other left wing blogs; right wing blogs to other right wingers. Only around 12-16% of links cross the partisan divide. The data on blog readers is perhaps even starker. Very few people indeed read both left wing and right wing blogs. The vast majority of blog readers read only left wing or only right wing blogs. Furthermore, there is strong evidence of ideological polarization – when we scale blog readers' views on various ideological issues, they clump together at the left and right extremes of the scale. Blog readers are far more polarized than viewers of network news, including Fox News.

Yet if we look at the data more closely, we see some evidence of a tradeoff that isn't really considered by Benkler and Sunstein – one between participation and cross-cutting ideological debate. Political scientists such as Diana Mutz have argued that discussion between people of differing ideological persuasions tends to depress participation in politics. While we don't have direct evidence that this is happening, we do see that readers of political blogs are significantly more likely to participate in politics than non-readers, and that readers of leftwing blogs are especially likely to participate.

We have to be careful with this kind of data (it doesn't tell us much about causal relationships), but one plausible interpretation is that people who are more exposed to political information that supports their own ideological biases are more likely to get involved in politics, and that people who are exposed to the kinds of movement politics that we see among left-wing netroots blogs

are especially likely to get involved. In short – the kinds of polarization that we see among blog readers may have positive consequences as well as negative ones. In particular, it may make these readers more likely to participate in politics in a variety of ways.

What does this have to tell us about the relationship between the networked public sphere and US elections? Three things. First – that at least part of Benkler's argument is right. We are likely to see a major increase in political participation, especially among activists, as a result of the Internet. Nor is there any good reason to believe that this will be confined to the left wing. We may expect to see more mobilization taking place on the right, as they adopt new tools to their own particular purposes and circumstances.

Second, this surge in participation will be strongly partisan in nature. What evidence we have suggests that the people who are getting more involved in politics are far more partisan and more ideological than the average American citizen. Some may see this as a problem – American political elites tend to like bipartisanship and moderate consensus. But there are real political advantages to stronger partisan divisions – as a minor strain of American political thought has argued, they provide voters with real choices in a way that different flavors of centrism cannot.

This furthermore has interesting possible consequences for the Obama administration (I have a piece forthcoming on this in the next issue of *The American Prospect*). Obama's governing philosophy is one of pragmatist consensus and civic participation. But the party machine that he has created may help spur further partisan mobilization, both on the left (as people continue to stay involved in politics) and the right (as Republicans begin to try to emulate the Democrats in order to start winning elections again).

Third, we are likely to see a growing division between partisan activists, who will participate actively in politics, and moderate non-activists, who will turn out only at elections, if at all. Markus Prior has argued that media choice is leading to a differentiation between the apathetic and moderate majority who have little interest in consuming political news, and intense partisan minorities, who are voracious consumers of information. This phenomenon may have knock on consequences for elections. We are plausibly going to see increases in participation among both apathetic moderates and engaged partisans, but in very different ways. Apathetic moderates will turn out in greater numbers at the polls (because of better GOTV technologies, social pressures from partisans etc) but will otherwise remain unengaged. Intense partisans, in contrast, are not only likely to vote, but to engage in a variety of other activities. We're likely facing into a new age of American politics, dominated by partisan activists. It's going to be interesting.

* *This note builds on results reported in Eszter Hargittai, Jason Gallo and Matthew Kaine, "Cross-Ideological Discussions among Conservative and Liberal Bloggers, Public Choice (January 2008) and Henry Farrell, Eric Lawrence and John Sides,* "Self-Segregation or Deliberation? Blog Readership, Participation and Polarization in American Politics," *. Eric and John deserve full credit for the underlying research, but should be in no sense held accountable for errors or overblown claims in this note.*

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