Building a Political Science Public Sphere with Blogs

Henry Farrell, George Washington University
John Sides, George Washington University

Recommended Citation:
Farrell, Henry and Sides, John (2010) "Building a Political Science Public Sphere with Blogs,"
The Forum: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 10.
DOI: 10.2202/1540-8884.1396
Building a Political Science Public Sphere with Blogs

Henry Farrell and John Sides

Abstract

We argue that political science blogs can link conversations among political scientists with broader public debates about contemporary issues. Political science blogs do this by identifying relevant research, explaining its findings, and articulating its applicability. We identify strategies besides blogging that individual scholars and the discipline could undertake to enhance its public profile.

KEYWORDS: political science research, blogs, public debate

Author Notes: Henry Farrell is Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University, a regular contributor to The Monkey Cage, and a co-founder of Crooked Timber, a blog covering political theory and the social sciences. John Sides is Assistant Professor of Political Science at George Washington University; he helped found and continues to contribute to The Monkey Cage, a political science blog.
Political science blogs--blogs that are written by political scientists on topics related to the discipline--have flourished over the last three years. Although they are still overshadowed by the economics blogosphere, where blogs by scholars such as Paul Krugman, Brad DeLong, Greg Mankiw and Tyler Cowen have become key sites of public debate, they are beginning to have a real and substantial effect on broader discussion.

This is not well understood within political science. We suspect that many members of the profession view blogs as at best a personal hobby, and at worst a distraction from real research and perhaps even a malign source of mean-spirited gossip. In this article, we present a strong case to the contrary. Political journalists and policy experts now read blogs, cite them, and are influenced by them. Casual empiricism suggests that political science books that are highlighted in discussions among academic bloggers are more likely to receive public attention. To cite one recent example of which we have direct knowledge: Gregory Koger's recent book *Filibustering: A Political History of Obstruction in the House and Senate* was discussed extensively by political science bloggers, leading directly to interviews by the *Washington Post* and National Public Radio's *Fresh Air*, as well as a long review in the *New York Review of Books*.

Political science blogs can thus act as a key point of intersection between the discussions that political scientists have among themselves and public debates about politics and policy. Political scientists have often been reluctant to engage in these debates for fear that their work will somehow become “unscientific.” Although we recognize the dangers of subordinating political science to the vagaries of journalists and politicians, we do not believe that these dangers immediately threaten political science. If anything, the problem is the opposite: a political science that has become too isolated from discussion in the society surrounding it to contribute usefully to this discussion.

The case we present is both pragmatic and pragmatist and is rooted in the ideas of John Dewey and others. We argue that political science needs to be useful, not in the narrow sense that specific pieces of political science research have obvious and direct payoff for policy makers, but in the more general sense that political science helps inform and improve the quality of democratic debate.

On the one hand, this is a minimalist definition; many kinds of research and knowledge can plausibly inform and improve debate. On the other, it points to serious deficiencies in political science as a field. Most obviously, political scientists very often do not seek to speak to an audience outside the few specialists interested in a very specific topic. This would not be a problem if there were structured ways of transforming political science research into forms that were more easily digested by the public. However, the discipline has few such structures, and those that exist (such as the American Political Science...
Association’s field journal, *Perspectives on Politics*) are easily accessible only to those within the discipline or with access to university libraries.

Here, blogs and related forms of electronic publication may play a key intermediary role. Blogs not only help political scientists participate actively in public debate, but also connect the academic discourse among political scientists with the conversation in the public sphere. If interlocutors in public debate—whether journalists, politicians or policy specialists—are to read political science and understand how it applies to their interests, they must be able to find relevant political science research and, in many cases, have it explained in ordinary language or through simple but striking graphical presentations of quantitative data.

This is exactly the role that political science blogs are beginning to play. They are catering to a group of journalists and participants in public debate with a genuine interest in political science arguments and a demonstrable eagerness to consume useful and punchy political science findings. In turn, a nascent political science public sphere is taking shape, involving both political science blogs and more traditional journalists and policy writers.

So there is reason for qualified optimism: a wider audience for political science research does exist. However, significant challenges remain for the profession. If that audience cannot find political science research, cannot read it (because it is located behind paywalls), or cannot understand it (because its insights are cloaked in jargon), then it will continue to be sidelined—a considerable problem if we are right that political science needs to engage with broader debates in order to justify its pragmatic relevance.

If political science blogs provide a way to connect political science with more general public debates, then political scientists need to understand better how the political science blogosphere works. They also need to consider changing the ways in which they present their own work and make it available in order to enrich a political science public sphere. We hasten to emphasize that not all political scientists should blog, but they should at least make it as easy as possible for their key findings to reach the broader public.

**The Political Science Blogosphere: A Brief History**

Blogging is no longer a pursuit of amateurs. Most prominent bloggers today do it for money. Some are retained by prominent media outlets, such as the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* or the *Atlantic Monthly,* or by think tanks of all ideological persuasions. Others—such as Joshua Marshall, founder of the influential *Talking Points Memo*—have sought to create their own media empires. Only a minority of well-known bloggers remain independent and non-
commercial, and most of those have a paying position that allows them the time and freedom to write (e.g., in academia).

This was not always true. When blogging first came to the fore, most bloggers were amateurs. University undergraduates (such as Ezra Klein and Matthew Yglesias, both of whom went on to develop successful careers as a result of their blogging) rubbed shoulders with journalists, academics, policy wonks, and homemakers. A few of these early bloggers, including Daniel Drezner, Jacob Levy, Chris Lawrence, Henry Farrell and Marc Lynch were academic political scientists, while others (such as James Joyner) had political science doctorates but were working in non-academic positions. However, although all of these bloggers sometimes drew on their political science experience, none of them blogged exclusively, or even most of the time, about political science. In contrast, for example, to philosophy, there was no professional political science blogosphere. While early political science bloggers frequently linked to each other and responded to each other’s arguments, they presumed that most of their readers were not political scientists. Philosophers, in contrast, used blogging to engage in (often quite technical) conversations with each other about disciplinary topics.

The economics blogosphere provides another vantage point. The decisions of prominent economists to blog early on plausibly helped to legitimize blogging within their discipline. Brad DeLong, a well-known economist and sometime Clinton administration official, helped pave the way for other prominent economist bloggers, including Nobel laureates Gary Becker and Paul Krugman, Greg Mankiw (former head of the Council of Economic Advisers), Tyler Cowen, Dani Rodrik and many others. Mark Thoma, an economist at the University of Oregon, provided cohesion to discussions among economist bloggers and linked their arguments to public debates through his Economist’s View blog, which undertook to summarize daily the important debates among economists. The triple role of Paul Krugman as a prominent economist, op-ed writer for the New York Times, and eventual New York Times blogger helped build links between these different worlds of argument.

In contrast, political science blogging was dominated by assistant professors and graduate students in its early years. More senior scholars seemed disinclined to blog, to the extent that they actually knew what blogging was in the first place. This may have dampened any enthusiasm political scientists might have had for blogging. The imprimatur of well-known colleagues helps reassure graduate students and junior scholars that their job and tenure prospects will not be hurt by blogging, and assure tenured scholars that their dignity will not be undermined through participation in an untested medium.

As late as 2007, there was no real political science blogosphere, despite a genuine interest among policy-focused bloggers in political science research. As
prominent blogger Ezra Klein described the problem after asking his readers to suggest interesting political science blogs:

The lack of suggestions on my request for political science blogs reminds me how odd the robust representation of economists in the blogosphere really is. ... a fairly broad channel has arisen for publicizing and popularizing relevant economic research in the political sphere. Not so with relevant political science research, even as it would seem, if anything, more relevant. Why have economists taken to the blogosphere in so much greater numbers, and with so much more apparent success, than practitioners of other disciplines that also intersect with contemporary politics?¹

Klein’s post helped spur political scientists to begin blogging more systematically about the discipline, including the two authors of this article (who were responsible for founding, respectively, a short-lived blog that publicized interesting political science papers, and The Monkey Cage, which is still in existence).² A count of known blogs suggests that there are approximately eighty devoted to political science, with varying levels of activity; this is likely an underestimate, but not an enormous one. Although the political science blogosphere enjoys less public recognition than either the economics or the legal academic blogosphere, it is now large enough to help link the discipline to public debates.

Equally important has been the growing audience for political science research among media figures. Bloggers who have become more integrated into the mainstream media have brought a different understanding of journalism with them. In Greg Marx’s summarization:

As Anne Kornblut, another Post political reporter, put it, “They’re not aiming for A1 [the front page of the newspaper] and being asked, ‘What’s new here? How is this going to change the country tomorrow?’” Klein is explicit on this point, outlining a role for journalists that sounds as much like teaching as reporting. “I think that we as a profession need to become more comfortable with repetition,” he says. “What is newest is often not what is most helpful for readers.” A case in point: when explaining why

legislation is bottled up in Congress, Klein routinely discusses the skyrocketing use of Senate filibusters—a recent and consequential change in the rules of politics that nonetheless doesn’t count as “news” on most days.¹

This model differs substantially from traditional “horserace” political journalism in ways that are congenial to political science. Rather than soliciting sound bites from political scientists about who is likely to win or lose elections, journalists in this mold want to answer the same general questions as political scientists: they are interested in the enduring forces that structure politics. Many also have a specific interest in quantitative information and will often reprint a well-done graph illustrating an interesting empirical claim. In fact, such a graph is probably more likely to be picked up and discussed than a purely verbal presentation of the same information. This fetish for what Ezra Klein has called “chart porn” is nearly absent in many traditional print publications, which have often been biased against any graphical presentation more sophisticated than the justly maligned pie-chart.

This new brand of wonkish journalism has helped create a rich conversation among political scientists, policy analysts and journalists about topics of mutual interest. To be sure, this conversation has not been without difficulties. Sometimes, the language that political scientists use among themselves may be interpreted in surprising ways.⁴ Nor has it been univocal. Some political scientists have perceived their role in Weberian terms, blogging about the relevance of political science to politically salient questions, without themselves taking political positions.⁵ Others have mixed political science with their own political opinions. The conversation has also most certainly not been one-way. Political scientists have learned from their interlocutors, who often have more direct experience of politics and politicians than the modal political scientist. Finally, while political scientists are making progress, there are limits to it. Many journalists likely share New York Times political journalist Matthew Bai’s prejudiced view that political scientists’ understanding of America stretches no further than a visit to Bed, Bath and Beyond.⁶

This conversation has nonetheless helped integrate political science into public debates. The knowledge that political scientists can bring to bear is

³ Ibid.
⁴ One of the authors of this article wrote an op-ed using ideological scaling to examine the distribution of opinion among blog readers. When he and his co-author referred to the ‘extreme’ left end of the scale, they found themselves under attack from irate left-of-center bloggers, who believed that they were being described as extremists.
relevant to topics as diverse as institutional reform, the internal politics of international organizations, the effect of the economy on elections, and why citizens do or do not trust government. Blogging therefore helps political science become more pragmatically useful: the things that political scientists know and talk about are increasingly what journalists, policymakers, and other intellectuals are talking about.

**The Functions of the Political Science Blogosphere**

Nevertheless, there is much more that the political science blogosphere can do. Its coverage of political science research is variable, essentially depending on the particular interests of a small number of bloggers. Most political science research is trapped behind the paywalls of academic journals, which charge large sums of money to those who want access. Finally, many (and perhaps most) political scientists are not used to writing for a broader public while retaining academic rigor.

From repeated discussion with journalists and other interested parties, including participants in a special panel at the 2010 meeting of the American Political Science Association, we have identified three needs that blogs already help fulfill, but could surely meet better in future. Blogs can help identify interesting and relevant research. They can explain the basic findings of this research to the public. Finally, they can show how this research applies to contemporary problems.

The first of those needs is more important than many scholars understand. Political scientists take it for granted that their colleagues will understand their subfield and the particular debates in which they are engaged. Such an understanding is the goal of graduate training, with the requirement for comprehensive exams or similar, and peer review, with its emphasis on producing research that speaks to the major questions of the field and that engages existing research. Acquiring this understanding requires years of training, which non-academics do not have. Journalists usually do not know where to find relevant research on topics that they are working on. Although tools such as Google Scholar make their life easier, they provide little guidance as to the quality of specific articles, the degree to which research questions are considered settled, and so on.

Blogs provide guidance in two ways. First, when political science blogs focus on topics of contemporary interest, they can provide basic information about who is working on which topic, what the relevant books and articles are, and similar basic information. This provides journalists with a first approximation of specific debates and suggestions about where they should go for further information. Second, political science bloggers often become informal go-
between for journalists. Both of us have frequently been asked by journalists for
the names of specialists in a particular topic, the basic findings of political science
on that topic, and related questions.

Furthermore, political science bloggers can help explain political science
to non-political scientists. Most departments do not emphasize writing and
presentational skills in their graduate programs. Nor do many political scientists
take much care to explain, for example, statistical results in ways that are
accessible to readers without specialized training. Here again, political science
bloggers can help by explaining research in the plain language that scholarly
journals and books typically do not demand (although perhaps they should).
Political science bloggers can furthermore take quantitative data that has been
presented in unprepossessing tables or homely charts, and rework it into graphs
that present the main findings in a more striking format.

Finally, and most importantly, political science bloggers can help apply
political science research to topics that are the subject of public discussion.
Political scientists are usually not trained to do this. Yet it is exactly through such
applications that political science can justify its public relevance. Political
scientists have extensive factual knowledge and a unique understanding of the
causal mechanisms underlying much of politics. Yet if they cannot communicate
this knowledge and understanding, they will fail in a key aspect of their vocation.
Some protagonists within public debate want to understand political science’s
lessons, but cannot do so unless political scientists learn to communicate better.

Here again, political science blogs can help. Political science bloggers--
who have one foot in their discipline and another foot in public debate--can show
how research is relevant to public argument. Roughly speaking, there are two
ways in which they can do this. One is to serve as disinterested experts, seeking as
best as they can to present the state of the art within the discipline, and how it may
be applied to contemporary issues. This is the approach that we have tried to take
in The Monkey Cage. A second approach is to present research findings honestly
but in support of a particular political position, while trusting to John Stuart Mills’
logic of struggle among opposing ideas. Although the first approach is surely
more congenial to political science’s self-conception, the second also has its
argumentative merits.

If we are right that political science needs to engage broader debates so as
to justify its pragmatic value, then we face a major challenge as a profession. The
connections between disciplinary debates and public arguments are poorly
developed. Political science blogs can help build better connections. The fact that

---

7 For a valuable recent restatement of this argument, see Nancy Rosenblum (2008), On the Side of
the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship (Princeton NJ: Princeton University
Press).
the political science blogosphere--underdeveloped as it is--has already begun to do so suggests that it has considerable promise for the future.

**Expanding the Political Science Public Sphere**

To connect political science to public arguments, we need to change how we make our research available. Obviously, we believe that the state of debate among political scientists and between political scientists and interested readers of political science would improve greatly if more political scientists took up blogging. Blogging provides a unique set of tools for political scientists to talk about their research and that of others for the benefit of a wider audience. Not all political scientists should blog (we suspect that most political scientists should not blog), in part because successful blogging requires presentational skills and a willingness to engage with a non-professional audience that many political scientists do not have. However, political scientists who are interested in blogging should do so, and, more importantly, should be encouraged by their colleagues to do so. Serious political science blogging is no substitute for good research, but it is a valuable disciplinary service and should be treated as such by committees scrutinizing tenure files, among others.

Those who have no interest in blogging themselves should still make their research available through personal websites, through the online research repositories at some universities, or through other means. Many political scientists still seem fearful of publicizing their findings to a wider world. They should lose their inhibitions. The more widely available one’s research is, the more likely it is to find readers both inside and outside the discipline.

This is all the more so because many academic publishers now recognize the value of making research available online. Journal publishers will almost always allow authors to put draft copies of their work on their personal websites. This allows bloggers and others to link easily to research that they discuss, so that readers can download the relevant papers for themselves. The recent decision of the American Political Science Association to encourage presenters at its annual meeting to upload papers to the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) should also help people find useful political science research.

Furthermore, we encourage those who have made interesting new research available online to email the details to us or to other bloggers, ideally with key summaries and/or graphs included as separate attachments. Although bloggers may hear of new papers through their personal networks or find them through web searches, there is no guarantee that they will find all or even most of the interesting new research without help from authors.

In addition to these individual practices, we suggest changes at the level of the discipline. Most importantly, we propose that *Perspectives on Politics*--the
journal of the field that is intended to present the research in a manner that is intelligible both to political scientists from a variety of disciplines and to the broader public--should be made free and open access. There would be significant costs associated with this change; journals are not put together for free. However, the consequences for the field’s general visibility and accessibility would be invaluable. Here, the American Economics Association provides an important example and precedent. It has recently announced that its equivalent publication, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, will be open access. Neither the AEA nor APSA (if it follows suit) are likely to massively increase readership in the short term by providing open access. However, they are likely to improve the prestige of the discipline and strengthen its links to public debates. It is precisely this kind of initiative that professional associations, which are intended to internalize the costs of measures that improve the field as a whole, are supposed to foster.

Finally, reorienting political science towards a greater engagement with public argument should create feedback loops that may change the self-understanding of the discipline over the long term. These effects would be, for the most part, beneficial. Debates about the underlying purpose of political science tend to be a back-and-forth between miscellaneous positivists, who believe that political science should aspire to discovering general covering laws, and post-positivists of various stripes, who argue that this scientific project is both impossible and burdened by its own implicit normative freight. Our pragmatist approach would sidestep this sterile argument by asking instead about how the social sciences can be *useful* in better informing democratic debate, while recognizing that scholars may (and certainly will) disagree about what this usefulness will involve in practice. A political science that is more engaged with public debate will, exactly because of that, concern itself more with questions of usefulness. Even while seeking to maintain methodological rigor (the more sure we are that we know something important, the more useful that knowledge is), it would begin asking a subtly different set of questions that would reshape political scientists’ understanding of the world, and their role within it, in salutary ways.