Effects of Partisan Rhetoric on Attention and Influence in the Blogosphere

Abstract:

Do blogs that use strident partisan rhetoric garner more attention and influence than those using mixed or neutral language? Existing studies on partisanship in the blogosphere categorize political blogs as left, neutral, or right. We argue that this categorical classification system obscures one of the main features of the new media system: the greater potential for ideologically extreme rhetoric, or what we refer to as strident partisan discourse. To examine the effects of stridency, we construct a new measure of blog partisanship that uses computer-based learning to identify terms and phrases that are unique to Democratic or Republican legislators, as documented in the Congressional Record. This measure of stridency reflects the degree to which a blog uses partisan language by generating a continuous measure ranging from extreme Democratic to extreme Republican rhetoric, rather than coding each blog’s partisanship as a categorical variable. We then use this new continuous measure to test the hypotheses that rhetorical extremity in the blogosphere increases both audience traffic and influence amongst the online public. The paper provides a methodological contribution by introducing a new measure of partisanship in the blogosphere, and an empirical contribution by analyzing the effects of
understudied dimensions of the new media environment. It thus serves as a complement to extant studies of partisan media effects in the online context.