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HOW CONSPIRACIES RISE, SPREAD AND FALL: THE CASE OF VOTER FRAUD, THE BLOGOSPHERE AND THE 2004 ELECTION

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The idea that public opinion is fundamentally top-down and elite-driven is virtually orthodoxy among contemporary political science researchers. Support for conspiracy theories, however, pose a fundamental challenge to this prevailing view because the dynamics of mass opinion here are, *prima facie*, likely *not* to be a top-down or elite-driven process. In order to test the hypothesis that conspiratorial thinking is the result of anti-elite, bottom-up opinion dynamics rather than the result of elite-driven, top-down opinion dynamics, this paper tracks blog discussion of election related conspiracy theories during the four week period from November 2 to November 30, 2004. Using a computer assisted, quantitative content analysis of 16 randomly selected A-list political blogs and 147 randomly selected, less popular political blogs, I find strong support for the idea that conspiracy theories are the result of bottom-up, anti-elite opinion dynamics. More specifically, I find that bloggers who endorsed electoral conspiracy theories were more likely to criticize elite sources of information, less likely to link to mainstream media sources and, more importantly, that endorsement of election-related conspiracy theories was not the result of Congressional discussion, executive branch statements, print media articles or broadcast media coverage.

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THE AGE OF CONSPIRACY

“This is the age of conspiracy.”
Don DeLillo, *Running Dogs* (1989)

Conspiracy theories – a set of beliefs in which a cabal of individuals and/or organizations act covertly in order to subvert a legitimate process and achieve some malevolent or otherwise untoward end – have been a long-standing feature of American popular discourse. In the late 18th and early 19th century, for example, Free Masons, Illuminati and Jesuits were commonly accused of manipulating political outcomes for their own benefit from behind the scenes. In more recent decades there have been widely circulated theories about the alleged role of the Clinton Administration in the death of Vince Foster, the alleged role of U.S. oil companies in engineering the 1973 energy crisis, the alleged government cover-up of assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and the alleged government cover-up of a UFO incident at Roswell, New Mexico.

Despite this fairly long tradition of conspiratorial thinking, however, there is a palpable sense that we currently inhabit an “age of conspiracy.” Thus in the last few years we have seen the publication of a welter of books on our conspiratorial moment (see, e.g., Dean 1998, Marcus 1999, Melley 1999, Pipes 1999, Knight 2000, Fenster 2001, Goldberg 2002, Knight 2002, Barkun 2003, West and Sanders 2003), theories of conspiracy abound in cultural works – from the high art of Don DeLillo’s fiction to the long-standing television series “The X-Files” – and a little soaking and poking on the Internet will uncover a stunning range of recent events to which some conspiracy is attributed – the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the AIDS epidemic, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Bush’s victory in the 2000 U.S. presidential

election – and a number of well-traveled websites – such as www.abovetopsecret.com, www.conspiracyplanet.com, and www.conspiracyarchive.com – that are dedicated exclusively to the discussion and dissemination of conspiratorial beliefs.

One of the most recent examples of this trend towards conspiratorial thinking has been the emergence of theories surrounding the outcome of the 2004 election. Beginning with malfunctions in voting machines and the publication of incorrect exit polls on websites such as Slate.com – which wrongly showed Kerry winning Ohio, Florida, New Mexico, Iowa, Colorado and Nevada by 2-4 percentage points – and gaining steam with real voting anomalies in Florida and Ohio, accusations of “election fraud,” “vote hacking” and “election stealing” rose quickly after the election and achieved heightened prominence throughout November 2004 before falling off the map in December 2004.

THE DYNAMICS OF CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING

The very existence of conspiratorial thinking challenges the prevailing view of where we get our political information and how we form our political opinions. Beginning with the early work of Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) and Downs (1957), a long tradition of scholars have hypothesized that the “rational ignorance” of ordinary citizens leads them to pay little attention to political affairs and to rely instead on cues from political leaders when forming their political judgments. This hypothesis, which suggests that mass opinion is essentially top-down and elite-driven, has come to dominate the contemporary literature on political psychology and public opinion.¹ In their review of recent works on heuristics, for example, Gilens and Murakawa (2003) write

¹ A representative sample works that adopt an elite perspective on mass opinion can be found in Brody (1991), Carmines and Stimson (1989), Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2003), Gerber and Jackson (1993), Lupia and McCubbins (1998), Page and Shapiro (1992), Popkin (1991), Stimson (1991), Zaller (1992). For a critique of elite opinion theories, see Lee (2002).

that, “among political scientists, the heuristic that has attracted the greatest attention is the use of elite cues as aids in political decision making” (18) and Lee and Schlesinger (2001) claim that “today, the idea that public opinion is fundamentally top-down and elite-driven is virtually orthodoxy among political scientists” (5).

Support for conspiracy theories pose a fundamental challenge to this prevailing view because the dynamics of mass opinion here are, *prima facie*, likely *not* to be a top-down or elite-driven process. Take, for example, the following generic definition of a conspiracy theory – namely, as a belief that an event, or set of interrelated events, is caused by the covert action of a cabal of individuals and/or organizations who aim deliberately to subvert a legitimate process and achieve some malevolent or otherwise untoward end through their action. In the realm where these individuals and organizations are government actors – such as in conspiratorial accounts of 9/11, the elections of 2000 and 2004, and the assassinations of various political leaders – conspiracy theories are premised, foundationally, on the notion that elites are not to be trusted and, more specifically, that elites are knowingly bent on obfuscating the truth or manipulating our perceptions of reality.² For individuals that support such theories, the government is the public’s enemy and not an institutionalized means for pursuing the public good.

Given that elites are not likely to endorse conspiracy theories that paint them as enemies of the public good, support for conspiracy theories probably does not spring from elite cues. In fact, assuming that most elites are likely to challenge and debunk conspiracy theories, conspiratorial thinking in the mass public is more likely to grow from seeds planted by non-elite actors. To state all of this more simply, when conspiracy

² As Keeley (1999) suggests mainstream institutions and elites may be perceived as responsible for or “in” on the conspiracy.

theories emerge and spread throughout significant segments of the population, we need to look beyond elite influences and focus our attention, instead, on the impact that non-elite actors are exerting on mass opinion.

In order to test the hypothesis that conspiratorial thinking is the result of anti-elite, bottom-up opinion dynamics rather than the result of elite-driven, top-down opinion dynamics, this paper tracks blog discussion of election-related conspiracy theories during the four week period from November 2 to November 30, 2004. Using a computer assisted, quantitative content analysis of 16 randomly selected A-list political blogs and 147 randomly selected, less popular political blogs, I find strong support for the idea that support for conspiracy theories are the result of bottom-up, anti-elite opinion dynamics. More specifically, I find that bloggers who endorsed electoral conspiracy theories were more likely to criticize elite sources of information, less likely to link to mainstream media sources and, more importantly, that endorsement of election-related conspiracy theories was not the result of Congressional discussion, executive branch statements, print media articles or broadcast media coverage.

STUDYING CONSPIRACIES IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

Although support for conspiracy theories is a critical case for understanding the dynamics of opinion formation, there has been a noticeable dearth of political science research about conspiratorial thinking. The main reason for this shortage probably stems from the fact that survey questions – the data that political scientists are most likely to employ – about conspiracy theories are relatively rare and, to the extent that they exist at all, provide little information about how conspiracy theories rise and spread through the mass public. Indeed, because pollsters seem to rely primarily on elite cues in order to

determine which questions to ask and when to ask them (Lee, 2002), questions about conspiracy theories – which are neither endorsed nor discussed by elites – seem to rarely make it on to the polling agenda.

With this background in mind, there are two reasons to think that the blogosphere is an especially good site to study the dynamics of conspiratorial thinking. First, blogs, particularly in comparison to public opinion polls, are an especially rich and informative source of data about an individual's political attitudes. In addition to revealing that the blogger cares enough about an issue to actually sit down and blog about it, the content of the blog itself provides an abundance of information about the nature and origin of the blogger's opinion on that issue. The content of blog, for example, may reveal where the blogger stands on the issue, which frames the blogger employs to understand the issue, which actors the blogger references when discussing the issue, which events motivate the blogger to blog about the issue, which sources the blogger links to when blogging about the issue, whether the blogger incorporates audio and visual components into his or her discussion of the issue, whether the blogger attempts to mobilize his or her audience to action on the issue and, most importantly, how all of these things change for the blogger over time. Blogs even contain a great deal of information about how readers react to the statements of the bloggers. Indeed, most blogs include a section for reader comments, "trackback" information on which other websites have linked to each post on the blog and statistics on the number of "hits" that the site has received. In short, researchers interested in the dynamics of conspiratorial thinking are likely to find all of the information they require on blogs.

Second, although blogs cannot claim to provide accurate measures of the opinions

of the general public, they do capture the viewpoints of individuals who occupy a special place in theories of public opinion. Beginning with the work of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and continuing with the more recent work of Berry and Keller (2003), many scholars have emphasized the role that a small group of politically engaged and active citizens play in the process of opinion formation and change. More specifically, a long history of political communication research into the “two-step” flow of information has shown how these “opinion leaders” or “influentials” act as intermediaries between elites and the mass public by communicating the messages of political elites to the less engaged segments of the population. To the extent that opinion leaders form this bridge between political elites and the mass public, tracking the opinions of opinion leaders is worthwhile for public opinion researchers not only because it can reveal what larger segments of the population think about an issue but can also, and more importantly for our purposes here, provide a good test of whether opinions on a particular issue respond primarily to top-down or to bottom-up dynamics. Indeed, because the conventional wisdom in political science research is that opinion leaders obey a strictly top-down, elite driven process of opinion formation and change, the content of blogs might be used to test for both elite and non-elite influences on mass opinion. If opinion leaders, for example, begin discussing an issue in the absence of any elite cues to do so, non-elite influences are suggested. Similarly, if opinion leaders begin discussing an issue only after elites have begun debating it, elite influences are probably at work.

Bloggers, by all accounts, fit the “opinion leader” mold very well³ and, as a result,

³ A recent survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2005), for example, has found that bloggers are more likely to be well educated and a study conducted by the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet (2004) showed that “online political citizens” are “nearly seven times more likely than average citizens to serve as opinion leaders among their friends, relatives and colleagues” (3).

blogs are an ideal site for testing the extent to which conspiracy theories are the result of top-down or bottom-up influences. To be more precise, if conspiracy thinking truly does respond to anti-elite, bottom-up dynamics instead of elite-driven, top-down dynamics, an analysis of support for conspiracy theories in the blogosphere should reveal three general patterns. First, elite discussion of conspiracy theories should not have a significant influence on endorsement of conspiracy theories. Second, support for conspiracy theories in the blogosphere should contain a significant amount of anti-elite rhetoric. One likely form of this is that blogs should spend a significant amount of time “debunking” mainstream accounts of relevant events and developments. Third, support for conspiracy theories should link to alternative sources of information.

MEASURING ELITE AND BLOG DISCUSSION OF CONSPIRACIES

As a result of the fact that there are no agreed upon guidelines for how to gather a sample of blogs to study, I decided to gather two distinct samples of political blogs: one drawn from the population of popular, “A-list” political blogs and the other drawn from the broader population of less popular political blogs. In order to create a population list of A-list blogs from which to sample, I downloaded the top 100 rankings from these four sources (*Blogstreet*, *The Truth Laid Bear Ecosystem*, *The Truth Laid Bear* and *Technorati*) during the first week of February 2005 and included all blogs that appeared on at least two of the four websites’ top rankings.⁴ In total, there were 84 blogs on the final population list. From this population list, I randomly sampled 20 blogs. As a result of the fact that I am only interested in the content of political blogs and, more specifically, the content of American political blogs, I checked each of the 20 sampled

⁴ This approach is the one used by McKenna and Pole (2004) in their study of A-list political bloggers.

blogs to ensure that they discussed “political” issues and were written by authors in the United States.⁵ Blogs that did not meet these two criteria were not included in the analysis that follows. Overall, three blogs did not discuss political issues, one blog was written by an author outside the United States and 16 blogs discuss political issues and were written by authors inside the United States.⁶ The final list of A-list political blogs is presented in Table 1.

The second measure of blog discussion of voter fraud samples a much different population: less popular political bloggers. Unfortunately, gathering a sample of less popular political blogs presents a more difficult problem than gathering a sample of A-list political blogs. Indeed, whereas the number of popular political blogs is relatively small and there are a few, well-known sites that are devoted to tracking A-list blogs, the number of less popular political blogs is literally countless and there is no single website that claims to track all less popular blogs. Fortunately, however, many bloggers choose to list their blogs on one of the many blog directories that have sprung up around the internet and, more importantly, these directories allow bloggers to categorize their blogs based on the subjects the blogger thinks their blog discusses most. Since these directories allow for searches based on these subject keywords, it can be relatively easy to locate blogs that are political.

Despite the fact that these directories include only those blogs that have been submitted for inclusion by their authors and, as a result, cannot produce anything like a complete list of political blogs from which to sample, I relied on twelve of the most well

⁵ I adopted a broad definition of “political” and excluded only those blogs that were devoted exclusively to the arts, literature and technological issues.

⁶ The three blogs that did not discuss political issues were *geek and proud*, *kottkeorg*, and *Slashdot*. *Where is Raed?* was the blog not written by an author in the United States.

known blog directories⁷ to generate a population list of 10,732 unique political blogs.⁸ From this list, I randomly sampled 250 political blogs.⁹ Once again, because I am interested only in American political blogs, I checked each of the sampled political blogs to determine if the blog written by an author in the United States. Of the 250 less popular political blogs sampled, 12 were not actually blogs, 33 had addresses that no longer worked, 58 blogs were not written by authors in the United States and 147 were written by authors in the United States.¹⁰

In order to identify posts where voter fraud was discussed, a “keyword in context” (KWIC) content analysis program was used to code each of the 5511 posts from November 2, 2004 to November 30, 2004 in the sample of A-list blogs and each of the 5064 posts from November 2, 2004 to November 30, 2004 in the sample of less popular blog for mentions of “election fraud,” “voter fraud” and “voting irregularities.”¹¹ Posts were coded as either having mentioned voter fraud (i.e. the phrases “election fraud,” “voter fraud” or “voting irregularities” were used) or as not having mentioned the issue (i.e. the phrases were not used). In addition, those posts that mentioned one of these keywords were also coded as endorsing, rejecting or remaining neutral towards the election-related conspiracy.

In order to measure discussion of voter fraud by political elites from November 2,

⁷ The twelve directories were: *Blogwise*, *Blogarama*, *BlogCatalog*, *BlogUniverse*, *BlogSearchEngine*, *BlogStreet*, *CampaignLine*, *ETalkingHead*, *GetBlogs*, *EatonwebPortal*, *Globe of Blogs* and *Yahoo’s* directory of blogs.

⁸ This is similar to the approach used by Adamic and Glance (2005). In their article they create a sample of 1000 political blogs by downloading the listings of political blogs from several online weblog directories, including *eTalkingHead*, *BlogCatalog*, *CampaignLine*, and *Blogarama*.

⁹ In addition, I excluded the blogs that were included in the A-list population from the final list of less popular political blogs.

¹⁰ The list of the less popular blogs included in the study are available from the author upon request.

¹¹ The key words were selected because they are words that seem essential to discussing the issue. In other words, mentions of key words are a necessary but not sufficient condition for discussion of the issue.

2004 to November 30, 2004, a number of different measures were constructed. First, as a measure for print media coverage, I used a daily count of the number of stories in the *New York Times* that mentioned at least one of the three phrases listed above.¹² Second, as a measure for broadcast coverage, I used a daily count of the number of stories on the broadcasts of *ABC News*, *CBS News*, *NBC News*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *MSNBC* and *News Hour with Jim Lehrer* that mentioned at least one of the three phrases listed above. Third, as a measure for congressional discussion, I used a daily count of the number of congressional hearings, floor speeches and other public statements by members of Congress that mentioned at least one of the three phrases above.¹³ Fourth, as a measure of executive branch discussion, I used a daily count of the number of speeches, press briefings and other public statements by the President, Vice President, cabinet officers and agency heads and their press secretaries and staff that mentioned at least one of the three phrases listed above.¹⁴ Finally, as a measure of campaign discussion of voter fraud, I used a daily count of the number of press releases from the Bush and Kerry campaigns that mentioned at least one of the three phrases listed above.

RESULTS

BLOGS IN THE SAMPLE

Before discussing the relationship between blog and elite discussion of voter fraud, it is worth saying a few words about the political blogs included in my sample. First, my sample of A-list blogs appears to slightly over represent liberal blogs. Using the coding scheme presented in Appendix 4, I coded each of the 16 A-list blogs in my sample

¹² *The New York Times* was selected to represent the media agenda because it is the elite newspaper in the United States (Winter and Eyal, 1981) and because the *Times*' coverage usually serves as a guide for what is important to other media outlets (Graber, 1997). Editorials and letters to the editor, however, were excluded from the final counts of the number of stories.

¹³ This measure is derived from a search of the archives of the Federal News Service.

¹⁴ This measure is also derived from a search of the archives of the Federal News Service.

for ideology. Overall, there were seven liberal blogs (44 percent), seven conservative blogs (44 percent) and two blogs with no clear ideological position (12 percent). In order to determine whether this sample was representative of all A-list blogs, I coded each of the 69 A-list blogs that were written by authors in the United States and focused on political issues for ideology. Of these 69 A-list blogs, there were 25 liberal blogs (36 percent), 32 conservative blogs (46 percent), two independent blogs (3 percent) and 10 blogs with no clear ideological position (14 percent).¹⁵ As a result of the sampling error produced by the small size used in this study, therefore, liberal blogs are slightly overrepresented while blogs with less clear ideological leanings and independent blogs are slightly underrepresented.

Second, the number of liberal blogs in my sample of less popular political blogs far exceeds the number of conservative or independent blogs. To be more precise, there were 67 liberal blogs (46 percent), 44 conservative blogs (30 percent) and 11 independent blogs (7 percent) in my sample of 147 less popular political blogs.¹⁶ In addition to being relevant to my specific goal of analyzing discussion of election-related conspiracy theories, the results of this ideological coding are also interesting because they provide some initial insight into the distribution of ideological commitments in the blogosphere. While further research is needed to explore whether the large number of liberal bloggers in my sample is merely a result of a tendency on the part of conservative bloggers to avoid posting their blogs on blog directories, it appears that liberals have adopted blogging as a form of political expression in far greater numbers than either conservatives

¹⁵ Many of the blogs that were categorized as “no clear ideological position” had multiple authors that contradicted or challenged each other.

¹⁶ In addition, there were 25 blogs that could not be coded for ideology. Most of these blogs were very short and, as a result, contained very little information on which to base a classification of ideology. Indeed, some of these 22 blogs contained only a few posts and made no reference to politics.

or independents.¹⁷ These findings are consistent with previous research that has shown internet activists are actually more likely to be liberal than conservative or independent (Hill and Hughes, 1998).

Third, there were significant differences between the level of activity on the A-list blogs in my sample and on the less popular blogs. To be more precise, A-list bloggers posted an average of 9.5 times per day from November 2 to November 30 while less popular bloggers posted only 1.2 times per day. Although this finding is not surprising given that A-list blogs are popular, in part, because they are frequently updated with new content to attract readers, there was also significant variation in the level of activity within each sample. Among the A-list blogs in my sample, for example, *Informed Comment* averaged only 2.9 posts per day while *Instapundit* posted an average of 23.8 posts per day. Similarly, among the less popular political bloggers, *Random Thoughts* averaged 26.9 posts per day during November while *Evil Arrival of Good Survival* posted only once. In short, political bloggers, regardless of popularity, devote vastly different amounts of time and attention to their political blogs.

Fourth, although all of the blogs in my sample of A-list blogs dealt almost exclusively with political issues, the blogs contained in my sample of less popular blogs varied widely in the overall level of political discussion. Some of the blogs in my final sample of less popular blogs were exclusively political and offered almost no details on the personal life of the blogger while other blogs doubled as personal blogs – with stories and anecdotes about the blogger’s personal life filling a large portion of the blog. This variation in the amount of political discussion is the inevitable product of the fact that

¹⁷ Another possibility is that the blog directories used here are somehow unattractive to conservative bloggers and, as a result, the population list from which the sample was drawn under represents conservative blogs.

blogs allow authors to discuss any topic they want and that the blog directories from which the less popular blogs in this paper were sampled impose no restrictions on what keywords can be used to describe one's blog.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ELITE AND BLOG DISCUSSION

The statistics in Table 2 provide a general overview of the amount of discussion about voter fraud conspiracies during the four weeks of this study. For each of the eleven different actors, Table 2 displays the mean and standard deviation of the daily counts, the maximum number of stories, posts or articles on any single day and the percentage of days for which no stories, posts or activities mentioned voter fraud. As Table 2 shows, although there was very little discussion of voter fraud conspiracy theories overall, elite actors were far less likely to discuss them than political bloggers. The measures of the congressional and executive discussion, for example, showed very little attention to voter fraud. Indeed, voter fraud was mentioned in only three in congressional hearings, floor speeches and other public statements by members of Congress and mentioned only once in speeches, press briefings and other public statements by members of the executive branch. Similarly, neither campaign released any statements about voter fraud or voting irregularities after the election. Political bloggers, by contrast, devoted considerable attention to voter fraud theories. Liberal A-list political bloggers, for example, mentioned voter fraud at least once in 31 percent of the days studied here and less popular political bloggers mentioned it at least once in 38 percent of the days studied here.

The time series graphs shown in Figures 1 and 2 provide some insight into the ebb and flow of discussion about theories of voter fraud over the period of study. As Figure 1 shows, elite discussion of voter fraud was sparse throughout November. In fact, the only

days in which voter fraud received considerable attention from political elites were November 2nd (the day of the election) and November 10th. As Figure 2 shows, the ebb and flow of blogger discussion about voter fraud differed considerably from the ebb and flow of elite discussion. More specifically, political bloggers showed relatively sustained attention to voter fraud theories for weeks after the election. The sustained attention, however, was not the result of all different stripes of bloggers discussing voter fraud. Instead, liberal A-list and less popular bloggers discussed voter fraud frequently while conservative bloggers – regardless of popularity – rarely discussed the issue. To be more precise, liberal bloggers posted about voter fraud theories 64 times while conservative bloggers posted about them only 15 times.

In addition to differences in their propensity to discuss voter fraud theories, liberal and conservative bloggers, unsurprisingly, displayed dramatic differences in their willingness to endorse voter fraud theories. As Figure 3 shows, not a single post on a conservative blog endorsed voter fraud theories and 38 percent of A-list and 25 percent of less popular conservative blog theories explicitly rejected them. Liberal blogs, by contrast, were far more likely to endorse voter fraud theories – with 43 percent of A-list blog posts and 61 percent of less popular blog posts endorsing the theories. There were, however, a significant number of liberal A-list blog posts (13 percent) that explicitly rejected the theories of voter fraud. It seems, therefore, that liberal A-list blogs were more cautious in their embrace of theories of voter fraud than less popular liberal blogs.

To what extent was endorsement of voter fraud conspiracies a response to the coverage of the broadcast and print media, discussion by Congress and the executive branch and campaign press releases? In order to answer this question, I rely on vector

autoregression (VAR).¹⁸ VAR models use lagged values of all of the variables in a system of interrelated variables to predict the current value of each variable in the system (Bartels, 1996).¹⁹ This approach is attractive for our purposes here because VAR models, unlike structural equation models, relax a priori assumptions about the direction of causality between variables and the number of time lags to be included in the analysis.²⁰ Indeed, Wood and Peake (1998) suggest that VAR is an effective methodology for determining causal relationships when theory is unclear or underdeveloped.

The first step in VAR analysis is to determine the appropriate number of lags to include in the system of equations that is being estimated.²¹ Following Sims (1980), I determined the number of lags to include in each model by sequentially adding lags to the system of equations and testing for the statistical significance of each additional lag using a modified F-test. Additional lags need to lead to a significant improvement in the fit of the VAR model in order to be included.²² Based on Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) and the Final Prediction Error (FPE) as well as degree of freedom considerations, I selected a lag period of two days.

The next step in VAR analysis is to conduct "Granger causality" tests in order to detect the causal relationships that exist between the variables in the system of

¹⁸ For an overview of the use of vector autoregression in political science see Freeman et al. (1989). For empirical examples of VAR see Wood and Peake (1996) and Bartels (1996).

¹⁹ In the context of this study, VAR models the activity of each actor as a function of the past behavior of the other ten actors in the analysis.

²⁰ More specifically, VAR treats all of the variables in the system as endogenous to the equation rather than forcing the researcher to specify the relationship between the variables prior to the analysis.

²¹ Determining the appropriate number of lags (p) in VAR analysis is crucial. As Enders (2004) writes, "appropriate lag length selection can be critical. If p is too small the model is misspecified; if p is too large, degrees of freedom are wasted" (281). In addition, Gujarati (1994) points out that Granger exogeneity tests can be highly sensitive to lag lengths.

²² Although it is possible to include separate lag lengths for variable, most studies using VAR analysis use the same lag length for all equations (Enders, 2004).

equations.²³ “Granger causality” is based on the idea that “variable X causes another variable Y, if by incorporating the past history of X one can improve a prediction of Y over a prediction of Y based solely on the history of Y alone” (Freedman, 1983; 328) and Granger causality tests, therefore, provide statistical evidence for whether lags of one variable Granger cause any of the other variables in the system. More specifically, a chi-squared statistic is used to test the null hypothesis that the lags of the independent variables are significantly different from zero. A significant chi-squared test means that the independent variable “Granger causes” the dependent variable while an insignificant chi-squared test means that the independent variable does not “Granger cause” the dependent variable.

In order to determine whether endorsements of voter fraud theories were the result of bottom up opinion dynamics, I conducted a Granger causality test for the six equation system that includes my measures of elite discussion (print media, broadcast media, Congressional discussion and executive branch discussion) and my measures of endorsement and rejection of voter fraud conspiracies.²⁴ Table 4 displays the results of the Granger causality test. Each dependent variable is listed in the first column along with all of its independent variables in the second column.²⁵ Figure 4 presents the same information in a slightly different form – a diagram showing the causal relationships between each of the actors.

²³ Because VAR is sensitive to non-stationarity in the data, I conducted a Dickey-Fuller test for each of the time series and, in each case, the null hypothesis of a unit root was strongly rejected. In addition, I examined the autocorrelation and partial autocorrelations coefficients and found evidence of stationarity.

²⁴ The VAR was also checked to ensure stability. All of the eigenvalues were within the unit circle, thereby, satisfying the stability condition.

²⁵ The chi-squared statistic represents the results for testing the null hypothesis of “Granger exogeneity” – that all seven daily lagged values of the independent variables have true coefficients of zero, so that the past history of that variable contributes nothing to our ability to account for the current value of the dependent variable.

The Granger causality tests reveal a number of interesting relationships. First, as Table 4 and Figure 4 show, both print and broadcast media were influenced not only by each other but also by bloggers who endorsed election related conspiracy theories. This finding is not surprising given that a significant number of the print and broadcast stories about electoral fraud discussed the role of the blogosphere in perpetuating conspiratorial thinking but it does provide further evidence that political blogs may be exerting an “agenda setting” impact on mainstream media coverage (Drezner and Farrell, 2004).

Second, Table 4 and Figure 4 show clear evidence of a bottom-up rather than top-down opinion dynamic in the endorsement of conspiracy theories. As suggested above, to the extent that conspiracy theories respond to bottom-up and not top-down opinion dynamics, I should find that endorsement of election related conspiracy theories is not caused by elite messages. In the context of a Granger causality test, I would expect to find that Congressional discussion, executive branch statements, print media articles and broadcast media coverage are not significant influences on endorsement of voter fraud theories in the blogosphere. As Table 4 shows, endorsement of election related conspiracy theories was not significantly influenced by any of the measures of elite discussion. It appears, therefore, that those bloggers who endorsed theories of voter fraud did so without the guidance of political elites or the mainstream media.

Finally, those who rejected election related conspiracies were influenced by those who endorsed such theories but not vice versa. Much has been made of the blogosphere’s ability to foster discussion and debate between individuals who hold conflicting points of view on a given issue. In the case of election related conspiracy theories, it appears that supporters of conspiracy theories started the debate by pronouncing some version of the

conspiracy theories discussed here. Once these theories found their way into the larger blogosphere, opponents rushed to discredit them by providing alternative evidence and alternative interpretations of the election results.

BLOG DISCUSSION OF ELITE SOURCES

Although the evidence presented provides support for the hypothesis that conspiratorial thinking is not the result of a top-down, elite-driven process, while conservative blogs rarely complained about the mainstream media's coverage of voter fraud, liberal blogs frequently criticized the mainstream media. More specifically, while conservative blogs criticized the mainstream media's coverage in only 13 percent of posts, liberal blogs criticized the media's coverage in nearly 24 percent of posts on voter fraud. Not all liberal blogs, however, were equally likely to criticize the mainstream media in their posts on voter fraud theories. In fact, 27.3 percent of liberal posts that endorsed voter fraud conspiracy theories criticized the mainstream media whereas only 19.4 percent of liberal posts that did not endorse voter fraud theories criticized the mainstream media. Although bloggers are notorious for attacking the mainstream media's coverage of political issues, it is important to note that this finding is consistent with the idea that those who endorse conspiracy theories explicitly reject elite influences.

BLOG SOURCES

Table 3 displays the distribution of links used by political blogs in their discussions of voter fraud. As Table 3 shows, links to mainstream media sources (23.5 percent of all links) were less common overall than links to other blogs (27.1 percent). Interestingly, links to A-list blogs (8.8 percent) were less common than links to less popular blogs (12.9 percent) and links to local news media (8.2 percent) were only about

half as common as links to national news media (15.3 percent). As Table 3 also displays, there were significant differences between the sites that liberal and conservative blogs linked to in their discussions of voter fraud. While conservative blogs were vastly more likely than liberals to link to other blogs, liberal blogs were significantly more likely to link to media sources and to university websites. Consistent with previous research into the use of links by political blogs (Adamic and Glance, 2005), liberals tended to avoid linking to conservative media sites and blogs while conservatives tended to avoid linking to liberal media sites and blogs.

In addition, Table 3 displays the differences between the sites linked to by those who explicitly endorsed election related conspiracy theories and those who rejected them. Surprisingly, bloggers who endorsed conspiracy theories were far more likely to link to mainstream media sites and far less likely to link to political blogs than those who rejected conspiracy theories. These findings contradict the hypothesis that conspiratorial thinking will involve an outright rejection of elite messages and an emphasis, instead, on non-elite sources of information.

CONCLUSION

This paper started by suggesting that conspiratorial thinking presents a significant problem for top-down, elite-driven theories of public opinion. Indeed, conspiracy theories, by definition, involve an explicit rejection of elite influences and, in practice, are usually not supported by any mainstream political actors. Using the unique data provided by political blogs, I found two pieces of evidence in support of the argument that conspiratorial thinking is the result of anti-elite, bottom-up opinion dynamics. First, I found that bloggers who endorsed electoral conspiracy theories were more likely to

criticize the mainstream media's coverage of election related conspiracies. Second, I found that endorsement of electoral conspiracy theories was not the result of Congressional discussion, executive branch statements, print media articles or broadcast media coverage.

The analysis and findings presented here suggest two clear directions for future research. First, although I have argued that political blogs present a particularly good site for studying conspiratorial thinking, they also provide the kind of rich data that may shed light on the process of opinion formation and change for more mainstream political issues. Indeed, by revealing not only where the blogger stands on a particular political issue but also how intensely the blogger feels about the issue, which frames the blogger employs to understand the issue, which actors the blogger references when discussing the issue, which events motivate the blogger to blog about the issue, how important the blogger thinks that issue is relative to other issues of the day and which sources the blogger links to when blogging about the issue, blogs can provide a useful complement to analyses that rely solely on survey data.

Second, other examples of conspiratorial thinking might be usefully studied using the approach presented here. A number of conspiracy theories, such as speculation about the Israeli government's role in the September 11th attacks and the US government's role in the Oklahoma City bombing, have achieved a high level of prominence on the internet. Future work may want to explore whether the opinion dynamics of these issues is the same as the ones discovered here for voter fraud.

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Appendix 1 – Coding Scheme for Ideology of Blogs

In order to code for the ideology of the blog four steps were taken. First, the title of the blog was checked for references to ideology or political partisanship. Many political blogs include some reference to their ideology or partisanship in the title of their blog. Second, the blog's introductory description was checked for statements of ideological or partisan preferences. Many political bloggers use the fact that most blogging software allows the blogger to write a short statement of purpose or summary of their blog to express their ideological beliefs. Third, the content of the blog itself was checked for statements of opinion about the election. If a blog made an outright statement of preference about the outcome of the election, such as "please let Bush win," "please defeat Bush," "vote for Bush" or "vote against Bush," the blog was coded for the direction of that statement. Finally, the sidebar of each blog was checked for links to explicitly partisan or ideological websites.

Table 1 – Sample of A-list Blogs

Blog Title	Address
America Blog	http://www.americablog.blogspot.com
Daily Dish	http://www.andrewsullivan.com
Daniel Drezner	http://www.danieldrezner.com
Eschaton	http://atrios.blogspot.com
Hullabaloo	http://www.digbysblog.blogspot.com
Informed Comment	http://www.juancole.com
Instapundit	http://www.instapundit.com
Little Green Footballs	http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com
Michelle Malkin	http://www.michellemalkin.com
Powerline	http://www.powerlineblog.com
Talking Points Memo	http://talkingpointsmemo.com
Tapped	http://www.prospect.org/weblog
The Independit	http://indepundit.com
Vodka Pundit	http://www.vodkatpundit.com
Winds of Change	http://www.windsofchange.net
Yglesias	http://yglesias.typepad.com

Table 2 – Discussion of Voter Fraud by Actor

Actor	Mean	Standard Deviation	Maximum	% Of Days with No Mentions
Kerry Campaign	.00	.00	0	100.00%
Bush Campaign	.00	.00	0	100.00%
Print Media	.10	.31	1	89.66%
Broadcast Media	4.00	.98	4	82.76%
Congress	.10	.31	1	89.66%
Executive Branch	.03	.19	1	96.55%
A-List Blogs (Liberal)	1.28	1.16	4	31.03%
A-List Blogs (Conservative)	.10	.31	4	89.66%
Less Popular Blogs (Liberal)	.97	.98	3	37.93%
Less Popular Blogs (Conservative)	.10	.30	1	89.66%
Less Popular Blogs (Other)	.00	.00	0	100.00%

Table 3 – Links to Source Types

Link Type	Overall	Liberal	Conservative	Endorsed Conspiracies	Rejected Conspiracies
National Media	15.29%	16.67%	11.36%	24.59%	13.89%
State and Local Media	8.24%	8.73%	6.82%	4.92%	5.56%
Total Media	23.53%	25.40%	18.18%	29.51%	19.44%
A-list Liberal Blogs	4.71%	6.35%	0.00%	3.28%	5.56%
A-list Conservative Blogs	4.12%	0.00%	15.91%	0.00%	11.11%
Less Popular Blogs	12.94%	7.94%	27.27%	6.56%	16.67%
Links to Self	5.29%	4.76%	6.82%	1.64%	13.89%
Total Blogs	27.06%	19.05%	50.00%	11.48%	47.22%
Liberal Media	5.88%	7.14%	2.27%	8.20%	5.56%
Conservative Media	1.76%	0.79%	4.55%	0.00%	0.00%
Total Partisan Media	7.65%	7.94%	6.82%	8.20%	5.56%
Government	0.59%	0.79%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Universities	2.94%	3.97%	0.00%	6.56%	2.78%
Other	38.24%	42.86%	25.00%	44.26%	25.00%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 4 – Granger Causality in the Six Equation System

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Chi-Square	p-value
Reject Conspiracies	Endorse Conspiracies	38.27	.00
	Congress	11.27	.00
	Executive Branch	1.45	.49
	Print Media	.40	.82
	Broadcast Media	48.31	.00
Endorse Conspiracies	Reject Conspiracies	1.12	.57
	Congress	1.01	.60
	Executive Branch	3.74	.15
	Print Media	1.66	.44
	Broadcast Media	2.20	.33
Congress	Reject Conspiracies	3.93	.14
	Endorse Conspiracies	10.60	.01
	Executive Branch	1.87	.39
	Print Media	.63	.73
	Broadcast Media	.65	.72
Executive Branch	Reject Conspiracies	31.28	.00
	Endorse Conspiracies	1.50	.47
	Congress	11.49	.00
	Print Media	5.43	.07
	Broadcast Media	24.90	.00
Print Media	Reject Conspiracies	3.23	.20
	Endorse Conspiracies	3.73	.16
	Congress	10.04	.01
	Executive Branch	29.48	.00
	Broadcast Media	25.85	.00
Broadcast Media	Reject Conspiracies	12.78	.00
	Endorse Conspiracies	1.23	.54
	Congress	.35	.84
	Executive Branch	7.81	.02
	Print Media	9.02	.01

Figure 1 – Elite Discussion of Voter Fraud

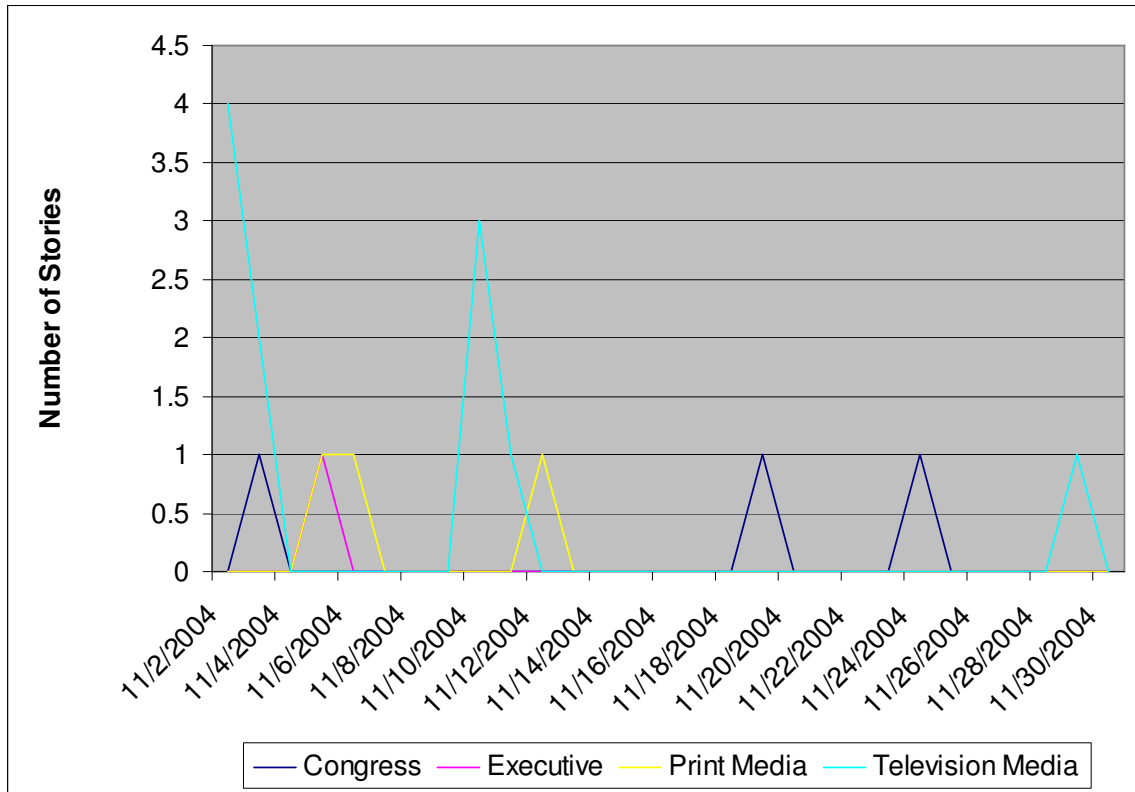


Figure 2 – Blog Discussion of Voter Fraud

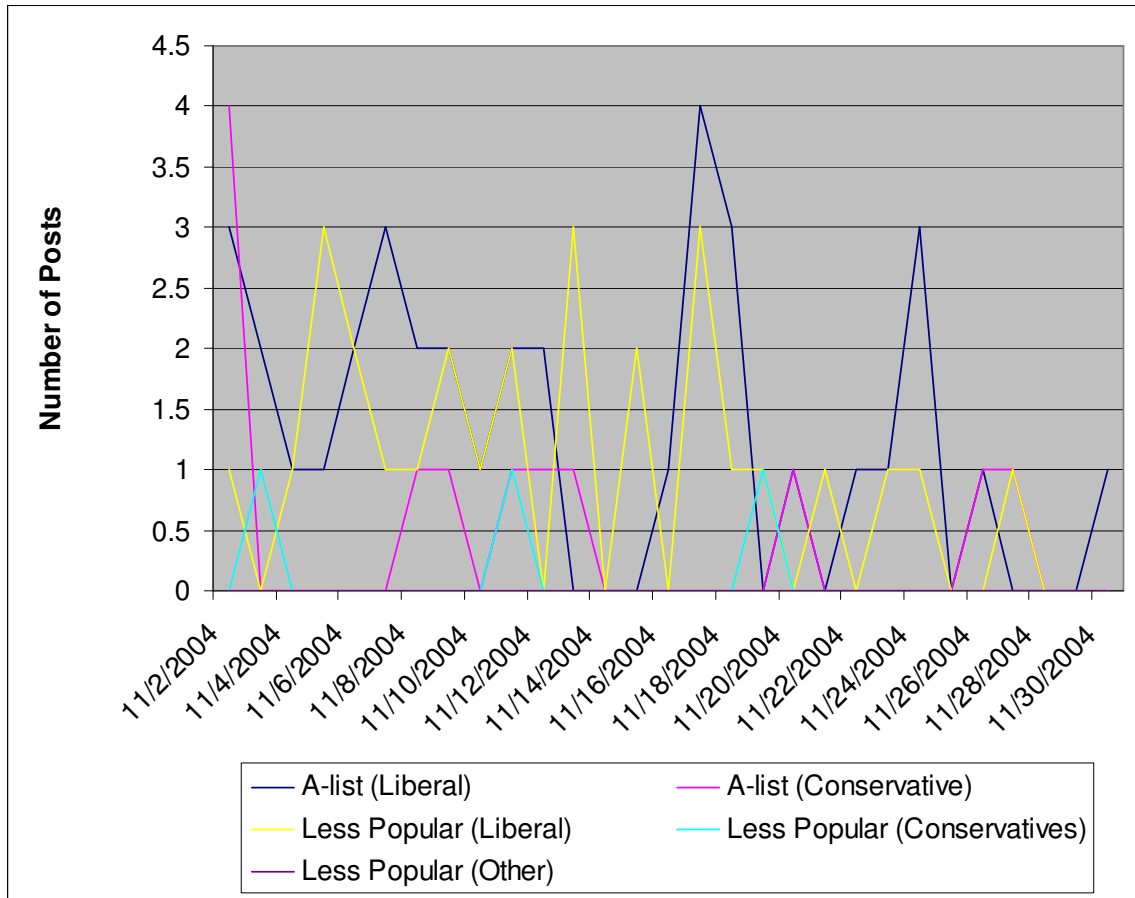


Figure 3 –Endorsement of Voter Fraud Theories

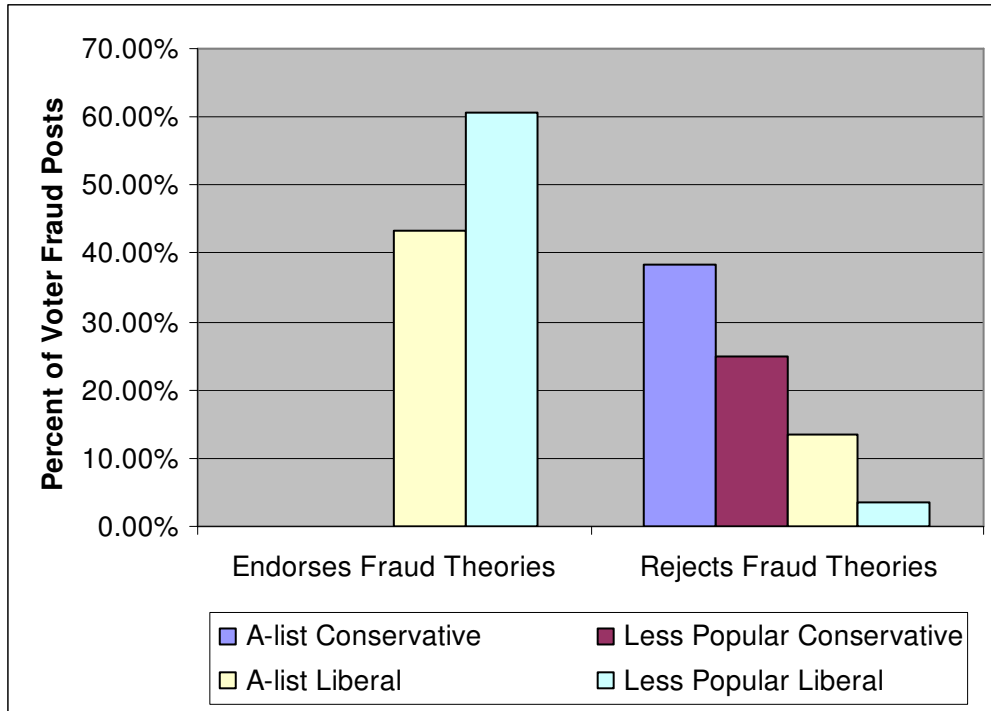


Figure 4 – Relationships between Variables

