The impact of political events on blog conversational patterns: two cases from Greece

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Abstract

Blogs are becoming a major source of communication, a good way of circulating new ideas, producing a well-informed public and helping people's participation in political processes. This paper studies how two recent political events about the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement, are discussed through blogs. It uses Social Networking Theory and Statistical Analysis to examine whether political polarization is reproduced in blogging, for the Greek case. The paper also considers how different political events have a different impact on the polarization of bloggers' political communication. Findings suggest that polarization is reflected in blogs' conversational patterns. Debate events are associated with more polarized social networks of blogs.

Key words

Political blogs, links distribution, social networking, focal points, Greece.

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Resum

Els blocs s'estan convertint en una de les principals fonts de comunicació, una bona manera de difondre noves idees, produir un públic ben informat i fomentar la participació popular en els processos polítics. Aquest article analitza com es debaten a través dels blocs dos fets polítics recents sobre el Moviment Socialista Panhel·lènic. L'article utilitza la teoria de les xarxes socials i l'anàlisi estadística per determinar si la polarització política es reprodueix en els blocs en el cas grec. L'article també analitza com diferents fets polítics tenen diferents impactes sobre la polarització de la comunicació política dels blocaires. Les dades obtingudes indiquen que la polarització es reflecteix en els models conversacionals dels blocs. Els episodis de debats estan associats amb xarxes socials de blocs més polaritzades.

Paraules clau

Blocs polítics, distribució d'enllaços, xarxes socials, pols d'atracció, Grècia.

Introduction

Web 2.0 brings significant changes to the way Internet is used (Yap et al. 2008). It offers a plethora of social media including blogs; file, photo and video sharing systems like YouTube, Flickr, SlideShare; social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, SecondLife; wikis like the collaborative encyclopaedia Wikipedia; and RSS and atom feeds that keep users updated with the latest web content. One of the key characteristics of Web 2.0 is the idea of User Generated Content. Users have the ability to create their own content rather than passively consume what is created for them by others (Zappen et al. 2008, 17-25).

In the political context, use of the Internet makes information more compelling, lowers the costs of participation and creates new opportunities for involvement (Turnšek and Jankowski 2008). More specifically, Web 2.0 has created an architecture of participation (O'Reilly 2005) which, in terms of political discourse, facilitates the co-production of information and social networking, offers spaces for individuals to interact and encourages bottom-up communication (Lilleker and Jackson 2008).

Barger (1997) used the term weblog for first time and defined blog as "a web page where a blogger 'logs' all the other web pages he finds interesting". Later on Drezner and Farrell (2004) defined a blog as "A web page with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources". The term blogosphere refers to weblogs as a social network (Hill 2004).

"A major attraction of weblogs is their relative ease of construction/updating and the lack of the need or any special skills in web design or of HTML coding" claimed Pedley (2005, 95-100). Blogging tools provide enhanced features for between-blog interactivity, thus promoting the creation of social networks among bloggers (Du and Wagner 2006, 789-798) another key feature to their success (Williams and Jacobs 2004, 232-247). Interactivity between blogs takes three forms. The first form is that of a "blogroll" that many bloggers maintain. The blogroll is a list of blogs that bloggers frequently read or especially admire. Albrecht et al (2007, 504-520) refer to this form as "connectedness of weblogs". The second form is achieved by posting comments to entries and is a key form of information exchange in the blogosphere (Drezner and

Farrell, 2004; Mishne and Glance 2006). Marlow (2004) wrote about comments "a simple and effective way for webloggers to interact with their readership". Drezner and Farrell (2004) highlighted the fact that links and page views are the "currency" of the blogosphere and Blood (2002) mentioned that the most reliable way to gain traffic to a blog is through a link on another weblog. Lastly there are trackbacks and pingbacks. Trackback is a citation notification system (Brady 2005). It enables bloggers to determine when other bloggers have written another entry of their own that references their original post (Waggener Edstrom Worldwide 2006). "If both weblogs are enabled with trackback functionality, a reference from a post on weblog A to another post on weblog B will update the post on B to contain a back-reference to the post on A" (Marlow 2004). A pingback is an automated trackback. "Pingbacks support auto-discovery where the software automatically finds out the links in a post, and automatically tries to pingback those URLs, while trackbacks must be done manually by entering the trackback URL that the trackback should be sent to" (http://codex.wordpress.org/Introduction_to_Blogging#Pingbacks)

The political blogosphere

Blogs are powerful because they allow millions of people to easily publish and share their ideas, and millions more to read and respond (www.technorati.com). In the political blogosphere, blogs are "a potential alternative to the traditional media as gatekeepers of information and news" (Pedley 2005, 95-100). McKenna and Pole (2004) claim that blogs have the potential to shape politics, political discourse and political participation. Blogs have also been described as a mobilization tool due to their ability to spread political news very quickly (Albrecht et al 2007, 504-520; Kahn and Kellner 2004, 87-95).

Commenting on political blogs into American politics, Graf (2006) wrote "In just a few years they have become a finger in the eye of the mainstream media and a closely watched forum of political debate". There have been times that bloggers have broken major news (Jackson 2005, 292-303), their point of view sometimes contradicting that of the mainstream media (Lankshear and Knobel 2003). In September 2001, bloggers created a protest against Trent Lott who supported Strom Thurmond's segregationist stance in the 1948 presidential election at the 100th birthday of Senator Strom Thurmond (Bloom 2003). Bloggers also echoed the suspicion that "President Bush was using a listening device for assistance during the presidential debate and worries over the validity of voting machines" (Su et al. 2005). In November 2005, bloggers in Germany found that the picture used for the claim of the social marketing campaign had already been used by some Nazis in 1935 (http://www.spreeblick.com/2006/01/27/you-are-deutschland-too-just-kidding/). In the US-led invasion of Iraq, blogs posted photos before other media and sometimes contradicted the point of view of mainstream media like CNN (Lankshear and Knobel 2003).

Blogs are tools for politicians to campaign and reach out to their constituency (Trammell et al. 2006, 21-44). Jackson (2006, 292-303) wrote "during an election campaign, a weblog is a means for a party to promulgate its policies through a virtual network of political bloggers". An example of a highly successful blog is Howard Dean's *BlogforAmerica*. This blog was used to mobilize supporters and funding, even though Howard Dean's candidacy was not successful (Kerbel and Bloom 2005, 3-27; McKenna 2004 Pole 2004). Chadwick (2009, 9-41) pointed out that "the 2004 primary and presidential campaigns in the United States saw the emergence of a campaigning model based on online venues loosely meshed together through automated linking technologies, particularly blogs". According to Albrecht et al. (2007, 504-520) paradigms of blogs being used as campaign instruments are the 2004 presidential election, the 2005 U.K. general election, the 2005 Danish parliamentary election, the 2005 New Zealand general election, the 2005 German Bundestag election, the 2007 French election and the 2007 Australian Federal Election. At recent presidential elections, Barack Obama maintained a blog at his webpage http://www.barackobama.com.

Drezner and Farrell (2004) found out that, even though there are over a million bloggers posting thousands of new items daily, the average blogger has almost no political influence as measured by traffic or hyperlinks and they highlighted that "this is because the distribution of weblinks and traffic is heavily skewed, with a few bloggers commanding most of the attention. This distribution parallels the one observed for political websites in general. Because of this distribution, a few "elite" blogs can operate as both an information aggregator and as a "summary statistic" for the blogosphere". The same was claimed by Jackson (2006, 292-303) who wrote "elite bloggers can act as a "focal point" encouraging influential visitors to congregate around them. To influence the news, political and policy agenda, political actors need to attract an "A" list audience to their weblog".

Blogs have the advantage of speedy publication and an advantage in socially constructing interpretive frames for understanding current events. Blogs appear to play an increasingly important role as a forum for public debate, with knock-on effects for the media and politics. In Greece, where the ratio of Internet users is relatively small, there is nonetheless an expanding portion of bloggers who comment regularly and have the power, to a certain degree and under certain circumstances, to trigger political movements. Posting opinions on the Internet can be considered as an expression of activated public opinion in contrast to public opinion per se, which is recorded through surveys and concerns the wider public. Based on the relevant literature, the paper uses the established blog search engine Technorati.com in order to track Greek political blogs and provide indicators of their popularity and interconnections.

Aims and methodology

The paper examines the degree of interconnectivity, cohesion and polarisation of Greek political blogs. The basic hypothesis supported by the literature is that, within polarized political systems, blogs are forming clusters around central blogs that are considered reliable or share the same affiliation. Internet users who wish to be informed quickly locate the focal points of discussion and, to save on surfing, they read only the posts on these blogs. Bloggers also locate focal point blogs and place their posts along with a link to their blog. They therefore expect the readers of focal point blogs to visit their blogs as well. This research examines whether this hypothesis holds for Greek political blogs.

In order to deal with with this question the paper studies two cases, specifically political events, both concerning the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK). The first case is about the recent debate that took place on the web regarding the election of PASOK's new President. The Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) (one of the two major parties in Greece) was defeated in the national elections of 16 September 2007 and this defeat led to a major leadership crisis. Elections for a new leader were held 11 November 2007. The paper examines blogs that were for or against the two main presidential candidates for the period from 16 September to 13 November 2007. The political event of the election of a new PASOK President was chosen because it is a debate that lasted two months. It is a significant political event since it not only relates to one of the major parties in Greece but also motivated nearly one million PASOK supporters to cast their vote on 11 November. The president's election was accompanied by extensive political discussion, mainly on TV but also in the media in general. The event had all the features of a debate.

The second event concerns the dismissal from the parliamentary party group of Mr. Costas Simitis. Mr. Simitis, a former Prime Minister of Greece, was dismissed by the newly elected President of the party George Papandreou (June 2008). Blogs commenting on this event from 12 to 30 June 2008 are also studied. The dismissal of a former Prime Minister by the newly elected President is an important event in itself but becomes more so since it relates to the efforts of George Papandreou to build a strong self-image. Unlike the election for President, it was not a debate. Rather it was an already accomplished and therefore momentary event when discussed by the media. Concerning bloggers reactions, this event also provoked an immediate and extensive discussion.

George Papandreou was elected as the new President of PASOK on 11 November 2007 with a marginal victory of 53% over his main opponent Mr. Evaggelos Venizelos. In June 2008 the newly elected President of PASOK adopted a resolution concerning the critical comments and interventions of the former Prime Minister, Member of Parliament and member of the Parliamentary Group of PASOK, Mr. Costas Simitis. Mr Papandreou dismissed Mr Simitis from the parliamentary group of PASOK via a movement that was noted as an attempt by Mr. Papandreou to appear decisive and capable of resolving his party's critical issues. Both the election of President and the dismissal of Mr. Simitis from the parliamentary group were discussed and commented at length in the media and considered to be very significant. Blogs also had a share of this discussion. Both issues gathered high percentages of comments.

The paper uses Technorati.com, which is considered a reliable and popular blog search engine. Blogs with some authority are recorded, which link to the two main presidential candidates through G. Papandreou's and E. Venizelos' websites and blogs. Technorati Authority is the number of blogs linking to a website in the last six months. The higher the number, the more Technorati Authority the blog has. In the authors' view, this consideration grants greater validity in the blog selection process. Through the search via technorati.com, 65 blogs with some authority were found. Links within these blogs included on the blogrolls of these specific blogs were recorded. Blogrolls are lists of blogs that bloggers frequently read or especially admire and they include them at the side of their blogs. Also through the same search engine, 54 blogs with some authority were recorded, commenting on Mr. Simitis' dismissal. Links within these blogs included on the blogrolls of these specific blogs were recorded.

The methodology uses Social Networking theory. Links between blogs (recorded from blogrolls) are used to represent blog interconnections on directed graphs. A study of the networks reveals, firstly, how blogs are self-organized into groups around focal conversation points and, secondly, how this formation changes depending on the impact of the political event that is being discussed. Findings reveal whether the original hypothesis also holds for the cases we examine, and whether blogs have different polarizations in the sense that debates, compared to static events, may conform better to the original hypothesis concerning both the quantitative features of the networks and also the content of the comments posted on blogs.

Next, Multidimensional Scaling is used in the analysis to quantify the data. This method reproduces the original data and maps them onto a space with fewer dimensions (namely two, in our analysis) while an effort is made to keep the distances between the original data intact in the newly reproduced data. Hierarchical Cluster Analysis uses quantified data to produce clusters of blogs with similar properties. Blogs in the same cluster are linked by nearly the same set of blogs. The blogs in a formed cluster are therefore considered to be of the same family (political or otherwise) through the blogs that link them. Some of the clusters produced by Hierarchical Cluster Analysis gather together the largest number of incoming links. If this happens, then they may serve as conversation focal points or "focal point" blogs (Fuchs, 2007). This property is a consequence of the skewed distribution of links, also mentioned by Drezner and Farrell (2004). Only a few blogs have a very large number of incoming links while the rest, the majori-

ty of blogs, have only a small number of incoming links. This paper also presents the distribution of incoming blog links.

Findings

Figure 1 presents the blog interconnections. The 69 blogs commenting on election of the president and the 54 blogs commenting on Mr. Simitis' dismissal are presented in graphs. As Drezner and Farrell (2004, p. 13) mention, "blogs with large numbers of incoming links offer both a means of filtering interesting blog posts from less interesting ones, and a focal point at which bloggers with interesting posts and potential readers of these posts can coordinate. When less prominent bloggers have an interesting piece of information or point of view that is relevant to a political controversy, they will usually post this on their own blogs. However, they will also often have an incentive to contact one of the large 'focal point' blogs, to publicize their post. The latter may post on the issue with a hyperlink back to the original blog, if the story or point of view is interesting enough, so that the originator of the piece of information receives more readers. In this manner, bloggers with fewer links function as "fire alarms" for focal point blogs, providing new information and links". They also mention that "we note that this implies that, even while focal point blogs play a crucial mediating role, smaller blogs may sometimes have very substantial political impact by bringing information to the attention of focal blogs" (Drezner and Farrell, 2004 p. 13). This paper argues that "focal point" blogs are recognized as authority blogs by the bloggers' community and they may serve as the blog cores where the interesting and informational discussion is taking place.

To test whether this hypothesis holds for political blogging in Greece, this paper examines the distribution of incoming links for the two sets of networks of the study. Figure 2 presents the histograms of incoming links. Most of the blogs have a very small number of incoming links, while only a few blogs have a large number of incoming links. This is true in the case of the presidential election but is less obvious for Mr. Simitis' dismissal. This finding provides some evidence that Drezner & Farrell's (2004) argument about the skewing of incoming links holds true.

Next, Multidimensional Scaling (MS), which presents a very good fit with Stress < 0.05 in both cases, followed by Hierarchical Cluster Analysis (HCA) result in the formation of six clusters in both the cases studied.

From Figure 3 it can be concluded that, in the case of the presidential election, three clusters (right tail of the left graph), and in the case of Mr. Simitis' dismissal two clusters (right tail of the right graph) have the feature of having only a small number of blogs and at the same time gather together a large number of incoming links. These clusters are of interest since they represent focal discussion points.

Partisan focal points are more interesting to study. These are clusters where the majority of the blogs within the cluster are maintained by people who are politically involved in and active members of PASOK and these are not characterized by just a journalistic style. Regarding the presidential election, 9 out of 65 blogs are distributed into three clusters: one cluster with four blogs is partisan pro Papandreou and the other two clusters (4 and 1 blog respectively) have various and mixed political characteristics. All of them are placed at the right tail of the graph. Further quantitative analysis reveals that 61% of the blogs commenting on the presidential election link to blogs of

**Figure 1. Social Networks of blogs commenting on:
election of PASOK President (left) and dismissal of Mr. Simitis (right)**
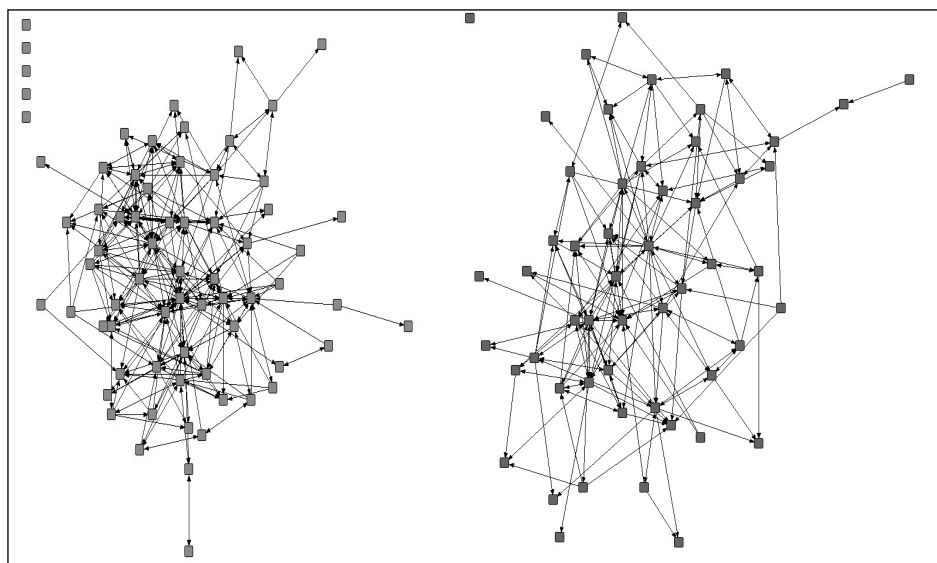
Source: authors' own.

Figure 2: Histograms of incoming links:
election for President (left) and Mr Simitis' dismissal (right)
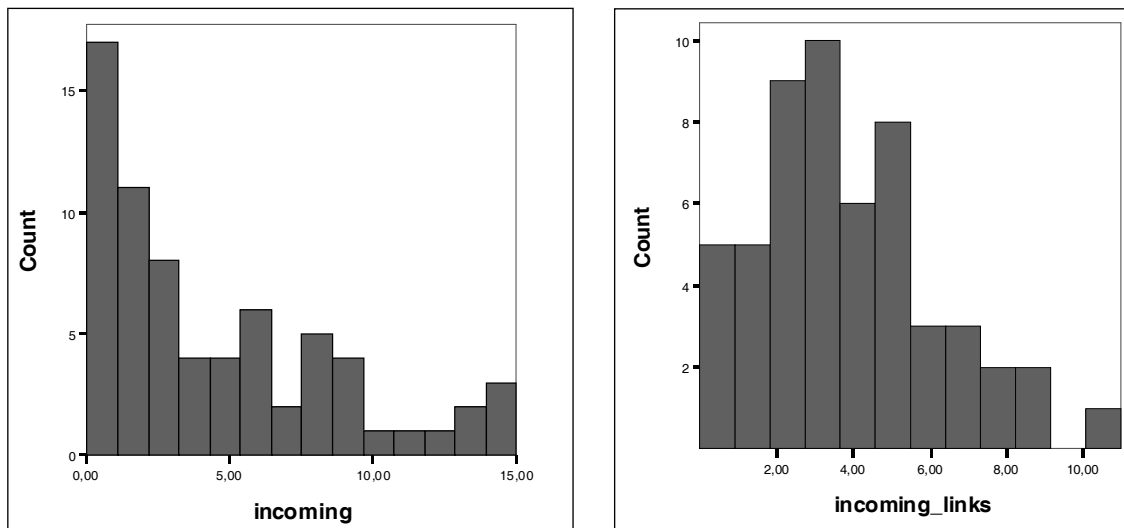
Source: authors' own.

these focal point clusters, while 26% of the blogs link to all the blogs of at least one of these clusters.

Regarding the dismissal of Mr. Simitis, 3 out of 54 blogs are distributed into two clusters: one cluster has just one blog, which is partisan and pro dismissal, while the other two blogs constitute the second cluster. They are mainly characterized by a journalistic and informative style. Further analysis suggests that 37% of the blogs commenting on Mr. Simitis' dismissal link to blogs of these focal point clusters, while 20% of the blogs link to all the blogs of at least one core cluster.

In conclusion, it seems that Greek bloggers are indeed organized into centralized and focused networks. Their communication is organized around core blogs, which are considered popular or significant. Profile analysis of the cluster blogs shows that the only partisan blogs that take part in the discussion are indeed members of only these core blog clusters, and this in turn provides evidence of the degree of polarization of the discussion. Our case studies provide evidence that polarization is more obvious for the case of electing the president of PASOK, for two reasons: 1. more partisan blogs are members of the core (or focal points) blog clusters, and 2. the skewed nature of the links distribution is greater. Consequently, a small number of blogs group together an even larger number of incoming links and are, in turn, considered as focal points. In the case of the election for the PASOK President, it seems that conformity with the general patterns supported by the literature for western countries is more obvious, while the case of the dismissal of Mr. Simitis offers less evidence of adaptation. In this sense, polarization for the second case should be considered smaller.

Differences concerning blog political discussion could be summarized as follows:

a. In the different mobilization and attendance of bloggers in the discussion: In the dismissal of Mr. Simitis, only one blog still maintains participation out of the nine blogs that participated in the presidential election. This blog originates from the most partisan and purely political cluster that was present at the discussion for the election of President. It appears that the special characteristics of Mr. Simitis' dismissal (as an already finalized political action and therefore unable to be influenced further), does not considerably affect the mobilization of other active bloggers.

b. In the polarization – formation recorded for partisan clusters of blogs: For the case of the presidential election, one partisan cluster has four partisan blogs, as opposed to the case of the dismissal of Mr. Simitis, where one partisan cluster has just one partisan blog.

Qualitative differences in the discussion regarding the two events

The previous section presented how conversational patterns differ from each other according mainly to quantitative indexes of linkage among bloggers. Further analysis reveals that there are also qualitative difference regarding the presentation, discussion of and commenting on the two events. These differences can be found through extended content analysis of the blogs' comments.

There are common characteristics regarding comments for both cases i.e. description of the event, attempts at interpreting the protagonists' choices and actions, expression of agreement or disapproval, the relation of the political events with the media as a theme of discussion, the protagonists' personal characteristics and profiles are discussed, the general tenden-

Figure 3: Representation of the clusters by size (percentage of blogs in cluster) and popularity (percentage of incoming links compared to total number of blogs). First election for President and second Mr Simitis' dismissal
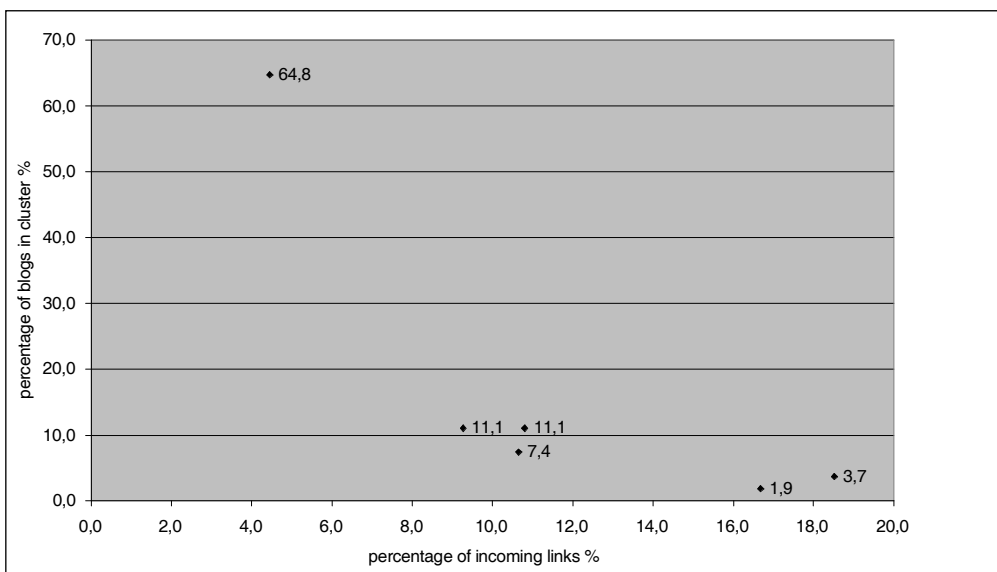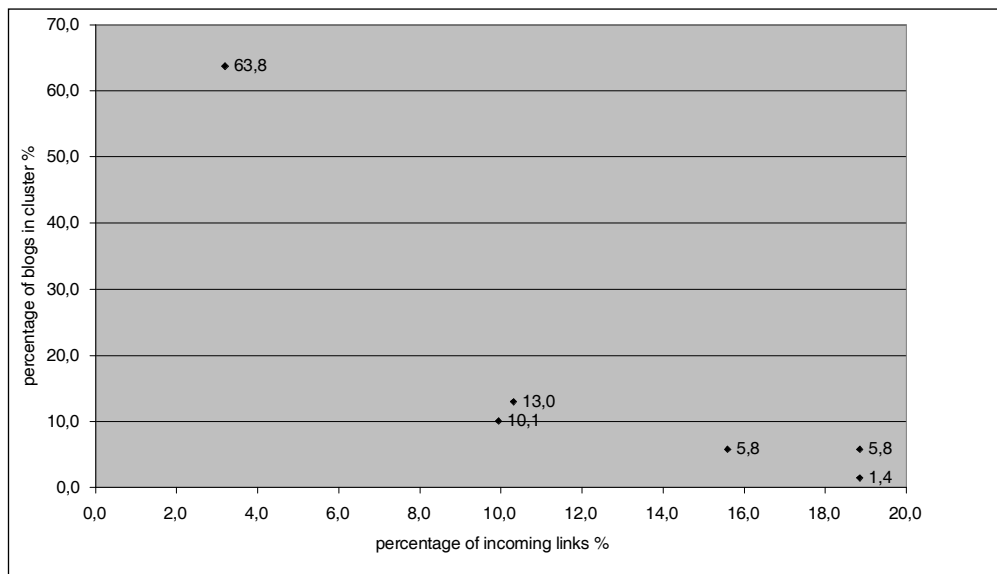
Source: authors' own.

cy is recorded in favour of one candidate G. Papandreou (Papandreou as opposed to Venizelos/Papandreou as opposed to Simitis) and, finally, attempts are made to predict the future of PASOK. However, there are some differences among comments about the two events. For the discussion with regard to Mr. Simitis' dismissal, the number of issues discussed and the number and length of comments are smaller, comments are less aggressive and readers and commentators record less personal stories and views. Also, support in favour of the main protagonists is generally smaller; prompts to citizens to act following a specific political plan are absent. In general, the dynamics arising from the fact that a political event is still evolving and thus susceptible to influence are absent.

Conclusion

This paper is original due to two issues. First, social networking theory was used along with multivariate statistical analysis to search for focal point blogs. Based on the original hypothesis that political blogs are organized around central blog groups, the paper made an effort to locate them. Second, it used this idea to explore possible differences in this self-organization across the political discussion of different political events. In this way, the paper locates not only frequencies of posts through blogs but also finds which blogs monopolize the discussion in a sense. Also, by locating the most partisan of these blogs, the paper offers findings concerning the discussion's degree of polarization.

  The research has provided evidence that political blogging in Greece conforms to the characteristics described in the literature regarding political blogging in polarized political systems. Greek political blogs act within a social network of blogs, which form authority core groups where the discussion is taking place. Greek bloggers are organized into focused social networks according to the specific event. This happens especially when a public debate takes place. The findings offer some evidence concerning the degree of political participation and mobilization is recorded in political discussion through blogging. The skewed nature of incoming link distribution and the formation of core blog groups may be used to explain the importance of some blogs in providing information and in discussion.

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