

Political Effects of Blogs in Malaysia

**INTERNET POLITICS AND STATE MEDIA CONTROL:
CANDIDATE WEBLOGS IN MALAYSIA**

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This paper underscores the importance of online research in illuminating the social processes underlying Internet effects on politics. It is an empirical study of the effect of blogs on the 2008 general election in Malaysia that demonstrates the significant positive effect of having a blog on the likelihood of winning a Parliamentary seat, independent of controls. Theoretically, I expect that use of the Internet is a sound political strategy for disseminating information, given the Malaysian government's censorship of traditional print and broadcast media. Using the population of electoral candidates in the 2008 general election (N=471), I estimate a logistic model predicting the effects of having a blog on winning a Parliamentary seat. The results show that opposition candidates benefit significantly more from having a blog than do non-opposition candidates, as blogging provides opportunities denied to them by Malaysia's state-controlled media. Bloggers are more than seven times as likely to win an election compared to non-bloggers, controlling for incumbency, party membership, and race. This analysis also makes an exploratory effort to identify social mechanisms that can explain the effect of blogs. In addition to being an alternative source of information, blogs' potential for building interpersonal relationships and their role as mobilization tools are discussed using qualitative examples.

Keywords: Citizen, Civil society, Information, Strategy

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Much has been made of the Internet's role in politics, particularly in the 2008 U.S. Presidential election campaign. David Perlmutter, author of *Blogwars*, observed Barack Obama's effective use of social networking, including weblogs, to "gain a large share of the youth vote and gain a decisive fundraising edge" (Perlmutter webchat transcript 2008). He is not the only person to do so; popular press and online pundits alike have commented on Obama's digital savvy outshining that of John McCain. TechCrunch, a weblog dedicated to all things Internet-related, featured numerous posts regarding Obama's Internet advantage, first against Hillary Clinton in the primaries, and later against McCain, in terms of website visitors, time spent on affiliated websites, and fundraising (Schonfeld 2008).

While Internet usage continues to be dominated by developed countries, the case of Malaysia demonstrates how this technology is being used in emerging democracies, especially by those who are not already in power. Weblogs, which are websites containing current and archived personal commentary on selected topics displayed in reverse chronological order, have been particularly contentious. Bloggers, because of their typically dissident opinions, have earned the ire of several government officials. In 2007, a Malaysian government official described bloggers as "karaoke singers who take pleasure in their own singing but have no influence although they claimed to have received millions of hits" (Bernama 2007). He went so far as to claim that "although there were numerous bloggers, the mainstream newspapers would ultimately hold sway over the majority of the people."

His position is not immediately refutable. Although many scholars and pundits have made claims regarding the influence of the Internet, very few have undertaken systematic empirical studies to quantify these effects. This study aims to do exactly that, by examining the relationship between an electoral candidate's performance in a national election and his or her online presence. My intention in conducting this study is to understand the role of the Internet, specifically blogs, in Malaysia's 12th general election in March 2008. In this election, the newly formed opposition coalition won 82 Parliamentary seats out of 222 (37%), handing the incumbent government its worst result ever. This result breaks with historical trends and is in marked contrast to the 2004 general election, when the incumbent government won 198 out of 219 seats (90%). The 2008 results were especially significant insofar as they marked the first time that the government coalition lost its stranglehold on Parliament, losing the 2/3 majority it needs to amend the constitution (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 here]

Political analysts have suggested several possible factors that may explain this turnaround, one of them being the role of opposition bloggers (e.g. Tan and Zawawi 2008). Because the government controls news media by means of a law requiring annual printing license renewals and by limiting opposition ad time during election campaigns, opposition politicians have had to look elsewhere to promote their message and platforms. Blogs proved to be a successful medium for publicity and information flow, as well as a useful setting for socio-political discourse and resource mobilization. However, to date, no systematic study of the effects of blog use has been conducted.

I posit that having a blog had a positive effect on electoral outcomes, especially for the opposition coalition, and test my argument using primary data that I collected from the Internet on politicians and their blogs. I first describe briefly the demographics and politics of Malaysia. Next, I outline the limits of extant research on blogs and develop a theoretical framework explaining why and how blogs matter. Then, I describe my research design and discuss my findings. Finally, I conclude with suggestions on how to further extend this line of inquiry regarding blog effects.

MALAYSIA IN CONTEXT

Demography

Covering just under 130,000 square miles, Malaysia's population in 2007, according to the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI 2007), was 26.5 million. Approximately 60% of the population is Malay, 25% is Chinese, and 8% is Indian. Malay is the national language, with English widely spoken in urban areas. Most Chinese and Indians also speak ethnic languages and dialects such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hokkien, Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu.

Internet penetration in Malaysia has increased steadily from 27% in 2001 to 42% in 2004 to 56.5% in 2007 (WDI 2007). The WDI estimate the proportion of broadband subscribers in the country to be 5.2% as of 2007.¹ This is corroborated by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), which reports almost 15 million Internet users in Malaysia as of March 2008, indicating Internet penetration of approximately 57%. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that, as of March 2008, just over 1.3 million are broadband subscribers (approximately 5%).

Politics

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy, modeled after the Westminster parliamentary system in the United Kingdom. Parliament consists of two houses: the Dewan Rakyat (People's Hall, derived from the House of Commons) and the Dewan Negara (Nation's Hall, derived from the House of Lords). As of 2008, the

¹ For comparison purposes, the WDI estimate Internet penetration in the US to be 73% and broadband usage to be 22% at the same period. Internet penetration is highest in Norway, where 85% of the population uses the Internet.

Dewan Rakyat comprises 222 Members of Parliament (MPs), one for each population-drawn constituency.

The constitution of Malaysia calls for a general election at least once every five years, wherein the Prime Minister (PM) dissolves Parliament and new MPs are elected within sixty days using the first past-the-post system. Candidates need only be citizens and residents of Malaysia aged 21 and above; they need not reside in the constituency (or district) that they are contesting. The PM is the leader of the political party with the largest representation in Parliament. Practically speaking, this has always been the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which is the largest party in the Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front) coalition that has governed Malaysia since independence in 1957.²

The 2008 election was a watershed in Malaysian history because it was the first time that the BN lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament, the margin necessary to amend the constitution. It also marked the first time the opposition officially campaigned as a coalition, the Pakatan Rakyat (PR), or People's Pact. This was no mean feat, considering that each of the component parties traditionally held entirely different ideologies. Parti Keadilan Rakyat, (PKR), or the People's Justice Party, pushed for reform of corrupt and outdated government policies, including those based on race. The largely Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) had a democratic socialist agenda. Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, campaigned on a conservative religious platform. How big was the Internet's role in leveling the playing field in terms of making the opposition's message accessible in a country where traditional broadcast media is controlled by the government?

WHY AND HOW BLOGS MATTER

The motivation for this research is straightforward. As Internet usage becomes ubiquitous in society, it is sociologically relevant to understand how it influences social outcomes. In their review of sociological research on the Internet, DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001) urge sociologists to widen and deepen their efforts to understand this new technology. Up until that point, scholarly research had focused on the Internet as an indicator of inequality and social capital (Nie 2001) with only some qualitative and exploratory work on online communities (Baym 2000; Kollock and Smith 1999) and political effects (Browning 1996). Since then, the technology has grown tremendously, but research on how online social processes affect offline social outcomes has not advanced as quickly.

² Historically, Malaysian politics have been predominantly race-based (Abraham 1997). This analysis controls for race and finds its effects non-significant, likely due to the correlation between race and party membership (Balasubramaniam 2006), which is a subject for separate discussion.

Although communications scholars have given some attention to the Internet, they initially viewed it as just another broadcast medium. By largely ignoring the participatory and collaborative social settings the Internet provides, they come to the conclusion that Internet effects are not significantly different or stronger than the effects of television, radio, or newspapers (e.g. Beck, Dalton, Greene, and Huckfeldt 2002; Margolis and Resnick 2000).

This study is an effort to address both these shortcomings, by advancing Internet research and by treating the Internet not just as a communications medium, but also as a social setting. The social processes that take place online may have considerable offline consequences. This is especially important in states that exercise control over the media. Of the many ways in which one can examine Internet effects, I chose to examine blogs because they are one of the most popular means of distributing information without requiring much technical expertise (Chadwick 2006). In comparison to newsgroups, blogs are much easier to set up and have been used in fields and industries as diverse as live sports coverage, scientific research, and architectural design (Lovink 2008). They are especially important in Malaysia because they fly under the radar of legislation constraining traditional media. (For an overview of blogging in Malaysia, see Tan and Zawawi 2008.)

I also chose to study election outcomes because they provide a concrete measure of the advantage (or disadvantage) provided by the Internet. Andrew Chadwick (2006), in his thorough overview of Internet Politics, describes how the Internet is not only affecting existing political institutions, but is shaping new norms, rules, and procedures in politics. He argues that the Internet is more than just a medium; it is a social setting where ideological reinforcement occurs and network structures are reinforced and extended. He also reiterates how two factors relevant to election campaigning are affected by the Internet.

The first is party competition. The Internet "allows previously marginalized or even new parties to emerge and compete with established players" (p148). In Malaysia, where the opposition is denied easy access to mainstream media, the Internet becomes a powerful weapon they can use to gain publicity. Second, there is a potential redistribution of power. Egalitarian use of the Internet may result in decentralized networks that redistribute power from party leaderships to grassroots activists. Chadwick argues that "psychologically disempowered spectators will feel their political efficacy increase, not only by physically turning out to rallies and meetings but by contributing to and learning from a much richer online public debate" (p149).

Examining the effects of politicians' blogs on their election performances enables theoretical advancement by considering how effective candidate blogging can be as a campaign strategy. Examining

these effects in Malaysia allows me to simultaneously quantify blog effects and media control effects, whose interaction has practical implications for government policy and opposition strategy not just in Malaysia but also in other emerging democracies and developing nations. The central research question I address in this study is: what effects do blogs have on electoral outcomes in a media-controlling state? This question has two parts: first, does having a blog have any effect at all on a political candidate's election performance? Second, if there is an effect, what drives it?

In this paper, the term blogs refers specifically to weblogs containing socio-political content that are created by Malaysian electoral candidates and updated at least once a month prior to the election. I distinguish blogs from a candidate's website that is managed by his or her political party because I am interested in specific blog effects that are separate from mere online presence. My hypotheses rest on the assumption that blogs function differently from static websites (Chadwick 2006).³

Election performance is defined as the voting outcome in an electoral contest with the candidate as the unit of analysis. It is operationalized as the likelihood that a candidate will win an election contest.

A media-controlling state is one where government policies or laws restrict equal distribution of information. These policies or laws may apply to the source of the information, the channels of distribution, i.e. mass media, or the audience. In Malaysia, the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984 makes it a criminal offence to possess or use a printing press without an annual permit granted by the Home Affairs Minister. In the 1980s, at least two newspapers had their printing licenses revoked for printing articles that were supposedly anti-government. The government also restricts opposition access to public television and radio, which has implications for election campaigns. The Information Minister at the time defended this position by claiming that since these media are state-run, they should prioritize the government message (Ingram 1999). Moreover, much of the private broadcast media is owned by organizations affiliated with the government (George 2006).

However, as part of its efforts to promote Malaysia as a regional hub of information technology, the government had (up to the 2008 election) an informal policy of not censoring the Internet (George 2006; Tan and Zawawi 2008). Thus, Malaysia does not completely control all forms of media. This makes it distinct from other media-controlled states such as China, Myanmar, and Singapore where there is widespread censorship of all forms of media. The decision not to censor the Internet was a political opportunity for many activists. Independent news sites such as Malaysiakini and individual bloggers such as Raja Petra Kamarudin were able to voice anti-government opinions, and a greater diversity of political

³ Blogs facilitate interaction more than static websites due to differences in content, degree of perceived intimacy and interactivity opportunities.

opinion was made public. It could have been this increased freedom of speech that led to increased participation in and support for opposition politics. With respect to the 2008 general election, I propose that having a blog has a significant positive effect on a candidate's performance. This effect may be explained via three mechanisms.

Mechanism 1: Blogs in an Agenda-Setting Model

The first, favored by political communications scholars such as Lenart (1994) and McCombs (2004), simply views the Internet and blogs as an example of a mass medium. This mechanism emphasizes media effects, such as agenda setting, on public opinion and voting behaviors. Diffusion from blogs to other mass media is an important element in this story because of bloggers' limited access to traditional mass media (i.e. newspapers and television) in Malaysia.

According to the two-step flow model of communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), information is not transferred directly from the media to the final consumer, but shapes the public agenda through an "opinion leader." Opinion leaders are people who have high levels of interest in politics and seek out media information on topics of interest, then disseminate the information to others. Although this model minimizes direct media effects in favor of interpersonal effects via the opinion leader, it does not alter the fact that the original source of information was the media.

Yeoh (2008) describes a process of "secondary access" to explain how inadvertent audiences in Malaysia come into contact with blog content. He posits that political activists and supporters who read political blogs channel the information from blogs on to their social networks by means of chain text messages on cell phones, or as excerpts copied and pasted into emails or printed and distributed as flyers (see George 2006 for examples of this two-step process in Indonesia and Tibet). As people pass along the messages they receive, the blog's message can reach both people who are initially uninterested and people who do not have direct access to the blog.

Through a process of diffusion, information that is first published by bloggers, for example, allegations of government corruption, is also picked up by the mainstream media in spite of the government's attempts to control published content. To avoid having their printing licenses revoked, traditional news media prefer to self-censor and refuse to break such stories, but bloggers self-publish and are unaffected by the PPPA. Once a blog has given sufficient coverage to a subject, print media can publish articles on the subject with less fear of being accused of starting the fire. Thus, the topic that the politician-blogger raised is now being circulated by mainstream media.

Mechanism 2: Blogs as a Social Setting

This agenda-setting mechanism, while not wrong, is inadequate on its own to explain the effects of online interaction on offline behaviors. A second way that blogs may shape the public agenda is by serving as a setting for social and political discourse and allowing the public to develop a personal relationship with the blogger. This framework emphasizes the importance of interpersonal interaction in shaping political opinion and takes into account the human factor in addition to direct effects of media.

Unlike other broadcast media, the Internet allows its audience to talk back and interact with both content creators and other content consumers, which could be an important aspect of its influence on voting behavior (Perlmutter 2008). Instead of having to write and mail a letter to the editor, blog readers are able to instantly voice and share their opinions. Repeated exchanges among readers lead to increased ties, familiarity, and solidarity, which do not typically exist among newspaper subscribers and television viewers.

Generally, blogs give readers an evolving insight into the blogger's attitudes and opinions more than a single press release (Perlmutter 2008). By releasing new content regularly, bloggers encourage return visits to their blogs and provide fodder for social discourse, increasing their influence. It follows that by providing a natural link between media exposure and interpersonal communication, blogs should increase the effects of information flow on public opinion, insofar as such effects exist.

Mechanism 3: Blogs as a Means of Collective Mobilization

The third mechanism is best understood by considering socio-political blogging in Malaysia, at least on the part of the opposition, as a means of collective mobilization. Many first-time opposition candidates in this election started their political careers as bloggers and social activists. While the Internet remains uncensored, opposition bloggers are taking this opportunity to use it to garner support and mobilize resources, for example, to raise funds for their election campaigns. They have used blogs to distribute information not otherwise available, to promote their political platforms and agendas, and to organize collective action, such as announcing rallies and other public events.

Cross-linking between blogs results in organizational structure and a hierarchy of which blogs are most popular and influential (Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane 2008). As this structure solidifies over time, blogs increase in reputation and influence. Popular bloggers may take advantage of their high status with microblogs (e.g. Twitter), which consist of much more abbreviated content (usually 140 characters or

less) that dispense with political debate in favor of brief announcements. This method of collective mobilization may be especially important in repressive states, but that is a subject for separate discussion.

To answer my research questions regarding blog effects, I propose two hypotheses. H1: A blogger is more likely to win an election than a non-blogger, all else being equal.

H1 tests the argument that having a blog has any effects on a candidate's election performance, regardless of the mechanisms by which those effects occur.

H2: The effects of having a blog on a candidate's election performance are stronger for opposition candidates than for candidates from the incumbent government.

H2 tests the underlying assumption that the extent to which the state controls the media affects the extent of blog effects. As previously stated, although Malaysia's government restricts opposition access to traditional news media, it does not restrict access to the Internet. Thus, all electoral candidates may experience blog effects, but opposition bloggers have the most to gain because the Internet provides a previously unavailable means of distributing their message to the public.

DATA/METHODS

Data Collection

This study uses publicly available data that I collected from online sources. I obtained two types of data: first, electoral information on the entire population of Parliamentary seat candidates in the March 2008 general election, and second, for those candidates who blogged, information on their blogs.

To obtain electoral information, I used the official website of the Election Commission (EC) of Malaysia (<http://www.spr.gov.my>) and an election website (<http://www.undi.info>) run by Malaysiakini, an independent news organization. The data available from both these sources are the names, races, and sexes of the candidates, their party affiliations,⁴ their constituencies (or districts), the number of registered voters at each district, voter turnout, and the number of votes received by each candidate. Additionally, the Malaysiakini website provides the political party each candidate represents and the racial demographics of each district.⁵ I compiled a list of all the candidates in November 2008.

To obtain information on candidate blogs,⁶ I used three types of search terms on Google (<http://www.google.com>).⁷ If Google returned a candidate blog in its search results,⁸ I visited it to collect

⁴ I treat independent candidates as members of the opposition in order to obtain a dichotomous variable measuring opposition membership.

⁵ There is no source cited for these descriptive statistics.

⁶ I also collected data on static candidate websites, such as profile pages on a political party's website. However, these were not included in statistical analysis as data collection was carried out post-election and there is no way to confirm these static websites existed prior to the election.

data on blog variables. I obtained the date of first post from the blog's archive. I also checked what interactive features or options each blog provided that would enable readers to participate in discussions, both with other readers and the blogger. Specifically, I noted if a blog included any of the following four items: the blogger's email address, a commenting tool, a bulletin board (or forum) for discussion, and/or a link to the blogger's social networking profile (such as Facebook). Finally, I counted the number of comments posted to the blog in the first two weeks of its inception and the final two weeks immediately preceding the election on March 8th, 2008.⁹ I conducted these searches and completed data collection on the blogs in December 2008.¹⁰ It is possible, although unlikely, that some blogs were discontinued following the election, resulting in a non-random sample for this analysis. However, given the increase in the total number of blogs post-election, it would seem that blogging is seen as a sound political strategy, thus reducing the likelihood that a politician would stop blogging.

Variables

I used maximum likelihood estimates of logistic regression models to predict electoral outcomes, using robust standard errors to correct for potential non-independence within districts (Long and Freese 2006). My dependent variable is whether or not a candidate won a Parliamentary seat in the election (won = 1). I tested my argument that having a blog increases a candidate's likelihood of being elected, net of other factors. As such, my independent variable of interest is whether or not a candidate blogged prior to the election (blogged = 1). To test the hypothesis that blog effects are stronger for the opposition, I interacted my independent variables with whether or not a candidate is a member of the opposition (opposition = 1).

In addition to opposition membership, I also controlled for incumbency¹¹ and number of opponents. Political scientists have long recognized that incumbency is an important predictor of electoral success in the two-party system practiced in the United States at both federal and state levels (Glantz, Abramowitz, and Burkart 1976; Caldeira and Patterson 1982). More recent work indicates that this finding also applies to the multi-party system in Britain (Katz and King 1999), on which Malaysia's political system is based. In such a system, I also expect a candidate's likelihood of winning to decrease as the number of

⁷ Details of the search terms and methods are available upon request.

⁸ All the candidate blogs used in this study were listed in Google's top ten results based on search term, indicating Google ranked them higher than other websites belonging to people with the same names.

⁹ Data collection at these two time points may not capture accurately patterns of blogger and reader activity over time. It is possible, for example, that losing candidates may have stopped blogging before the campaign period. Nonetheless, their blogs, however short-lived or early, may already have had an effect on the candidate's election prospects.

¹⁰ I intended to crosscheck my findings using the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>) search engine. This would have enabled me to locate blogs that might have existed during the election campaign and were subsequently removed. Unfortunately the Internet Archive has disabled its keyword search, so I cannot be certain that I located every possible blog. Nonetheless, I compiled a list of all candidate blogs from available search results and excluded from analysis those that were created post-election.

¹¹ Data on candidate campaign expenditure were unfortunately not available.

opponents faced increases. Quite simply, the more competitors there are, the lower any candidate's probability of winning.

After controlling for the candidate's sex and race, I further constructed a dichotomous variable to indicate the relationship between a candidate's race and the dominant race of the district in which he or she is standing for election. This variable takes the value of 0 if the candidate's race is not the dominant race (e.g. if a Malay is running a predominantly Chinese district), and 1 otherwise. Finally, I controlled for the effects of running against at least one other candidate who blogs.

Complete data on these variables were collected for all 480 candidates in 222 districts. The majority of the electoral races were two candidate races, but there were 23 races involving three candidates, seven races involving four candidates, and two races involving five candidates. Seven races were uncontested, and one candidate withdrew at the last minute, leading to an eighth uncontested race. I excluded from analysis these nine candidates who received no reported votes from their respective districts, resulting in a final sample of 471 candidates from 214 districts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

[Table 1 here]

Table 1 describes the means of the political and demographic variables used in the analysis. The racial composition of both candidates and elected officials is an approximate representation of the demographics of the population. The breakdown of elected officials by race (not shown) is 57% Malay, 25% Chinese, and 7% Indian, compared to the population distribution, which is approximately 60% Malay, 25% Chinese, and 8% Indian.

Of the 125 incumbent MPs standing for re-election, only 15 were members of the opposition coalition.¹² Within the opposition coalition, the DAP was the most successful party, winning 60% of seats it contested, despite fielding the fewest candidates (47). PKR had the lowest percentage of seats won, at 32%, despite fielding the most candidates (97). PAS won 35% of the 66 seats it contested. In the government coalition, UMNO dominated the election, winning 70% of the 115 seats it contested. MCA and MIC won 38% of 40 seats contested and 33% of 9 seats contested, respectively.

[Table 2 here]

I turn now to characteristics of bloggers, with reference to Table 2. Fifty-seven of the candidates had created blogs prior to the election on March 8th, 2008. Over a quarter of the bloggers were

¹² The Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient between opposition membership and incumbency is -0.51 ($p < .01$). This is not such a strong correlation that there is cause for concern that the model containing both variables has problems with collinearity.

incumbents, and more than two thirds of them won a Parliamentary seat in the election. The newest blogger started blogging only three days before the election, while the earliest blog had been created in June 2002. Consistent with my expectations, the majority of the blogs (77%) belonged to opposition candidates. DAP candidates contributed 20 blogs (35%), while 18 PKR candidates maintained blogs (32%). PAS candidates added a further 6 blogs (11%). While two independent candidates had blogs, few candidates from the minor parties in the government coalition had blogs. All 11 blogs from the BN came from the three race-based political parties, UMNO (2), MCA (8), and MIC (1). Fifty-three electoral races featured at least one candidate who had a blog, including four races where both candidates were bloggers.

Do Candidate Blogs Affect Electoral Chances?

[Table 3 here]

Logistic regression analysis with robust standard errors indicates that blogs have a significant positive effect on the likelihood of winning an election, with these effects increased for opposition bloggers. These findings are summarized in Table 3.¹³ The baseline model containing only control variables (Model 1) reveals the expected significant effects of incumbency, opposition membership, and competition on electoral outcomes. All else being equal, incumbents are 4.66 (i.e. $\exp(1.54)$) times more likely to be elected than non-incumbents. Conversely, an opposition member is slightly less than half as likely to be elected as a member of the ruling coalition (a factor of 0.46 i.e. $\exp(-0.77)$). Also, having more than one opponent significantly reduces a candidate's odds of winning. Candidates who face two, three, and four opponents have their odds of winning reduced by 28%, 49%, and 67% respectively, compared to candidates who face only one opponent.¹⁴

When blogs are included in the analysis, the resulting model (Model 2) lends credence to H1. Bloggers are five times as likely to win an election compared to non-bloggers, *ceteris paribus*. It is worth noting that a Wald test indicates this effect is not significantly different from the traditionally emphasized effects of incumbency ($\chi^2 = 0.15$, d.f. = 1, $p = 0.70$). This implies that the presence of a blog is as important a predictor of electoral success as incumbency. Moreover, running against a blogger (as opposed to a non-blogger) significantly reduces a candidate's odds of winning by 26%, regardless of the candidate's own blogging status and party membership. Increased competition continues to be a

¹³ I also generated separate models with district-level variables such as number of registered voters, voter turnout, and dominant race (in the district). All these variables were shown to have non-significant effects. These results are available upon request.

¹⁴ As alluded to earlier (in footnote 2), more discussion may be warranted on the non-significance of the effects of a candidate's race when controlling for relationship between the race of the candidate and the majority of voters in the district. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

significant threat to a candidate's chance of winning. For example, a second opponent reduces a candidate's odds of winning by 30% when compared to having only one opponent.

H2 contends that the positive effect of having a blog is stronger for opposition candidates than it is for government candidates. The inclusion of an interaction variable in Model 3 finds support for this hypothesis. All else being equal, opposition bloggers are almost eight times as likely to win an election as opposition non-bloggers (i.e. $\exp(2.71-0.64)$). However, for ruling party candidates, there is no significant advantage in having a blog versus not having one, as seen by the non-significant coefficient of -0.64 ($\chi^2 = 0.74$, d.f. = 1, $p = 0.39$). The results of this interaction can be seen more clearly in the predicted probabilities of winning an election (Table 4). Holding all other variables in Model 3 at their means, opposition bloggers are expected to win 75% of the time, while opposition non-bloggers can only be expected to win 27% of the time.

[Table 4 here]

In sum, there is compelling evidence for the argument that blogs do matter, and that they are especially crucial for Malaysia's opposition. While these results are promising, they are not infallible. In any social setting, there are variables that cannot be accounted for. In the case of Malaysia's general election, several events coalesced around the election whose effects are hard to separate. For example, recent street protests against racial policies, the return of Anwar Ibrahim to electoral eligibility, and economic turmoil were all campaign issues.

Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that blogs were important for electoral success. I turn now to a discussion of the possible mechanisms behind blog effects in the context of media control as practiced in Malaysia. I have proposed three mechanisms by which blogs affect election outcomes: as an alternative information source, as a community setting for interaction and socio-political discussion, and as a means of social mobilization. The small sample of blogs ($N=57$) does not allow me to make strong statistical claims regarding these mechanisms, hence the discussion that follows is largely qualitative.

How Do Candidate Blogs Affect Electoral Chances?

Mechanism 1: Blogs in an Agenda-Setting Model. It may be that political blogs derive their strength from acting as an alternative information source in a media-controlled society. Opposition bloggers are often willing to break news stories that traditional media would avoid. Jeff Ooi, a first-time candidate who won his seat by a margin of 35% of the vote share over his nearest competitor, makes frequent references to the "little birds" who provide him with news, and, on occasion, correct his posts.

Soon after my blog: Election by December? went up, a Little Bird from the mainstream media SMS-ed to advise me that the poll is likely to be on in March, not December. [...] That newsroom Little Bird may be reading tea=leaf [sic] correctly, and I often respect his views.

Posted on October 11, 2007

URL: http://www.jeffooi.com/2007/10/election_after_december.php

Once a blogger breaks a big story, other bloggers (political or otherwise) distribute it by linking to it, and it may become a big enough item that traditional media is pressured into publishing what people are already talking about. More often than not, grassroots publishing is good enough for the bloggers, many of whom uploaded videos of their speeches and campaign activities on their blogs since government-owned broadcasting companies were denying them television airtime.

In some cases when the press has published a news story, blogs are used to present a personal point of view. In May 2007, a male MP made a sexist reference to a leak in the Parliament building, "Mana ada bocor? Batu Gajah pun bocor tiap-tiap bulan juga. (Where is the leak? The Batu Gajah MP [who is a woman] leaks every month too.)" (The Star, May 16, 2007). An article published by The Star, one of Malaysia's English mainstream dailies owned by the MCA, noted that the "MP even denied making such statements saying that the media had blown it out of proportion" (The Star, May 16, 2007). The Batu Gajah MP in question, Fong Po Kuan, wrote on her blog a week later:

While I was driving to Kuala Kangsar, a call came in. [...] The caller then said, "I am sorry ..."
Is a she. [sic] A lady who was so outrage [sic] over the sexist remarks made by the two BN MPs.
She said that the two should apologise to me.
Her main concern is the kind of message which will be sent to school children who are studying in co-ed school. The message that it is alright to say such sexist remarks ie joke about the natural cycle of woman given by God. How would the girls feel if the boys starting to joke about the girls "bocor" [leak] in school? She added, would the female teacher reprimand the boy if he makes such a remark against her?
She also told me that she called Shahrizat [Minister of Women, Family and Community Development] and Nazri's [Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of parliamentary affairs] office to express similar worries to both of them. She reminded me to take this matter to Parliament when the House resumes its sitting.
Her call was not the first I received which tendered apology to me. Earlier, a man also called. I am still feeling touched by their gestures.
Posted on May 23, 2007
URL: <http://pokuan.blogspot.com/2007/05/23/138/>

In these examples, blogs are not only an alternative source of information, but they also personalize and humanize the story, making their content more persuasive (Perlmutter 2008).

Mechanism 2: Blogs as a Social Setting. It is within this context of personal communication, seemingly direct and intimate, that interaction among bloggers and blog readers may occur. Because it is typically the candidate blogging and not a media or public relations representative, readers may feel a personal connection to the blogger and want to respond. Indeed, almost all the bloggers included at least one way for readers to interact with them, as shown in Table 5.

[Table 5 here]

Comments were by far the most popular means of inviting participation from readers, with 53 blogs (93%) including a commenting option attached to each blog post. Dedicated bulletin boards were the least common interactive feature, with only four blogs (7%) including them. This is easily explained by the fact that bulletin boards often require separate servers and considerably more technical expertise to set up. In general, all but three blogs had at least one interactive feature, and one blog utilized all four – email, comments, a bulletin board, and a link to a social networking profile.

The number of comments generally increased with the age of the blog. Many of these comments were simply expressions of support and encouragement for a particular candidate. However, there are readers who go beyond cheerleading and engage in socio-political discourse on these blogs. Comments on a single post can reach the hundreds if the topic is particularly scandalous or controversial, as in the case of the V.K. Lingam video clip.¹⁵ Bloggers who participate in these discussions are likely to increase their salience and status among blog readers and improve their chances of being elected.

Mechanism 3: Blogs as a Means of Collective Mobilization. Another way in which blogs may play a social role is in terms of recruitment or mobilization, especially during the election campaign. The ongoing interaction on a blog could have made the requests of the blogger seem more appealing or persuasive to the reader. Numerous opposition bloggers solicited and received campaign donations on their blogs. Many also used their blogs to let readers know where and when major campaigning events were being held, which was especially vital for the opposition whose events were not widely publicized in newspapers. A comment on Tony Pua's blog reads:

haiyoh, tonight rained so heavily Tony. I turned up to see you speak but then the rain stopped you. Too bad. Good of you to provide information of when your ceramah [rally] is. BN's candidate don't [sic] even update her website. Don't even know when is her ceramah... and don't care lar actually.

Posted on March 6, 2008

URL: <http://tonypua.blogspot.com/2008/03/ceramah-thursday-ss2-chow-yang-pasar.html>

Besides illustrating how readers can interact with a blogger, this comment has at least two other implications. First, as this paper has demonstrated, opposition bloggers give themselves an advantage by providing information on their blogs, making themselves more personable, providing options for readers to interact with them, and mobilizing supporters. Second, it hints at blogging strategies that further distinguish opposition bloggers from non-opposition bloggers. At the time of the election, microblogging had not yet gained momentum, but one can imagine how that technology might have been used to spread

¹⁵ This video clip showed a lawyer, V.K. Lingam, on the phone with a judge, Ahmad Fairuz Abdul Halim, allegedly discussing the latter's influenced appointment as Chief Justice of the Federal Court. It was first released on YouTube in September 2007 and became a popular blog topic.

information about events along the lines of smart mobs and rally the masses. (For more information on smart mobs, see Rheingold 2003).

Further Research Opportunities

These examples illustrate how blogs can play important social roles in a political process. Unfortunately, data limitations restricted my investigation into which mechanisms matter most. More detailed studies of blog content, form, and readership would provide greater purchase on these mechanisms. I suggest that a useful follow-up to this study would be a similar statistical analysis using data from the next general election in Malaysia, which will occur not later than 2013. First, it would test whether the effects described in this paper were a flash in the pan or an accurate depiction of the strength of blog effects over time. Second, it would test whether these positive blog effects continue to be significant for only opposition candidates.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have highlighted the political advantage that Malaysian electoral candidates, particularly members of the opposition, gain by simply having a blog. I have also suggested that the mechanisms driving this effect are not just the result of a more efficient communications medium that enables a wide distribution of information at a low cost. Instead, I proposed several social processes that could ultimately prove to be important in understanding how blogs matter, especially in media-controlling or repressive states.

This study has emphasized Malaysian politics in light of the delicate balance that currently exists between censorship of traditional media and the relative freedom of the Internet, but the concepts raised and discussed are globally applicable. Empirical studies of blog effects in both advanced and emerging democracies, with and without state control of the media, would have implications for political policy and strategy. Trans-national comparisons of the effects of political blogs could reveal similarities that support a world systems theory of resource distribution or differences that indicate cross-cultural differences persist in online interactions.

The Internet's reach is much broader than politics and its means much more diverse than blogs. Its social effects can be seen in a variety of settings ranging from social networking websites that are rewriting the rules of privacy to Creative Commons licenses that are reshaping sharing and copyright. Social scientists have their pick of these issues and would do well to embark on a more systematic research agenda of this ubiquitous social medium.

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FIGURES

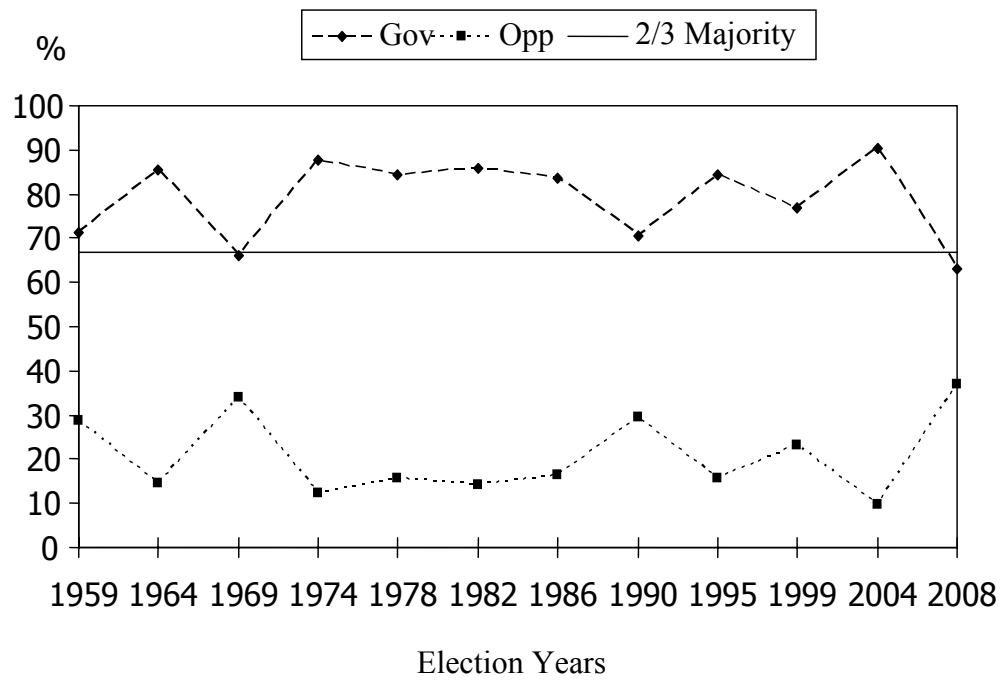


Figure-1. Historical trends of electoral outcomes in Malaysia, 1959-2008.

TABLES

Table-1. Descriptive Statistics for All Variables Used in Analysis of Blog Effects on Election Outcomes

Variables	Descriptive Statistics		
	Mean	S.D.	Range
Dependent Variable			
Won	.45		
Explanatory Variable			
Has a blog	.12		
Control Variables			
Incumbent	.27		
Opposition member	.55		
At least one opponent has a blog	.15		
Male	.91		
Race:			
Malay	.55		
Chinese	.26		
Indian	.05		
Other	.14		
Candidate race is district race	.64		
Number of opponents:			
One	.77		
Two	.15		
Three	.06		
Four	.02		
Other Variables of Interest			
Candidate vote share (%)	44.11	18.83	.47 - 91.27
Registered voters by district	49068	19230	6608 - 112224
Voter turnout (%) by district	74.73	6.47	49.65 - 87.54
Dominant race by district			
Malay	.57		
Chinese	.20		
Indian	.00		
Other	.23		

Data sources: Election Commission of Malaysia, Malaysiakini, and Google, Dec. 2008
(N = 471)

Table-2. Comparison of Candidates With and Without Blogs

	With Blogs (%) ¹		Without Blogs (%) ¹	
N	57		414	
Characteristics				
Male	45	(79)	383	(93)
Race				
Malay	19	(33)	241	(58)
Chinese	31	(55)	92	(22)
Indian	6	(10)	18	(5)
Other	1	(2)	63	(15)
Political affiliation				
Government coalition (BN) ²				
UMNO	2	(4)	113	(27)
MCA	8	(14)	32	(8)
MIC	1	(2)	8	(2)
Opposition coalition (PR)				
DAP	20	(35)	27	(19)
PKR	18	(32)	79	(7)
PAS	6	(10)	60	(14)
Independent	2	(4)	45	(11)
Incumbent	16	(28)	109	(26)
Won in the election	39	(68)	175	(42)

Data sources: Election Commission of Malaysia, Malaysiakini, and Google, Dec. 2008

¹Percentages are calculated with respect to each column's N, e.g. 45 out of 57 bloggers are male (79%). Government coalition percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

²Only BN component parties whose candidates have blogs are included in the table.

Table-3. MLEs of Coefficients from the Logistic Regression of Election Win on Independent Variables

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Control Variables			
Incumbent	1.54**	1.43**	1.47**
Opposition member	-0.77*	-1.11**	-1.24**
At least one opponent has a blog	-1.34**	-1.35**	-1.24**
Male	-0.27	-0.03	-0.01
Race:			
(Malay = reference)			
Chinese	0.11	-0.21	-0.22
Indian	0.51	0.19	0.07
Other	-0.22	-0.22	-0.29
Candidate race is district dominant race	0.07	-0.03	-0.17
Number of opponents:			
(One = reference)			
Two	-0.33*	-0.36**	-0.42**
Three	-0.67**	-0.72**	-0.80**
Four	-1.10**	-0.80**	-0.77**
Explanatory Variable			
Has a blog		1.62**	-0.64
Interaction			
Has a blog * Opposition member			2.71**
Intercept	0.30	0.26	0.40
Likelihood χ^2 (compared to null model)	856.80**	155.47**	157.55**
Degrees of freedom	11	12	13
Incremental χ^2		17.30**	10.51**
BIC	-2285.69	-2301.24	-2304.23

Data sources: Election Commission of Malaysia, Malaysiakini, and Google, Dec. 2008
(N = 471)

Note: All models use robust standard errors to correct for potential clustering effects within electoral districts.

* p<.05, ** p<.01 (two-tailed test)

Table-4. Predicted Probabilities of Winning an Election by Candidate Attributes

Candidate attributes	Win	95% CI
Opposition blogger	.75	(.63, .87)
Opposition non-blogger	.27	(.21, .36)
Government blogger	.41	(.14, .75)
Government non-blogger	.57	(.48, .65)

Data sources: Election Commission of Malaysia, Malaysiakini, and Google, Dec. 2008
(N = 471)

Note: Predicted probabilities are from Model 3 in Table 3, containing interaction between opposition status and having a blog. All other variables are set to their means.

Table-5. Characteristics of Blogs Belonging to Electoral Candidates

Blog Characteristics	Descriptive Statistics		
	Mean	S.D.	Range
Interactive features:			
Blogger's email	.61		
Comments	.93		
Bulletin board/Forum	.07		
Social networking profile	.18		
Interactivity index	1.79	.84	0 - 4
Blog age at election (in weeks)	58.56	67.94	.43 - 297.71
Comments during:			
Two-week campaign period ¹	135.81	567.86	0 - 4115
Two-week inception period ²	19.07	82.26	0 - 544
Comments differential ³	130.60	536.23	-87 - 3571

Data sources: Election Commission of Malaysia, Malaysiakini, and Google, Dec. 2008

(N = 57)

¹N = 53: four blogs disabled commenting

²N = 45: eight blogs were created less than two weeks before the start of the election campaign

³N = 45