

An exploration of Political Blogging in Greece

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Abstract. 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 of public debate, with knock-on consequences for the media and for politics. In Greece where the ratio of internet users is relatively small there is however an expanding portion of bloggers who comment regularly and have the power to a certain degree and in certain circumstances to trigger off political movements. Based on the relative literature, the paper locates Greek political blogs and provides indicators of their popularity and interconnections. As a case study, the paper considers the recent debate that took place on the Web relatively to the election of PASOK's new President. Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) (one of the two major parties in Greece) was defeated on the national election of September 16 2007, and this defeat brought up a major leadership crisis. Election for a new leader was held on November 11 2007. The paper examines the posts of blogs that were pros or cons the two main candidates for presidency for the period from September 16 to November 13. Using social networking theory and statistical analysis, it presents and measures blogs' connectivity, conversational patterns and variations over time. It examines the skewdeness of incoming blog links and finds the core blog groups that serve as focal points for political bloggers. The paper adds to the study of political blogs by reporting patterns of blogging and making one of the few contributions to the study of political blogging in Greece.

Keywords: blogs, Greece, political blogs, PASOK, links distribution, skewedness, connectivity, patterns, social networking, closeness, focal points, core groups, blog authority

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Introduction

Drezner and Farrell (2004, p. 5) defined weblogs 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”. Blogs can take a number of forms and tend to have a number of characteristics in common, such as: being set up to display blog postings in reverse-chronological order or with their content arranged by subject; each entry has a timestamp so that the reader knows when it was posted; being updated regularly with new material; providing a personal viewpoint; give their readers an opportunity to comment on blog postings, or to contact the author directly (Pedley, 2005).

Blogs help self-expression and self-empowerment (Blood, 2002). In the business world, blogs are considered as environments for knowledge sharing (Festa, 2003), a “magic” formula for corporate communication (Jüch and Stobbe, 2005), a potential for future profit (Lu and Hsiao, 2007) and a new way to reach potential customers (Hsu and Lin, 2008). Librarian blogs serve as new information channels both for the library and information science community and for the general public (Bar-Ilan, 2007). In education, blogs can help students to share their learning experiences, express their thoughts to the instructor (Maag, 2005) and enhance their studies (Kim et al., in press). Journalists regard blogs as alternative sources of news and public opinion (Lasica, 2001). In the political context, blogs as possessing a “social-transformative, democratizing potential” claimed Herring et al. (2004) and Walker (2007) called blogs “a soapbox” and highlighted their attractiveness for voicing political messages.

Nowadays, blogging tools provide enhanced features for between-blog interactivity; thus promoting the creation of social networks among bloggers (Du and Wagner, 2006). Williams & Jacobs (2004) recognized interactivity as the key to the success of social network systems such as blogs. Interactivity between blogs take two forms. The first form is that of a “blogroll” that many bloggers maintain. It is a list of blogs that bloggers frequently read or especially admire. The second form, is achieved by expressing their thoughts by posting comments to entries (Drezner and Farrell, 2004; Mishne & Gance, 2006). Posts commenting on posts are a key form of information exchange in the blogosphere. Drezner and Farrell (2004) highlighted the fact that links and page views are the currency of the blogosphere.

Forty percent of the Greek population uses Internet. Percentages are higher among young people and men. Search for information, sending emails, downloading, playing games, chatting, and online buying are the reasons for using internet. Using a sample of 1367 bloggers (Karampasis, 2007, <http://ereuna.wordpress.com/>), found out that blogging started to expand during 2002-2003 in Greece. There exist 9510 blogs written in Greek, but only 4639 of them are active. The average Greek blogger is around 30, with college education. S(he) uses DSL connection. Blogs receive less than 100 visits daily, while they do not have any advertisements and they discuss multiple subjects. Bloggers are 64% male. 65% of the bloggers live in Athens (53.1%) and Thessaloniki (12.4%). Eleven percent is residents of abroad. Motives for blogging are keeping a diary, experimenting, taking action while being anonymous,

creation of a community. Personal interests, art and culture, and entertainment are the main subjects throughout Greek blogs. News and politics blogs are rarer. Thirty eight percent of the bloggers consider blogging to be a form of journalism, while 51% does not.

The paper aims to describe basic characteristics of political blogging in Greece using at large their quantitative properties. It examines the posts of blogs that were pros or cons the two main candidates of the election for presidency of Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) for the period from September 16 to November 13. Blogs connectivity, closeness, variations over time and skewedness of the blog incoming links distribution are the main characteristics of this investigation.

Political Blogging

Blogs have been seen a good way of circulating new ideas (Baker and Green, 2005) and featured in articles regarding their political activism and influence (Su et al., 2005). “The interest within the political sphere on bloggers is that they are a potential alternative to the traditional media as gatekeepers of information and news” mentioned Pedley (2005, p.295). Johnson and Kaye (2004) claimed that weblogs were viewed, by web users, as a credible source which provided depth and thoughtful analysis and based on this Jackson (2006: p.295) suggest that “during an election campaign a weblog is a mean for a party to promulgate its policies through a virtual network of political bloggers”. Talking more generally, Trammell et al. (2006) noted that blogs are a popular tool for politicians to campaign and reach out to their constituency and Graf and Darr(2004) that blogs appear to play an increasingly important role as a forum of public debate, with knock-on consequences for the media and for politics.

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. Political blogs have exposed lapses in mainstream media coverage, chastened reporters with the fear of an angry online response to sensitive stories, and at times set the media agenda. Political blogs have also been influential in raising money for political candidates and pushing select races into the national spotlight”. Investigating political blogs for campaigns, Garrett (2004) [in Trammell et al (2006)] mentioned that bloggers write posts in a personal voice, update the blogs several times a day, encourage and moderate comments, offer hyperlinks to internal and external sources, and other blogs, and call the readers into action. As far as, visitors of political blogs in USA, is concerned, Bloom (2003) mentioned that a high percentage are political reporters, politicians and policy makers: key opinion formers. Taking this in to consideration Jackson (2006, p.296) mentioned: “This can give political bloggers a disproportionate influence, based on the type of blog visitor, and not just the number of blog visitors. Therefore, 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”. It was, Drezner and Farrell (2004) who found out that even though there are over a million bloggers, posting thousands of new items daily, the median blogger has almost no political influence as measured by traffic or hyperlinks and they highlighted “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” (p. 4).

The most reliable way to gain traffic to a blog is through a link on another weblog (Blood, 2002). In that way “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”(Drezner and Farrell, 2004 p.13). Less prominent bloggers contact one of the large ‘focal point’ blogs, to publicize their post when they have an interesting piece of information or point of view that is relevant to a political controversy. On the one hand this lead the readers to ‘focal point’ blogs, as they know that they will find links to many interesting stories, and on the other hand bloggers to send posts to focal point blogs as they know that they are likely to find more readers. Based on this and the lognormal distribution of weblogs, in a given a political issue, the media only needs to look at the top blogs to obtain a “summary statistic” about the distribution of opinions (Drezner and Farrell). In this vein Adamic and Glance (2005, p.2) noted: “Because of bloggers’ ability to identify and frame breaking news, many mainstream media sources keep a close eye on the best known political blogs”.

Methodology

The paper aims to describe basic characteristics of political blogging in Greece using at large their quantitative properties. It uses technorati.com to track Greek political blogs and provide indicators of their popularity and interconnections. As a case study, the paper considers the recent debate that took place on the Web relatively to the election of PASOK’s new President. Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) (one of the two major parties in Greece), under Georgos Papandreou’s leadership, was defeated on the national election of September 16 2007, and this defeat brought up a major leadership crisis. Election for a new leader was held on November 11 2007. The paper examines the posts of blogs that were pros or cons the two main candidates for presidency for the period from September 16 to November 13. Technorati.com search engine is used to search for all blog posts that link to the sites or blogs of the two main candidates for presidency of PASOK, G. Papandreou and E. Venizelos, for the period 16/9 – 13/11/2007. It presents and measures blogs’ connectivity, conversational patterns and variations over time. The paper adds to the study of political blogs by reporting patterns of blogging and making one of the few contributions to the study of political blogging in Greece. The study uses Social Networking theory to present and study blogs. Blogs connectivity, closeness and variations over time are the main characteristics of this investigation. In addition, the paper discusses skewedness of the blog incoming links distribution and how this is affecting the formation of central or core blog groups, which serve as “focal point” blogs (Drezner and Farrell, 2004).

Multidimensional scaling and Hierarchical Cluster Analysis are used to explore blog patterns regarding connectivity. Also, the paper uses measures of closeness of core groups in order to examine whether blog groups political affiliation is reflected to blogs interconnections.

Findings

Through the search via technorati.com, 142 blogs were found. Figure 1 presents the variations over time for blog posts linking to Papandreou’s (the former,

and current, president of the party) site/blog. Figure 2 presents the variations over time for blog posts linking to Venizelos' site/blog. Posts linking to Papandreou are more uniformly distributed. However, the distribution of blog posts linking to Venizelos is more interesting. The discussion about the new contender attracted more attention from bloggers and Venizelos was criticised and discussed widely. This is the reason that the blog posts present a higher density in the left side of their distribution, reflecting the discussion at the beginning of the re-election period.

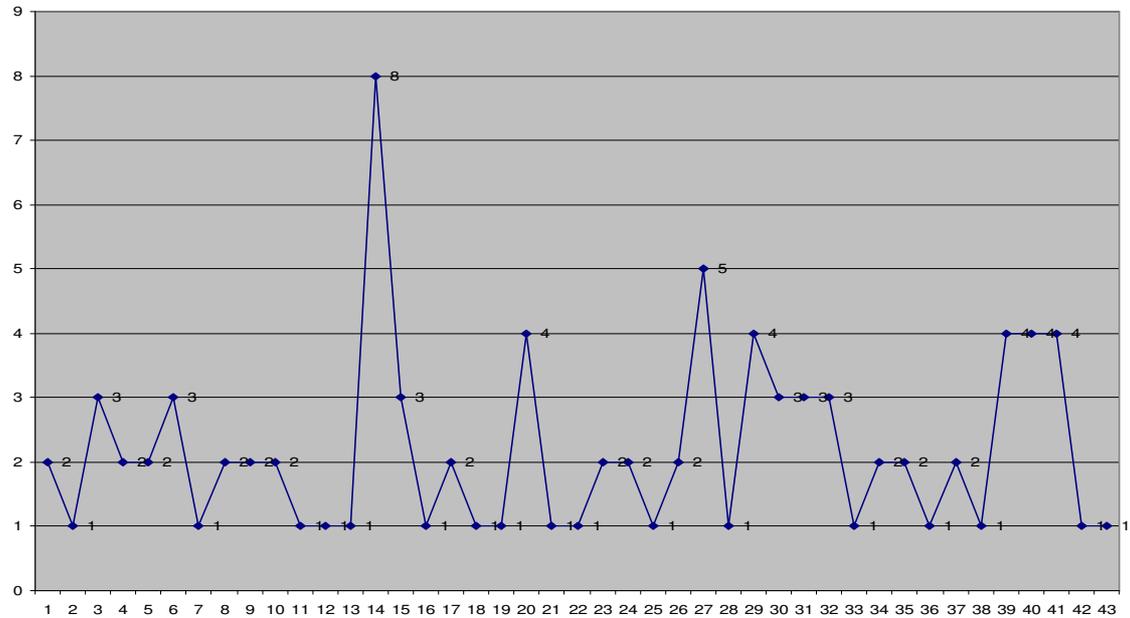


Figure 1. Variations over time for blog posts linking to Papandreou site/blog.

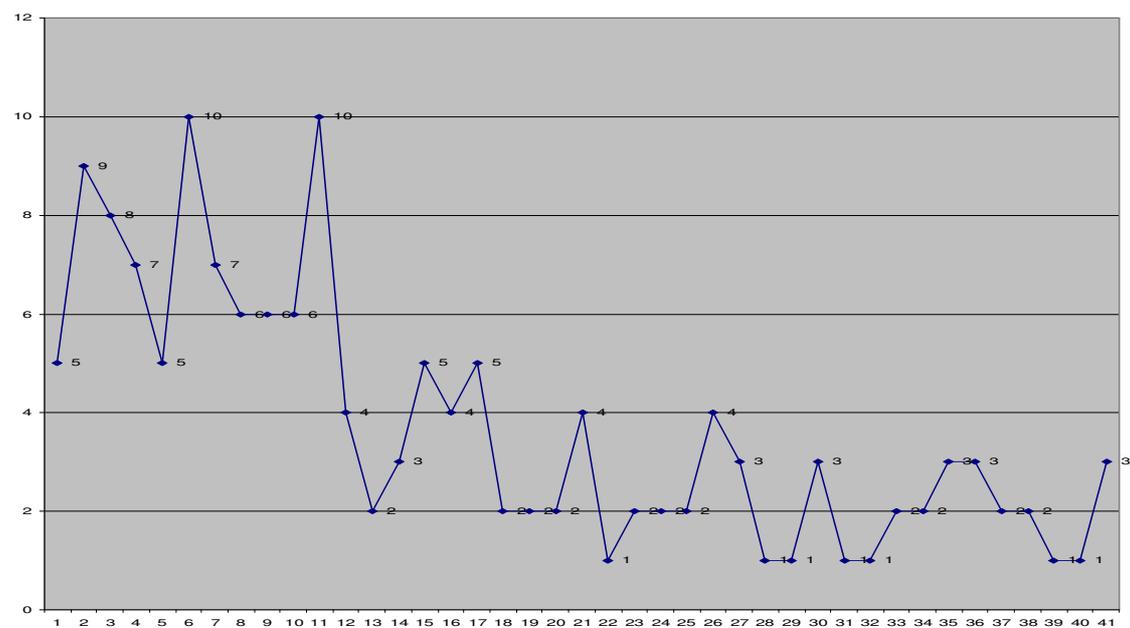


Figure 2. Variations over time for blog posts linking to Venizelos site/blog.

In order to explore the connectivity patterns of political blogs, the paper uses the social networking theory. The next step involves the presentation of the 142 blogs using a graph. UCINET 6.0 for Windows is used for this presentation. Figure 3 presents the interconnections of the 142 blogs. 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”. Also they 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 blogs cores where the interesting and informational discussion is taking place. This property can be used to limit the analysis only to these blogs, excluding in this way other blogs which might be considered to have limited interconnections with other blogs or they are isolated. This property is a consequence of the skewed distribution of links, also mentioned by Drezner and Farrell (2004); only few blogs have a very big number of incoming links while the rest, the majority of blogs, have only a small number of incoming links.

To test whether this hypothesis holds for political blogging in Greece, this paper examines the distribution of incoming links to the 142 blogs of the study. To measure incoming links for a blog, the paper calculates the percentage of the 142 blogs that link to it. For example, a percentage of 10% for a specific blog means that nearly 14 out of 142 blogs link to it. Figure 3 presents the histogram of incoming links for the 142 blogs. Most of the blogs have a very small number of incoming links, while only a few blogs have a big number of incoming links. In any case, the percentage of incoming links does not exceed 17%. Blogs have a very low degree of interconnectivity and this is due mainly to the fact that most blogs are constructed in an “amateur” fashion or they were built just for campaigning the two main candidates. Figure 4 presents similar findings. It presents blog ranks according to incoming links (1 being the highest linked blog) versus the percentage of incoming links. From both Figure 3 and Figure 4 it is obvious that there exist a skewed distribution, which implies that only a few blogs gather the highest number of incoming links. This finding provides evidence that Drezner and Farrell’s (2004) argument about the skewedness of incoming links distribution holds true.

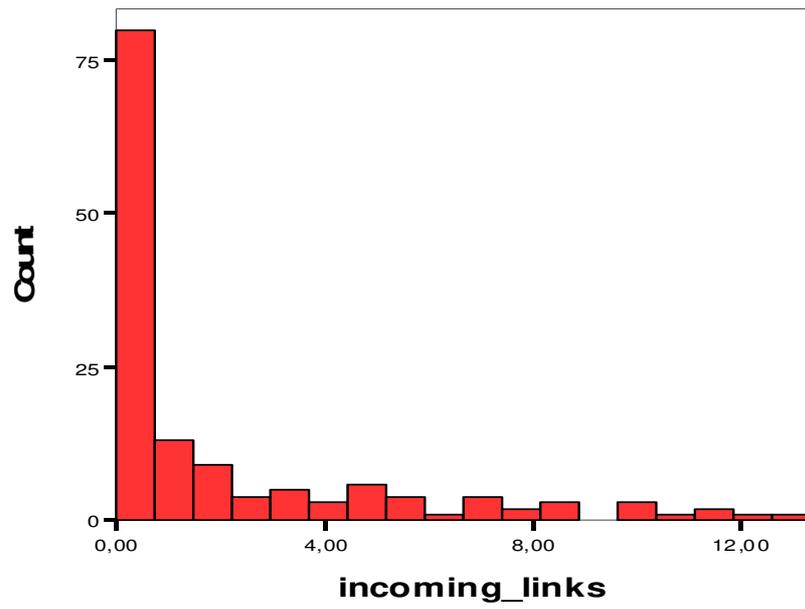


Figure 3. Histogram of percentages of incoming links for the 142 blogs.

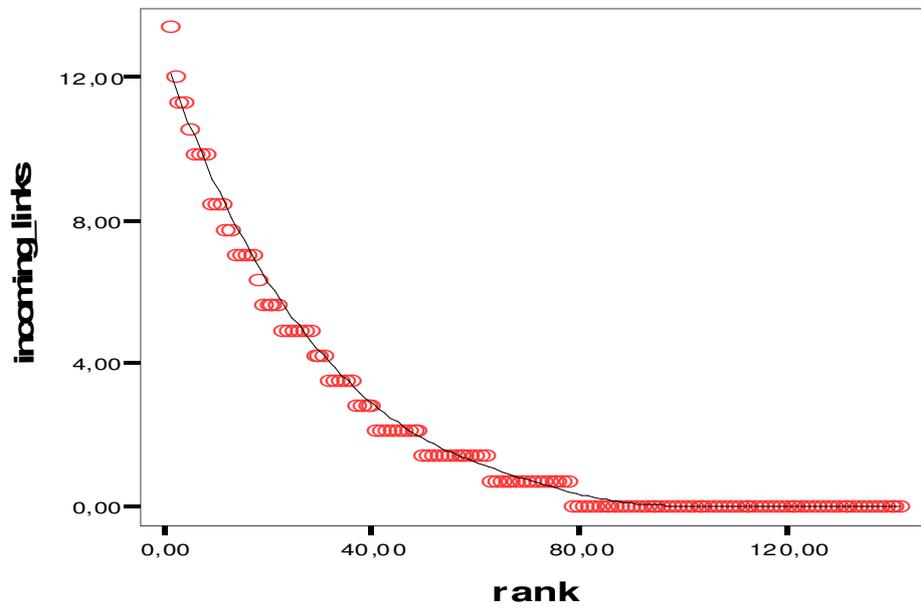


Figure 4. Ranks of the 142 blogs vs percentages of incoming links (% out of 142).

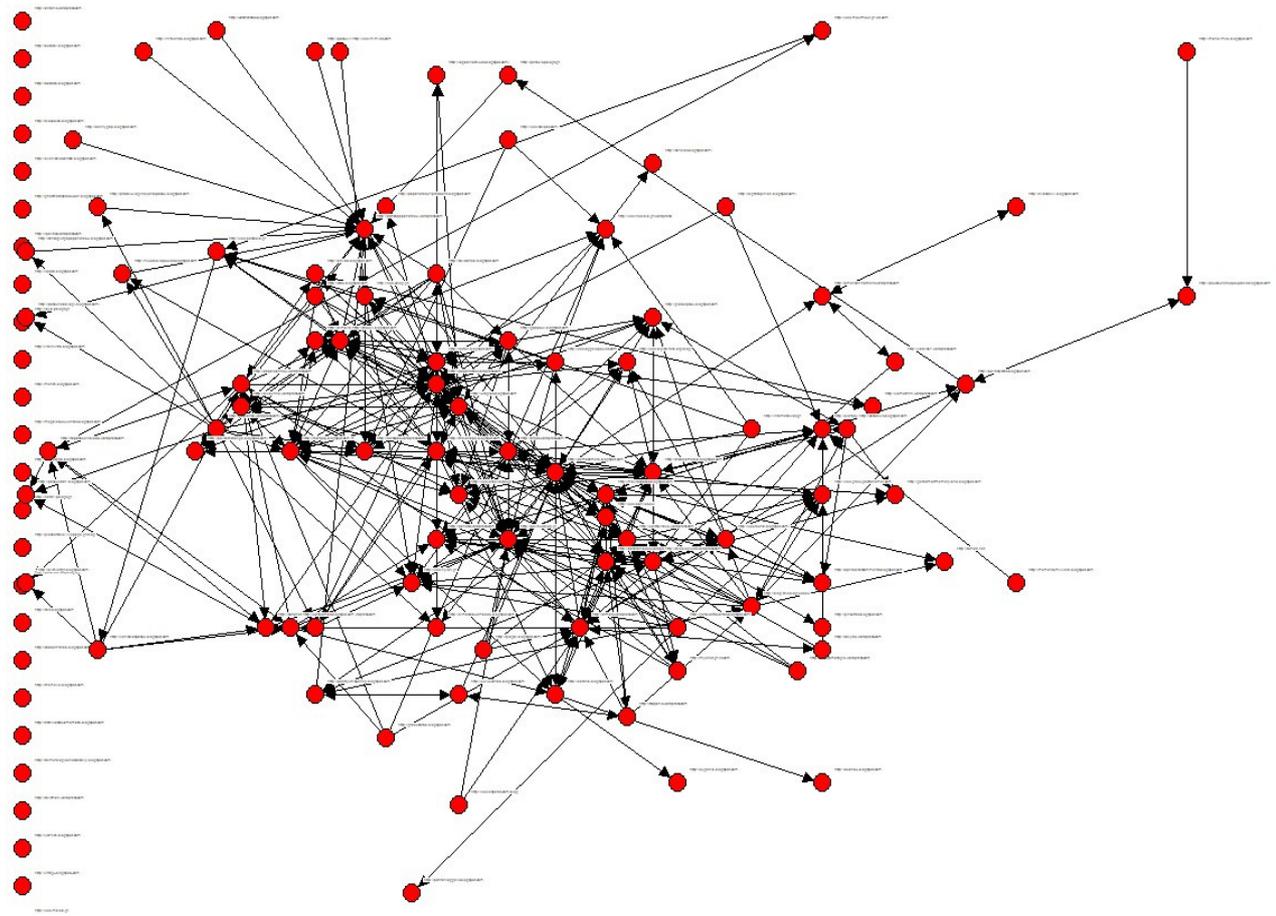


Figure 5. Blogs interconnections according to incoming links from blog rolls.

The next step involves the construction of a blog interconnection graph. It is a directed graph where blogs are noted as nodes and incoming links as directed arrows (Figure 5). One can notice that there exist a central area of the graph where it seems that two core networks are formed, which they gather most of the incoming links. To describe this situation explicitly, statistical analysis using Multidimensional Scaling (Stress=0.03039), followed by Hierarchical Cluster Analysis is performed. It results to the formation of three groups (clusters) of blogs regarding incoming links. These groups of blogs are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Blog groups description.

	Affiliation	Mean percentage of incoming links
Group 1 (6 blogs)	Pro Papandreou	10%
Group 2 (17 blogs)	Non political, political but with no PASOK affiliation, critical to both candidates and especially to Venizelos	7%
Group 3 (119 blogs)	All the rest of the blogs	1%

From Table 1 it is clear that Group 1 contains blogs, which are pro Papandreou. Their administrator is mainly a member of PASOK. The average percentage of blogs (in 142 total) linking to this Group is 10%. Group 2 consists of non political, non PASOK though political, or critical blogs to both candidates. The average percentage of incoming links is 7%. In conclusion, the average percentage of incoming links is relatively low to both groups. The large number of non-political blogs, or the temporary character by means that they were constructed for campaign reasons, or the “amateur” fashion of constructing a blog may serve as reasons for this. Groups 3 contain all the rest of the blogs. They have a very small number of incoming links (1%) and they are distinguished from the two core Groups. Formation of groups is a finding, which is also compatible with those founded by Drezner and Farrell’s (2004).

Further, the analysis searches for “closeness” of the core groups (Groups 1 and 2). “Closeness” describes the property of a group of blogs where on the one hand, there exist a large number of interconnections of blogs within the group, and on the other hand, there exists only a small number of links between blogs of this particular group and any other group of blogs. In the present study, this means that there exists a large number of interconnections within Group 1 and Group 2, but only a small number of links between blogs of Group 1 linking to blogs of Group 2 and vice versa. Table 2 presents the mean percentages of links within each core group linking to Group 1 or Group 2. For each blog, the percentage of incoming links is calculated. Then the average percentage for each core group is obtained. Table 2 shows that the average blog of Group 1 is linked by 55.6% of the blogs of Group 1, while the average blog of Group 2 is linked by only 11.76% of the blogs of Group 1. On the other hand, the average blog in Group 2 is linked by 25% of the blogs of Group 2 and by 16.7% of Group 1. Group1 exhibits a higher degree of closeness, while Group 2 presents low degrees of linkage to both groups of blogs.

Table 3 goes a step further since it presents the percentages of degree of connection within each core group and between them as well. Two groups are in “connection” if any blog of one group links to any blog of the other. Degree of connection for a group can be calculated as the percentage of blogs linking to any blog of it. From Table 3 it is clear that 83.3% of blogs in Group 1 are linked by at least one blog of Group 1. Half of the blogs of Group 2 are linked by at least one of the blogs of Group 1 and half of the blogs from both Group 1 and 2 are linked by at least one blog from Group 1. On the other hand, 76.5% of the blogs of Group 2 are linked by blogs of Group 2, 23.5% of the blogs of Group 2 are linked by blogs from Group 1 and 23.5% of blogs from both groups are linked by blogs from Group 2.

In conclusion, the two core groups are characterized by a high degree of closeness, yet there exist enough interconnections between the two groups. Closeness is significant but not absolute.

Table 2. Mean percentages of links within each group linking to blogs of Groups 1 and 2.

	Group 1 (6 blogs)	Group 2 (17 blogs)
Group 1 (6 blogs)	55.6%	11.76
Group 2 (17 blogs)	16.7%	25%
Group 3 (119 blogs)	7.5%	4%

Table 3. Degrees of “connections” to Groups 1 and 2.

	Group 1	Group 2	Both Groups 1 and 2
Group 1 (6 blogs)	83.3%	50%	50%
Group 2 (17 blogs)	23.5%	76.5%	23.5%
Group 3 (119 blogs)	19.5%	27.1%	11%

Conclusions

Political blogging in Greece, although limited, conforms to the characteristics described in the literature regarding political blogging. Political discussion through blogs is influencing media but also they influence it as well. As Drezner and Farrell (2004) conclude that blogs may frame political debates and create “focal points” for the media as a whole. In this way, blogs sometimes have real political consequences, given the relatively low number of blog readers in the overall population. Skewedness of incoming links distribution and the formation of core blog groups may be used to explain the importance that some blogs have on the provision of information and discussion. Empirical evidence from Drezner and Farrell (2004) is also reproduced in the present analysis. Greek political blogs act within a social network of blogs, which form authority core groups where the discussion is taking place. These core blog groups provide citizens’ opinions and attitudes, which are taken into consideration by media. Recently, for example, there are plenty of published articles in Greek newspapers, referring blog posts.

Political affiliation is partly reflected on the formation of blog core groups. Because of this, it is easier for citizens to coordinate and find out where the interesting debate is taking place.

This paper made an effort to describe the mathematical properties of political blogging in Greece, by means of connectivity and closeness. It strived to apply recent advances in political blogging research, being one of the few relative studies in Greece.

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