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# Bloggers Leave Their Mark on Capitol Hill

By Robert B. Bluey



In ways both big and small, bloggers are changing how business is done on Capitol Hill.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada learned firsthand the effect bloggers can have on public policy when he was handed a defeat only days after Democrats took control of the 110th Congress.

In the weeks that followed, bloggers demonstrated they weren't going away. No matter what the issue—from the minimum wage to the war in Iraq—bloggers made sure they were part of the debate, demonstrating that anyone with a blog can have an impact on public policy.

Bloggers began having an impact on Capitol Hill long before the 110th Congress, but with conservatives relegated to the minority in the House and Senate, right-leaning bloggers have ratcheted up their focus on Congress.

It all started in early January when conservative Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina sought to strengthen the Senate's ethics reform bill by amending it to include the same earmark reform language in the House-passed version supported by Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California. Reid's deputy, Majority Whip Dick Durbin of Illinois, tried to kill the amendment, but nine Democrats broke ranks and backed DeMint. Instead of accepting defeat, Reid tried to twist arms and reverse the vote.

That's when bloggers took notice. Following the lead of The Heritage Foundation's Bridgett Wagner, who notified bloggers via e-mail, a coalition of bloggers known as "Porkbusters" documented Reid's strong-arm tactics. Andy Roth at the Club for Growth and Ed Frank at Americans for Prosperity jumped on the story, alerting supporters on their blogs. Meanwhile, I posted video on YouTube of Reid and DeMint's clash on the Senate floor.

Other bloggers sent e-mails to Jon Henke, the newly hired new-media director for Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. It's Henke's job to deal with bloggers,

and if there was ever an occasion, this was it. Despite McConnell's support for DeMint's amendment, an Associated Press story reported otherwise, and Reid implied as much on the Senate floor.

McConnell's staff got the message—and set out to correct the record. Henke e-mailed bloggers, “Sen. McConnell is supporting Sen. DeMint and doing everything we can to make sure that the Democrats don't destroy earmark reform.” By the next day, Henke was playing offense instead of defense, keeping bloggers apprised of the latest developments.

The debate had captivated the blogosphere. As Roth noted at the Club for Growth, more than 1,700 blogs had been written about earmark reform over a 24-hour period.

Three of the most well-trafficked liberal blogs—Daily Kos, MyDD and TPMmuckraker—also turned on the Democratic leader. “Sen. Harry Reid is fast losing whatever credibility he had on earmark reform,” wrote a blogger at Daily Kos. “Who's the arm-twister now?” asked Paul Kiel at TPMmuckraker.

Just one day later, Reid reversed course and DeMint was lauding him for agreeing to language that was “even stronger than what I had originally proposed.”

Last fall, it was through a similar effort that two freshmen senators—liberal Barack Obama of Illinois and conservative Tom Coburn of Oklahoma—overcame hurdles to pass legislation improving government transparency on contracts and grants by putting most federal spending on the Internet in a Google-like, searchable database.

A group of conservative and liberal bloggers, most of whom had never met each other, rallied around the legislation, propelling it from oblivion to President George W. Bush's desk. And the White House, recognizing the significance of the moment, invited a dozen bloggers to the bill signing.

The difference between then and now is that

two U.S. senators—McConnell and DeMint—now employ seasoned bloggers. As important a role as Henke played in the minority leader's office, so too did Tim Chapman in DeMint's. Chapman, who previously worked with bloggers while at The Heritage Foundation, knew how to get the message out.

Chapman and I began building the foundation for blogger activism last May when we co-founded a weekly meeting for conservative bloggers. Sponsored by Heritage and *Human Events*, the meeting brings together some of the nation's top bloggers—from RedState's Erick Erickson to Townhall's Mary Katharine Ham—to share and discuss policy issues on Capitol Hill. More than a dozen members of Congress have addressed the group, and even the White House sent a representative to address the group in January. Each meeting offers an active discussion of how conservative bloggers can work together.

According to a recent study conducted by T. Neil Sroka, a student at George Washington University, upward of 90 percent of Capitol Hill offices pay attention to blogs, and 64 percent of congressional staffers say blogs are more useful than mainstream media for gauging political problems. Two of the most popular blogs—Daily Kos on the left and RedState on the right—welcome any user to post, meaning you could be changing minds almost instantly.

That's what's great about blogging—no matter what you care about, chances are you can build a coalition. And with tools like Technorati, an Internet site that tracks 63.2 million blogs, and Google Blog Search, it's never been easier to find people with common interests.

As the episode with Reid illustrates, bloggers can pack a punch and—with allies in the halls of Congress—they really can make a difference.

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