



Remembering Robert Elgie: a blogging academic

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Introduction

The academic contributions of Robert Elgie are, without question, considerable (cf. Passarelli 2021). The variety and breadth of his interests and publications mean that even those who are primarily familiar with one aspect of his work, may not be entirely aware of his research in other areas. This is even true with regard to his work on the “third regime type” of semi-presidentialism, an area in which he was considered the world-leading authority. Although among academics Robert was probably best known for his many academic publications on the subject, including a number of seminal edited volumes that explored the politics of semi-presidentialism across the world, even more people outside of academia engaged with his work through another medium: his blogs. This short essay aims to highlight Robert Elgie’s contribution to political science as an academic blogger. It provides a personal reflection on the development of his own website and blog, “The Semi-Presidential One”, his subsequent project, the “Presidential Power Blog” through which I came to know him as a cherished colleague, mentor, and friend, as well as the legacy of these projects.

The semi-presidential one, 2008–2013

Robert started his website and blog “The Semi-Presidential One” at <www.semi-presidentialism.com> in December 2007—a time when academic blogging was still not commonplace and only slowly gained acceptance in the academic community.

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The Monkey Cage, perhaps one of the best-known political science blogs to date, had only been founded two months earlier, and academic bloggers were often still confronted with scepticism from colleagues (Sides 2011). Robert's blog was not only remarkable because it formed part of what might be termed 'the first wave' of academic blogging in political science. Its specific relevance for the discipline stemmed from the fact that it was written by a tenured full professor and established authority in the field. In contrast, many other political science blogs were written by graduate students or early-career researchers (cf. Farrell and Sides 2010). Hence, by becoming an academic blogger Robert undoubtedly contributed to establishing blogging as a legitimate form of academic activity and means of disseminating research.

Like many other academic blogs at the time, *The Semi-Presidential One* was primarily the endeavor of a dedicated individual. Starting with a blog post about Turkey as the "newest semi-presidential country" (Elgie 2007a), Robert primarily wrote brief informative pieces on various aspects of semi-presidential politics rather than longer analyses; nevertheless, he did so very regularly and produced a total of 200 posts during his first year of running the blog. While some posts were often no longer than a few lines and highlighted new publications or reported (partial) election results, they also included lists of semi-presidential regimes that he would update regularly over the years (e.g. Elgie 2007b, 2010, 2011). Notably, the geographical coverage of the blog extended far beyond France, Finland, or other classical cases of semi-presidentialism in Europe. Instead, Robert's aim was to cover all semi-presidential regimes past and present—over the course of almost six years of blogging at *The Semi-Presidential One*, he covered more than 100 countries and territories that either featured a semi-presidential constitution at one point in time or (had) debated its introduction. Consequently, his lists of current and historic cases of semi-presidential, premier-presidential, and president-parliamentary regimes were—and still are—frequently cited by scholars as an authoritative source (with examples too numerous to mention here); furthermore, Robert's coverage of political events was considered to be so exhaustive and reliable that some scholars used his blog posts as a means of systematically identifying instances of intra-executive conflict (e.g. Sedelius and Mashtaler 2013).

Through the blog, Robert made his vast knowledge of semi-presidentialism accessible to the public as well as to all those academics who did not have access to his many books or (paywalled) articles. He used the medium of the blog to explain political science concepts, to present scholarly discussions in an accessible manner, and to show—in a wider sense—how political science could contribute to current debates about politics. Thereby, Robert clearly did not regard blogging as a means of one-way communication. Instead, he also used the blog to engage with the public—he was as much approachable to readers of the blog as he was to fellow academics and others who had the pleasure of getting to know him in person. Going through old blog posts, one cannot help but be amazed by the fact that any time somebody commented on a blog post—asking a question or offering a potential correction—Robert dutifully replied, explained, and was happy to take suggestions on board.

Eventually, *The Semi-Presidential One* was also how I first got to know and engage with Robert's work on semi-presidentialism and presidential politics more generally. While preparing my PhD proposal on presidential activism in Central and



Eastern Europe, Robert's articles and books became a key resource for me and I frequently consulted the blog to understand them better. Inspired by the way in which Robert combined academic scholarship with public engagement in his blog (and encouragement from my PhD supervisors, one of them an active blogger himself), I eventually decided to follow his example and started my own blog to accompany my PhD research at <www.presidentialactivism.com> in late 2010. Initially, my blog largely followed Robert's example and I published short posts on presidential politics in Central and Eastern Europe before turning to longer (comparative) analyses. This allowed me to keep track of current developments and gain a deeper understanding of the cases I was covering in my PhD thesis. The blog also proved useful when I conducted interviews with presidential advisors and politicians, serving as a kind of 'business card' for those who searched my name before agreeing to be interviewed. Similarly, when I attended my first academic conferences, some participants were already familiar with my blog which greatly facilitated networking. In addition, the blog allowed (or forced) me to regularly engage in academic writing. When I struggled with a period of writer's block after returning from fieldwork in late 2012, the blog helped to keep me going and slowly 'write my way back' to working on my thesis.

The presidential power blog, 2013–2021

Over the years, both Robert's and my blog began to attract a sizeable readership (in case of my blog not least due to the fact that Robert linked to it on several occasions), although for both of us it was often difficult to keep up frequent postings given other commitments. Robert had been successful in procuring guest posts from co-authors and colleagues as well as his PhD students, yet realised—like many other 'first wave bloggers'—that a single-author blog was otherwise difficult to maintain (cf. Dunleavy and Gilson 2012). Furthermore, much of the early purpose of the blog had been to provide brief analysis or commentary and linking to interesting resources, i.e. tasks that were now much easier to accomplish using Facebook and Twitter (where Robert was almost as active as on the blog). In the summer of 2013, Robert, therefore, reached out to several colleagues to create a new blog that would—similar to bigger blogs such as the *Monkey Cage* (which only shortly after became part of the *Washington Post*) or the growing blog family of the *London School of Economics*—rely on a group of regular contributors and provide the same level of high-quality content.

After contact between Robert and me had previously been limited to linking to each other's blogs and occasional retweets, I was delighted and honoured when Robert emailed me directly and asked whether I wanted to be part of a more general blog on presidential politics that not only looked at semi-presidentialism or—in my case—presidents in Central and Eastern Europe but at presidential politics and the role of presidents in countries around the world. The merger of both of our blogs (both continued to be available but largely served as archives) as well as the team of country experts that Robert had recruited laid the foundation of a new blogging project: the "Presidential Power Blog" at <www.presidential-power.net>.



The new blog shared a similar vision as *The Semi-Presidential One*—its goal was to make academic knowledge and expert analyses available to the public, albeit with a broader scope covering all aspects of presidential politics around the world irrespective of regime type (Elgie 2013). This founding idea was shared by all contributors, yet scrolling through the blog readers will quickly realise how much this and the topics covered reflected Robert's broad academic interests. The blog was something that was close to his heart; however, it is easy to underestimate how much the blog not only represented Robert as an academic, but also his personal virtues and qualities. For instance, from the start, he actively sought to involve young scholars like me—even if he did not know them personally or if they had not published anything yet—and always treated them as his equals. In the beginning, each member of the team covered a wide range of countries (sometimes entire world regions); yet as we grew to include some 30 regular contributors, Robert made sure to involve people from all around the world and thus transformed the blog into a truly global, diverse and inclusive project. In addition, he often actively invited scholars—either as regular contributors or for guest posts—whose research went in very different directions, potentially even criticised or sought to 'disprove' his own work.

Given that Robert concurrently served in other many other roles, perhaps most prominently as editor of *French Politics* and reviews editor for *Government & Opposition*, it is almost inconceivable to imagine the work and energy that he poured into the project. For the first five years of running the blog under Robert's editorship, we published a new blog post almost every day. Similar to a newspaper editor, Robert not only coordinated the posting schedule of regular contributors (often reaching out to see whether one would be able to write a new post for this or that date or to suggest recent events that even experts on the respective countries had missed as topics for new posts) but also recruited guest authors, proof-read posts and offered feedback—all in addition to his other scholarly work and responsibilities. Even though I was actively involved in running the blog, often taking over from Robert while he was travelling or in dealing with more technical aspects of the website, I only began to grasp the immensity—and perhaps burden—of Robert's work on the blog when he approached Sophia Moestrup and Fiona Yap and me in late 2018 to take over the blog. Over the years that followed, we realised how difficult it was to uphold this steady stream of blog posts, recruit new guest contributors, and just keep the blog running.¹

Robert's untimely passing affected all contributors to the blog deeply and the collections of reactions published on the blog (Yap, Moestrup, and Köker 2019) and elsewhere (see Yap, Moestrup, and Köker 2020) showed how many of us shared connections with him through the blog and beyond. After a period of reflection, we decided to continue the blog to honor Robert's legacy. However, in August 2021 we, unfortunately, had to take the difficult decision to discontinue the *Presidential Power Blog* in its current form. Nevertheless, it is probably not an exaggeration to

¹ Our experiences thereby largely mirrored the reflections by Stuart A. Brown, full-time editor for the LSE blog family, on the manifold tasks associated with editing and running a successful academic blog (Brown 2021).



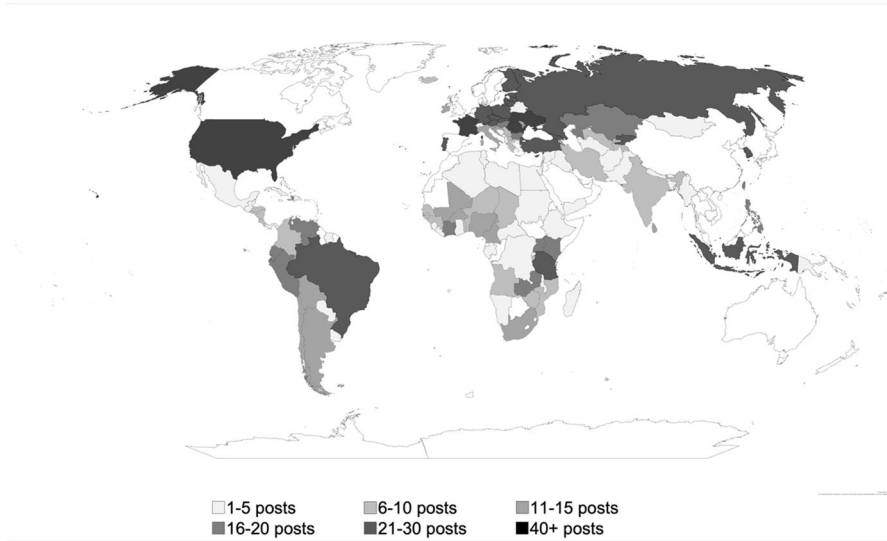


Fig. 1 Distribution of contributions on the Presidential Power blog by country. Source: Own elaboration

suggest that over the eight years of its existence it was a highly successful and in many ways exceptional project. The blog published a total of 1415 posts covering 138 countries and territories authored by close to 100 regular and guest contributors (Fig. 1). Remarkably, blog posts on some of the least-known cases were authored by Robert himself; many of these are still cited regularly in academic publications and student theses, they are referenced in think tank materials as well as in Wikipedia articles, and other online resources. Therefore, we also decided to ensure that the blog remains online for the time being and we are actively working towards preserving the blog posts as a resource for future scholars of presidential politics and as testament to Robert's amazing work.

Conclusion: blogging with Robert and beyond

My academic career will always be intricately linked to Robert Elgie and his blogging. I first came into contact with his academic work through *The Semi-Presidential One* and later had the privilege to get to know him closer personally through our collaboration on the *Presidential Power Blog*. In the early days of the blog, we usually exchanged emails on a weekly basis, arranging posting schedules and dealing with the frequent hiccups of the blog's social media accounts. Robert subsequently served as external examiner for my PhD thesis in 2014; thereafter, emails were no longer limited to discussing aspects of the blog and he became a trusted advisor and important mentor. As such, Robert not only actively supported me in my professional development—including making the case to Palgrave to establish a new series of Studies in Presidential Politics in which a revised version of my thesis (Köker 2017) became the first volume—but also helped to guide me through



personal struggles that I experienced as an early career academic. Blogging with Robert taught me to present arguments and ideas in a clear and comprehensible manner and gave me the confidence to pursue them further. At the same time, Robert's academic curiosity, ability to ask critical questions without stifling enthusiasm or innovative thought, and appreciation of others' work, fundamentally shaped me and how I aim to be as an academic.

Academic blogging has become a 'mainstream' activity in political science (Esarey and Wood 2018) and 'early adopter' academics such as Robert clearly helped to pave the way for this development. Yet, I believe that in the history of political science blogging *The Semi-Presidential One* and *Presidential Power* (as well as Robert's role within them) deserve a special place. Even years after its discontinuation *The Semi-Presidential One* remains an important resource for scholars—a legacy not shared by many other single-author blogs from the early days of academic blogging. While I can only hope that the same will be true for *Presidential Power*, it is a different aspect that defines its legacy. The *Presidential Power Blog* was more than a publication platform dedicated to presidential politics. Thanks to Robert's dedication, it brought together a diverse range of scholars and thereby established lasting professional and personal connections. The blog provided (directly or indirectly) a springboard for the careers of many young academics by giving them a chance to present their research and ideas to the world under the guidance of a leading scholar. The networks created through the blog have also formed the foundation for new scholarly initiatives, including the *ECPR Standing Group on Presidential Politics* founded in 2015, and to this day live on and continue to be the source of new collaborations of scholars around the world. While it is impossible to quantify the impact of Robert's contribution to scholarship in his role as a 'blogging academic'—and it may well pale in comparison to his other scholarly achievements—I am immensely grateful nonetheless to have been able to contribute to even this small aspect of Robert's impressive legacy.

Notes

"The Semi-Presidential One" is available at <https://www.semipresidentialism.com>

"Presidential Power" is available at <https://www.presidential-power.net>

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