

SIGNING AN E-PETITION AS A TRANSITION FROM LURKING TO PARTICIPATION

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Abstract – As one form of online political participation, the e-petitioning is seen as a response to a perceived decline in public trust of political institutions and the associated symptoms of political disengagement. This paper uses the psychological concepts of self-efficacy, prosocial behaviour and lurking and shows how they could be applied to e-participation, in particular in the context of the decision to sign a petition (or not). Different models are examined and some potential future research areas are identified.

1 Introduction

The internet is not only a communication channel which can help people express themselves; it also equips users with tools, personal skills or positive feelings which are then transferred from the online to the offline environment, and can also increase individuals' feelings of effective self-efficacy. Individuals participate in offline and online environments for a number of reasons and motivations, and they will often show altruistic and prosocial behaviour. But in the same way that individuals choose to help others, many choose not to – they prefer to read or gain access to information, without contributing, a behaviour often negatively described as “lurking”. A challenge faced by researchers is to understand why people choose to ‘lurk’ as passive observers of a process rather than actively participate, and why they move between passive lurking and active participation.

Educational, managerial, regulatory, and legal systems are being crafted to deal with the new realities made possible by the new online environments. In the area of political participation, petitioning is a simple yet effective tool which provides a first step for citizens who want to interact with and influence democratically-elected assemblies, from their Local Council to the European Parliament. Internet-based e-petition systems have already been introduced in some EU member states both at national and, increasingly, local levels in order to make it easier to gather signatures from a wider audience.

This paper looks at the extent to which signing an e-petition can be seen as a type of de-lurking and considers whether understanding the factors behind a citizen choosing whether or not to sign a petition provides a possible area for investigating behaviour around lurking.

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This paper begins by following Cruickshank and Smith (2009) in giving a brief overview of the state of play with e-petitions. The main actors in the petitioning process can be placed into two groups:

- *Internal actors:* (a) Officers of the assembly who are responsible for the operation of the system (forum moderators are generally considered to belonging to a subcategory of officer). (b) Elected Representatives (and their support staff) who respond to petitions individually and collectively.
- *External actors:* (a) Petitioners; that is, the person (or group) who initiates a petition after identifying an issue and follows its progress through submission to final feedback and outcome. (b) Citizens: that is, those persons who are entitled to sign the petition. Eligibility rules may vary here, and this raises important questions of identity and authentication which are beyond the scope of this article. However, Citizens can be broadly divided between those who are participating in a petition by signing it (referred to here as the Signatory), and the non-participating majority.

The main focus of this article is to examine approaches which enable more to be understood about the citizens' intentions either to engage or not to engage with an e-participation system such as EuroPetition. The theoretical contribution of the article is to establish that the an understanding of the psychological dimensions such as personality and self-efficacy has much to offer both practitioners and academics in understanding the patterns of uptake, the use of e-petitioning systems, as well as the factors that influence the decision of the citizen to simply access information or act as a participating signatory. The article proceeds via a brief overview of the current body of research in the area of e-petitioning.

2 The place of e-petitions in the democratic process

“...with the spread of Information and Communication Technologies, a new practice has come into force, consisting of aligning the practice of petitions and the use of Internet technologies. This has led to the implementation of appropriate technical components... today citizens have more instruments to interact with the institutions, to make their voice heard and, eventually, to take part in the policy-making process” Santucci (2007)

Many advanced industrial democracies have adopted reforms designed to confront a perceived decline in the public's trust of political institutions and the associated symptoms of disengagement. It has been argued that, as a device to transform established representative democracies into more participatory democracies, e- petitioning has been the source for great advances (Linder and Ulrich, 2008).

Political scientists have conceptualized petitioning as a mechanism for making democratic inputs sitting somewhere between pure representative democracy and direct democracy (which bypasses representatives altogether), in a distinct category of advocacy democracy (Carmen, 2007a), where the participation activities are directed towards influencing the decisions of elected representatives, thereby mitigating the risks of weakening existing democratic institutions. On the other hand, since the policy impact is indirect as it is mediated by representatives, perceived fairness and openness in the process can be as important as the actual outcome, as illustrated by this letter in a national UK newspaper:

“Can anyone name an e-petition to the Prime Minister that has achieved its aims? Each time I have signed one, I have later received an email telling me why the PM cannot agree.” – Letter to Telegraph (London), 27 May 2009

It is necessary to remember that the participants in the petitioning process and e-democracy generally have been shown to be generally male, educated and older than the general population (Carmen, 2007a; Lindner and Ulrich, 2008). This is despite the potential of these systems to widen the pool of participants in the decision making process; conversely, it is unrealistic to assume that universal participation could be achieved or indeed is desirable - there appears to be a realistic ceiling of ca. 30% active participation (Ferro and Molinari; 2009, Maier-Rabler and Reimer, 2009). Even more realistically, achieving the participation of 1% of citizens in any one e-petition would generally be considered a stunning success.

For these reasons, it is useful and important to understand the factors influencing the decisions made by individuals (or groups) about whether to participate in the political system by initiating, or simply signing, a petition, or to remain as ‘mere’ passive observers, no matter how well informed. Therefore, the core question arises of the need to understand and model the citizen’s decision-making process around the use of e-petitioning systems.

3 Self-Efficacy: Understanding the factors behind use

The perspectives offered by a social-cognitive approach provide a stimulus to address personal and societal aspects. In contrast with previous studies of e-petitioning have focused on the technical and institutional perspectives (see Lindner and Ulrich, 2008, for further examples).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) broadens the analysis offered by traditional acceptance models with their history in behaviourist psychology and focus on perceived outcomes by giving prominence to the concept of *self-efficacy* – defined as beliefs about one’s ability to perform a specific behaviour. Unlike efficacy, which is the power to produce an effect (in essence, competence), self-efficacy is the belief (whether or not accurate) that one has the power to produce that effect.

“People who regard themselves as highly efficacious act, think, and feel differently from those who perceive themselves as inefficacious. They produce their own future, rather than simply foretell it.” Bandura (1986)

Expectations of positive outcomes of behaviour are meaningless if we doubt our capacity to successfully execute the behaviour at all; conversely, previous bad experiences can create a self-reinforcing cycle of expectations of negative outcomes. This could potential provide a model for understanding why citizens would choose to sign a petition, or just remain as an observer. There are two aspects to this.

The concept of Computer Self-Efficacy (CSE) is used to make individuals’ judgment of their capability to perform a computer-based task central to the analysis (Compeau and Higgins 1995). CSE has been used to help understand the decision of an individual to use an application, generally in an institutional or business context rather than within a democratic system. However, it seems clear that CSE is an appropriate conceptual tool which can help illuminate the decision-making process around the use of e-participation systems. Further, while CSE is typically applied to ‘professional’ users, which in the e-participation context might equate to the ‘internal actors’ (council/assembly officers, elected representatives and

their staff), it seems plausible and useful to apply it to the decisions of the external actors (petitioners and citizens) to submit and to sign or discuss a petition online respectively.

There are clear parallels to be drawn between Computer Self Efficacy and Political Self Efficacy (PSE) (Caprara et al, 2009). Where CSE is concerned with self-perception of the ability to produce an intended result with computer-based systems, PSE is concerned with citizens' perceptions of their own ability to bring about intended results in dealing with politics and public authorities. PSE addresses the estimations that citizens make about their own capacities to effect a result through their actions (internal PSE), and also about their attitudes to the political system as a whole (external PSE). Therefore, while CSE effectively models the role of the confidence of citizens in engaging with an e-petitioning system, PSE models the role of both their confidence in their own ability to deal with public authorities, and their views on the extent to which public authorities can be influenced, affected or changed by individual or group actions.

The benefits of the SCT approach are twofold. Firstly, it allows judgment to be made of the role of efficacy-related factors in the decision to use the e-petitioning system to participate in a democratic process. Secondly, it highlights citizens' perceptions of the system. Fundamentally, it is also of interest to assess the interaction between CSE and PSE, and whether a citizen's confidence in their ability to utilize interactive systems is paralleled by a belief in their ability to successfully interact with the political system as a whole.

In other words, this framework allows exploration of environmental (social / cultural / institutional / educational) and personal factors (experience) behind the decision to either engage or not. The analysis therefore focuses on the participant's (or potential participant) subjective perspective as well as upon the objective context. Results from this analysis can therefore help to assess the 'core critique' that e-participation systems provide an additional channel for those who already have the skills, knowledge and confidence to interact with the political system, rather than widen the pool of participants. By so doing, the scope for providing information, support and other appropriate interventions can be identified.

4 Prosocial Behavior

The concept of prosocial behaviour can help understand the actions and motivations of individuals in the online context. Prosocial behaviour is defined as "voluntary intentional behaviour that results in benefits for another" (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987), and can include donating money, computer power, software and documentation, time and attention, information and emotional support. This kind of behaviour is increasingly important for solving social problems (Dourish, 2001) and is seen as the "glue" that helps people stay together so that they can collectively help solve each other's problems (Preece, 2000).

Different groups may use different technologies depending on the context and the subject being discussed, as is the case with signing an e-petition, often associated with an offline group activity such as a local issue-based campaign. Prosocial behaviours can be learned and sustained on the net, but social identification processes are instrumental in the group's collective definition of what is considered to be "helpful" or "harmful" behaviour in the specific context.

Individuals participate for altruistic or conformist reasons, to boost their self-esteem (McLure and Faraj, 2000) self-enhancement (Allport, 1937) and self-efficacy. All behaviour is motivated in some way and individuals will engage in a particular behaviour in order to

achieve a desired end (Atkinson and Birch, 1970), and prosocial behaviour will depend on the helper's motivation. Motivation is distinguished between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation: intrinsic motivation includes the desire to feel competent and self-determining, show altruism, or seeking to increase the welfare of others; extrinsic motivations are usually associated with some sort of external reward. Motivations are enduring, exist across all situations and are expressed through the appropriate goals. Different motives and goals may underlie the same surface behaviour and the social and psychological consequences of participation may be different for different users (i.e. some participate to gain information or support, others to communicate). The motivations and goals for using the online resources will determine how they will be used.

This means that there are a number of reasons why individuals choose to contribute and participate, for example because they believe that their visible participation is important for the group's performance, that their contributions to the group are identifiable, or because they like the group (see e.g. Markey, 2000). Individual group members benefit from prosocial behaviour, and are often grateful for it. The whole group as a whole also benefits with increased reputation, learning (Lakhani and von Hippel, 2003) and identification.

Altruism has been identified as a major motivator for encouraging prosocial behaviour as well as contribution and collaboration (Maloney-Krichmar and Preece 2005); it reflects the desire to give back and is also known as reciprocity (Axelrod, 2006). Generalized reciprocity, a process in which an individual gives back to the community, rather than directly to the person from whom the contribution was received, can also be seen in the online environment (Wasko and Faraj, 2000). Joyce and Kraut (2006) found that the more often users contribute content to an online community, the more likely that they will continue to participate in that community. Although people will contribute time and effort (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler and Kraut 2007), traditional "offline" problems such as the bystander effects or diffusion of responsibility (Barron and Yechiam, 2002) and simply lack of participation do occur.

5 Lurking: still participating

Lurking is both a special form of behaviour, often found in online environments, and central to understanding participation in online environments. Lurkers are one of the 'silent majority' in an electronic forum – they posts occasionally or not at all, but are known to read the group's postings regularly.

It is assumed that lurkers receive informational benefits from passive participation, but less so than active participants (Amichai-Hamburger, 2005). Preece, Nonnecke and Andrews (2004) note that only few lurkers intend to lurk from the onset – they believe that the majority of lurkers become lurkers as a result from previous interactions with the community - and there are obvious parallels to be drawn with the ideas behind self-efficacy being influenced by past experiences.

Lurking should not always be seen as a "negative" form of behaviour: lurking still implies a positive choice to pay attention to what is happening in a community. One challenge that e-participation set itself as a subject area is to move even beyond those who are lurkers - and to focus on the "ignorers", competing against rival streams in the attention economy (e.g. sport or entertainment), and trying to bring citizens back to focus and take an interest in the democratic decision making process: from this perspective, for a citizen to become a lurker is the first, hardest, step in engagement.

Preece and Shneiderman (2009) provide one model that differentiates between levels of participation, and suggest the “Reader-to-leader Framework” as a way of understanding and motivating participation. Starting from “all users”, these move to become readers (i.e. lurkers), then contributors, collaborators and finally leaders. Participation in each of the phases is characterized by certain behaviours and motivations which need to change, be encouraged and supported. Each transition includes a number of steps and behaviours; the aim is to increase the user’s confidence and activity, knowing that at the same time many will also terminate their participation for a variety of reasons. Reading is a typical first step toward more active participation (Preece et al., 2004) - for some people, overcoming their resistance to novelty may require strong encouragement, while others tend to embrace new experiences.

The most understandable motivation for people to read content is that they can personally benefit from doing so. The next step, getting return visitors is more difficult, as is making a contribution and collaborating. Preece and Shneiderman (2009) argue that those factors that motivate readers are also important to those who then decide to contribute and gain the confidence to do so: for example, a sense of belonging, a welcoming environment, safety, support for newcomers, and contacts to ask questions. They also mention other issues such as the ease for making small contributions, visibility of contributions made, recognition of quality and quantity of contributions, rewards, etc.

The users’ changes in the different participation stages little understood, and even less understood or discussed are the reasons why participants terminate or why they give up collaborating and return to individual contributions or merely reading. Variables such as the community size, personality of participants, topic, social interactions, such as conflicts and other, external factors such as worldwide news events (Preece, 2009), can undermine participation. Political, social, and economic changes may also be tied to effective participation in social media. Changing user (consumer and citizen) values with respect to societal and political issues as well as changing attitudes, for example, concerning privacy, also have an impact on participation.

6 Conclusion

One of the challenges that e-participation has set itself as a subject area is to start the engagement process by proving tools to help the transitions between ignoring, lurking and actively participating in relation to societal issues and the democratic decision making process. E-petitioning is arguably the most mature area of e-participation, in that it is well-established and often makes useful inputs to political processes, giving insights that can be applied to other forms of e-participation and online engagement generally.

This article has sought to identify some of the psychological aspects which impact e-participation. The article presented Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) to give prominence to the individual’s (implicit or explicit) decision to perform a specific behaviour. Self-efficacy shows that expectations of positive outcomes of behaviour are meaningless if we doubt our capacity to successfully execute the behaviour at all; e-petitions require citizens’ belief in their ability to successfully interact with the political system as a whole.

It has to be recognized that the last few years have shown that participation in the majority of civic platforms and networks have still not been as successful as anticipated. As Adar and Huberman (2000) note, systems based on altruistic reciprocity may experience problems and fail but given that the online environment can be used as a learning or testing environment,

the internet could actually encourage participation in real life (Putnam, 2000) if the challenges modelled by (for instance) self-efficacy can be faced.

We would argue that in the same way as informing oneself about a political issue is still a positive action, lurking should not always be seen as a “negative” form of behaviour: lurking still implies a positive choice to pay attention to what is happening in a community. Finding a mechanism to capture the factors behind the decision to sign a petition and the consequences both in terms of prosocial behaviour and its impact on self-efficacy could give a new perspective on the de-lurking process in general and understanding the (psychological) processes behind the phase changes in the levels of participation described by Preece and Schneidermann (2009). There are of course methodological issues to be addressed in collecting data from those who are not predisposed to participate online, raising questions around how to access the lurkers and non-participants.

Despite this, we believe that the factors discussed here establish some principles that can usefully inform ongoing work and future research questions in understanding the uptake of e-participation systems and possibly online engagement generally.

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