AMERICASPEAKS
Engaging Citizens in Governance

Government Sponsored E-Petitions:

A Guide for Development and Implementation

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America*Speaks* and E-Petitioning

America*Speaks*' work on e-petitions emerges out of our mission to engage citizens in the decision-making that impacts their lives. E-petitions offer a new means for governments to involve citizens in the formal decision-making process, and if implemented correctly, e-petitions can improve participation and increase government transparency. Petitioning, and electronic petitioning more specifically, embodies many of the engagement principles around which America*Speaks* structures its work. We strive to engage diverse audiences, create links between citizens and decision-makers, and develop clear citizen priorities, all of which can be achieved through a successful e-petition process.

We believe that e-petitions offer an exciting opportunity for governments to engage citizens in a productive dialogue about policy-making and have great potential to strengthen the connection between citizen and government, especially on the local level.

Acknowledgements

The creation of this guide would not have been possible without the financial support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. We would also like to thank Professor Tina Nabatchi of Syracuse University and Matt Leighninger of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium. Both provided essential insights that strengthened and refined the final product. The paper would not have been possible without the initial work of David Stern, who laid the groundwork for the guide's design, and Steve Brigham, who provided guidance throughout the entire process. Finally, we would like to thank the government representatives from Bristol, Queensland, and the White House who made themselves available and were gracious with their time and expertise.

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Overview of E-Petitions

The right to make formal requests to an authority through a petition has been a staple of citizen government interaction since the early 1400s, when the practice of government petitioning became widespread under King Henry IV of England.[1] The English practice of petitioning made its way to America with the first colonists. In the United States, the right to petition government can be found in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states that the people have a right "to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Interestingly, petitioning during colonial times "required government hearing and response," but "this original theory and practice of petitioning foundered when abolitionists flooded Congress with petitions during the debates over slavery. As a result, the right to petition was collapsed into the right of free speech and expression – a definitional narrowing which persists to the day."[2] As such, today, Americans have a right to petition, but not a right to a government response.

In the modern era, many governments have begun implementing e-petition processes through government websites. E-petitioning, short for electronic petitioning, has become more popular as access to the Internet has grown and more citizens have become used to interacting in online spaces. While an electronic petition is most simply defined as any petition submitted electronically, this paper uses the term to refer to systems that deal with petitions that are posted through a government website and allow for individual electronic signatures.[3]

In the 1990s, the rise of the Internet spurred the growth of e-democracy tools, which promised to make democratic participation more convenient, accessible, and interactive. Petitions were a logical place for e-democracy experimentation because of their long history and public acceptance. In the late 1990s, Napier University's International Teledemocracy Centre, now part of the Centre for Social Informatics, began to work with the Scottish Parliament to develop the first government-sponsored e-petition system. Napier University's work with the Scottish Parliament produced *e-petitioner*, a platform that was used to pilot e-petition programs throughout the United Kingdom.

E-Petitions as a Participatory Tool

E-petitions have the potential to enable greater citizen participation in government decision-making through increased citizen interaction with government. However, this outcome is by no means guaranteed. Like many other participatory practices, an unsuccessful e-petition process can alienate citizen users, become hijacked by large interest groups, and undermine the legitimacy of government decision-making through perceptions of misspent government time and resources.[4] Yet, these potential problems can be managed by developing an e-petition process that creates genuine engagement.

Designing a participatory interaction between citizens and a government requires that e-petition implementers consider the type of participatory environment they are trying to create. If petitioners sign an e-petition, but never receive a response or any other kind of follow-on interaction, how truly participatory is the e-petition? How is the citizen petitioner more democratically engaged through the act of signing? This example is not meant to degrade the petition-signing process, but to highlight that a successful e-petition process should create a deeper sense of democratic engagement. One way to create that engagement is through substantive and timely petition responses. However, petition responses are not the only kind of engagement that a government can provide. For example, if the e-petition process encourages petitioners to engage with elected representatives or e-petition administrators, such as clerks, citizen petitioners may develop a greater understanding of the political process, which may enable petitioners to become more effective participatory actors.[5] Creating an e-petition process that engages citizen petitioners in this way can strengthen the legitimacy of the governing body and the policies that it creates.

While e-petitions can be a useful means for substantive citizen participation, they are most successful when used as part of a larger participatory exercise. Additional pathways for citizen engagement, such as transparent meeting processes and online surveys, can improve the impact of e-petition processes by providing new ways for citizens to find out about the work of government and engage with elected officials. The government in each of three case studies considered in this guide implemented an e-petition process as part of a larger e-democracy or participatory project.

Purpose of this Guide

This paper is intended to serve as a guide for public managers who are interested in exploring e-petition implementation in their communities. The guide is divided into five sections: a general overview of e-petitioning, an exploration of the key decision areas in e-petition implementation, a federal level case study, a state level case study, and a local level case study.

The discussion of key decision areas for implementation focuses on five topics: goal setting, connecting e-petitioning to decision-making, managing the interaction between citizens and government in the e-petition process, determining the appropriate technology for e-petition implementation, and evaluating e-petition processes. Recommendations on e-petition implementation within these key decision areas are offered.

In an effort to provide a wide swath of e-petition models, our case studies each look at a different level of government and engagement context. The federal case study examines the White House's "We the People" e-petition platform. While the platform is still relatively new (it began in 2011), it provides an opportunity to explore both executive-side petitioning and petitioning in the U.S. context. Our state level case considers Queensland, Australia's e-petition platform. Queensland is an interesting case in that it emerged as a result of political turmoil and does not have a signature threshold, despite the large population it serves. On the local level, we explore the city of Bristol, in England, which was a pioneer in local government e-petitioning and uses a model that may be useful for localities in the United States.

Key Decisions in E-Petition Implementation

Leaders who implement e-petitions face a core set of decisions that determine the course and direction of their systems. The decision areas discussed below are intended to give prospective e-petition implementers a sense of the choices they will face, as well as the potential outcomes associated with certain decisions. This section is divided into a discussion of five distinct questions:

- **What are your engagement goals for e-petitions?**
- **How will e-petitions connect to decision-making?**
- **How will the citizen-government interaction be managed?**
- **What are the technical matters you must consider?**
- **How will the outcomes of your e-petition system be measured?**

While these questions are applicable to all e-petition system implementations, the order in which they are addressed may vary. Each e-petition system is shaped by its government context and engagement culture. No two e-petition processes will be identical, and these questions should be considered as a suggestive, rather than prescriptive, guide.

What Are Your Engagement Goals?

Answering this question will help you shape the structure of the engagement process and will impact everything from resource allocation to program advertising. It is helpful to identify what engagement needs the government entity faces, and how, if at all, an e-petition system may address those needs. Put simply, why e-petitions?

Our research indicates governments embrace e-petitions to pursue a variety of goals. However, in each case, the overarching objective is to develop a greater relationship with citizens. Other goals may include:

- **CREATE A CITIZEN FEEDBACK LOOP.** Many governments are looking for a way to develop two-way modes of communication with citizens. E-petitions allow citizens to share their views, while also allowing the government to respond and, at least potentially, begin a more participatory dialogue around policy-making.[6]

- **ENABLE CITIZEN BUY-IN.** When citizens are formally involved in government decision-making, they are more likely to accept its outcomes. AmericaSpeaks' town meeting work shows that even when a participant disagrees with the outcome of a process, the participant is more likely to accept the outcome if they feel that their voice has been heard in the decision-making process.[7]

- **TRACK ISSUE INTEREST GEOGRAPHICALLY.** E-petitions allow the government to track petition submission and signage by geographic location, meaning that interest in issues can be mapped geographically and managed accordingly.

- **MANAGE HIGHLY POLARIZED ISSUES.** The e-petition process creates a safe space for differences to be aired by creating a mechanism through which all sides of an issue can gather support. Because of the terms-of-use requirements that are put in place, governments can ensure that petitions use a civil tone. Additionally, e-petitions allow the government entity to explain its reasoning for policy positions to those who are most engaged on an issue.

- **SPEAK DIRECTLY TO THE PUBLIC.** Using an e-petition process allows governments to respond directly to those concerned about an issue without having to use the media as an intermediary.

- **IDENTIFY COMMUNITIES OF SUPPORT FOR ISSUES.** E-petitions enable the governing body to identify communities of support for issues and allow for the creation of a continuing dialogue with supporters of those issues.

- **STREAMLINE EXISTING PETITION PROCESSES.** While e-petitions do not replace existing paper petition processes,

they encourage petition signing to occur in a more transparent, responsive, and streamlined process. For example, Queensland, Australia, has used its e-petition platform as a hub for both paper and electronic petitions. Doing so has brought transparency to the paper petition process through the online posting of paper petition responses.[8]

- **INCREASE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF GOVERNMENT PROCESS.** The e-petition process can provide citizens an opportunity to get a closer look at how their government works and educate them about the kinds of issues the government works on.
- **ESTABLISH CULTURE OF CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT.** By offering a mechanism for citizen views, governments who sponsor substantive e-petition processes send a message that they are interested in having citizens shape the government agenda.
- **ENGAGE ACROSS PHYSICAL BARRIERS.** For communities that cover a large geographic area, e-democracy tools such as e-petitions can help bridge physical barriers and engage citizens who may not live close to government. A recent study suggests that U.S. state capitals that are removed from major population centers may contribute to perceptions of corruption.[9] In such cases, e-democracy mechanisms are useful tools for engaging citizens in the work of government despite geographic distance.

When developing your goals, consider if they can be accomplished through an e-petition system alone or if they will be better reached through a larger e-democracy program. For example, if the primary goal is to increase public understanding of government decision-making, an e-petition system alone may be insufficient. The combination of an e-petition system, webcasts of public meetings, and more accessible descriptions of the decision-making process might better meet this goal. Each of the cases considered in this guide implemented e-petition systems as part of larger participatory plans or projects.

Establishing goals will help determine the structure of, and outreach strategy for, the e-petition system. In addition to setting engagement-oriented goals, it is important to recognize the impact that such a project will have on the governing body itself. For example, what kinds of resources can be committed to the project? What type of relationship does the government want to have with the public? These goals will guide your decision-making going forward.

It may also be useful to pilot an e-petition system for a period of time as a way of clarifying and refining what engagement goals will really matter for your jurisdiction. Many of the existing e-petition platforms began as trial programs, which were then modified to best suit the community's needs. In the case of Bristol, England, a trial period helped educate the community and the elected officials in the e-petition process and gave the city an opportunity to modify the platform's features as it developed.[10] It is also important to consider other factors that may influence your decisions in this arena: Are there pre-existing engagement activities with which e-petitions should be integrated? Is there a history of negative relationships between the government and certain groups? Are there community needs (e.g. language translation) that need to be addressed for the e-petition program to reach its goals?

We recommend the use of a trial period to test the technical platform itself and the community response to it, and to help educate decision-makers about the value of e-petition systems.

How Will E-Petitions Connect to Decision-Making?

The structure of e-petition processes matters. It is important to determine how e-petitions will connect with formal decision-making, because the nature of that connection will determine the value of the e-petition system to citizens and the governing body. How the system connects to decision-making is heavily dependent on the branch of government implementing e-petitions.

Management and Dissemination of E-Petitions

For e-petition systems that reside within the executive branch, it is necessary to determine whom citizens are able to petition and from whom they can expect to receive responses. Can petitions only be directed toward the mayor, or can they also be directed toward individual department or agency heads? Who is responsible for responding to the petition? If all petitions are submitted to the chief executive, who directs the petition to the correct responder or decides who is best suited to respond to a petition? Who manages the e-petition process? In the case of the White House e-petition platform, We the People, a team of policy advisors meets to determine who is best suited to respond to a specific petition. While the petitions may be directed at the President, he rarely answers them directly.[11]

Similar issues arise for the legislative branch. Are petitions submitted to the entire council or to individual councilors? The answer may depend on whether the system is being managed by the council clerk or individual councilors' offices. The legislative branch has an additional consideration in determining the form of an official petition response. Does the council guarantee petitioners a discussion of the issue? Do petitioners receive a written statement from a specific councilor or a notice of when a floor debate on the issue will be held? These types of questions need to be addressed to determine what citizen petitioners can expect from the e-petition process. For example, in Queensland, the Clerk of Parliament oversees both paper and electronic petition submission and is also responsible for ensuring that the government response is issued and made available to the public.[12]

Signature Threshold

In addition to determining a realistic response time, e-petition administrators may choose to establish a signature threshold for successful petitions. Various factors should be considered when selecting a threshold number.

- What human resource constraints will the e-petition system have? If the threshold for signatures is very low and many petitions are successful, many hours of staff time will be needed to shepherd the e-petitions through the government.
- What is the size of the population that the government serves? If a city has 400,000 residents, then a 100,000-signature threshold would be too high for any petitions to succeed.

When using a signature threshold, we recommend choosing a number that more accurately represents the politically engaged portion of the population. While the exact number will vary depending on the community, it may be useful to begin with 5-10% of active voters.

Is there a threshold for existing paper petition processes? You may want to consider using the same number for paper and e-petitions to ensure that those who use one medium are not negatively impacted.

- The threshold can be flexible. The signature threshold is likely to change as the system grows and develops. As long as it is publicly stated that the threshold number may change, it is

acceptable to modify the number as the needs of the e-petition system change. In the case of We the People, the White House e-petition platform, the threshold has changed dramatically, going from 5,000 to 25,000 to 100,000. As the e-petition platform gained users, the threshold was raised to ensure that only the most popular petitions were successful. However, the changes to the signature threshold were criticized as limiting citizen access.

As such, we recommend that e-petition system administrators avoid making frequent changes to the signature threshold and supply justification for any changes made to the signature threshold.

The signature threshold will vary depending on the community in which an e-petition system is implemented. What has worked for one community may not work for another. Examples of how other governments have navigated these issues are explored in the case studies that follow.

Official Response

Those implementing e-petitions, either in the executive or legislative branch, will have to determine what form the official response will take, how the response will be issued, and an appropriate time frame for the response. Setting a time frame for a guaranteed response is an important component of the e-petition process and should not be overlooked. Central to the premise of e-petitions is the notion that timely government response demonstrates respect for citizens, and thus improves the credibility of the e-petition system. If the e-petition site makes a stated guarantee that a response will be issued within 60 days, a failure to do so will undermine the validity of the government response and the trustworthiness of the system at large. Some governments may be tempted to avoid this issue by not setting a guaranteed response time, which is also problematic. If petitioners are not guaranteed a timely response, they may feel that the e-petition system is not a serious attempt to communicate with citizens and understand their concerns. For instance, the White House does not have a response time guarantee, and it has received criticism for its untimely responses to e-petitions, which may take many months.[13]

We recommend that e-petition systems utilize some form of response time guarantee. The appropriate time will vary across petition systems and may be dependent on the size of the population, the number of petitions received, and the staff time available for managing the e-petition system. The time guarantee will provide a sense of accountability for citizen petitioners, while also creating a petition response structure that treats all e-petitions equally.

Educating Decision-Makers

It is also important that the decision-makers or elected officials on the receiving end of the e-petition system are educated about the petition system and how it works. If officials are engaged with the e-petition process, they are more likely to take petitions seriously and appreciate the value of citizen views. In some cases, such as in Bristol, elected officials are encouraged to use the e-petition system themselves as a means to organize and energize the public around their policy ideas. Doing so encourages grassroots organizing among elected officials and promotes greater engagement between elected officials and the public.[14]

Even if elected officials are not formally encouraged to use the e-petition system, we recommend that decision-makers receive a thorough introduction to the platform to encourage its use and to help spread institutional acceptance of the platform.

How Will The Citizen-Government Interaction Be Managed?

Citizens participate in an e-petition system because they are interested in expressing their views and potentially impacting government decision-making. As such, it is important for the government sponsor to set realistic expectations among citizen petitioners and accurately represent the e-petition process and outcomes. Although not intended to be exhaustive, the list below includes the most common ways governments have communicated what citizens can expect through the e-petition systems they use:

FORMAL DESCRIPTION OF E-PETITION PROCESS AND GOVERNMENT GUARANTEES. Most petitioners will form baseline expectations from the description of the process that the sponsoring government provides on the e-petition website. This includes any guarantees about timely response, manner of response, as well as any formal submission requirements and procedures. If these fundamental descriptions are clear, realistic, and consistent, the petitioner will have a better sense of what they should expect from their e-petition experience. However, if these guarantees are not met, petitioner faith in the system is likely to be undermined.

We recommend that your e-petition system create an easy-to-understand formal process. These formal rules should be available on the site and should be accompanied by some sort of step-by-step guide or informational content piece that outlines the process of creating a petition, signing a petition, and what petitioners can expect from the e-petition process. Important site rules or restrictions should also be included. This information can be presented through multiple media, including downloadable guides, video tutorials, or infographics, among others.

CLEAR AND ACCESSIBLE TERMS OF USE AND PRIVACY POLICIES. In addition to formal procedural rules, the e-petition platform terms of use and privacy policy should be easy to understand and accessible from multiple points on the website. E-petitions sometimes require that signatories provide information about themselves, so it is important to clearly state who has access to personal information, what the information will be used for, and what will happen to the information in the future.

ADVERTISING THE E-PETITION PLATFORM. Many e-petition platforms are advertised to generate community interest and involvement. While advertising can be a useful way to spread the word about the system, it is important to make sure that the expectations being conveyed are realistic. For example, a tagline like "Share your opinion" may be more realistic than "Change your government." As the platform ages, there are likely to be some successful petitions that do impact policy. When advertising these successful petitions, do not imply that all petitions are likely to influence decision-making in a similar way. For example, the tagline for the White House's We the People platform is "Your voice in our government," which suggests that the platform is a mechanism for citizen agency, but not necessarily impact.[15]

We recommend that governments advertise the site, especially when launched, through formal means, such as press releases, social media platforms, and government websites. As the e-petition system develops, it is likely to start advertising itself through the social sharing of petitions. Most petition systems place the burden of promoting individual petitions on their creators, thus enabling promotion of the system through participant word of mouth.

LEVERAGING MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE PLATFORM. The media is likely to cover the release of the platform, as well as interesting or controversial petitions. While you cannot control media coverage of the platform, it can be leveraged to help spread news about the system and to highlight its capabilities. For example, a particularly controversial petition in Bristol about the graffiti artist Banksy drew a lot of media attention to Bristol's e-petition platform. Bristol seized the opportunity to advertise the site and responded by featuring the controversial petition and engaging with the media about the platform.[16]

USER EXPERIENCE ON SITE. The interaction between citizens and government is also moderated through the user experience on the site itself. Making the user interface simple and navigable, as well as providing contact information, can make the transition to e-petitioning simpler for many citizens. We the People, the White House e-petition platform, uses video tutorials and graphics to help guide people through the site. In addition, the site's search functionality and petition categorization make it easy to navigate through existing petitions and to find new petitions.

We recommend that e-petition site designers consider the user experience when designing e-petition platforms. The ease of finding and signing petitions is central to the success of any e-petition platform. It may be useful to use citizen focus groups or something similar (perhaps with government staff) to test the user experience of the site before the site is launched.

What Are The Technical Matters You Must Consider?

Technological decisions are core to any e-petition system. While each government's technical needs and requirements will differ, the following steps are intended to serve as a guide on a range of technological evaluation and implementation issues.

DETERMINING THE APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY. When choosing the right underlying technology, you face three general options: taking open-source code from an existing e-petition site, developing the technology from scratch, or using a public e-petition site.

Open-Source

Most, if not all, existing government-sponsored e-petition systems are open-source, meaning that their underlying code can be copied and used elsewhere for free. Developing an e-petition site from open-source code introduces a specific set of considerations. The code is free to take, and there may also be a community of developers who work with the code regularly to make modifications and improvements. When comparing different open-source platforms, you may want to see how active the community of developers is around the platform. If many people are working on it, it generally means that there will be a group of people who can help address issues on the site and who can serve as resources for website updates. You also want to look for the site features that are most important to you. Make sure that those features are available in the open-source version of the platform, or that your developer can add them after the platform has been created.

Developing From Scratch

If you have the technical capacity or are unable to find an open-source option that fits your needs, you may consider building the platform from scratch. This requires a lot of in-house development expertise or the ability to hire outside developers. We would not recommend this path unless you have a lot of available resources or have specific needs that aren't met in an existing platform or that cannot be added. If you choose to build it independently, you can open-source the code for the platform once it is complete. For example, the White House developed We the People independently and then open-sourced the code to make the platform available to others.

Public E-Petition Sites

There are a plethora of public e-petition sites that are unaffiliated with a government body. These sites do not allow back-end government control of the petition site, but do serve as platforms for citizens to create and sign petitions. It may be possible for a government to select a pre-existing public petition site and work with the site to encourage citizens to submit petitions to the government through the public site. Some of these public e-petition sites[17] only provide basic petition functionality, while others integrate social networking tools[18] to allow petitioners to interact and do outreach around their petitions. These more social e-petition sites help build communities of politically engaged citizens. However, using a public petition site will introduce issues related to data ownership, portability, and privacy. Additionally, there may be complications in accessing email addresses and acquiring signatory information.

Choosing The Right System

Developing a successful e-petition platform will require that the sponsoring government select an appropriate system, which leads to a question: What should you look for in comparing different systems?

EASE OF INSTALLATION AND MAINTENANCE. While this will be dependent on the capacity of whatever technology and technical staff are being used for implementation, it is an important consideration from a cost and management perspective.

PETITIONER INTERFACE. Discussion of the petitioner interface should center on the ease of use and the availability of tools useful to citizen petitioners. Simply put, how easy is it to start, sign, or find a petition? The following site features should be considered.

- **RANKED LISTS:** On a site where there may be a large volume of content, such as active e-petitions or responses, it is helpful to provide several ways for petitions to be listed and searched. Some commonly used ranked lists include: popularity, most recent, or a random selection. The ranked lists available to site visitors are important because the petitions presented to the most users are likely to receive the most signatures. To avoid appearing as if the site favors certain petitions, make sure that there is an explanation for the listing of petitions, such as chronological order, and that all active petitions can be easily accessed.
- **SEARCH FUNCTIONALITY:** If the site includes a search feature, how does it work? Does it search the full text of petitions, a set of keywords (chosen by either the petitioner or site administrator), or tags?
- **DUPLICATE PETITIONS:** Similarly, if someone creates a new petition and a similar petition is already active, is the petitioner notified and offered the opportunity to sign the existing petition instead of creating a new one?

Many of these considerations will vary depending on the number of active petitions on the site, how many visitors the site receives, and the way the site is being used, all of which may change over time. For example, if petition creators are driving signatories directly to specific petitions, the issues around petition lists may be minimized. However, many users will be brought to the site by a specific petition and may look at other petitions while on the site, making the listing functionality very important.

BACK-END INTERFACE. The back-end interface used by system managers runs parallel to the petitioner interface. How easy is it to use and understand? How will it fit in with internal workflow? For example, will petitions have to be copied and pasted into another system to be distributed to the responding officials or, does the e-petition system allow petitions to be forwarded and tracked? Similarly, can responses be sent to petitioners through the e-petition platform, integrated into an existing email client, or do the email addresses need to be exported and then sent using a separate email program? How easy is it for platform administrators to archive and post petition responses?

TAGS AND CATEGORIZATION. How do petitions get categorized to minimize the number of similar petitions that enter the system? In the case of We the People, petition creators choose tags and categories for their petition. These tags are then searchable, making petitions easier to sort and find. Additionally, each petition must fall into a specific issue category, which enables searching petitions by issue area.[19]

INTERACTIVE FEATURES. In addition to the basic features of an e-petition site, interactive features can be added to create greater citizen interaction and engagement: for example, enabling user comments on petitions, the option to upload additional information (documents, photos, links) to petitions, and user profiles to allow signatories to interact with one another and form groups. While these features enable greater engagement and connectivity among users, they can create more back-end management concerns for system administrators. Additionally, some governments may not feel comfortable using their official websites as platforms for issue or advocacy groups to form and connect.

USER VERIFICATION. While many e-petition platforms attempt to verify who site users are through email, we have not seen a system that is able to genuinely verify that users are telling the truth about their identities. The use of email verification may help to combat e-petition fraud through mass automatic signatures, but it does not address the use of multiple email accounts by the same user or help determine the identity of the user. Given that the technology is not able to prevent all fraud, it may be useful to develop a penalty for fraudulent use of the system and outline its consequences on the website. In Queensland, e-petition fraud can result in a fine, and if the fine goes unpaid, it can lead to jail time.[20]

STAFFING AND RESOURCES. Prior to researching all of the possible technical possibilities, it is important to do a cursory examination of your commitment and capacity for e-petition implementation.

- **WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SYSTEM?** If there is an internal IT team, they may have the ability to install and configure the e-petition system. If you have a website, whoever maintains your website may be able to do this. However, you also may need to identify a new external consultant or vendor for the implementation.

- **WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR TECHNICAL MANAGEMENT OF THE SYSTEM?** Similarly, you will need to determine who will be responsible for maintaining the system

once it is up and running. This will include troubleshooting problems that may arise and ensuring smooth operation of the system.

- **WHAT IS YOUR BUDGET FOR TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION AND MAINTENANCE?** Knowing your budget ahead of time will help focus your efforts on finding the right system.
- **WHAT IS YOUR STAFF OR BUDGET FOR SUBSTANTIVE TRAINING AND ONGOING MANAGEMENT OF THE SYSTEM?** Being realistic about the amount of staff and budget that you have available for the project will help facilitate its success. If your government already receives paper petitions, it is ideal that the same team processes e-petitions and, if possible, that both types of petitions move through the same internal process.

BUILDING A TEAM. E-petition systems can be managed by one person or many, and in cases where several people will be involved in designing and implementing the system, it is important to build a team that will make appropriate software choices.

- **WHO IS ON THE TEAM?**
  - **TECH TEAM.** If there is an existing IT team that will be doing the installation and maintenance of the e-petition system or a web consultant that is already working with the government body, they need to be included on this team. Their familiarity with different technologies will help to guide the decision of what software is most appropriate for your specific situation.
  - **MANAGEMENT STAFF.** Who will be responsible for managing the system and responding to petitions once it is up and running? Involving platform administrators early in the planning process will allow them to provide feedback on the interface and air any concerns they may have. This will not only ease the training, but also give them a sense of ownership in the system, thus improving the likelihood of its success.

DATA CONCERNS WITH EXTERNAL VENDORS AND HOSTING. For governments that use outside vendors to run their e-petition system, it is important to be ready to address data ownership and privacy issues that may arise.

- **RETAIN OWNERSHIP.** The terms of service on some sites claim ownership of the data that is entered into them. As such, government sponsors of e-petition sites should ensure that an external vendor or consultant does not own the data being collected. To avoid the issue, include government ownership of site content as part of any vendor contract. If you are using an external e-petitions site, you may need to have your legal department verify that its terms of service do not preclude you, as a government entity, from using their service.
- **RETAIN ACCESS.** When an external vendor is used, make sure a plan is in place should the government decide to switch vendors or if the contractor goes out of business. Additionally, make sure that you are able to retrieve collected data. It may be useful to set up a regular backup service to ensure continued access to site data.
- **PORTABILITY.** If vendors or platforms need to be changed, how easy is it to move the data from the previous system to a new one? Addressing this issue will be easier if multiple vendors can host the e-petition system or if data can be backed up and accessed externally from a proprietary vendor.

How Will The Outcomes of The E-Petition System Be Evaluated?

In thinking about the development of an e-petition system, it is helpful to consider the metrics that will be used to evaluate the program. The goals laid out in the beginning of the planning process can be used as a guide for designing the evaluation process. What metrics are useful in measuring your specific e-petition goals?[21] While some metrics will be specific to the government context, other metrics can be used in many e-petition system evaluations.

USAGE DATA. How many petitions were submitted? How many petitions crossed the signature threshold? How many signatures have been logged? How many unique visitors? These are a few examples of the usage-related questions, which are useful to determine the depth and breadth of engagement with the e-petition system. It is helpful to know not only how many people are using the system, but also how people are using it and how often they return. This data should be available through analytics monitoring of the e-petition site.

IMPACT METRIC. An impact metric is much more subjective than usage data but can provide valuable feedback on how citizens feel about the e-petition system. Which parts of the system are working? Which aren't? For example, sending an automatic survey after individuals have signed a petition or received a response provides the government with an opportunity to ask petitioners questions about how they felt about the experience or if they would do it again. Additionally, surveys can also be given to decision-makers to establish whether the e-petition system has impacted their policy-making process or their understanding of citizen concerns. The White House, Bristol, and Queensland have all used surveys at some point to help evaluate their respective e-petition programs.

SYSTEM RELIABILITY AND RESPONSE TIME. How well do the technical components of the e-petition platform work? How often does the site go down? Are there certain pages where petitioners log a lot of complaints or leave the site? Examining these technical components of the e-petition process can improve the user experience and increase the reliability of the system. It is also useful to maintain a record of how long it takes to respond to petitions and how often you fail to meet any stated timeliness guarantees. Keeping track of this data helps to keep the government accountable for the timeliness guarantees that it makes to citizen petitioners.

MANAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION. How has the system been managed? Are system administrators fluent and efficient in system management? Do they have the right skills to perform their duties? What are the costs (in terms of money and time) to run the e-petition program? Asking these types of questions will help evaluate how the system is being managed internally and the impact of e-petitions on internal resources.

We recommend that you utilize some kind of analytics tool, such as Google Analytics, to monitor the e-petition site usage and use regular site surveys to gather feedback from users. Additionally, metrics and evaluations should be made public and accessible as a means of showing the public how well you are meeting your engagement goals. It is also useful to develop an evaluation plan, including a schedule, to ensure recurring measurement and evaluation.

Hopefully, this discussion has better prepared you to answer some of the questions you will face in your e-petition system implementation. The following case studies are intended to show you how other governments have navigated through their own e-petition implementations and provide insight into potential obstacles and opportunities.

CASE STUDY:

We the People – United States

Background

The Obama Administration launched the "We the People" e-petition website to enable Americans to share their views with the executive branch. As a tool for the entire country, We the People serves over 300 million people.[22]

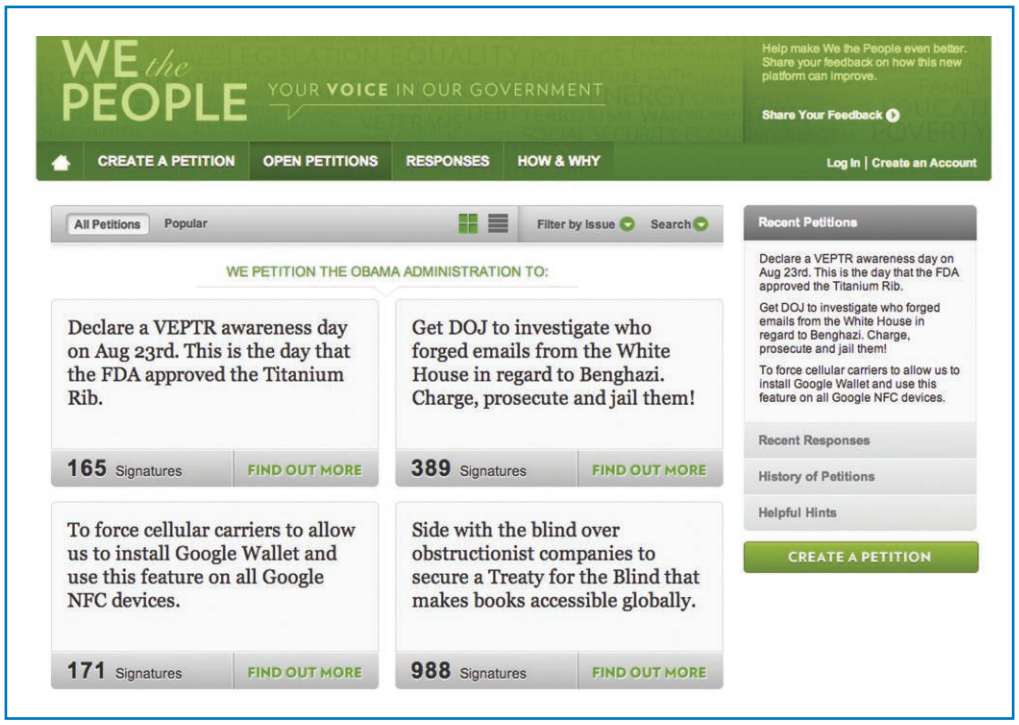
E-Petitions in the United States

The right to petition government is enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which states that people have a right to "petition Government for a redress of grievances." While the right to petition was once used for the personal redress of grievances, it is now primarily used by groups of citizens who want to express their views or demand a specific action on a particular issue. It has been formally established that though there is a right to petition, there is no defined right of receiving a government response.[23]

When President Obama took office in 2009, he issued a Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, calling on the Executive Branch and its agencies to be more transparent, participatory, and collaborative. In September 2011, President Obama introduced the U.S. Open Government Partnership National Action Plan,[24] outlining the action steps to foster greater transparency, participation, and collaboration in government decision-making.[25] The creation of an e-petition platform was one of 26 specific commitments in this plan.[26]

Soon after the release of the National Action Plan, the Obama Administration launched the We the People e-petition website. The site not only allowed people to petition the White House, but also guaranteed that if a specified number of people signed a petition within 30 days, the White House would issue a response. Usage of the site has grown steadily, and the number of site users doubled following the 2012 election, bringing the total number of site users to over 7 million.[27] As of March 2013, the We the People site had received more than 178,000 petitions[28] and had issued over 150 responses.[29] The signature threshold to trigger a White House response has changed over time. When the platform launched, the threshold was 5,000, but in January 2013 it was changed to 100,000.[30]

The We the People e-petition site was influenced by pre-existing e-petition platforms, including the United Kingdom's House of Commons e-petition site (http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/).[31] The White House site is the first e-petition site created by the U.S. government and is the only example of e-petitioning in the United States that we have found. Though the site was influenced by international e-petition platforms, a team of White House developers built it.[32] In the summer of 2012, the White House open-sourced the code for We the People, making the platform available for use by other governments, organizations, and individuals.[33]



Key Decision Areas for We The People - United States

Determining Engagement Goals

As a presidential candidate in 2008, Barack Obama vowed to implement new accountability transparency measures.[34] To keep his campaign promise, he announced his Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government on his first day in office. The memo highlighted increased public participation as a path to government openness, and is described on the White House website as "empowering the public – through greater openness and new technologies – to influence the decisions that affect their lives."[35] While e-petitions were not the only initiative launched by the Obama Administration to meet this goal, they embody the spirit of openness through technological innovation.

Due to the long history of petitions and the public's familiarity with the mechanism, government-sponsored e-petitioning is an accessible participation tool that can provide an opportunity for the government to engage in a dialogue with citizens about issues that are important to them. According to the We the People website, the platform "helps the White House understand the views of the American people and have a focused and civil conversation with them."[36] The We the People platform provided an avenue for the Obama Administration to meet its public commitments to participation. E-petitions, as part of the Obama Administration's larger government openness initiative, were positioned as a means for the public's voice to be heard, in contrast to the perceived Washington culture of secrecy and special interests. The tagline for the e-petition platform is "your voice in government," suggesting that individuals lacked a proper voice prior to the introduction of the platform.[37]

Connecting E-Petitions to Decision-Making

The We the People platform is housed within the executive branch; petitions sent through the platform can only be directed at the White House or executive branch agencies. To participate on the site and create or sign petitions, individuals must be 13 or older and create a WhiteHouse.gov account, which asks for an email address, name, and ZIP code. A verification link is sent to the email address and the user must click to verify the address. When creating a petition, users must provide a title and select an issue category. The platform then searches for petitions that already meet those criteria and asks if the user would prefer to sign an existing petition in lieu of creating a new petition. If a user continues to create a new petition, he or she can provide a description (up to 800 characters) and add keywords and tags. Once submitted, the petition cannot be edited and the petition creator is provided with a link to the active petition on the We the People site. However, at this point, the petition is not searchable on We the People. The petition creator must share the link through his or her own networks, and once the petition reaches 150 signatures, it becomes searchable on the White House e-petition site.[38] This threshold initially places the burden of publicizing a petition on the petition creator.

Petitions can be viewed by issue category, date, or popularity, and can be searched using key terms. Potential signatories can view a petition, see the initials and general location of other signers, and view how many more signatures are needed

before the petition crosses the threshold for a White House response. Once users have signed a petition, they are prompted to share the petition via social media. According to the platform's rules, an e-petition has 30 days to reach 100,000 signatures. If the e-petition does not reach the signature threshold within 30 days, it is removed from the site. If the petition crosses the threshold, it is then brought to an internal meeting at the White House, where members of the Office of Digital Strategy, which oversees We the People, have gathered relevant policy officials. The outcome of this meeting determines who in the executive branch is best suited to respond to the petition.[39]

While petitions that cross the signature threshold are guaranteed a response, there is no stated timeline for that response. The lack of timely response has been criticized, and several petitions that had crossed the threshold were still awaiting responses many months later as of January 2013.[40] Policy officials whose work is related to the content of the petition usually write the responses, which are then posted on the e-petition site and emailed to all of the petition's signatories. A single response can be issued for multiple petitions on related subjects.

While the tone of each response varies according to the writer and the topic, petition responses appear to be primarily of four types:

- An explanation of what the administration's position is on the topic in question.
- "A request for further engagement"[41] between policy officials and the petition creator or signatories on the issue.
- A statement on how policy has changed as a result of the petition.
- A description of why the White House cannot address the petition. There are various subjects that the White House will not address, such as law enforcement, procurement, or adjudicatory matters.[42]

While most petitions do not cross the We the People threshold, some successful petitions have created a substantive policy impact. For example, petitions against online piracy legislation, such as the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) of 2012, were part of a larger online protest that was successful in building enough opposition to stop the proposed legislation. Other petitions created impact without the backing of a larger movement. In the beginning of 2013, a petition surfaced requesting that cell phone unlocking (which allows cell phones to be used on different carriers) be legalized. The White House response to the petition was very supportive, stating "The White House agrees with the 114,000+ of you who believe that consumers should be able to unlock their cell phones without risking criminal or other penalties."[43] The response was very well received by the petition creator, who said, "A lot of people reacted skeptically when I originally started the petition, with lots of comments to the effect of 'petitions don't do anything.' The optimist in me is really glad to have proved them wrong. The White House just showed that they really do listen, and that they're willing to take action."[44] This response shows how a positive interaction can give petitioners a more positive view of government.

Managing the Citizen-Government Interaction

Creating an online portal for citizen-government interaction in a country as large and diverse as the United States requires a fair amount of management. The team behind We the People, the White House's Office of Digital Strategy, manages the interaction with the public on many levels and through varying means. First and foremost, the interaction is mediated by the formal rules set in place by the e-petition platform.[45] These rules are fully outlined in the site terms of participation and made more accessible to the general public through video tutorials and explanations throughout the site. The use of videos and graphical representation of the e-petition process helps new and less experienced users understand the process, while also managing their expectations.

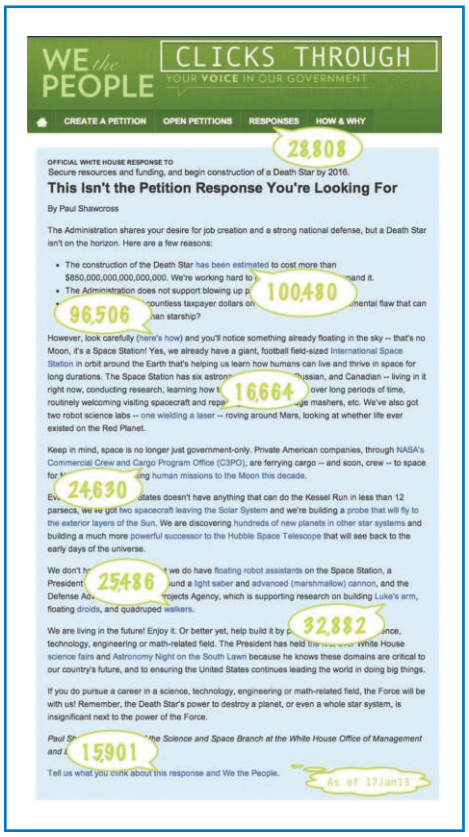
While the introductory videos lay out the general e-petition process, other site videos highlight the potential impact of e-petitions on the policymaking process. For example, one video explaining the e-petition process states, "there are issues that are on live petitions right now on We the People that senior members of the White House are having meetings about because the issue came to us through We the People."[46] This suggests that petitioners can have a tangible impact on policy.

Petitioner expectations are not only managed through the articulation of formal rules, but also through the design of the platform itself. For example, a petition creator must select an issue area for the petition as it is being created. Such a step makes it easier for the site to sort and search petitions, but it also forces petition creators to conform to the constraints of the site. Similarly, petition descriptions cannot exceed 800 characters.[47] The mandatory account creation also serves to control the interaction between users and the site. While the information is only verified using an email link, the site asks for identifying information, such as a name and zip code, which is treated as public information. The terms of participation also state that the White House can send users emails related to We the People generally, not only to the petitions that they sign. Additionally, the White House keeps user information on file, stating that "information will likely be retained by the White House until the end of the current Administration, at which time it will be transferred to the National Archives and Records Administration."[48] These structural components control the way users are able to interact with the site, fundamentally framing the nature of the interaction.

In addition to these formal mechanisms, the White House sets the tone of the platform by advertising the platform elsewhere on the White House website. For example, the White House blog serves as the source for information about the e-petition platform and process, including site changes and updates. The tone set by the We the People blog posts continually suggests that the site is evolving and is still in its early stages, giving readers a sense that their experience with the platform will change over time[49] and creating a space for the White House to advertise the successes of the site.[50] In addition, the We the People blog posts encourage readers to share feedback about the site on Twitter or through contact forms.

For many petitioners, the citizen-government interaction is judged through the petition response (or lack thereof), which places importance on the content, tone, and timeliness of petition responses. These vary across petitions, but it is worth noting that the White House's e-petition process has received criticism on all three fronts. Some petition responses have been criticized for being dismissive or simply stating an administration position without any substantive explanation, while other responses have not been issued in a timely manner (or at all).[51] However, the White House has publicly stated that it takes the petition process seriously, even responding to a petition about the quality of petition responses with the title "We're listening. Seriously."[52] Despite this claim, the decision-making process behind petition responses is not visibly transparent, either in the explanation of the petition process or in the reasoning put forth in many petition responses.

The quality and content of petition responses can carry additional impact by creating avenues for further engagement. For example, a response to a petition calling for the creation of a "Death Star" (a fictional space station from "Star Wars") included many links to space-related projects already under development, essentially redirecting those who expressed interest in space exploration to the appropriate resources (e.g., NASA newsletters and websites).[53] One link included in the petition response lead to 10,000 sign up's for a "Spot the Station" tool on a NASA site and "The impact on NASA's Commercial Crew and Cargo Program Office (C3PO) page was huge. Traffic to the site increased about 200x between Jan. 10 - 12. The traffic over that weekend represents more than half the traffic to that page for the entire month."[54] While not seen in every petition response, this practice encourages petitioners to remain engaged with government and its resources, even if the White House does not choose to take the action requested in the petition.



Each petition response creates a unique relationship with its signatories, giving the White House an opportunity each time to make petitioners feel understood and heard. However, this outcome can easily become compromised by the quality of the petition response, as well as unrealistic public expectations for what petitions can accomplish. As the site develops, the relationship between petitioners and the White House will also continue to evolve.

Technical Considerations

An internal team of developers at the White House created the We the People platform. While the platform uses features similar to other e-petition platforms, it was not built from existing open-source e-petition platform code. The platform was built using Drupal, an open-source content management system. The White House made the platform code available through an open-source license in August 2012, which can be found at github.com/WhiteHouse/petitions. Like other e-petition platforms, We the People offers basic petition functionality including signing, creating, and browsing petitions. The site also features additional functionality, such as a featured response page, issue categories and tags, site moderation, account sign-ups, and video/multimedia capabilities.

The added functionality allows the site administrators to more easily organize information, both for site users and for back-end purposes. For example, using predefined categories makes it easier to search for petitions relevant to citizen interests and allows the White House to understand which issues are generating interest in specific geographic areas. The account structure allows information to be tracked over a long period of time, across interest area and geography. The usage data is publicly available (petitioners are identified by their initials and ZIP codes) and can be used by the government and the public to understand areas of overlapping interest. For instance, in the wake of the mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in December 2012, petitioners on both sides of the gun control issue signed the same petitions about mental health, suggesting people may who disagree about gun control, may still agree about mental health policy.[55]

The availability of data generated through the We the People site speaks to the White House's engagement with the tech community around the e-petition platform. In addition to making the platform open-source, the White House has also hosted a "hackathon," where developers were invited to the White House to create tools using the data generated by the site. At the first hackathon in February 2013, developers created a diverse set of tools, including "Where the People," a time-lapsed map of petition signatories expressed as a percentage of the population.[56] The tools developed at the hackathon were based on the development of a We the People application programming interface (API), which was announced in February 2013. An API allows the e-petition platform features to be accessed on third-party sites. For example, if you could sign a We the People petition on an advocacy organization's website, you would be interacting with the We the People API. The White House explained the purpose of the API by saying, "At its most basic, We the People is a conversation. Individuals ask questions of the White House, and the Obama administration responds. What this API allows us to do is broaden the discussion – make it as flexible, open, and transparent as possible."[57] While the Write API (which would allow interaction on third-party sites) is not yet released, it demonstrates the White House's desire to make the platform more accessible and available online.[58]

Evaluation

Similarly to other e-petition platforms, We the People employs various site usage metrics, gathered through Google Analytics, to help with evaluation.[59] As of March 13, 2013, the site had received over 11.6 million signatures, had 7.2 million total users, and had collected over 178,000 petitions.[60] However, those numbers don't paint the whole picture. According to Chris Wilson of Yahoo! News, about 10% of participants make up 40% of the signatures on the site, meaning that a group of "supersigners" or "repeat users" accounts for much of the activity on the site.

In addition to gathering usage information, which the White House regularly includes in blog posts related to the site, the White House also uses surveys of site users to determine the quality of their experience on the site. According to the White House, 86% of survey respondents would create or sign another petition on the site; 66% said that the Administration's response was helpful to hear; and 50% said that they learned something new as a result of the petition response. This data suggests that the site is at least somewhat successful at engaging the public.

The White House employs the We the People usage data as proof of its commitment to openness and civic engagement, and of its fulfillment of their goals for the site. For example, the e-petition platform is often cited as a success of the Obama Administration's commitment to open government. One blog post reflecting on the Open Government commitment stated, "with the launch of the White House's 'We the People' petition platform, citizens now have a more powerful voice in government." Technically, the site has undergone significant changes since its launch, including becoming open-source and developing an API. These developments are seen as successful steps toward fulfilling the openness and engagement goals set out by President Obama. While these changes will work to increase the number of people who have access to the site and provide increased access to site data, they do not address concerns related to the timeliness or quality of petition responses.

CONCLUSION

With all of the media coverage of We the People, it can be easy to forget that the platform is young and relatively untested. While the site seems to have helped the Obama Administration meet some of its open government goals, it is not yet institutionalized within the executive branch. The election of the next presidential administration and its decisions about e-petitioning will test the longevity of the platform for both the government and the public. If the next presidential administration continues utilizing e-petitioning, either through We the People or another tool, it will help solidify the practice, making e-petitions less of a political tool and more of an instrument for citizen voice. Moreover, as Americans become accustomed to government-sponsored e-petitions, there may be a growing desire for increased citizen access and government response. While the full impact of We the People remains to be seen, its recent growth suggests that there is a political and public desire for simple, accessible tools for government openness and citizen access within the United States.

CASE STUDY:

Queensland, Australia

Background

Queensland is a state situated in the northeastern part of Australia that covers 22.5% of the Australian continent, making it about 2.5 times the size of Texas. Over half of Queensland's 4.5 million people lives outside of urbanized areas – making physical access to state government difficult.

Government Structure

The government of Queensland is modeled after the British Parliament, meaning that it has three branches: parliament (legislative), cabinet and executive council (executive), and courts (judicial). Queensland is made up of 89 electoral districts each with an elected representative to the state parliament, which is unicameral. The political party, or group of parties working together, that wins the majority of seats in parliament (45 seats) forms a government, and the group of parties that wins the second highest number of votes forms the opposition. It is important to note that Australia has compulsory voting in federal, state, and local elections, meaning that all citizens 18 years and older are registered to vote and are supposed to vote in all elections.

E-Petitions in Queensland

In the early 2000s, various members of Queensland's Parliament faced allegations of electoral fraud. These allegations were of great concern and sparked an independent investigation, called the Shepardson Inquiry, which recommended prosecution of some elected officials. While the Shepardson Inquiry did not directly call for electoral reform, it highlighted existing issues within Queensland's system. As a response, the Restoring Integrity Good Government Plan ("the Plan") was implemented in 2001. This plan was initially part of a Labor party campaign platform that called for initiatives designed to "cut out bad practices and restore integrity to the democratic processes of the State."

The Plan focused on three main goals: "honest democracy, honest elections," and parliament working on behalf of citizens. In the Plan, various directives were outlined to achieve each goal. The development of an online petition system was included as a means to help Parliament work for citizens' needs. Various other openness mechanisms were also included, such as the broadcasting of parliamentary meetings and an e-democracy trial.[70] In August of 2002, a 12-month e-petition trial began on the Queensland Parliament website. The evaluation of the trial took place the following year; it found that the public and Members of Parliament (MPs) supported the new system, citing the increased transparency brought by the publishing of ministerial responses to paper petitions. In November 2003, e-petitions became an official feature of the Queensland Parliament.[71]

Key Decision Areas for Queensland, Australia

Determining Engagement Goals

The goals of the Queensland e-petition system should be viewed within the context of the larger Restoring Integrity Good Government Plan, which outlined government response to electoral fraud. The Plan was created not only as a needed response to perceptions of corruption, but also as a way to address "disengagement by citizens, declining levels of public trust and in confidence in government and increased public expectations for governments to be responsive, accountable, and effective."[72] E-petitions were included in the Plan as a means of making Parliament work in the interests of citizens and bringing the public into the governing process. Additionally, e-petitions fit into the government's "commitment to use information and communication technology (ICT) to improve government policies, programs, and services," as well as to "strengthen participatory democracy."[73]

Neil Laurie, Clerk of the Queensland Parliament, summarized the following goals for the e-petition program:[74]

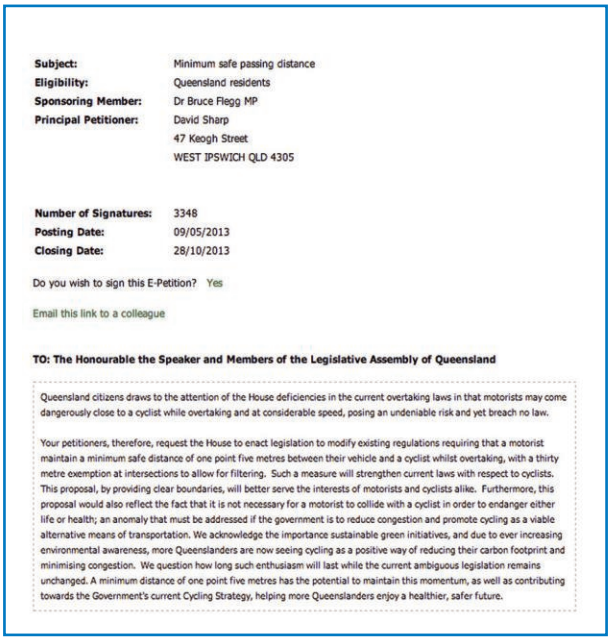
- Strengthen the democratic right intended by the petitioning process to give the public a direct voice in the Queensland Parliament;
- Create an additional avenue by which the public can raise issues directly with the parliament and provide a central location where the public can learn about and support petitions of which they may have been otherwise unaware; and
- Deliver greater accessibility, transparency, and responsiveness around petitioning.

These goals have influenced the structure of the e-petition system and its implementation. For example, the e-petition website serves as a hub for all parliamentary petitions (electronic and paper petitions), thus providing a central location where citizens can participate in the petition process. Centralizing the petition process helped deliver on the goal of bringing transparency to the pre-existing paper petition process.[75]

Connecting E-Petitions to Decision-Making

Queensland's e-petition process is different from many other e-petition processes in two significant ways: there is no signature threshold, and a Member of Parliament or the Clerk of the Parliament must sponsor petitions before they are presented to Parliament. While both paper and electronic petitions must find a sponsor, the process of acquiring sponsorship varies between paper and electronic petitions. For e-petition creators, an e-petition must find a sponsor before it can receive signatures. However, paper petitions receive signatures before sponsorship. A petition creator, called the principal petitioner, can either find a sympathetic MP or can submit the petition to the Clerk of the Parliament to receive sponsorship.

The first step in the e-petition process is for the principal petitioner to find a sponsor, either an MP or the Clerk. Contact information for MPs is available via the e-petition site, as is an e-petition request form, which is required when seeking petition sponsorship. The e-petition request form asks for the wording of the petition, eligibility criteria for signing the petition, how long the petition should remain active, and contact information for the principal petitioner and the petition sponsor. The principal petitioner can choose from among three options to determine who is eligible to sign the petition: Queensland citizens, Queensland residents, or voters of a certain area within the state. As such, it is the principal petitioner's responsibility to identify which group would have the greatest interest or commitment to the petition.



Subject: Minimum safe passing distance
Eligibility: Queensland residents
Sponsoring Member: Dr Bruce Flegg MP
Principal Petitioner: David Sharp
47 Keogh Street
WEST IPSWICH QLD 4305

Number of Signatures: 3348
Posting Date: 09/05/2013
Closing Date: 28/10/2013

Do you wish to sign this E-Petition? Yes

Email this link to a colleague

TO: The Honourable the Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland

Queensland citizens draws to the attention of the House deficiencies in the current overtaking laws in that motorists may come dangerously close to a cyclist while overtaking and at considerable speed, posing an undeniable risk and yet breach no law.

Your petitioners, therefore, request the House to enact legislation to modify existing regulations requiring that a motorist maintain a minimum safe distance of one point five metres between their vehicle and a cyclist whilst overtaking, with a thirty metre exemption at intersections to allow for filtering. Such a measure will strengthen current laws with respect to cyclists. This proposal, by providing clear boundaries, will better serve the interests of motorists and cyclists alike. Furthermore, this proposal would also reflect the fact that it is not necessary for a motorist to collide with a cyclist in order to endanger either life or health; an anomaly that must be addressed if the government is to reduce congestion and promote cycling as a viable alternative means of transportation. We acknowledge the importance sustainable green initiatives, and due to ever increasing environmental awareness, more Queenslanders are now seeing cycling as a positive way of reducing their carbon footprint and minimising congestion. We question how long such enthusiasm will last while the current ambiguous legislation remains unchanged. A minimum distance of one point five metres has the potential to maintain this momentum, as well as contributing towards the Government's current Cycling Strategy, helping more Queenslanders enjoy a healthier, safer future.

If a principal petitioner is able to find an MP to sponsor the petition, the MP files paperwork with the Clerk of the Parliament, who determines whether the petition meets the stated e-petition requirements.[76] After passing the Clerk's review, the e-petition is posted online and is open for signatures. A petition can be posted for a minimum of one week and a maximum of six months; the exact time is determined by the principal petitioner and the petition sponsor. Signatories to the petition are able to sign up to receive an automatic email with the petition response. Once the petition has reached the end of its active period, the petition is closed and presented to the Parliament at its next session. The minister overseeing the content area of the petition must submit a response to the Clerk within 30 days. If a minister is unable to respond, a reason must be sent to the Clerk within 30 days, and a final response must be submitted within three months. After receiving a ministerial response, the Clerk forwards the response to the principal petitioner, the petition sponsor, and petition signatories, and also posts the response online.

Once a response is posted online, it can be found through a link on the original petition, which brings up a PDF of the formal response letter from the minister. Possible e-petition responses can include:

- An explanation of what actions were taken as a result of the petition.
- A statement that the issue is under consideration.
- An explanation of why the issue cannot or will not be pursued.

Paper petition responses are handled similarly, with the exception that the petition gathers signatures before the principal petitioner identifies a sponsor. Responses to both paper and electronic petitions are available on the e-petition website.

Managing Citizen-Government Interaction

The interaction between citizens and government is moderated through the formal construction of the e-petition website and its rules, as well the type of interaction that takes place on the site. The website's conditions outline who is eligible to use the site and the consequences of misusing the site. Queensland's conditions of use explicitly state that failure to comply with the site's terms of use could result in a fine and, if the fine is not paid, imprisonment.[77] The privacy statement explains that petitioners' information (name, address, email address) is kept until the petition receives a ministerial response or six months has passed since the e-petition was tabled by Parliament. Despite the deletion of petitioner information after a specified period of time, the privacy statement clearly indicates that petition information is public and that it remains available at the Parliament's Table Office to be read or copied after the petition has been tabled.[78] This means that petitioner information, including addresses and email addresses, could be accessed and copied even after the formal petition period has ended.

The principal petitioner is responsible for finding a sponsor for the petition and for advertising the petition to potential signatories. "It is the principal petitioner's responsibility to promote their petition and raise awareness in the community. The Queensland Parliament's role is only to facilitate the process."[79] While the burden of advertising falls on the principal petitioner, MPs "and their electorate office staff also play a crucial role in the petitioning process." MPs are provided with training and materials to assist petitioners as they move throughout the process.[80] This interaction serves as a means for MPs to create valuable relationships with active citizens and reach out to voters by showing their support for citizen-driven initiatives. Petitioners can also receive support from the Office of the Clerk, who can help provide strategic guidance, such as how long a petition should remain active.[81]

This e-petitioning structure creates a dynamic interaction between citizens and government. Queensland's use of MP or Clerk sponsorship encourages principal petitioners to have a more personal interaction with government officials and has the potential to create meaningful citizen-government dialogue. According to the Clerk, "members of the public regularly seek advice and assistance in preparing petitions."[82] However, the level of citizen interaction seems to subside after the petition enters the formal response process. Once the petition response is issued, there is no specific space for citizen interaction on that petition. At that point, petitioners can create new petitions or may continue to work with the petition sponsor to find a more suitable way to bring the issue onto the parliamentary agenda.

Due to Queensland's investment in other e-democracy tools, interested petitioners are also able to view live broadcasts of the parliamentary chamber, as well as various committee hearings. Archived broadcasts are available dating back to February 2011.

Technical Considerations

Queensland's petitions website was created in house by the Parliamentary Service's Information Technology Service, which has continued to support the Office of the Clerk in managing the petition system's technical components.[83] It is estimated that the cost of building the system was approximately $80,000, which was primarily spent on hardware (server), related software, and developer hours. The petition site itself has two primary interfaces, one for petition signers and the other for system administrators. The public petition-signing interface is largely automated, including the closing of a petition on a specific date and the deletion of signatory information; however, the posting of ministerial responses is performed manually.[84]

The site features include a petition-signing function, a list of current petitions (both electronic and paper), a list of closed petitions and ministerial responses, a total number of signatures for each petition, a share function (to send petition to friends) and links to the Clerk and MPs. To prevent fraud through mass email submissions, the e-petitions platform utilizes a unique ID generation system, which gives each petition signature a verifiable ID number "which must be quoted as part of the signing process."[85] While the site offers both electronic and paper petitions, they are accessed through separate links on the main page. Additionally, there is no search or organizing function, which can make it difficult to navigate the existing petitions.

Evaluation

Similar to other e-petition systems, Queensland evaluates its petition program with a combination of usage data, formal evaluation, and user surveys. According to the Clerk of the Parliament, there have been over 600 e-petitions and 1,323 paper petitions since the beginning of Queensland's e-petition program. While there have been more paper petitions, e-petitions generally receive more signatures because they can remain available on the website for up to six months, which is longer than most paper petitions remain active.

A comprehensive evaluation of the Queensland e-petition process in 2003 "confirmed that the system is providing an additional and accessible avenue for the community to engage in a key government process and that there is a high level of support in the community and among Members of Parliament for the e-petition process."[86] This 2003 evaluation found that users of the e-petition system believed it to be a convenient tool that increased transparency in the petition process and encouraged public input in government decision-making.

Between April 2003 and May 2005, the petition site ran an online survey to gather information from users. Approximately 3.5% of site users responded to the survey, which asked why people decided to use the site, how they found out about the site, what activities they did while on the site, if they would return, and their general satisfaction with the site. Survey respondents found the process easy to use and thought it was "a useful opportunity for democratic participation."[87] Most survey respondents discovered the site through the promotion of a specific petition, "including recommendations from others (39%), word-of-mouth (14%) or from the principal petitioner (10%)."[88] When asked why petitioners signed an e-petition, over 40% cited convenience, and about a quarter said to prompt a petition response.[89] This survey helped to provide a set of recommendations for improvements to the e-petition system. Unfortunately, there has been no formal evaluation of the Queensland e-petition system since 2005, so it is not clear how the government has responded to earlier recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Queensland's e-petition system demonstrates the usefulness of e-petitions as a mechanism to bridge the physical divides between government and the public. As noted by the Clerk of the Parliament, creating citizen access to government with a dispersed population can be difficult, and "providing accessible government and avenues for people to have their say on matters that are important to them and their communities, regardless of their location, is particularly important and challenging in Queensland." [90]

As part of a larger government initiative, Queensland was able to use e-petitions as a force for citizen action and government transparency. While the features of the Queensland e-petition site are not flashy, the site is easy to navigate and delivers timely government responses, without the constraint of a signature threshold. Other large communities, such as states or agencies with large, decentralized constituencies, can look to Queensland as a model for e-petitioning on a large scale that still addresses relatively local or detailed citizen concerns.

CASE STUDY:

Bristol, England

Background

Bristol is a city in South West England with a population of 428,100. The city has undergone a population increase of 9.7% since 2001 and over the past decade it has experienced an influx of international immigrants, particularly from India, Somalia, and Poland. The population is relatively young, with over 70% under the age of 50, which has created strains on a wide range of government services.[91]

Industry in Bristol is varied and includes technology, financial services, banking, and distribution. However, Bristol faces "urban challenges such as congestion and high house prices relative to income. Compounded by a difficult financial climate, workers and younger people are finding it harder to find work and somewhere to live."[92] In addition, Bristol contains pockets of poverty. In 2008, an estimated 27% of children lived in poverty in the city, and in some areas poverty among children reaches 60%.[93]

Government Structure

The Bristol City Council is made up of a Mayor, who serves a three-and-a-half-year term, and councillors, who serve four-year terms. There are two councillors for each of the city's 35 wards. The Mayor selects a Cabinet of up to eight councillors to oversee various services and determine key policies. At various times throughout the year, all of the councillors gather in a Full Council to appoint committees, adopt and amend policy and budget frameworks, and set the budget.[94]

E-Petitions in Bristol

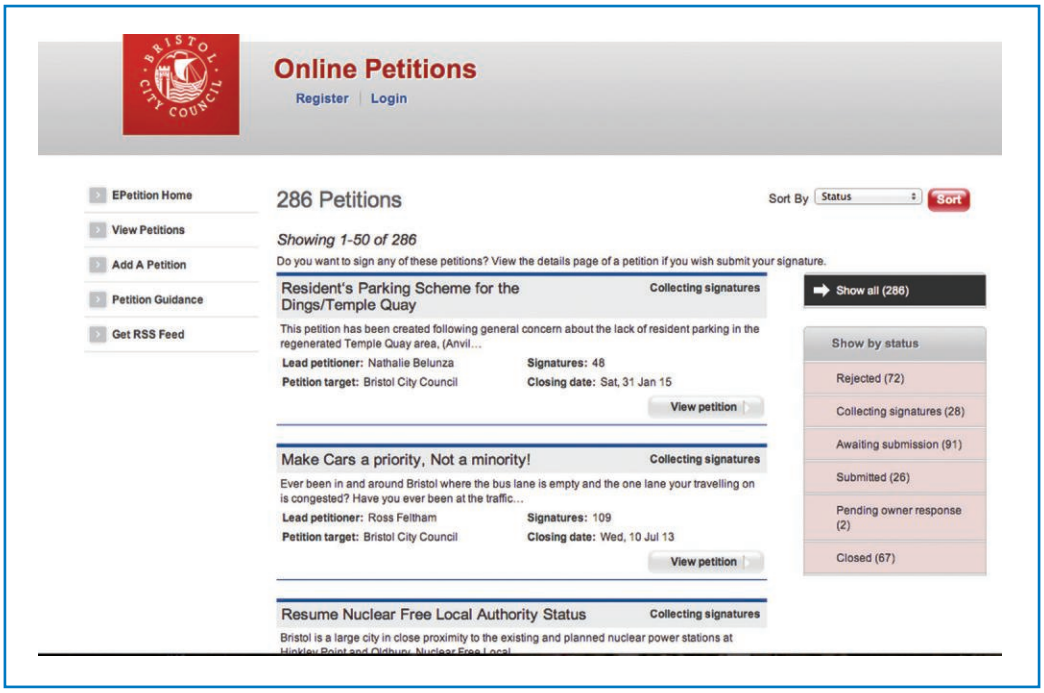
In the early 2000s, Bristol city administrators recognized that the city was experiencing a significant decline in voting, especially among the young.[95] To address this participation vacuum, the city began exploring ways to increase citizen access to and involvement in the city council. In 2000, Bristol experimented with Consultation Finder, an online system where citizens could explore all of the council's pubic consultations.[96] As this experimentation was occurring, the British government launched a nationwide e-democracy initiative, called the Local e-Democracy National Project [97], funded through the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. In 2004 Bristol, along with one other city, was awarded several grants through this e-democracy initiative to pilot new participatory tools, including e-petitions.[98]

Bristol began an e-petition pilot program in 2004, using a modified version of the *e-petitioner* platform developed by Napier University, Edinburgh for the Scottish Parliament. During the six-month trial, the e-petition system received 9 petitions and 890 signatures. Throughout the pilot period of the project, the e-democracy program team expended significant effort to ensure that city councilors and department managers understood the e-petition system and their role within the process. Over time, the process has become accepted and expected by citizens and councillors.[100]

At the end of the pilot period, the ownership of e-petition technology developed for Bristol under the Local e-Democracy National Project was transferred to Bristol.[101] In 2007, Bristol, in conjunction with Napier University and Public I,[102] modified the piloted e-petition platform to better suit the needs of platform administrators. For example, the initial platform allowed

for signatories to leave comments for each signature, which became too time intensive for platform administrators to manage and was omitted from the platform redesign.[103] Over time, the platform has continued to develop and now includes social media sharing among other features. Bristol's e-petition platform continues to be part of a larger e-democracy program that includes webcasting council meetings, online discussion forums, and the public consultation finder.[104]

Bristol was a global pioneer in local government e-petitioning. The Bristol e-petition platform has become a model for e-petitioning at the local level and has been replicated around the world.



Key Decision Areas for Bristol, England

In this section, we explore the key decisions in e-petition implementation in Bristol.

Determining Engagement Goals

Although Bristol initially developed its e-petition system as part of a larger national-level e-democracy initiative, Bristol's e-petition administrators and councillors determined that the program brought value to both citizens and government.[105] Bristol's Democratic Services Team, which manages the e-petition system, described the following engagement goals for Bristol's e-petition system:[106]

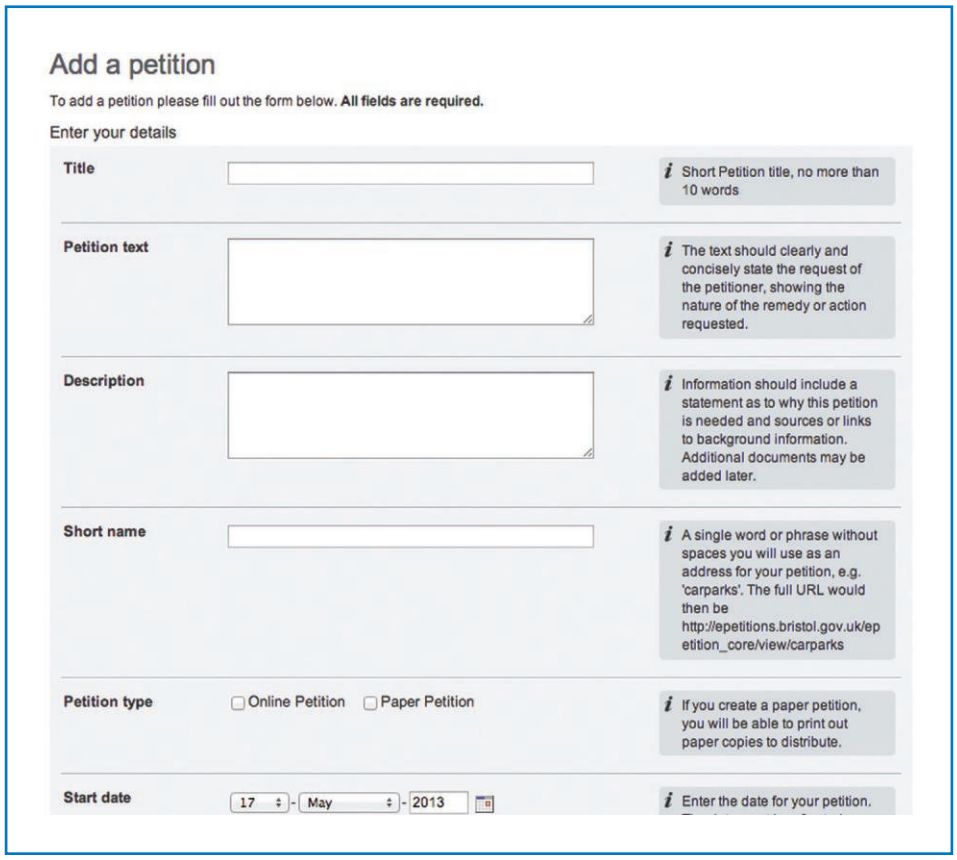
- Inform the public about the work of the city council
- Engage the public in the work of the council
- Promote democratic involvement

These goals address both government and citizen needs. For the city council, e-petitions provide a path toward understanding the roles and responsibilities of city councillors, as well as making councillors more visible to voters. Citizens are provided convenient access to the formal policy-making process, in addition to increased accountability through public responses and more transparent decision-making.[107] Given the high concentration of younger citizens in Bristol, their low voter turnout, and their high Internet usage rates, e-petitions (along with other e-democracy tools) were seen as a good way to increase participation.[108]

Connecting E-Petitions to Decision-Making

Bristol's e-petition site clearly outlines the formal structure of the e-petition and paper petition process through a document titled "Bristol City Council Petitions Scheme." Electronic and paper petitions are treated equally by the council and must conform to certain restrictions, including an exclusion of petitions related to planning, licensing, or issues that are under appeal.

However, e-petitions operate under a slightly different timeline and process. After a lead petitioner creates a petition, provides the necessary personal information, and determines how long they would like their petition to stay active,[109] the Bristol e-petition administrator has up to five days to determine whether the petition is suitable for online posting. If for some reason the petition is deemed unsuitable, the site administrator contacts the lead petitioner and requests changes before the petition can be resubmitted. If the lead petitioner does not respond with changes within ten days, a summary of the petition, along with a rationale for why it was not posted, is posted in the "rejected petitions" section of the site. Petitions can be rejected for various reasons, ranging from insufficient submission information to "vexatious, abusive or otherwise inappropriate" content.[110]



Once an e-petition is approved and placed on the site, it is open for signatures. Each signatory is asked to provide his or her name, postcode, and a valid email address that is verified through an email confirmation system. Petition signatories can see the names and ward (corresponding to postcode) of other signers, but contact information is unavailable. After an e-petition is closed for signatures (the time frame is determined by the lead petitioner) and the petition has a minimum of 20 signatures from people who live, work or study in Bristol, the petition is submitted to Bristol's Democratic Services Team and an acknowledgement is sent via email to the lead petitioner and signatories within 15 days. The acknowledgement includes

information about what the council intends "to do with the petition" and a timeframe for the council's response. Petition acknowledgements and council response are also posted online. Council responses can take one of the following forms:

- Confirmation from the council that the action requested has been taken.
- Explanation of why the action cannot or will not be taken, and/or if the council intends to take a different action.
- An announcement that the council intends to debate the issue, along with the date, time, and location of that debate. Petitions that have more than 3,500 signatories "trigger the right to be debated by the full council." In this case, petition organizers are given the opportunity to present at that meeting and receive written confirmation of the outcome of the debate, which is also posted online.
- A determination that the issue needs more investigation and the planned steps to that end.

The central roles in Bristol's e-petition process are played by the Democratic Service Team, which is responsible for communicating with petitioners, coordinating a response with relevant councilors or committees, and ensuring that the process occurs within the allotted time frame.

Managing the Citizen-Government Interaction

Bristol takes an active role in setting citizen expectations around the e-petition process, including its outcomes and government impact. The formal petition scheme, highlighted on the main e-petition site, is a primary way of setting clear citizen expectations for the e-petition process. Petitioners who take the time to read the petition scheme will have a good idea of what they can expect from the petition process, including submission requirements and the timeline for response. For those who may not read the entire petition scheme, the petition guidance section of the e-petition site offers a section on "What can petitions achieve" and simply outlines two possible outcomes: bringing an issue to the attention of the council and demonstrating public support or disapproval of an issue.[111]

The details outlined in the petition scheme, such as potential response types and other ways to share citizen views, help to set a tone of government responsiveness and leave the impression that the Bristol council is genuinely interested in the concerns of citizens. The Bristol government furthers this by webcasting council discussions and highlighting e-petitions, among other engagement activities, on the city's homepage. In addition, the structure of the e-petition website helps to shape the citizen-government interaction. A city webpage describing the e-petition process highlights "some notable petitions and what they have achieved," suggesting to site visitors that the e-petition process impacts decision-making.[112]

While not necessarily read by most petitioners, the site use and privacy policies are also an important component of what petitioners can expect from the e-petition experience. On the Terms and Conditions page, the privacy policy states how the petitioner information will be used and how long it will be kept, along with how and why certain information is collected and maintained.[113]

However, formal documentation is not the only way that Bristol shapes the citizen-government interaction. When e-petitions were first launched, the platform was advertised in local newspapers and through promotional pamphlets, as well as through community groups and events.[114] The city also offers a newsletter that highlights e-democracy activities on its website.

Bristol was also able to leverage media coverage of the e-petition platform to encourage more users to visit the site. One controversial petition in 2007 about the removal of graffiti art by the artist Banksy garnered over 3,000 e-petition signatures and media coverage throughout the country, which helped increase citizen awareness about the system.[115] While the council did not control the media coverage itself, Bristol issued "news articles and press releases to highlight what actions have been taken as a result of e-petitions."[116] In doing so, Bristol helped to shape the media coverage of the e-petitions platform and sets impact expectations for citizen petitioners.

It is important to note that Bristol encourages city councillors to initiate petitions using the e-petition platform. This creates a space for councillors to try and gain community support for their desired policies and fosters interaction between elected officials and community members.

Technical Considerations

Bristol's current e-petition platform emerged out of the trial-period platform developed by Napier University and funded through federal government grants. The Napier University platform, e-petitioner, was initially developed for the Scottish Parliament and was modified to be used in Bristol. In 2007, after the completion of the trial period, Bristol moved to an open-source platform developed by their ICT contactors, Public I. On making this transition to the open-source platform, Carol Hayward, a consultation manager from the Bristol City Council, noted, "The original project taught us a great deal about e-petitioning and working with Napier [University] gave us an excellent opportunity to really test whether e-petitions were an effective e-democracy tool. We believe that this was proven however we wanted to enhance the service further to both support our back office functions more effectively establishing the management of both on line and hard copy petitions. We were keen any system also fitted in with our open software approach."[117]

This newer platform was primarily based on the Napier University model, but had greater customization and integration with Bristol's other web democracy initiatives. Bristol was already contracting with Public I for webcasting services, and Public I added the development of the e-petition platform at no additional cost to its existing contract. Public I continues to provide technical support to the Bristol e-petition platform. The site's primary user-facing features include: creating petitions, signing petitions, sorting petitions (based on status,[118] title, date, signature count, or petition target), and a list of signatories. The revamped platform added a tracking function to allow site managers to track the progress of petitions and more easily monitor petition status. It also integrated the management of paper petitions, allowing petition administrators a single interface to monitor all petitions.[119]

Version 2 of the Bristol e-petition platform is open-source and can be found at http://joinup.ec.europa.eu/software/epetitions/home. The newest version of the software used on the current Bristol site is publicly offered by Public I for £3,500, along with a yearly site-hosting fee of £500.[120] The same software can be seen on other government petition sites, such as the West Sussex County Council site, which is almost identical to Bristol's site except for its branding.[121]

Evaluation

The Bristol case is unique in that the trial period of the e-petition platform was thoroughly evaluated as part of the Local e-Democracy National Project. The metrics used as part of the trial included site usage, implementation costs, and potential for impact. Considering that a trial of e-petitioning had not occurred on the local level before, the results appeared promising. After a six-month trial, nine e-petitions[122] had been submitted, and 16 months later, in July 2006, the platform had received 39 e-petitions.[123] The platform was judged to be relatively resource-intensive for local councils, but less so for citizens.[124]

Current evaluation of the Bristol e-petition system focuses on usage of the e-petition platform, in terms of the number of total signatures and the number of petitions submitted on a yearly basis. The e-petition system has received over 200,000 signatures, and the number of e-petitions received ranges from 21 to 55 per year.[125] Additionally, the Democratic Services Team that oversees the e-petition platform uses surveys to gather feedback from citizen participants, but response rates are low.[126] However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the e-petition system has engaged the public, especially younger people.[127]

CONCLUSION

The experience of Bristol, an early adopter of e-petitioning, points to both the obstacles and opportunities of local government e-petitioning. The widespread acceptance and use of the platform speaks to the value that e-petitioning brings both the public and elected officials. While it offers a place to voice public concern, it also provides public officials with a means to promote their policies and understand public opinion. Bristol's experimentation with its site shows that e-petitions require time and management to work effectively, and can be strengthened by other simultaneous e-democracy activities. Lessons like these can be taken and applied to other localities interested in pursuing e-petition processes, making Bristol a model for thoughtful and evolving local e-petition experimentation.

Conclusion

Constructing an e-petition system that meets the unique needs of your jurisdiction requires making a complex and interconnected set of decisions as you move toward and through implementation. In particular, as you move through the design of an e-petition system, it will be essential to regularly revisit the goals you set at the outset to ensure that your e-petition process will serve your community as well as your government. While it will be important to address all of the questions raised in this paper and to study carefully the three cases we have featured, there are four major recommendations worth emphasizing.

- **REMAIN FLEXIBLE AND AWARE OF YOUR COMMUNITY CONTEXT.** What works in one place may not work in another, even if the places have similar characteristics. Make sure that the process that you create is able to meet your community's specific needs.
- **EXPERIMENT AND EVALUATE, PUBLICLY.** E-petition implementation is an iterative process and the petition system you create will likely change over time. Be open to that change and include the public in making important adjustments to the process. Prepare regular evaluations of the e-petition program and reach out to the public for their feedback. Allow the public to help shape the direction of the e-petition platform, so that it reflects the users' needs.
- **TRANSPARENT OUTCOMES ARE BEST SERVED BY A TRANSPARENT PROCESS.** If one of your e-petition goals is to increase transparency within the governing body – and we believe it should be - make sure that the decision-making behind the petition responses is transparent.
- **E-PETITIONS ALONE MAY NOT BE SUFFICIENT.** As the case studies show, e-petitions are usually part of a larger open government agenda. Using an e-petition process on its own is unlikely to be enough to create a genuinely participatory and transparent environment.

As more communities implement and innovate around e-petitions, our notions of best practices will change. In the long history of petitions and governance, e-petitions, we must remember, are still in their infancy. However, it is safe to say that the spread of e-petitions is a positive development for the practice of democratic participation. For citizens, the continued use of e-petition systems can lead to a greater capacity for civic participation, a greater ability to get things on the government agenda, and greater expectations for political participation outside of the voting booth. Citizen participation and increased government accountability through e-petition processes has genuine potential to strengthen linkages between elected officials and the participatory public.

While e-petition processes create additional pathways for citizens' participation in governance, their continued use also has the potential to impact public officials' views of participation. As e-petitions not only provide decision-makers with greater insight into public opinion but also easy ways to organize and mobilize and foster more positive relationships with the public, decision-makers may begin to recognize the benefit of greater investments in participatory activities.

We hope this can lead to a larger role for public participation within our political discourse at every level of government. Beyond these impacts, widespread use of e-petition systems has the potential to normalize and institutionalize the practice of e-petitions. Public discussion of e-petitions may begin to focus less on silly or implausible petitions and more on the successful petitions that have created a substantive policy impact. As J.H. Snider said about the We the People site, "we judge a democratic process not by how many bad ideas are proposed but by how many good ideas actually get turned into law."[128]

This is an exciting time to be exploring e-petitions and how they can be used to strengthen participatory democracy. We congratulate you for considering e-petition implementation in your community.

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