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An overview assessment of ePetitioning tools in the English local government

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Abstract. According to legislation introduced in 2009, all English local authorities were expected to implement an online petitioning facility by the end of 2010. This mandate offers a unique opportunity to assess the impact of a national eParticipation policy at such scale focusing on a particular engagement tool. A web content analysis methodology was used to collect data from the 353 English local government websites. Different variables measuring the implementation of this initiative were explored, including evidence of other eParticipation activities such as online consultations. The data were then cross-examined with institutional background factors such as political affiliation of the leading party. The study results question whether the legislation actually achieved its purpose since they indicate apparent efforts of minimum institutional compliance and low actual use of ePetitions. Among others, population density and previous experience with eParticipation were positively correlated with the implementation effort and actual use of those systems.

Keywords: ePetitions, UK local government, Web content analysis, Impact assessment, Institutional factors, eParticipation adoption, eParticipation policy.

1 Introduction

An established conclusion in digital governance research is that citizen engagement in democratic processes is gaining far narrower attention at the policy level compared to public management efficiency [1]. In most cases, the use of ICTs for public engagement seems to be largely restricted to those fitting existing institutional frameworks [2-3]. Sparse international progress in operationalising eParticipation policies has resulted in limited opportunities for assessing the regulatory potential and impact of ICT-enabled engagement. Consequently, beyond a series of relatively isolated case investigations, uncovering more generalised elements on the interaction between eParticipation and institutions remains quite open [4].

Certain overview studies have attempted to explore the extent and type of eParticipation adoption in European countries [5-7]. Those studies, despite identifying a set of interesting hypotheses, were not presented with the opportunity to examine

the implementation of an institutionally enforced eParticipation tool at national scale. Such an opportunity has been recently offered in the English local government, following the introduction of the 2009 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act by the Labour government [8]. According to this legislation, English local authorities (LAs) were expected to implement a facility for receiving petitions in electronic form by December 2010. This directive did not solely advocate the development of local ePetitioning websites; it came along with a duty to design a coherent response process for both paper and online petitions.

In this paper, we present and discuss the findings of an overview web content analysis study conducted to assess progress with this policy about three months after the implementation deadline. The particular motivation was to examine how LAs responded to the ePetitioning call and identify institutional socio-economic factors associated with those responses. The study results are not encouraging about the early impact of this national policy: they indicate minimum effort of institutional compliance and low actual use of ePetitions. Factors such as population density, progress with other eParticipation activities and council political orientation were found to be related with the effort placed on implementing ePetitions and the actual use of those websites.

Before elaborating on the methodology and results, the next section develops the study's theoretical background and provides further information on ePetitioning in the UK. The paper concludes by discussing the impact of this national policy and presenting implications for future institutionally enforced use of eParticipation tools.

2 Study Background

Public participation at the local level is considered more feasible compared to national government due to the reduced distance between local authorities and the public [9]. Furthermore, as noted by Gronlund [10], enhancing local democratic processes becomes even more desirable since central planning authorities around Europe seem to be increasingly re-allocated locally.

2.1 EParticipation in the local government context

Previous work has attempted to associate institutional characteristics with eParticipation developments by LAs in the Netherlands [5], Italy [6] and the UK [7]. Van de Graft and Svensson [5] found political orientation of the party leading the authority not having a significant effect. In most cases, initiatives seemed to be motivated by pressures to innovate in anything the Dutch central government monitoring sought to audit. Medaglia [6] identified three influential factors: scale, local politics and socio-economic conditions. Larger authorities were considered more supportive of eParticipation initiatives due to increased geographical diversity and scale effectiveness from a cost/benefit perspective. Centre-left parties were also found to favour online engagement. From the socio-economic perspective, wealthier cities were more eager to experiment with eParticipation initiatives.

Finally, in the UK, a study by Pratchett et al. [7] assessed the eParticipation components offered by English and Welsh websites. They found positive evidence of eParticipation channels along with significant variations on the scale and depth of opportunities available to citizens.

Those studies point to several interesting directions for up-to-date research. In particular, the English local government presents an appealing environment for eParticipation research and practice. In England, LA policy implementation is planned, funded and audited centrally by the Department of Communities and Local Government. This centrally-led institutional framework does not necessarily impose absolute homogeneity. It encompasses a more complex combination of intentional *diversity* to account for localised settings and a set of auditing processes for rewarding or punishing local performance *selectively* in terms of funding distribution [11]. As a result, despite the existence of centralised strategies, important diversity patterns might occur on how ICTs are used in localised settings.

In this institutional context, the 2009 legislation offers a possibly unique opportunity to focus on a specifically mandated, centrally-funded tool for public engagement and examine LA responses at the national level. As elaborated on the next section, ePetitioning in the UK is well developed.

2.2 ePetitioning in the UK and beyond

ePetitioning in the UK has been a well-exploited tool long before it became a key element of the 2009 legislation. Since 2004, two influential LAs, namely Bristol and Kingston-upon-Thames had been regularly handling ePetitions. Such petitions cover a variety of local decision-making topics, for example, recycling, parking, library closures, bus stops and so on (see e.g. [12-13]). The perceived success of those two pilot initiatives indicated that the practice could be transferable at the national level. Along with other more widespread eParticipation tools such as online consultations, surveys or webcasting, a few English LAs experimented with ePetitions during the 2005-2009 period, for example Lambeth and Brighton & Hove.

Complementary to the local government, there has been strong evidence of the ePetitioning popularity in the UK, starting from the pioneer work of Scottish Parliament's ePetitions [14-15]. From 2006 until its termination in 2010, the Labour government's ePetitioning website accumulated millions of signatures in thousand different topics; it generated extensive debate over its impact and future potential [16]. Miller [16] provides some very interesting examples about the government's website and the dilemmas generated when engagement technologies attempt to merge with existing policy making structures.

Outside the UK, there have been numerous examples of ePetitioning tools being used in formal engagement processes, e.g. [17-18]. Those examples include ePetitioning systems used by different Parliaments such the German, the Australian, as well as the Welsh Assembly. There was also an effort to consider this activity at the European level by providing a common system for LAs around Europe [19]. The EuroPetition initiative reveals some interesting lessons about the transnational organisation of petitioning tools around Europe.

In the UK, the 2009 Act was one of the Labour government's last legislations before losing the May 2010 elections by the new coalition government. Despite earlier arrangements and most LAs having already formally decided upon their petitioning schemes, in September 2010, the new government announced its decision to withdraw previous central guidance on how this facility should be implemented. The motivation for this was the forthcoming Localism Bill aiming to offer more freedom to local communities on organising their democratic processes; it was also part of a political decision to reduce public sector budgets.

Nevertheless, LAs were still asked to comply with the statutory requirements, even if the details for implementing this tool were more left at their local discretion and needs. As an effect, close to the December 2010 deadline, it was not clear what LAs would decide to implement. Would LAs decide not to offer ePetitioning channels at all? Would they discourage petitioners in other ways, for example, by setting high signature thresholds to generate the petition response process or by keeping the new website away from publicity? Those circumstances provided an exceptional opportunity for exploring the implementation of this national eParticipation policy and examining its impact.

3 Research Methodology

Motivated by the opportunity to examine LA responses to the ePetitioning duty, an overview web content analysis was conducted [20]. Content analysis is a systematic technique for coding symbolic content, for example by identifying common patterns in media [21]. Web content analysis is a broad methodological paradigm which adapts traditional content analysis for Internet research. For the purpose of this study, there was no need to code symbolic content. The web content analysis was used to carry out a feature analysis of all the 353 English LA websites based on a specifically developed coding framework. The framework included 19 variables describing particular features relevant to the local implementation and use of the ePetitioning facility. Those variables, as presented in the next section, were drawn from:

- (1) *Basic characteristics* such as the existence of contact details within the website or instructions to assist petitioners.
- (2) *Indicators of good practice* such as providing notification services for new petitions or encouraging users to offer their feedback on how this new initiative could be improved.
- (3) Elements that could *constitute innovation effort* such as launching the system before the December 2010 deadline or providing a commenting facility or discussion forum for petitions.

To indicate the system's actual use, the numbers of open, completed or closed without yet responded number of ePetitions were also recorded in each website. The framework further included five complementary variables assessing other eParticipation activities (webcasting, use of social media, online consultations, online forums and online surveys).

The initial framework was validated by four experts, revised and then piloted with 35 websites. Amendments were made to ensure that the selected variables would accurately capture the most important features in a reasonable amount of time per website. A team of six coders was trained and instructed to visit each website following a specified protocol. Although most variables did not entail subjective judgements, coding disagreements or ambiguities were resolved on the spot. To prevent possible non-systematic errors between the different coders, about one third of the websites was randomly re-coded by a senior researcher.

The final dataset contained 337 usable results. The rest 16 websites were not used for the analysis because for some of them their fit with the coding framework was ambiguous in some variables. Others were not used because certain groups of 4 to 6 authorities were sharing the same ePetitioning website without clarifying individual differences relevant to the coding framework. Even if fit with the coding framework was ensured, for reasons of consistency it would not be possible to take into account the group cases for the cross-examination with background factors.

The data were collected within the first two weeks of March 2011 which corresponds to about 2.5-3 months subsequent to the December 2010 ePetitioning implementation deadline. The dataset was analysed with the help of PASW Statistics 18, along with secondary background data for each LA. Those data were collected from the September 2010 release of the Office for National Statistics [22] and included: population density, area size, population, average weekly income per household, employment rate, regional broadband Internet access percentage and political affiliation of the council leading party. The next section presents the study findings and the statistical analysis details. The variables used are numbered in parenthesis.

4 Study Findings

The ePetitioning facility is a space where users can start new petitions, sign the petitions offered by other users and view the outcome of previous petitions. The first characteristic examined (V1) related to whether ePetitioning was actually implemented or not and, if implemented, how easy it is to find from the LA's homepage. An important observation was that an ePetitioning facility was not offered in 61 of the 337 cases (17.6%). In 21 of those (6.2%) it was stated that the ePetitioning implementation is in progress. Furthermore:

- 19.3% or 65 facilities were linked with the council's home page.
- 26.1% or 88 facilities were one click away from the council's home page.
- 12.8% or 43 facilities required further ad hoc searching.
- 24% or 81 facilities were found using the council website search function.

In most cases, everyone working, living or studying in the area is eligible to petition the authority. Usually, a certain amount of signatures are randomly validated by responsible officers to ensure that the minimum threshold that triggers the response process is met. There are different types of petitions. Some types require

thousands of signatures; for example those asking for a full council debate on a particular topic or seeking to hold a public officer accountable. Most petitions fall into the ordinary category which deals with everyday local issues such as council services, planning applications, road issues, parks and so on. Ordinary petitions are usually discussed in one of the council's specialised committees.

Despite expectations for high thresholds for ordinary petitions, in 178 LAs (52.8%) there was either no explicit threshold set or it was clearly stated that all petitions, regardless of how many signatures they collected, would be taken into account by the authority. Thresholds up to 50 signatures were found in 80 websites (23.7%). Higher thresholds, in the 100-500 range, were found only in 19 (5.6%) cases (V2). In addition to the signature thresholds, as summarised in table 1, a set of variables representing different implementation characteristics were examined (V3-V11).

Table 1. Summary of the main variables examined for the ePetitioning implementation.

Variable	Found in...
Is there a forum, commenting facility or other linked space to discuss petitions? (V3)	7 or 2.1%
Is there evidence that the system was operating before the December 2010 deadline? (V4)	28 or 8.3%
Are there links to other council material in petition descriptions in order to assist petitioners get an informed opinion about the topic? (V5)	28 or 8.3%
Are there notification services for new petitions (e.g. RSS feed or mailing list)? (V6)	93 or 27.6%
Are there contact details within ePetitions? (V7)	110 or 32.6%
Is there evidence of seeking encouraged user feedback on the website design or the petitioning process? (V8)	13 or 3.9%
Is there any connection with paper petitions handled by the authority? (V9)	55 or 16.3%
Is there evidence of also accepting petitions from other online sources apart from the official council website? (V10)	9 or 2.7%
Is there an adapted privacy statement about the information collected? (V11)	84 or 24.9%

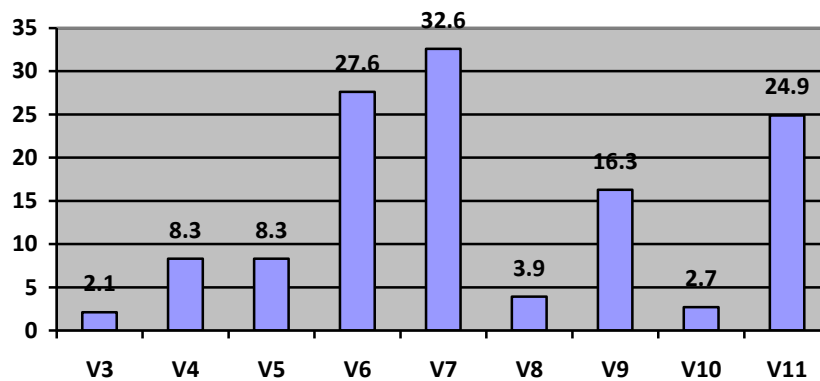


Fig. 1. Percentages of LAs implementing the features examined in table 1 (V3-V11).

The level of assistance and instructions offered to users about the website and the petitioning process was also assessed (V12). Four different levels were used, spanning from “no or almost no instructions” (66 websites or 19.6%) to “detailed instructions including step-by-step wizard” (35 or 10.4%). Most websites were classified in the second level (107 or 31.8%), followed by the third (69 of 20.5%).

Finally, the actual use of those systems was examined (V13). Not a single petition was open for signatures in 192 (57%) websites. In some websites there was either one (41 or 12.2%) or two open petitions (22 or 6.5%). In the rest 22 or 6.5%, there were up to 15 open petitions. At least one petition completed, including decision by the authority, was found in only 44 websites (13%) (V14).

Table 2 summarises the group of five variables examining other eParticipation activities. Although the study did not aim to capture in-depth details, official use of social media by LAs was found in more than two thirds of the cases. Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube were the most common social networks identified in council websites. Online consultations and surveys were also popular. Authorities were classified as positive in the consultation category only if there was an online route to participate in consultations (without email or post contact). The same was applicable for online compared to postal-only surveys. Webcasting, despite its high cost, was also offered in 57 cases. Finally, online forums or community discussion groups were far less common: they were found in less than 10% of the cases.

Table 2. Summary of other eParticipation activities examined.

Variable	Found in...
Are council meetings webcasted? (V15)	57 or 16.9%
Are social media officially used by the authority (e.g. Facebook groups, Twitter updates, Flickr, YouTube videos and others)? (V16)	231 or 68.5%
Are there online forums or community discussion groups? (V17)	32 or 9.5%
Are there mechanisms to participate online in consultations organised by the authority (e.g. forms, questionnaires or an online commenting facility)? (V18)	147 or 43.6%
Are online surveys used to ask for citizen feedback on public services, budget decisions or other local issues? (V19)	177 or 52.5%

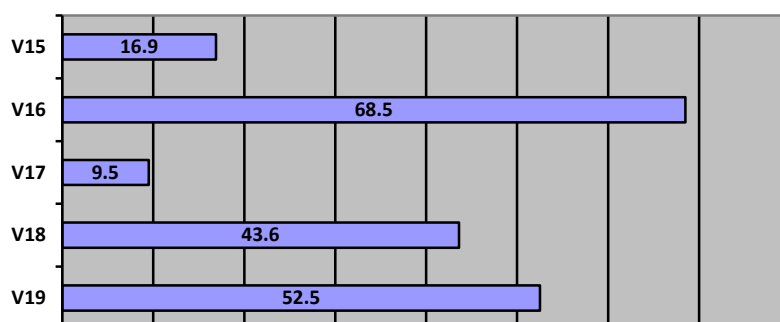


Fig. 2. Percentages of LAs implementing the features examined in table 2 (V15-V19).

For further statistical analysis, two composite variables were formed; they were named ePet1 and ePet2 respectively. Their aim was to indicate the extent of effort and creative thinking placed on implementing the ePetitioning facility by each authority (ePet1), as well as the level of system use (ePet2). Many different combinations of the available individual variables could have been selected to form those indexes. To create ePet1, the characteristics outlined in table 1 were added (V3-V11), also taking into account the total number of authorities implementing each variable. In this way, for example, offering a commenting facility for petitions gave an authority more points than having contact details (0.93 for the first and 0.68 for the second, see table 1). The system visibility within the council website (V1) and the level of assistance and instructions (V2) were also added without weighting (0-3 points).

Next, LAs were classified in four categories and assigned points (0-3) according to the number of petitions open, completed or submitted to the council without response yet. Adding those three variables created ePet2 which represented the level of system use. The volume of petition signatures was not taken into account for two reasons that didn't facilitate meaningful comparisons. The first is that signatures mainly reflect the level of support that petitioners manage to raise about topics which can be more or less localised, for example, concerning a single street or the whole authority. Second, during data collection, petitions could be open for various amount of time (e.g. a day or a month) which highly affects signature volumes.

Finally, an eParticipation index was formed by adding the five variables shown in table 2 (V15-V19, absence or presence of each feature counted as 0 or 1 respectively). Having defined those three indexes, it was possible to examine relationships with the background institutional factors through correlations (Pearson, two-tailed) and t-tests. From this analysis, the following interesting observations emerged:

- The effort placed on implementing the system (ePet1) was positively correlated with its level of use (ePet2) ($p < 0.01$).
- The eParticipation index (ePart) was positively correlated with both ePet1 ($p < 0.05$) and ePet2 ($p < 0.01$).
- Regional Internet broadband adoption, area size and employment rate were not related to any of the ePart, ePet1 or ePet2.
- The average weekly income per household was not related to ePart and ePet1, but was positively correlated with ePet2 ($p < 0.05$).
- Population and population density were positively correlated with all three indexes ($p < 0.05$).
- The LAs that decided not to implement ePetitions did not perform significantly better or worse in other eParticipation activities compared to those who did comply with the ePetitioning mandate. Political affiliation of the council was also not found to be important in terms of adoption or not.
- Early and late ePetitioning adopters had no difference in other eParticipation activities, but early adopters performed significantly better in both ePet1 and ePet2 ($p < 0.01$). Political affiliation of the council was also not found to be important in terms of early adoption.
- Conservative-led authorities (200 in total) performed significantly worse in ePet2 ($p < 0.05$) than other authorities.
- Authorities led by Liberal Democrats (21) or Labour (50) performed significantly better in ePart ($p < 0.05$) than other authorities.

5 Discussion

This overview study can certainly be interpreted from several perspectives and inevitably comes with limitations. Examining online channels offered to citizens by LAs and their implementation details reveals little about actual political engagement and the combination of local institutions that enact and support such efforts [23]. For example, case study work has illustrated how the ePetitioning facilities have been institutionalised in the early adopters' cases, e.g. [12]. The web content analysis exercise cannot straightforwardly uncover such elements nor provide evidence of local systems being actually promoted or silently resisted. The study was also conducted in rather short time after the December 2010 deadline when it is normal to expect that the new practice will not be yet fully embedded in the majority of LAs.

Nevertheless, despite its limitations, this study allows drawing some useful conclusions for eParticipation in a national case where the concept seems to be maturing from the theoretical/experimental to the policy implementation level. As Medaglia notes [6], assessing a new policy at the early stages can be important for its future impact due to the usually high cost of changing initial decisions. While the future of this particular policy depends on the new UK government's forthcoming regulatory work (Localism Bill), the current state-of-the-art demonstrates that, for most LAs, the ePetitioning mandate was certainly not seen as an opportunity to revolutionise local democratic processes.

The study results shows that institutional compliance was indeed achieved to a large extent despite hints by the new government that the initiative might be repealed by future legislation and not be audited. Although in about 25% of LAs ePetitions suffer from apparently low visibility, in about 45% of them locating the system requires at most one click from the council home page (see V1). Furthermore, despite initial expectations, the study did not find evidence of signature thresholds being a real barrier for prospective petitioners (see V2). In most cases, LAs appear willing to take into account petitions on quite localised issues potentially signed by a limited number of citizens.

Despite those positive indicators, it seems evident that most LAs allocated the minimum possible effort and resources to this new initiative. This conclusion is signified from combining two observations coming from the findings: limited implementation of the features examined in table 1 and low actual use of ePetitions (V13-V14). The first observation shows that LAs did not wish to or possess the resources to enhance the online petitioning process with support characteristics such as notifications for new petitions and commenting facilities.

The second observation illustrates that, regardless of most systems operating for less than three months, in most LAs the initiative was not advertised or promoted; the absence of even a single petition in 192 out of 277 websites looks like a clear indication. It was further noticed, but not formally examined as a separate variable, that in many cases where up to 5 petitions were present, usually more than one of them had been initiated by the same citizen or group of citizens. In this sense, online petitioning was relevant to the "usual suspects" in the local political life. A more detailed study with German Parliament ePetitions also points to this direction [18].

Beyond ePetitioning, the study also offers some suggestions about the state-of-the-art in other eParticipation activities. Certain activities which were thought to be at the

experimental stage a few years ago, such as online consultations, now have become more standard (V18). Furthermore, the low use of webcasting (V15) and community forums (V17) in comparison to consultations (V18) and surveys (V19) probably suggests LAs tend to favour forms of participation which do not require significant resources and, importantly, can be bureaucratically controlled by public officers. The more widespread use of Facebook groups, YouTube videos or Twitter updates should not be confusing in this direction: disseminating council information through social media does not imply continuous interaction with the public nor empowers citizens to set the agenda as for example petitions do.

In comparison with the studies reviewed in section 2.1, there are certain similarities and differences. First of all, as in the Netherlands case [5], institutional compliance was the main motivation to implement this initiative: in their majority, those systems were not used at all after almost three months and/or were implemented at the basic level. This study also seems to confirm most of Medaglia's findings [6]. Authority population and population density were strongly related to all three indexes. Bigger cities led by centre and left-wing parties performed better than rural areas led by conservatives. The fact that income per household was positively related with higher system usage probably confirms the conclusion that political participation online favours traditionally privileged citizen groups, e.g. [24].

6 Concluding Remarks

This paper presented and discussed the findings of an overview study of ePetitioning tools in the English local government. Following regulatory arrangements introduced in 2009, all English LAs were required to implement those tools by the end of 2010. Less than three months after this deadline, the web content analysis shows that the impact of this policy is questionable. Certainly, the legislation couldn't be expected to transform local democratic processes at such short time. Nevertheless, the overwhelming number of petitioning websites being implemented at the very basic level and/or being not used at all is certainly not encouraging.

An interesting question emerges from the outcome of this study: is regulatory enforcement the best option to enact the impact of eParticipation tools? Despite offering an opportunity to empirically address this question, the English experience with local government petitioning provides a rather ambiguous if not negative answer. Examining the evolution of those systems in time might point to more solid grounds. It is also important that future research takes into account citizens' views on available public participation channels. As Carman suggests [15], the existence of online engagement opportunities, whether regulatory enforced or not, can have limited impact if citizens do not view engagement processes as fair and politically neutral. Especially with respect to local government petitioning, this aspect can be even more important than the technological artefacts themselves which, even when simply implemented, might still be able to demonstrate positive impact on local democratic processes.

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