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'Success' and online political participation: The case of Downing Street E-petitions

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ABSTRACT

E-petitions are one of the most widely used and popular E-democracy tools. While hundreds of thousands of E-petitions are created around the world each year, and they receive millions of signatures, critics lament their limited impact on policy and the encouragement of 'slacktivism'. This raises an interesting question that this article seeks to address: if they have limited policy impact, why do people bother to create and sign E-petitions? To address this question, this article focuses on how participants define and measure 'success'. Understanding how citizens perceive the success of political participation is crucially important to the evaluation of democratic innovation and our broader understanding of democratic vitality. Focusing on one of the most famous and quantitatively successful systems to date, Downing Street E-petitions, this article seeks to understand the different ways in which participants perceived the 'success' of their petition and how the government communicated with them through its official reply. This article finds that people cite a wide range of benefits from their E-petition, and that they have a nuanced approach to considering 'success' that is not captured by traditional measures. However, many users were upset with official replies, and this undermined some of the broader impacts. The findings have important implications for how online democratic innovations are designed and institutionalized.

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Introduction

In response to a perceived crisis of democracy, governments have adopted new, technologically mediated avenues for political participation. Hay and Stoker (2009, p. 227) argue that the UK government sees it as a protective measure: 'We had better give [the public] more of a say in a variety of ways if we are not to incur their wrath'. However, there is a danger that poorly designed and institutionalized participatory mechanisms reinforce negative attitudes towards politics and politicians; rather than being part of the solution, they may be part of the problem (Wright, 2002, 2006, 2007). The problem for the designers of participatory innovations is that: 'we lack a real understanding of how citizens understand politics. Any strategy for revitalizing politics needs to take seriously the issue of how politics is perceived by citizens' (Hay & Stoker, 2009, p. 227).

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As will be outlined in detail below, one of the key measures of success in E-democratic innovation – and of political participation more broadly – has been the extent to which participation through such innovations leads to policy impact:

> What is often missing from the design of most democratic institutions is any sense that citizens have effective control over significant elements of decision-making […] one way in which their design should be judged is the extent to which citizens are afforded increased influence and control within the decision-making process. (Smith, 2009, pp. 22–23)

However, citizens should not predicate their participation on getting what they want: 'Citizens need to learn to live with disappointment […] Citizens' confidence in the participation process cannot be premised upon "getting their own way"' (Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2006, p. 289; Sartori, 1987).

There is at best a hard balance to strike – and at worst an explicit paradox – between definitions and measures of 'success' that focus on whether people feel they achieved their demands and got what they wanted and the democratic necessity that people should not predicate participation on getting what they want. Subsequent research has indicated that citizens have a more measured approach when considering success, not limited to getting what they want:

> citizens have a realistic view of what can be expected from [political participation]: voters don't expect their representatives to simply parrot their opinions and attitudes, or to be omnipotent and omniscient – to deliver miracles. The media might hold all politicians to superhuman standards, but voters do not. They want them to listen, and to show that they have listened … (Coleman, 2005, p. 8)

This article addresses debates about what people should and do expect to result from participating in politics by analyzing whether and how people who created Downing Street E-petitions perceived their action as successful. This study focuses on perceptions rather than externally defined and measured democratic outcomes because it is ultimately the perception of success (and how they define this) that matters to the individual citizen. First, this article presents an in-depth, qualitative, interview-based analysis of the perceptions of E-petition creators who used the Downing Street E-petitions platform, focusing on E-petitions that met the 500-signature threshold to receive an official reply. E-petitions are an interesting example because while they are a low-bar participatory act, they are also generally perceived to have little or no impact and this raises questions over why people still choose to participate. The broader context for this is ongoing debates about what some people see as broadly pointless 'slacktivism' (Morozov, 2009; Shulman, 2009) but which others suggest is missing the point about the role and function of E-petitions, and related activities (Karpf, 2010). The analysis finds that petitioners had a broad definition of success, not specifically focused on policy change, and this helped to rationalize action. In a minority of cases, there was perceived to be policy change or that the petition had failed miserably (in spite of having received at least 500 signatures). Second, the research analyses people's perceptions of the official reply that they (should have) received – and the views here were largely very critical. Finally, the research considers the implications of the findings for how to design and institutionalize democratic innovations.

The findings that arise out of the data lead to two principal arguments. First, scholars need to adopt more nuanced definitions of success, moving beyond the unduly blunt policy change-oriented definitions to capture the broader ways that people perceive

benefit from political participation. In so doing, we have a richer evidence base by which to design (or redesign) democratic innovations, but it also contributes to broader debates and concerns about the state of political participation. This leads to a second argument: the tone and content of the response from government is crucial to how people perceive the effectiveness of an innovation. Governments must be careful to explain its decisions to people and to manage public perceptions of political participation.

Measuring success in political participation

Numerous approaches have been used to define or measure success in political participation. However, it must be acknowledged that: 'What constitutes success in politics can be difficult to define … ' (Chadwick, 2011, p. 24). In their wide-ranging study of political participation in the UK, Parry, Moyser, and Day (1992, p. 269) argue: 'The success of participation can be estimated in several ways' but they state that 'most people would, above all, hope that they would get precisely what they wanted, that their action would be effective in producing a helpful response from those at whom it was directed'. In other work, Parry and Moyser (1994, p. 57) characterize it as 'democratic responsiveness […] the degree to which the elite appear to respond to citizen participation'. In fact, many studies of political participation focus their analysis of the outputs of participation on whether it was perceived to be successful or effective. For example, Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti (2005, p. 257) solely ask whether different forms of participation are perceived as effective. Dahl (1989) similarly argues that it must be effective, while Eisinger's (1973, p. 11) definition of political opportunity structures focuses narrowly on the 'chances of success'. In Smith's (2009, p. 23) 'democratic goods' analytical framework, the only output criteria is popular control.

Where research has been conducted on people's perceptions, it has often focused on the *probable* outcomes of participation, rather than their experiences of actual participatory acts. These perceptions are often described as political efficacy: 'feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change' (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, p. 187). Research (e.g. Converse, 1972) has shown a distinction between internal efficacy (personal perception of political knowledge and capability to act and influence politics) and external efficacy (the responsiveness of the system). Again, the focus is often the perceived ability to change public policy as being the key measure of success, typically using survey data and statistical modelling. Measures that focus on 'goal attainment' have the potential to broaden out the analysis of success.[1]

This links to a final concern: survey research typically leaves questions about the perceived success of participation open to the interpretation of the respondent without delving deeper into their understanding of this. For example, focusing on the Scottish Assembly's E-petitions system, Carman's (2010, p. 740) survey asked for respondents' views about the statement: 'I consider my petition to be a success', of which 61.84% disagreed and a further 14.84% strongly disagreed. The problem here is that the limited data mean we cannot tell why they were unhappy. It seems likely that people might be basing their answers on whether or not they achieved their policy demand – linking back to the earlier discussion of policy impact-oriented definitions. However, we do not ultimately know. It could be linked to the number of signatures received or the speed and tone of

the reply for example, and each would have different implications for how to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the system.

'Success' and Downing Street E-petitions

This study focuses on Downing Street E-petitions. Almost certainly the most widely used government-led E-democracy tool in the UK, it accepted over 33,000 petitions that received 12.4 million signatures with Downing Street making 3258 official replies. The Downing Street E-petition system was launched during Tony Blair's final term in office and was hosted on the Prime Minister's personal website to ' … make citizens feel as though they have a relatively easy way to put forward their opinions in a very direct manner to central government' (interview with Senior Downing Street Official, 18 August 2010). The system continued to operate through Gordon Brown's time as Prime Minister, though it was ultimately closed for the 2010 General Election 'purdah' period and was never revived. A reinvigorated E-petitions system was part of the coalition agreement between the Conservative and the Liberal Democrat parties though, and after an extended consultation period, a heavily revised E-petitions system has been re-launched on the direct.gov.uk portal.

Petitions are an interesting case because survey responses suggest that people think they make little or no difference, yet they persist as one of the most common political activities (Carman, 2010, p. 740; Hansard, 2009, p. 40). At face value, this is confirmed by the practice of Downing Street E-petitions. They were, quantitatively speaking, very successful – arguably the most successful E-democracy experiment ever (Chadwick, 2012, p. 61) – but numerous concerns have been raised about their impact on policy. A senior civil servant (personal interview) with direct interest in participatory exercises noted: 'I don't think it [Downing Street E-petitions] has ever been claimed to be a marvelous democratic innovation, it is just, this is what technology can do, you know, it doesn't do any harm … '. One former senior Labour government minister (personal interview) argued that:

> Downing Street E-petitions are useless, pointless and pernicious. I think they're useless in the fact they have no effect on anything; they're pointless in the fact they don't lead to anything and; they're pernicious in that they lead people to believe that by signing an E-petition they will actually change policy.

The former minister continued: Downing Street E-petitions were: 'totally dishonest and discreditable […] politics is about the ability to change things. The concept of E-petitions at Number 10 really bore no relationship to that at all […] they build an illusion that is fundamentally false'. Andy Williamson, former Director of the Hansard Society E-democracy Programme, similarly stated that Downing Street E-petitions: 'lacked an underlying process that guaranteed an authentic and considered response or which led to the possibility of an action occurring as a result of the petition'.[2] Bochel (2012), meanwhile, identified Downing Street E-petitions as a descriptive tool that was weakly institutionalized. She cites Somerville (2011, p. 425), who echoes the concerns of Hay and Stoker (2009): 'participants find that their participation makes no significant difference and they become (more) disillusioned, cynical and demoralised, with the result that representative democracy (further) loses legitimacy'.

As with the broader definitions of success discussed above, each of these analyses of Downing Street E-petitions is built around a measure of success that focuses on the extent to which petitioners achieve their demand and/or influence government policy. Clearly, the extent to which participation influences, or has the chance to influence, decision-making is important. If it is correct that people had only a very limited chance to influence policy, it could be seen as surprising that so many people took the time to create and sign petitions. Yet the statistics do not lie – millions of people signed a petition, and sometimes hundreds of petitions – with thousands of people creating new petitions (Wright, 2012, 2015 – see also, Wright & Coleman, 2012). This raises an interesting question that provides the broader context for this research: if people do not think they are going to succeed in achieving their demand, why do they still choose to participate and what benefits accrue from this participation?

Methodology

The methodology adopted here is a mixture of qualitative, semi-structured interviews (telephone, online and face to face) and qualitative, open-ended surveys using a semi-structured approach that followed the same schema as the interviews. A question on the responses from Downing Street was added to the survey as this was an issue that came up repeatedly during interviews. The qualitative approach was adopted because it allowed the researcher to explore people's perceptions in depth. The questions explored both the background to the creation of an E-petition, the methods used to promote the petition (if any), the impact(s) of the petition and their views about the timeliness and content of the government response. The questions were, in part, informed by a wider empirical analysis (that covered all accepted (33,058) and rejected petitions (a further 38,264 petitions) that had, for example, identified issues with the speed of replies and non-responses and the length and tone of replies.

While the qualitative survey design meant that follow-on questions were difficult (in five cases, subsequent questions were emailed to ask for more information), it did allow respondents the time to reflect on their answers. The qualitative surveys were used because the response rate was much higher than expected. It was not feasible to interview so many people (with the subsequent transcription costs), and so it was decided that, rather than decline people's offer to help and limit the data available, it was better to adopt a different methodology. Where necessary, interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all of the responses were analyzed using NVivo to ensure that patterns and themes across the interviews could be identified and systematically analyzed.

Three types of actor were interviewed. First, what might be described as elite interviews: people involved in the setting-up and running of Downing Street E-petitions alongside an interview with a senior former Labour government minister. These interviews outline the aims and perceived impacts of Downing Street E-petitions for the government. Second, the directors of campaigns or policy at nearly 20 organized groups such as Amnesty International, the Campaign to Protect Rural England and Age Concern were interviewed.[3] These interviews explored both the strategic decisions on whether or not to use Downing Street E-petitions, and, where used, how they helped to achieve the aims set out for them.

The principal empirical data for this article were drawn from a series of semi-structured interviews and qualitative surveys with people who created E-petitions that received more than 500 signatures and should have received a response. First a series of interviews were conducted with individual petition creators who gave no affiliation. As these were harder to contact, the analysis focused on the 20 most signed petitions created by individuals. Including them in the analysis was considered important because research has questioned whether new media empowers individual activists (e.g. Earl & Kimport, 2011) and they might have different perceptions of success.[4] Second, an attempt was made to identify and contact all of the petitioners who gave an affiliation to their petition and which went on to receive more than 500 signatures. The term affiliation is used to capture the diversity of 'things' to which people linked their petitions. This could be to a social group (e.g. old-aged pensioner, mother), business or even to make a statement. The analysis found that often these affiliated petitions were by individuals acting alone, and that there was some evidence of empowerment. Nevertheless, responses were received from a wide range of people, including politicians, clergy, business owners and employees, and academics. Overall, this supported the use of affiliation, but meant that neat distinctions were impossible (Wright, 2015).

Of the 13% of petitions that had an affiliation, 130 were identified and 87 agreed to help (with 82 responses received – this was the bulk of qualitative surveys; 16 interviews were conducted in total in this phase). Combined, this represents a wide range of data, including a broad spread of the petitions with more than 500 signatures. There are two limitations to the sample. First, there is a danger or self-selection bias (e.g. people who were unhappy with E-petitions might be less/more likely to accept the offer to participate). However, the self-selection issue appears to have been minimized because the vast majority of people who were contacted actually agreed to take part. Put simply, people seemed keen to talk about their E-petitions. Moreover, a diverse range of views was present within the sample. Second, similar to most existing work, the sample does not cover the perceptions of people who solely signed (rather than created) petitions (see IPSOS MORI, 2009 for an exception, focusing on Scotland). Further research into petition signers is necessary as they may have different perceptions of success.

Perceptions of 'success' in Downing Street E-petitions

People's perceptions of success varied significantly. This was directly linked to the aims of the petitioner in most cases. Where the aim was solely to change government policy, success was largely measured against this. However, it must be noted that this was the exception rather than the norm: aims were often defined broadly. Robert Bain of the Chagos Support Association summarized this:

> Well they didn't drop the appeal [against the Chagos' islanders right to go home], so in that sense no [it was not successful]. But then that's not really why you do a petition. In terms of drumming up support and getting attention and showing strength, yes, I think it was a moderate success.

It is important to note that the vast majority of E-petitions were only one tool being used as part of a broader campaign, making it difficult to disentangle exactly what role they played within the broader campaign. Megan Pacey reflected this: the success was 'not

necessarily as a consequence of the E-petition but it certainly was one of many successful components which resulted in a delay in implementation'. Nick Salmon was more positive:

> their E-petition 'was a significant part of the SPLINTA campaign success. The petitions were additional straws on the camel's back; part of a hugely energetic and time consuming lobbying effort that forced the Administration to engage with us; caused extensive parliamentary debate; gained very widespread media coverage; caused the Labour government to fundamentally alter policy HIPS; and ultimately persuaded the incoming coalition to make making the abolition of HIPs one of its first actions on coming to power.'

One example of where there was perceived to be a positive change largely due to an E-petition was on the status of midwives. According to Kay Hardie of the Independent Midwives Association:

> Government strongly acknowledged the problem and came on board to find possible solutions […] We knew a petition would not change the EU directive but that it would galvanize support for finding solutions … . It was very uplifting to see such a positive response!.

This example fits with one of the government aims for E-petitions:

> it is like dipping your toe into the water of public sentiment […] in order to actually understand what issues are of concern to the public, and what level of support certain ideas or proposals or concerns have. (Int. Senior Downing Street Official)

The issue for midwives was effectively an unintended consequence and Downing Street E-petitions enabled midwives to communicate their concerns to government quickly and the government attempted to resolve the issue. Another respondent noted that:

> Coincidence or not, the Government Minister, John Healey MP, made a statement at 9.30am announcing the shortlisted eco-towns that were going forward on 16 July 2009, the day we had arranged to deliver the paper petition and e-petition names to 10 Downing Street at 12 noon with four of the local MPs. So the apparent outcome from delivering our petitions to Number 10, was that 2.5 hours earlier, the Minister had seemingly acted upon what we requested and had not selected Pennbury to be on the shortlist of eco-towns going forward.

One of the largest petitions requested that a new Bank Holiday be created in November. Bank Holidays effectively give everyone a day off work and mark important occasions such as Easter and May Day. This was both to celebrate the British Armed Forces, and because there is no such holiday between the end of August and Christmas. The petition was created by Robert Warner, a civically active retired individual who regularly writes letters to the *Daily Telegraph*. Indeed, the petition was created in response to a letter published in the newspaper. Initially, he contacted everyone in his email inbox to tell them about the petition. He received a raft of replies from people saying they had signed the petition, but also offering more support. Warner wrote a letter to the *Telegraph* highlighting the petition, but this was not published. However, the regional television broadcaster did cover the petition that led to more media requests to cover the petition. He subsequently noticed that there was a lot of talk in online forums about the petition, and people trying to contact him. He stated:

> I didn't really promote it at all, and I do regret not having done that. At the end of the day I was actually rather chuffed. The family couldn't believe it: 'Dad, have you seen it? 300,000?!'

> […] so there was an immense feeling of satisfaction […] I've told them I want it on my tombstone!

Warner noted that he had no expectations at all when he created the petition, but 'when it got beyond the half million signatures' he felt there was a chance that it could be enacted, and this was strengthened when the Prime Minister said they were looking at acting on the petition on national television. The government did eventually create an Armed Forces day, but on a Saturday in the summer because of worries over cost. While Warner was 'cross that Gordon Brown presented it as his own idea', he felt that: 'The response was fair, even though I did not get what I wanted'.

In most cases, however, the perceived success was because of a much broader definition of success than having an impact on policy. Before discussing some of these in greater detail, the following list summarizes some of the reasons given for considering the petition a success:

- Increased publicity (e.g. media coverage)
- Raised awareness/kept issue alive
- Increased membership (e.g. UKIP claimed it increased membership by 10%)
- Increased credibility
- Galvanized/focused support – provided glue/continuity
- Created a sense of solidarity in the local/national community
- Made people realize they can make a difference
- Shows our supporters we are acting
- Government changed policy
- Government agreed to continue policy (as we wanted)
- Government provided alternatives or partial changes
- Helped gain key support/links (e.g. an MP, opposition parties, journalists)
- Helped gain access to ministers
- Received enough signatures to get an official response
- Reached a set target of signatures (often far-exceeding expectations of individuals)
- Increased understanding in government and/or amongst general public
- Made a strong statement about how people felt/an outlet to express their concerns
- Fulfilled a sense of civic duty
- It proved to the creator that other people cared about the issue

The findings of this research support an argument put forward by Karpf (2010): critics of 'slaktivist' forms of political participation such as Shulman (2009) tend to focus on the petition (or equivalent) in isolation but this misrepresents or misunderstands the actual aims and context of such participatory activities. As Karpf (2010, p. 32) succinctly puts it: 'the petition alone is not *supposed* to make a difference – it is one piece of a broader campaign to leverage organizational resources into power to affect Senate decision makers'. The people interviewed here explicitly backed this up: a suite of campaign tools and tactics were typically used (by individuals and affiliated groups), each with different aims and objectives. For example, Tania Spriggens noted that: 'The e-petition is just one in a number of campaigning tools we employ that helps create a ground swell of support, and when used in conjunction with other activities, can result in change'. Similarly, Gwyneth Taylor noted that: 'the government rescinded its decision […] the petition was part of an overall strategy including significant lobbying of MPs and peers plus a

threatened judicial review, which in the end was not proceeded with as an accommodation was reached'. However, the fact that it is perceived as easy was central for many individuals: 'I could do it in a couple of minutes, put it out into the ether and just see if it registered with people […] it was so easy, and it suits the laziness of today's Internet community … '.

Another common belief was that petitions were the beginning of the process and not the end; they opened up doors that led to more in-depth engagement with the policy process. For example, one interviewee noted that:

> In terms of the column inches and publicity we generated, it is hard to see how we could have done better in the time available. All our local political candidates or MPs were involved within a week. We were given access to various senior Post Office personnel involved, including the Director in charge of the Post Office Network Change process.

However, it must be noted that others were frustrated by the lack of broader communication. For example, one respondent who was clearly highly politically motivated contacted both MPs and ministers and did not receive a reply 'in any which way, shape or form. So, I didn't vote for any body – I thought bugger you'. This supports the contention (Carman, 2010; Somerville, 2011) that new pathways for political participation can exacerbate rather than ameliorate the apparent democratic malaise if they are not managed sensitively.

It should also be noted that for the larger virtual organizations, such as Avaaz, it was argued that E-petitions tended to play a strategic role:

> they 'tend to be good for growth, growing our [Email] list, and going viral, because it is a really low-bar action – often all one has to do is go to a page and input their email address. They tend to have slightly lower impact in terms of changing the game and winning on an issue […] we have had some breakthroughs with petitions but on the whole they tend to be more for organisational impact in terms of growth rather than sort of winning the campaign, winning on an issue'. (Personal interview)

This indicates a potential danger: organized groups could strategically use (or abuse?) E-petitions by creating them on topics that they care less about, but believe will generate more membership, or ask people to sign petitions that they believe government cannot act on so that they can use this non-action to strengthen support for them and against government policy.

This also raises a further area for potential success: petitions may actually be targeted at external organizations rather than the government. For example, there were petitions that asked the government to stop a company from mining in an area or to decrease the price of a product. In such cases, the government may not be able to act, but it does not mean that the company involved did not. As Brian Fitzgerald of Greenpeace noted:

> Corporations respond to public pressure much more quickly than governments, and as a result are finding themselves more frequently in our cross hairs. When you invest a great deal of money in your public perception, the economics of changing a harmful practice are often easy to measure against the brand damage to reputation and what it will cost to rebuild.

This is supported by private emails given in evidence to the Leveson Inquiry between the former News International Director of Public Affairs, Frederic Michel, and James

Murdoch focusing on News Corporation's attempt to take over BSkyB. The emails make clear that Michel was very worried about the Avaaz campaign, and that weakening it was crucial if the proposed takeover was to be successful.

This has implications for organizations and individuals that want to bring about change. Who should they target their campaigns at, particularly for global issues that exist beyond the nation state? An ongoing petition (hosted on Change.org) by the chef Jamie Oliver calls for compulsory practical food education. It is not made clear how signing the petition will 'create a movement powerful enough to force all G20 governments to take action', but it seems as though the hope is weight of numbers. Nevertheless, the clear aim is to move beyond individual governments to address what is presented as a global problem of malnutrition and obesity affecting different parts of the world. The lyrics of a song released by Oliver (written by Ed Sheeran and featuring people such as Paul McCartney) to encourage people to sign the petition also framed it in terms of people power that was beyond the scope of individual governments to address:

> don't rely on the government to fix this plight. No country in the world has ever won this fight. We're the only ones who can save our lives. Click the link below for the petition to sign. It doesn't take time so you need to just bear it. Do the right thing: sign it, share it.

Such shifts in the campaign strategy also have implications for measures and perceptions of success. Even if governments do not change policy, it does not mean that other organizations are not changing, and thus it adds to the complexity when attempting to both achieve and understand success.

In summary, individual, widely supported Downing Street E-petitions were often perceived to have been successful by their creators. In many cases, this was because they achieved broader aims such as increased publicity, higher membership or access to deeper, more involved areas of the policy process. It must be noted that there were also several cases where an E-petition was perceived to have led the government to change its policy. The extent to which any change was due to the E-petition is disputed, and many petitioners noted that 'successes' came as part of a broader campaign.

The broader accounts of success given here might be interpreted as an attempt to rationally justify their attempts to participate in politics. They could be seen as a damning statement about people's perceptions of political participation: that they think it will not make any difference but they have to try, and that it can help in other ways. This does not make the views unimportant for our understanding of political participation and what motivates and drives people. The findings appear to support Coleman's analysis that many people hold a more subtle and nuanced view of what they want and expect to achieve when participating in politics. In part, this is because expectations have been lowered by previous failures and/or negative media coverage. Proponents of political participation might prefer to see the gap between expectation and reality decreased due to governments being more prepared to act and communicate with citizens. But in the apparent absence of this, a public with decreased expectations – however perverse – would appear to be facilitating a more positive perception. This also suggests that how the government communicates the message to people is important, and it is to that which we must now turn.

A listening government?

Many of the respondents were scathing about the way they felt the government had treated their petition in official replies. First, there were serious issues with the production of official replies. As outlined in detail by Wright (2012), around 300 petitions with over 750,000 signatures did not receive an official reply when they should have, and replies often took many months – even years to be received – sometimes long after the issue had passed. The interview data collected here enable us to delve deeper into the findings: it highlights both the impact on the perception of participation that slow or non-response had, and the extent to which people went in attempting to get a reply. It is clear that there would have been many more missing petitions but for the intervention of their creators and supporters. As one petition creator put it: 'This [the reply] only happened after several letters of complaint were sent. Families felt this was disrespectful and insensitive given the issues in question.' Another noted that to get a reply they 'had to press, through Parliamentary Questions … '. For Duncan Cheadle of the Supper Club: 'someone needs to respond much faster (the length of time it took really was appalling) […] those not used to dealing with government will feel much worse about government and politics from having been involved in this way'.

When replies were received, while some petitioners were happy with the reply, the majority was disappointed – often severely. One issue was that the replies were often claimed either to be directly copied from earlier responses (e.g. to letters), or very similar. For Nick Salmon of Splinta: I could easily have written [the reply] in advance […] as I had had reams of previous correspondence. For another person, 'many of the phrases used were replicated exactly from other documents. The tone and understanding was similar, sometimes exact, to previous government issued statements. To test this perception, the official replies were analyzed using a text-matching tool powered by the Discovertext software: over 40 official responses had a 95% or greater similarity to another official response. The government was (with a hint of irony given that one of the biggest criticisms of 'slacktivist' campaigning is the cut and paste repetition of submissions) effectively plagiarizing itself.

The tone and content of the official replies led many participants to feel that the government was not listening or willing to communicate. It is worth citing several views given the extent of the anger presented. As one respondent put it: 'The response has always been "we have read your petition but we are not going to do anything for the following reasons … " This is neither helpful nor encouraging and gives the impression of not having listened.' For Jonathan Simmons of the Save the South campaign:

> The government response left me fuming, to be honest. I[t] was highly condescending, just repeated the government line parrot-fashion, and actually ignored most of the points in the petition's text. I suspect that all those who signed the petition and received that response felt equally irritated by its total lack of consideration.

For Dave Hampton, the reply was:

> Pure 'Yes (Prime) Minister' textbook stuff. Machiavellian. Polite but arrogant. Detailed but deliberately entirely missing the point. Late. Needed reminding. Unsatisfactory. And did

> not follow up when questioned. In other words, a brick wall. […] I was distressed that they did not bother to answer follow up questions – and would not engage in discussion … .

Another person gave a rather blunt summary of the message communicated by the official reply: 'We don't care, **** off'. Alan Ward of the Residents Landlord's Association felt that the reply was 'a blancmange of opacity: an even-handed repetition of the argument', while for Robert Bain, the reply was: 'the same old disingenuous mealy-mouthed claptrap that we've been hearing for years'. Chris Hodder stated that: 'They might as well have just written 'blah, blah, blah'. The response made no effort to explain the government's stance or seek a compromise.' Another respondent felt:

> It was meaningless, full of warm words with no real content, and did not address the specific issues raised. It had the appearance of a reply produced simply to tick a box saying 'petition replied to', rather than any attempt to properly engage with the issues raised. However, I had not expected to get a meaningful reply, that was not the point of the petition.

The perceived inadequate responses led some respondents to question the value of E-petitions. For Mark Johnson (KAALE): 'Government e-petitions are in effect, a complete load of junk – but a way that the government can use the excuse that it is listening to people, when it is not.' For John Wadsworth: 'e-petitions are sham democracy in that they give an impression that the Government is giving a degree of power to the people when in reality they just ignore it and carry on as normal.' Similarly, Simon Densley of Mast Sanity stated: 'it is yet another way for the Government (at that time) to pretend to be listening while really looking to do nothing. We really didn't expect much else … ' But how do these critical analyses of E-petitions marry with the earlier, more positive views?

This links back to the nuanced judgements being made: people assessed 'success' across several measures. Many respondents were critical of the reply yet actually felt that the petition was successful; the government response failed to communicate this. For example, Gray Dudek felt that the reply was

> not really addressed to us personally which we felt was slightly dismissive. The response on the website didn't really say that due to the petition the government have acted, they played down the petition in their note if anything by trying to say they were already thinking of doing it … .

Similarly, Simon Wigglesworth noted that while the petition had several positive outcomes, the 'response was one of the least useful elements of this tool'. Indeed, there was a more general view that the formal official replies (deliberately or otherwise) were not actually reflective of the degree of engagement and changes that the government was actually undertaking behind the scenes.

Conclusion

This research suggests that framing questions about the perception of success in political participation narrowly in terms of policy impact is too simplistic. People's perceptions of success are complicated and at times conflicted. While achieving the desired policy change might be the ultimate desired outcome, asking people if they perceive a petition to be successful does not fit with the multi-tool approach that most campaigns use: petition creators did not expect E-petitions to change policy in isolation. Furthermore, in delving deeper into the campaign impact (as opposed to the success) of a petition, respondents often

considered them to have been important, and successful in terms of the initial aims. In part, petitions were perceived to be successful because people had low initial expectations. Future research needs to take account of the more nuanced understanding of the impact of participation presented here. Such nuance is important because academic discourses form part of the broader socio-political debates about the crisis of democracy.

Respondent's perceptions of how the government replied to Downing Street E-petitions were largely scathing. While people do not necessarily expect the government to do what they want, they do expect to be listened to and to receive what they perceive to be a fair response that engages with the issue. The tone and content of replies played an important role in how people perceived the impact of their participation and of government itself. Official replies often fell far short of expectations: they were perceived to be late, dismissive, impersonal and unengaged. In some cases, replies were perceived to have downplayed or ignored the actual impacts of a petition; that the government did not want to admit that the petition had made a difference. The findings suggest that Coleman (2005) is right to argue that: the 'public has come to believe that governments don't know how to listen', but he does not go far enough. Put simply, this research suggests that many people believe the government is failing to listen *and* speak effectively.

This research indicates that much greater care and attention must be taken across government when writing official replies to public participation. Correspondence units within government departments are a significant part of the public face of government, and have a crucial role in shaping people's perceptions of political participation. Unfortunately, this has proved to be one of the weakest aspects of Downing Street E-petitions. If the government wishes to encourage political participation and communication through online democratic innovations, it must ensure that the processes that are put in place to respond to these messages are adequate. In this case, they were not. Relatively small changes, such as guaranteeing replies within a specific time frame; thanking people for taking the time to participate; and avoiding repetition (and cut and paste) from earlier responses were all possible ways to enhance Downing Street E-petitions.

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Notes

1. However, goal attainment is often operationalized in ways that do not afford us this information because it either focuses on predictive/potential behaviour, or does not actually ask about goals but uses apparent proxies. For example, a study that uses Eurobarometer data to comparatively analyze political participation amongst EU young people used data on people's interest in politics; whether they had voted at the last election; and whether they had undertaken a range of broader political acts (Recchi, 2007). Focusing on motivations behind different Obama

supporters, US research on emotions and politics analyzes what people and groups hope to achieve when participating, which is another way to understand motivation: “goals are necessary to the development of hope. Without goals there can be no hope” (Civettini, 2011, p. 98).
2. http://www.andywilliamson.com/?p=126
3. These interviews were funded by a British Academy small grant, Organising Virtual Collective Action, which focused on Third Sectors use of new media.
4. While on average petitions from organized interests were more successful than individuals in terms of signature rates, 19 of the 20 most signed petitions were from non-affiliated individuals. The 100 most signed petitions from individuals averaged over 62,000 signatures each. In fact, a formal group directly sponsored only one of the 50 most signed petitions.

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