

Structuring Engagement for e-Participation

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In this position paper I draw attention to some problems with current means of soliciting public opinion and suggest that e-participation should be seen as a two way process, not only soliciting views of the public, but providing them with explanation and understanding of issues and policies. The latter is currently under explored, but inspiration may be drawn from work on argument based explanation.

A site for filing petitions to Government has been running in the UK since November 2006 at <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/>. Through this site users can create, view and sign petitions. The five most popular in February 2007 were

We, the undersigned, petition the Prime Minister to...

- **Scrap the planned vehicle tracking and road pricing policy** (1414686 signatures)
- **ensure that inheritance tax is scrapped in this year's Budget** (62366 signatures)
- **repeal the Hunting Act 2004.** (26432 signatures)
- **scrap the proposed introduction of ID cards** (25855 signatures)
- **reduce the classified period for census data from 100 years to 70 years** (19772 signatures)

A person viewing the petition sees the 500 most recent signatories and a note from the petition creator. In the case of the road pricing petition this is:

“The idea of tracking every vehicle at all times is sinister and wrong. Road pricing is already here with the high level of taxation on fuel. The more you travel - the more tax you pay. It will be an unfair tax on those who live apart from families and poorer people who will not be able to afford the high monthly costs. Please Mr Blair - forget about road pricing and concentrate on improving our roads to reduce congestion.”

So great has been the response to this petition that the UK Prime Minister intends to e-mail each signatory giving a detailed explanation of the policy. The founder-director of mySociety.org, Tom Steinberg, is quoted as saying (Guardian newspaper 14/2/07)

“When people sign the petition the government can write back to these people. That’s never been possible before with a paper petition. This is all about change and evolution to a more deliberative democracy ... when you compare it to the fuel protests of 2000, they are signing on in a form of structured engagement rather than barricading fuel depots.”

But how structured is the engagement? How does the e-petition differ from the traditional “postcard” campaign, whereby people are encouraged to send individual postcards advocating or opposing a policy, and which was always met with a stock letter? Moreover the problems with petitions are well known. Consider Samuel Johnson’s condemnation of them in *The False Alarm*:

“The petition is then handed from town to town, and from house to house; and, wherever it comes, the inhabitants flock together, that they may see that which must be sent to the king. Names are easily collected. One man signs, because he hates the papists; another, because he has vowed destruction to the turnpikes; one, because it will vex the parson; another, because he owes his landlord nothing; one, because he is rich; another, because he is poor; one, to show that he is not afraid; and another, to show that he can write.”

Worse yet, a petition expresses a mixture of motives: in the case of road pricing above, civil liberties, resentment against fuel tax, concern for those who “need” to use a car, and so on are all mixed together.

But just as a petition expresses no definite point of view, nor is a stock answer intended to cover the needs of 1 or 2 million people likely to give a satisfactory explanation of Government policy. As explanation of expert systems has shown, effective explanation must be tailored to the user. There are lessons that can be learnt from such work – especially that based on argumentation - which can guide explanation:

- Using argument to drive a dialogue with the user so that the information is only presented in response to user requests, thus focussing on what the user is lacking: e.g. Bench-Capon et al (1993).
- Using user profiling to tailor the explanation to the values of the audience: if it is to convince, an argument must do so according to the values of the *audience* rather than the *speaker*. E.g. Grasso et al (2000).
- Engaging the user in argumentative debate: e.g. Yuan et al (2007).
- Graphical presentation of arguments e.g. the Zeno system of Gordon and Karacapilidis (1997).

One problem with these more sophisticated tools is that they are not so easy to use as, for example, a petition system. Some of them require some ongoing engagement to refine the user profile, while others require familiarisation with tools and notations and particular models of argument. All of this suggests that e-participation should not be structured around one shot usage, but rather seen as a regular on-going dialogue.

The aim of e-participation must be to enable the public to articulate their views, not as highly general and portmanteau statements, but so as to express their reasons and values, receiving in turn relevant information and assistance in understanding the pros and cons of their position and the positions of others. This will require much more sophisticated tools than those used at present, and a pattern of usage of e-participation sites that will enable these tools to be used effectively.

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