

Activism or *Slack*-tivism?

A Qualitative Study of

External Political Efficacy and Attitudes Toward E-Petitions

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Toward E-Petitions

**Introduction**

Since January 2007, over ten million members of Avaaz, a world-wide online activism site, have taken part in over 54,902,774 “actions” in order to make the world a more just and peaceful place (Avaaz.org, 2011). These actions include messages sent, phone calls, and petition signatures, each an example of e-democracy. While the sheer ability to mobilize these kinds of numbers is impressive in its own right, the ability to accurately measure the impact of these campaigns remains dubious at best. Many detractors, including Internet theorist Evgeny Morozov, refer to the work of Avaaz and other online-based activist sites as “slacktivism,” claiming that they lull activists who were once passionately engaged into laziness and complacency (Kinglsey, 2011). While Ricken Patel, founder of Avaaz, and his organization’s website claim that technology and online activism “can supercharge campaigns that have a clear strategy and theory of change” boasting the United Nations sanctions on Libya, the defeat of Silvio Berlusconi’s “censorship” law, and the delay of Rupert Murdoch’s BSkyB merger as campaign successes (Avaaz.org, 2011). Regardless of which side of the argument one falls on, little empirical evidence exists to support either.

In the same way that the African American students sitting at the “Whites Only” counter of a Selma diner could never predict what effect their actions would have, the outcomes of social activism are rarely known while they are in process. However, as critical social scientists, we believe that while the impact of the action itself is important, what will sustain a social movement is the increasing sense of empowerment that the action has on an individual. Because of this philosophy, we have decided to approach issues of social activism and e-democracy in terms of their impact on the individual. While there are notable exceptions (Lyu, 2008; Phang & Kankanhalli, 2006; Anderle, 2010), we have found very few studies that look at the relationship between external political efficacy and e-participation. Furthermore, we have found no studies looking at the relationship between that of external political efficacy and attitudes towards e-petitions, a form of e-democracy that requires very little time and energy to participate in.

It is clear from examples such as Avaaz that people worldwide are using e-democracy tools such as e-petitions to engage in social activism. And while it remains next to impossible to accurately gauge the effects of online activism on current events, we can directly learn from individuals where they side on the “activism vs. slacktivism” debate. Using focus groups, we will look at the relationship between attitudes toward e-petitions and external self-efficacy.

### **Literature review**

Before we can begin studying the relationship between external political efficacy and attitudes towards e-petitions, we must first define our key concepts.

#### **Traditional Petitions**

Petitions are a formal written application from a group or individual to some governing body or public official requesting action to address an injustice of a certain matter (*Petition*, 2011). Political scientists categorize petitioning as advocacy democracy, falling in between pure representative democracy and direct democracy. Unlike representative democracy, where proxy decision-makers are elected, and direct democracy, where citizens directly decide which policies suit them, advocacy democracy is where the act of participation is directed toward influencing the decision of elected representatives (Cruikshank, Edelman, & Smith, 2009).

### **Formal E-petitions**

E-petitions are the electronic equivalent of the traditional, offline form and are separated into two types. The first type is that of formal e-petitions. These are primarily found in Europe and are considered to be institutionalized and legally codified systems that are maintained through public institutions (Lindner & Riehm, 2008). These are petitioning systems developed and maintained by a government body, allowing citizens to directly communicate with it.

The effectiveness of formal e-petitions have been measured through evaluation research and participant observations in public access settings, with sponsors of the system generally expressing the usefulness of the new method in complimenting more traditional forms of democracy (Macintosh, Malina, & Farrell, 2002). However, Macintosh, Malina, and Farrell (2002) concede that research so far has yet to empirically show that technology increases inclusion and participation in the democratic process.

### **Informal E-petitions**

The second and more common type of e-petition is the informal kind. Informal e-petitions are requests to an authority, usually a governmental institution, by non-governmental

organizations and/or individuals (Lindner & Riehm, 2008). These include everything from petitioning your local school in order to keep its music program to asking the UN to sanction a country due to human rights violations.

Mosca and Santucci (2009) explored the role of e-petitions in European web campaigning and found that many different cultures and European nationalities were able to converge online to influence the EU in Brussels. In addition, Europeans were able to connect with other EU citizens and influence the policy making process (Mosca & Santucci, 2009).

### **Importance of E-petitions**

Although the effect of e-petitions is still unclear, their ubiquity online makes them a critical area of study for social scientists interested in the impact of e-democracy. Researchers believe that particular groups on the Internet may benefit from the strategic opportunities offered by e-petitions, allowing collective action against big businesses, governments, and international organizations (Postmes & Bruntsing, 2002).

Counter to these points, there is concern among some that Internet petition signing is too easy and may contradict the deliberative process that is seen as necessary for democracy (Baer, 2002). For instance, Internet security may not be adequate enough to prevent widespread abuse, and it may become wholly undemocratic for those who lack access to the Internet (Baer, 2002). In addition, it can be argued that digital signatures of e-petitions negate the meaning of Riley's (2009) characterization of petitioners as socially relevant persons, because, as he sees it, they lessen the power to persuade with their signees' personal testimony, a key element of the petition format.

Because e-petitions are significant to online democratic participation and their effectiveness as a democratic tool is much debated, we have decided to address the concept of external political efficacy to further our understanding of this issue.

### **Dimensions of Political Efficacy**

Political efficacy is defined as, “the 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, 2003, p. 187). Political efficacy has been one of the most consistently examined constructs in political science since it first entered the field in the 1950s (Morrell, 2003). After its initial theoretical definition by Campbell et al. (2003), it was later refined into two different constructs: internal efficacy, which refers to the belief that you as an individual can understand politics and therefore participate in the democratic process, and external efficacy, which is the belief that the government is responsive to your demands (Balch, 1974; Converse, 1972; Niemi, Craig & Mattei, 1991).

Attitudes are defined as the patterns of behavior that an individual or group has in evaluating something with a degree of favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Though some researchers (Ableson, 1972; Wicker, 1969) have concluded that there is very little evidence to support that consistent, underlying attitudes can be said to exist, it remains a key area of study, especially when it is related to action (e.g. Liska, 1975; Schuman & Johnson, 1976). For instance, the idea that an individual’s attitude toward an object has an effect on his or her overall pattern of responses to the object is an argument that Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) have made in the past. In other words, one may predict a single act by a person based on their attitude towards the act (Ajzen, 1991). The theory of planned behavior, an extension of the theory of reasoned

action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), posits that behavioral beliefs link the behavior of interest to expected outcomes, which in turn influence attitude toward the said behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

### **E-petitions and Attitude**

Because a consistency between attitudes and behavior has emerged from previous research, the concept of attitude has played a central role in understanding why humans act the way they do (Cooper & Croyle, 1984; Allport, 1935). Relevant to our own work, the relationship between attitudes and offline petitions have been looked at within a number of contexts (Kamenetsky, Burgess, & Rowan, 1956; Weigel & Newman, 1976). In addition, many studies have looked at the relationship between attitude and the larger scope of online participation in the form of e-democracy (Kolsaker & Lee-Kelley, 2008; Nugent, 2001; Coleman 2005). Likewise, studies have looked at e-petitions in relation to such issues as web campaigning (Mosca & Santucci, 2009), their effectiveness in the British House of Commons (Maer, 2010), and transnational mobilization (Costanza-Choc, 2003), among others. Furthermore, a relationship between political efficacy and political participation was found across many different countries and election systems (Ikeda, 2008).

### **Justification of Approach**

Scholars have done an excellent job of classifying the varying forms of online activism (Vegh, 2003; Smythe & Smith, 2002) but identifying its effects has remained illusive. For instance, even after the fact, it is difficult to say with any certainty what the role of Twitter had on the 2009 Iranian election (Gaffney, 2010). So while there is currently no concrete method to

determine causation between e-participation and real world events, what can be addressed is how attitudes towards e-democracy and tools like e-petitions affect external political efficacy.

## **Method**

### **Focus Groups**

The act of participating in e-democracy, a nascent and complex form of citizen participation, requires a methodological approach that respects and accurately captures the nuance and thoughtfulness of an individual's attitude. With this in mind, we will conduct two in-depth focus group sessions with American citizens between the ages of 18 and 35 to empirically investigate the beliefs, attitudes, and social norms related to participation in e-petitions.

Focus groups are a form of qualitative research leveraging on the unique communication that occurs in a group interview setting (Kitzinger, 1995). It is a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permission, non-threatening environment" (Krueger, 1994, p. 6). Focus groups are particularly useful for exploring and documenting people's experiences and related beliefs and understandings, which allow the researcher to examine not only what people think about a topic, but how and why they come to these understandings (Kitzinger, 1995).

It must be noted, however, that there are weakness to focus groups. These include the fact that the observations of an individual may be dependent or influenced by another individual's views (Prestin & Pearce, 2010). Likewise, it may be difficult to separately identify a participant's own beliefs from the beliefs that are held by the participant's self-identified culture (Gibbs, 1997). Another limitation particular to this approach, is that the researcher, or moderator, has less control over the data produced (Morgan, 1988). However, because of the limited availability of



scholarship on this particular topic, the open-ended approach of focus groups will function as the best method to develop the foundational knowledge for future research.

### **Participants**

In order to create a focus group that is as representative as possible of American Internet users, we posted informational fliers on college campuses seeking individuals who had used or were at least aware of e-petitions. We chose to begin with university students because they would have more access to Internet and Communication technology than other individuals would. In addition we attended various political events, including Republican and Democrat gatherings, as well as protests focused on both left and right wing issues, to recruit volunteers for our study. We mainly sought out individuals between the ages of 18 and 40, because they are the most active and savvy of all online users. While it should be noted that more mixed groups of individuals (e.g., Republican, Democrats, and Independents) may lead to a more argumentative discussion (Lindloff & Taylor, 2010), we will emphasize to the participants that we see each person as an American citizen, rather than a member of a party or movement.

As a result, 10 different individuals will be invited to each of our focus group sessions. This number was decided based on well-established methodological protocols that cite a group of 6 to 12 persons being most effective (Lindloff & Taylor, 2010). It has been established that a group of 4 to 8 adults is optimal (Kritzinger, 1995), however due to recruitment being the single most common source of failure in focus group research (Morgan 1995), we opted to include more participants than recommended.

### **Procedure**

Two researchers will attend the focus groups, with one acting as moderator for the discussion and the other offering additional questions and comments, while also taking notes. The focus group will take place in a quiet university classroom with participants' chairs set up in a semi-circle to facilitate engagement and proper eye contact. Participants will receive a \$15 gift card as compensation for their time. Singer and Couper (2008) express concern that monetary incentives may lead to participation coercion, however they consider incentives only "unduly influential" when they induce participants to take risks that they may not take without the incentive. Because our focus groups involves little to no physical or emotional risks, we believe that a monetary incentive is not imprudent.

The sessions will last for approximately 90 minutes (with a 5 minute break at the halfway point) to allow for an in-depth discussion that addresses the many facets of the topic. The session will be audio recorded with two microphones covering the participant semi-circle while concurrently picking up the researchers' speech. In addition, a video camera will be set up to document facial expression and hand gestures to more vividly capture the proceedings. The session will be transcribed verbatim from the audio files, with the video being used by the transcriber to accurately identify each speaker.

The researchers will encourage all participants to be candid and open with their thoughts and opinions, and will explain that there are no wrong answers and all responses will be useful for the process. A list of questions has been developed prior to the meeting (Appendix A) and the researchers will adhere to this list. However, to facilitate capturing unexpected insights, researchers will allow for deviance and tangential conversations during the group session. Key topics discussed will include: general use of the Internet, experience with traditional petitions, experience and attitudes toward social activism, awareness of e-participation and e-democracy,

attitudes toward online activism and e-participation, general attitudes regarding political efficacy, and specific experiences with influencing government policy.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When working with our group of individuals, we will take the utmost care to ensure that all ethical considerations are thoroughly addressed. When selecting and involving the participants, full information will be communicated regarding the purpose of the study as well as how the participants' contributions will be used. We will be honest and forthright about the expectations of the group and topic, and no one will be pressured to speak if they do not want to. Furthermore, we will emphasize that each individual's participation is completely voluntary and that they may leave the study at anytime. Given that we will be working with a group of people, we will make clear that specific information about individuals expressed during the discussion will remain known only to those in the room. We will ask all participants to respect the privacy of all involved and stress that all information of their fellow participants must remain confidential. In addition, we will anonymize the identity of all participants prior to the transcription process.

### **Data analysis**

Data will be analyzed with thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and documenting patterns, or themes, within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a search for themes that emerge as important to a description or understanding of a topic or phenomenon (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997) through the investigation of the data over multiple iterations (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). This process allows coders to elucidate patterns

within the data, where themes that emerge function as the analysis categories (Prestin & Pearce, 2010). The result is an approach “that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

The process for this analysis will begin with the researchers creating a master coding document of initial themes and keywords that become apparent from the focus group transcripts, with the understanding that the document may be revised as the analysis progresses. Next, the researchers will analyze the data as a group, fostering a shared understanding of the emergent themes through a discussion of consistencies and discrepancies in code assignment. Parent codes will be identified through this process, then text will be examined independently for child codes. Following this step, researchers will compare their coding to assure consistency of analysis. Throughout the process, each researcher will take conceptual notes, highlighting important issues that were not directly related to the developed themes. In addition, researchers will note relevant, representative quotations from participants to facilitate verisimilitude within the research paper. A final meeting will be held with all researchers to review coding and to resolve any differences in interpretation. Likewise, similar themes will be combined and those unrelated to the study will be eliminated from analysis.

### **Reliability and Validity**

As described in the process above, one of the key methods in which we will increase our validity will be through multiple researcher triangulation. By ensuring that more than one investigator is present and engaged with the focus group and involved with each step of the thematic analysis, we will work, as Douglas explains, to overcome bias and other shortcomings of a single researcher (as cited in Lindloff & Taylor, 2010).

## **Data Presentation**

Our data, interpretations, and conclusions will be organized within a written report. The report will provide explanations and summaries of thematic coding as it emerged within our research, as well as relevant quotations by participants illustrating how the articulation of themes occurred within the discussion. In addition, the major themes will be categorized within a table, along with quotes that highlight these themes.

## **Limitations**

As we have described in our introduction, coming to an understanding of such complex and nuanced issues as how attitudes towards something like e-petitions is related to external political efficacy is not an easy task. But remaining open to the findings that will come about through the research will be a challenge in itself.

One of the main limitations of our research is that the focused nature of our researcher-directed discussion leads toward data that is determined by preconceived notions of the subject (Morgan, 1997). In the case of our ideologically diverse group of participants, there may be a tendency towards polarization as a result of individuals expressing more extreme views in a group than they may in a one-on-one interview (Sussman, Burton, Dent, Stacy, & Flay, 1991). Additionally, we cannot make generalizations about groups of people from the responses of individuals, and it would be naive to approach our findings believing that this one cultural context can be extrapolated to define a whole culture. However, the themes that emerge through our analysis should be researched further, through quantitative methods such as national surveys.

While these limitations do exist, our findings will act as a critical first step in better understanding how attitudes toward e-participation are related to external political efficacy.

## Appendix A

### Focus Group Interview Questions

#### Internet use

- 1) How do you spend your time when you are surfing the web?
- 2) How do you think the Internet has improved your life?
- 3) How have you seen technology change politics and elections?

#### Offline Politics

- 1) What makes a good citizen?
- 2) Have you ever filled out a petition, for example to get a politician on an election ballot?
- 3) What kind of activities are you involved with that you consider political or civic?

#### External political efficacy

- 1) How do you think social change usually comes about?
- 2) How do you think political change usually comes about?
- 2) How much impact can an individual have on influencing political change?
- 3) How much impact do you personally feel you can have on influencing political change?

#### E-participation

- 1) Are you familiar with e-participation?
- 2) Have you or anyone you know been involved with e-participation?

3) If so, why did you or that person decide to be involved?

5) If not, why have you not used e-petitions?

5) What does e-participation mean to you?

#### E-petitions

1) Are you familiar with e-petitions?

2) What do you know about e-petitions?

3) How do/could e-petitions affect how people influence local politics?

4) How do/could e-petitions affect how people influence politics on a larger scale?

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