Activism or *Slack*-tivism?:

A Mixed Methods Study of External Political Efficacy and Attitudes Toward E-Petitions

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October 19, 2011

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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" which they say "empowers millions of people from all walks of life to take action on pressing global, regional and national issues" (Avaaz.org, 2011). Organizations such as Avaaz accomplish this through e-democracy, a form of e-participation defined as the process of citizens using the Internet to communicate opinions or complaints to government related to a public issue (Thomas & Streib, 2005), 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 (e.g. Gladwell, 2010; Mikkelson, 2007; Morozov, 2009) 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.

From the American Civil Rights movement to the 2011 Arab Spring, 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.

Many scholars have classified 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). And while there are notable exceptions (Anderle, 2010; Lyu, 2008; Phang & Kankanhalli, 2006;), 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. As we have explained above, e-petitions are a key tool for e-democracy, but their effects and usefulness are barely understood. This is akin to pouring random liquids into your car in the hope that one of them will be gasoline; not only is this inefficient, but it could easily ruin the engine.

We believe that it is our responsibility as social scientists and members of a democratic society to examine this issue of e-participation. It is clear that a need exists in the literature to explore this topic in order to develop variables heretofore unknown and to assess the extent that exploratory results generalize. This mixed methods study will address the impact that e-petitions, a specific form of e-participation, have on an individual’s sense of empowerment.

We will use an exploratory mixed methods design, where the researcher first collects and analyzes the qualitative data in order to build to a subsequent quantitative phase. A mixed methods approach to our topic area will allow us to use the strategy of typology development, where the analysis of one data type leads to a group of themes, a typology, that can then be analyzed against the second data type to enhance and expand on the typology (Onwuegbezie & Teddlie, 2003). This allows for triangulation as well as initiation benefit, two key benefits of mixed method research (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989).

We will use thematic analysis of focus group interviews to develop a quantitative survey for explore American college students attitudes towards e-petitions and how these relate to external political efficacy. The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data is to explore an under-researched topic, to develop a typology for assessing whether qualitative themes generalize to a population.

Literature Review

Democracy and ICTs

Many researchers are concerned that the necessary actions of an effective democracy are not occurring. Reasons for this include, the trend of individualism and consumerism within society (Coleman et al., 2007), declining youth participation (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Keenan, Hull, & Nagm, 2009), and a citizens' general distrust of and disconnect with government (Sanders, 2007). Because of these concerns, scholars are studying what effects new forms of technological mediation are having on participation (Anttiroiko, 2003; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal 2008). This mediation, known as e-democracy, is the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) to facilitate more informed and sophisticated decision-making by lawmakers and citizens (Efthimios et al., 2007; Hull, West, & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2011).

E-democracy assists in facilitating both requirements of Watson and Mundy's (2001) actions for effective democracy. It assists with the first facet of their requirements through the transmission of information between citizens and government facilitated by a network of emails, blogs, institutional and government web sites, as well as social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.

E-democracy helps promote the second facet of Watson and Mundy's (2001) requirements by embracing the ideal of inclusive and meaningful engagement by citizens in politics and civic affairs, fostering authentic citizen participation (Sanford & Rose, 2007). In addition, ICTs have altered the landscape of political activism by supporting the dissemination of pro-social ideas and opportunities throughout communities, countries, and the world (Ayres, 1999). Individuals can not only connect with their elected representatives, but with citizens across the globe as well. This leads to an increase in social connectedness and sense of community that empowers citizens and bolsters the development of democracy (Jones, 1995; Schwartz, 1995; Wellman et al., 2001).

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 (Cruickshank, 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, 2009). These are petitioning systems developed and maintained by a government body, allowing citizens to directly communicate with it.

Through qualitative means, 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, 2009). 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 Brussells. In addition, Europeans were able to connect with other EU citizens and influence the policy making process (Mosca & Santucci, 2009).

It is important to note that the generic term, “e-petition” is used interchangeably to refer to the formal and informal type, and special consideration of context and application must be given to clarify which form the term refers to.

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, Gurin, and Miller (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).

Dimensions of Attitude

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 (Allport, 1935; Cooper & Croyle, 1984). 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 (Coleman 2005; Kolsaker & Lee-Kelley, 2008; Nugent, 2001) . 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).

Due to the emerging nature of the phenomena of e-democracy, we will use an exploratory mixed methods approach for a typology development in relation to external political efficacy and attitudes toward e-petitions amongst college students. Qualitatively we will ask the question – RQ1: What are college students' attitudes towards the Internet as a tool for democracy? Quantitatively we will ask the question – RQ2: What is the relationship between political self-efficacy and individual attitudes towards e-petitions? And finally, through mixed methods integration and analysis we will ask the question – RQ3: To what extent and in what ways does a quantitative survey allow us to quantify emergent qualitative themes, found through focus groups of college students, involving the relationship between political self-efficacy and individual attitudes towards e-petitions via exploratory mixed methods analysis?

Methods

While there are many definitions of mixed methods, based on various philosophies and methodological orientations (e.g. Tashakkori & Tashlie, 1998;), the one most relevant to our own research is Tashakkori and Creswell's (2007). They define mixed methods in terms of research that involves the collection, analysis, integration, and findings based on qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study or sequence of studies (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). In addition, Johnson et al. (2007) emphasize that the combination of these approaches are necessary for both breadth and depth of reasoning and substantiation.

Methodological Challenges

Qualitative.

Reflexivity.

Looking at the challenges and limitations of both quantitative and qualitative research explicate the necessity of mixed methods. The main challenges of qualitative research involve issues of reflexivity and transferability. Because qualitative researchers are making personal judgements about categories and coding, there will naturally be bias in the research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Reflexivity involves the attitude of being systematically aware of the context of knowledge construction, especially in regards to the bias attributed to the researcher's background and personal views (Malterud, 2001).

Transferability.

Polit and Hungler (1999) define transferability as the ability to take findings from one study and apply it to another population or study (as cited in Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The transferability of a study determines how universal and reproducable the findings are, a daunting and sometimes impossible task when you are dealing with a specific population at a specific point in time. Because we are dealing with a group of college students and because technology is constantly evolving, transferability may be a considerable challenge. However, we believe that looking at e-participation from a wider scope will offer important findings regardless of the specific characteristics of the current online innovation.

Additional concerns.

One of the main limitations specific to our own qualitative study is that the focused nature of our researcher-directed focus group discussions lead toward data that is determined by preconceived notions of the subject (Morgan, 1997). Because we are recruiting college students based on Internet experience using maximum variation and snowball sampling, we will have a demographically and ideologically diverse group of participants. This may lead to 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). We see this as an advantage to our study as it will allow for more expansive exploration during our mixed methods integration and analysis. Another potential challenge of our qualitative study will be that 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, this further justifies our need for a quantitative phase to triangulate the findings from this stage.

Quantitative.

The main challenges of quantitative research include the lack of contextual and cultural understanding necessary to give a voice to participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In general, it is difficult for quantitative studies to yield findings that reflect the complexity of human behavior (Quintana, Troyano, & Taylor, 2001).

Some of the challenges specific to our own quantitative study are the lack of quantitative measures that have been developed specific to attitudes involving online participation. Alan and Krosnick (1991) argue that reliability of a survey attitude measurement, such as the Generalized Attitude Measurement that we use in this study, is dependent on such things as the topics assessed by the questions and the population sampled. Because such surveys as GAM have not been utilized in our area of research, it is problematic to make assumptions about the reliability of these attitudinal measurements. However, during our analysis phase we will be able to utilize initiation benefit to determine the effectiveness of scales such as GAM on a new area of research. This is further justification for a mixed methods approach involving typology development. From the limitations discussed above, it is clear that we must use mixed methods to most appropriately address our research question.

Cresswell. et al. (2003) justifies the use of mixed methods because it allows researchers to generalize results from a qualitative sample to a larger population, gaining insights into the phenomenon of interests in ways that could not be reached from one methodology alone. Because we are studying the emerging area of e-participation, which lacks the general typologies and theoretical constructs of more established disciplines, we find this rationale to be most in line with our own scientific philosophies. The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data is to explore an under-researched topic, to develop a typology for assessing whether qualitative themes generalize to a population.

Mixed Methods Study Design

We have chosen to use an exploratory sequential design for our mixed methods study on attitudes towards e-petitions and how they relate to external political efficacy. The primary purpose of the exploratory sequential design, according to Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011), is to generalize the findings of a small sample qualitative study to a larger sample, through a larger sample quantitative study. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) recommend that this method be used when either measures or instruments are not available or there is no guiding framework or theory. We would argue that these characteristics fit our study of e-participation, because as we stated above, the measure and instruments necessary to examine attitude in relation to an online activity have not been developed. Furthermore, no guiding framework or theory has been developed around e-participation.

In line with our own research goals, the exploratory sequential design has been very useful in developing and testing an instrument (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Daughtry and Kunkel (1993) argued that a lack of consensus in depression research had led to a variety of contradictory ways that depression is measured. They used exploratory sequential design to develop a concept map for depression. Concept maps are interpretable pictorial representations illustrating how a various themes are interrelated within a specific topic (Trochim, 2006b). Designing a concept map for external political efficacy in the context of e-petitions will help conceptualize this relatively new phenomena. Khoja et al. (2007) used the exploratory sequential design to develop e-Health assessment tools for public and private healthcare institutions in developing countries. Similar to our own research, Khoka et al (2007) used this mixed method design because it allows for the developing and testing of new instruments when researchers "look for accuracy, precision, and application of the instrument at the same time" (p. 426).

Mixed Method Study Challenges

The main challenges of the exploratory sequential design is that it requires considerable time to implement, including time to develop a new instrument (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Though this challenge does create problems in terms of budgeting and planning, we believe that the development of an instrument to better understand e-participation, an increasingly important area of the democratic process, warrants this type of prolonged approach. Another challenge to consider is the instrument development phase. Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011) emphasize the importance of making thoughtful decisions on which data to use from the qualitative phase to create the quantitative instrument, as well as undertaking a specific set of procedures that will help ensure scores developed on the instrument are valid and reliable. We will follow these best practices and be mindful of these challenges throughout the entire study.

Phase 1: Qualitative - Focus Groups

In order to create a focus group that is as representative of American college students as possible, we will use maximum variation to recruit our target population. Lahsaeizadeh and Yousefinejad (2011) used this same method for the first phase of their exploratory sequential study to recruit a representative sample. We will post informational fliers on college campuses seeking students who have used or are at least aware of e-petitions and e-participation. On the flier will be a link (as well as a direct QRcode) to a short online survey asking the potential participant questions regarding their demographic and ideological leanings. Following the principles of maximum variation, this will allow us to choose the widest range of individuals based on sex, age, political party affiliation, level of political activity, and knowledge of current events and politics. We will pick students to ensure the widest range of individuals and will have a follow-up call to verify the accuracy of their survey submissions. We chose to study university students because they would have more access to Internet and Communication technology than other individuals would, and therefore would be a good place to begin researching the area of e-participation. 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 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 (Kitzinger, 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 individuals 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 of 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 (1976) explains, to overcome bias and other shortcomings of a single researcher (as cited in Lindloff & Taylor, 2010).

Phase 1b: Qualitative Analysis for Quantitative Instrument Development

The thematic analysis and coding that is done during the qualitative analysis will allow us to do a more focused and specific survey. In this phase, our qualitative findings will help us develop a new quantitative instrument for studying the relationship between attitudes toward e-petitions and external political efficacy.

Themes of External Political Efficacy

While we do not currently have data to develop the actual instrument, the qualitative findings of our study and related literature will be used. Sheerin (2007) looked at political efficacy and youth non-voting in New Zealand. She developed an efficacy matrix showing characteristics of internal self efficacy (*high* and *low*) external self efficacy (*high* and *low*), and used this to create questions for interviews and focus groups (Sheerin, 2007). Some of the themes developed were: trustworthiness of politicians, whether politicians listen to young people, whether politicians were representative of the population, whether it matters who wins an election, whether an individual's vote makes a difference in an election, and general knowledge of politics (Sheerin, 2007).

Furthermore, in order to aid in our typology development we will ask an additional series of questions based on previous studies of external efficacy as interpretative sources (Dyck & Lascher, 2009; GSS, 1996; Pew, 1997). This will allow us to analyze the quantitative data against the qualitative data with more stratified groupings, leading to more initiation, triangulation, and expansion.

Phase 2: Quantitative - Survey

Participants.

Participants (n=340) will be selected through probability sampling of campus students and will be polled by telephone interview. Telephone interviews have the advantage of allowing researchers to gather data from the appropriate respondents with speed and relative ease. In addition, the relative anonymity of the telephone allows for higher comfort on the respondent's behalf (Burnard, 2004). However, some major drawbacks of the method involve the fact that many people don't have publicly-listed telephones, especially with the ubiquity of cell phones, along with calls being seen as a general intrusion (Trochim, 2006).

Variables.

External Political Efficacy.

We will begin with the questions inspired by Sheerin (2007), such as "It matters who wins an election," "Politicians listen to people like me," "Most politicians are not trustworthy," and "Politicians are representative of my country." With the additional themes that emerge from our qualitative analysis we will cluster the different forms of external political efficacy into a number of categories. Within these categories will create questions based on our themes with 7-point Likert scale responses (coded from 0 = strongly disagree through 7 = strongly agree).

Some possible survey questions could be: “Petitions that I sign are seen by government officials,” “I learn about new issues from petitions that I see online,” “Activities I do online make a difference in my world offline,” “I feel like I’m part of a group when I sign petitions,” and “I’m not interested in issues that don’t affect me directly.”

Additionally, a composite score of external political efficacy will be measured using five-point Likert scale responses (recoded from 0 to 4 so that higher numbers indicated higher efficacy) to the following statements: “The average person can influence politicians,” “I don’t have any say about what the government does,” “Even the best politician cannot have much impact,” and “Elections are a good way of making government pay attention.” In terms of reliability and validity, this measurement has been shown as a strong indicator of external political efficacy (Dyck & Lascher, 2009; GSS, 1996; Pew, 1997).

Attitude.

A composite score of attitude will be measure using the Generalized Attitude Measurement, a bi-polar semantic differential construct developed by McCroskey and Richmond (2006). It is based on the following adjectives: Good-Bad, Wrong-Right, Harmful-Beneficial, Fair-Unfair, Wise-Foolish, Negative-Positive. The respondents indicate their feelings on a 7-point scale, from which the composite score is derived. Participants will choose their feelings toward each adjective in response to a concept, in our case “e-petitions” (McCroskey & Richmond, 2006). In the phone survey, the interviewer will use GAM in the form of questions to the respondent (Appendix A). Reliabilities for this measure have generally been between .85 and .95 (McCroskey, 2006).

Procedure.

In order to describe the population from which data will be drawn, participants will be asked to identify the following variables: age, gender, and political affiliation. External political efficacy will be measured using five-point Likert scale responses from the questions stated above. Attitude will be measured using the bi-polar construct of the Generalized Attitude Measure in relation to the concept "e-petition" (Appendix B).

Validity.

The use of correlation will determine whether a relationship exists between external political efficacy and attitude towards e-petitions. A Pearson's r score will be reported to identify the strength of the relationship. A test of significance will also be reported to evaluate the likelihood that the result is simply from chance.

Integration and Analysis of the Two Data Sets

The final step of mixed methods analysis involves integrating the two sets of findings. For this, we will review the themes that emerged from our focus group interviews with the quantitative findings of our survey results. At this point, we will review the themes that emerge in the qualitative phase with the quantitative findings of our survey. By combining, organizing, and reporting the research findings, we will be able to develop a more thorough view of our phenomena through triangulation. In addition to focusing on the connections between the two data sets, we will use initiation, as discrepancies in quantitative versus qualitative findings can be intentionally analyzed for unforeseen insights invoked by paradoxical results (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989).

Typology Development

Typology development is a strategy for integrating two data sets. It involves the analysis of one data type to consider the “homogeneity within and the heterogeneity between subgroupings of data on some dimension of interest” (Carracelli & Greene, 2003, p. 198). This yields a set of substantive categories, or what is known as a typology, which are then incorporated into the analysis of the contrasting data type (Carracelli & Greene, 2003). Researchers have used this method in a number of mixed method purposes and contexts (e.g. Hall, Hord, & Griffin, 1980; Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, Collins, Filer, Wiedmaier., & Moore, 2007; Rossman & Wilson, 1985). This process also allows for iteration, where typology created from one data type can be used for analysis of the other data type, and the results can in turn be used to refine and expand the typology (Carracelli & Greene, 2003).

For our research we will use typology development with the intent of triangulation, initiation benefit, and iteration. Within our qualitative data, we will have groupings of themes derived from our focus groups. Within our quantitative data, we will have the responses to our typology questions based on our interpretative and investigative sources, along with the previous external efficacy scales and GAM. This will allow for a number of varying analysis to be done between the various groupings and subgroupings of our data.

Interpreting Results

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. We will create a concept map to aid in our own research as well as to visually show themes of external political efficacy in relation to e-participation. In addition, the major themes will be categorized within a table, along with quotes from individuals that highlight these themes. Statistical results of the survey will be presented with comparative analyses of the different groups that form around our typologies. These results will be integrated with quotations and insights from the focus groups to allow for a discussion of similarities and differences within the two data sets.

Reliability and Validity

As recommended by Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) we will address ways that we can increase our reliability and validity by having the same staff engaged in simultaneous analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. In addition, testing and verification of both types of data sources will be done (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). In our quantitative study we will address as Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) recommend, issues of statistical conclusion validity by ensuring we have a large enough sample population. And as previously discussed, we will demonstrate convergent validity through triangulation during our mixed methods integration and analysis.

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?

Appendix B

Directions: On the scales below, please indicate your feelings about "E-petitions." Numbers "1" and "7" indicate a very strong feeling. Numbers "2" and "6" indicate a strong feeling. Numbers "3" and "5" indicate a fairly week feeling. Number "4" indicates you are undecided or do not understand the adjective pairs themselves. There are no right or wrong answers. Only circle one number per line.

1) Good 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Bad

2) Wrong1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Right

3) Harmful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Beneficial

4) Fair 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Unfair

5) Wise 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Foolish

6) Negative 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Positive

Scoring:

Reverse code: 1, 3, & 4

Source: http://www.jamescmccroskey.com/measures/attitude_generalized.htm

General Social Survey, 1996

External Efficacy: additive index ranges from 0 to 16 constructed from five-point Likert scale responses (recoded from 0 to 4 so that higher numbers indicated higher efficacy) to the following statements: ‘‘The average person can influence politicians,’’ ‘‘I don’t have any say about what the government does,’’ ‘‘Even the best politician cannot have much impact,’’ and ‘‘Elections are a good way of making government pay attention.’’ Internal Efficacy: additive index ranges from 0 to 8 constructed from five-point Likert scale responses (recoded from 0 to 4 so that higher numbers indicated higher efficacy) to the following statements: ‘‘I have a pretty good understanding of the issues,’’ and ‘‘Most people are better informed about politics than I.’’

PEW Survey, 1997

External Efficacy: ‘‘Public officials don’t care what people like me think.’’ (Likert scale responses 1 (strongly agree), 2(somewhat agree), 3(somewhat disagree), 4(strongly disagree), with higher values indicating higher efficacy).

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