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Activism or *Slack-tivism*?:

External Political Efficacy and Attitudes Toward E-Petitions

Brendan Kirwin

Georgetown University

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## **1 Introduction**

Democracy is effective when there are two actions occurring simultaneously: (1) a transfer of information between citizens and government and (2) authentic participation by citizens in the political process (Watson & Mundy, 2001). Political self-efficacy, the personally held belief that one can have an impact on the political process, is a necessary component of effective democracy (Bandura, 2000). However, because the Internet has made such democratic participation relatively easy in comparison to historic modes of democratic involvement, we cannot so easily come to the conclusion that political self-efficacy is necessary for e-participation. Likewise, online democratic action may not necessarily lead to an increase in political self-efficacy.

With this in mind, though e-democracy has been studied in many forms, we have found very few studies that look at the relationship between political self-efficacy and e-participation. Furthermore, we have found no studies looking at the relationship between that of political self-efficacy and attitudes towards e-petitions, a form of e-democracy that requires very little time and energy to participate in. Therefore, through the use of quantitative survey procedures and analysis, we have developed formative research on Americans' attitudes towards this common form of e-democracy.

## **2 Literature Review**

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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; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). 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 (Coleman 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 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, ICT has 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

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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.

### *1 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”, 2009). Many civilizations throughout history have used petitions to influence society (Khan, 1990; Palmieri, 2007). 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). This can be seen in the United States, where elected representatives are determining actual policy; however, individuals, special interest groups, and lobbyists are influencing how the policy is determined. Furthermore, Mosca and Santucci (2009) stress that petitions have a dual nature, explaining that individuals can use them to engage with the political process while institutions can use them to enhance citizen participation.

Petitions have been a key tool in advocacy democracy legitimizing citizens’ concerns through a “strength in numbers” strategy. As Riley (2009) explains, people throughout history have used petitions to air individual and collective grievances to

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political authorities by codifying their dissent in signed documents. He continues by emphasizing that those that wield a petition both publish and protect their status as, “numerically distinct and socially relevant persons” (Riley, 2009, p.ix).

## *2 E-Petitions*

### *i 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.

### *ii 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. 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.

## *3 Importance of E-petitions*

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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. For instance, one petition-based site, Avaaz.org, has over 3 million members worldwide, with their largest e-petition receiving over 14 million signatures (Hill, 2010). Researchers also 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). 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.

#### *4 Political Efficacy*

##### *i Dimensions*

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

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1950s (Morrell, 2003). After its initial theoretical definition by Campbell et al., 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).

### *5 Attitudes*

#### *i Dimensions*

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. Brannon, 1976; Liska, 1975; Schneider, 1976; Schuman & Johnson, 1976). For instance, the idea that an individual's attitude toward an object has an effect on 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).

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

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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; Wood, 1985). 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), the British House of Commons (Maer, 2010), and transnational mobilization (Costanza-Choc, 2003), among others. Furthermore, the relationship between political efficacy and political participation was found to be positively correlated across many different countries and election systems (Ikeda, 2008).

While it is clear that issues of attitude in relation to traditional petitions, e-democracy, and political efficacy has been more generally studied, to the best of our knowledge, no one has examined whether political efficacy and attitudes on e-petitions are related. Thus we will ask the question – RQ1: What is the relationship between political self-efficacy and individual attitudes towards e-petitions?

### **3 Method**

#### *1 Participants*

200 participants will be selected based on a simple random sample of Americans 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



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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).

### *2 Variables*

#### *i External Political Efficacy*

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).

#### *ii Attitude*

A composite score of attitude will be measure using the Generalized Attitude Measurement (GAM), 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

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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).

### *3 Procedure*

In order to describe the population from which data will be drawn, participants will be asked to identify the following categorical 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.”

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.

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Appendix A

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 weak 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) Wrong 1 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.jamesmccroskey.com/measures/attitude\\_generalized.htm](http://www.jamesmccroskey.com/measures/attitude_generalized.htm)

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*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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