

# **Assessing (e)Democratic Innovations: “democratic goods” and Downing Street E-petitions**

## **Abstract**

In response to a perceived crisis of democracy, governments have trialled a variety of democratic innovations. How to measure the impact of such innovations is both difficult, and hotly disputed. This paper tests Smith’s (2009) broad-based ‘democratic goods’ analytical framework on what is often perceived to be a highly successful democratic innovation: Downing Street E-petitions. It accepted 33,058 petitions receiving 12,384,616 signatures. Downing Street made 3258 official replies. Given that it is arguably the most prominent e-democratic innovation in the world to date, the lack of empirical research is very surprising – and worrying – because the perceived success has led to the wider adoption of E-petitions. This paper will fulfil three principal aims: to test the veracity of the democratic goods approach for case study research, with a view to streamlining it for future research; provide the first detailed, theoretically-informed analysis of Downing Street E-petitions; and make recommendations for the application of such systems more broadly.

## **Introduction<sup>i</sup>**

There is a widely held perception that democracy is in crisis, evidenced by declining metrics of political engagement and a feeling of disconnection and distrust between citizens and politicians.<sup>ii</sup> Research suggests that the picture is more complicated than postulated by the decline thesis. For example, informal, non-traditional and consumerist modes of political participation have risen rapidly (Bennett, 1998), while the data on some forms of “traditional” political participation can be contradictory (Hay, 2007; Hansard, 2010; Stolle *et al.*, 2005).<sup>iii</sup> While the extent and nature of the problem is disputed, many governments have reacted with

great vigour to the perceived issues, in particular by developing online democratic innovations that might enhance political participation and “thus” strengthen democracy (Power Inquiry, 2005; Involve, 2005).

One of the most prominent and widely used e-democracy tools has been electronic petitioning. Petitions are a relatively straightforward participatory mechanism by which public opinion can form or coalesce around particular issues in the general public sphere and be communicated to the strong public sphere of decision making in parliament or government. Introduced in Scotland (Macintosh *et al.* 2008; Carman, 2010) and Germany (Lindner & Riehm, 2009) as a tool to bring citizens closer to parliament, e-petitions have subsequently spread rapidly to Australia (Lindner and Riehm, 2009), Norway (Winsvold, 2008), South Korea, the United States and beyond. As institutionalised e-petition systems have developed, non-official variants have blossomed within broader political campaigns such as run by Avaaz and 38 Degrees (Mosca & Santucci, 2009). Perhaps the most controversial, visible and widely used e-petition system was developed in the UK. Downing Street E-petitions accepted 33,058 petitions receiving 12,384,616 signatures over the course of its 4 1/2 year life. Of these, 3258 petitions received an official response. Given the widespread use and visibility of Downing Street E-petitions, it is surprising that no detailed analysis has been conducted to date. This is particularly worrying because the perceived “spectacular” success (see Escher, 2011, p. 71) – has led to them being adopted more widely and with significantly enhanced powers (see transferability, below). While ‘in terms of the number of participants’ it is ‘one of the most successful e-democracy experiments of all time’ (Chadwick, 2012: 61), are their issues hidden within the patterns of participation that might undermine what is at face value successful?

Smith (2009, p. 8) argues that the lack of systematic research fits a broader trend: there is a ‘dearth’ of ‘systematic evaluations of democratic innovations’. Without it, we cannot properly understand their impact, which may actually be negative (Hay, Stoker & Williamson, 2008), or build theory. As outlined in detail below, Smith’s response is a broad-based, generalisable “democratic goods” analytical framework that allows for comparisons both across different types of innovation and different political systems. However, no one has, as yet, used the “goods” framework to conduct new empirical research. This paper will address both of these issues by using it to analyse the Downing Street E-petitions service. In so doing, the paper will test the veracity of the framework with a view to streamlining it for future case research; contribute to the robustness of its theoretical positioning; provide the first detailed, theoretically-informed analysis of Downing Street E-petitions; and make recommendations for the application of such systems more broadly.

### **Democratic Innovations and “Democratic Goods”**

While there have been empirical studies of e-democracy experiments<sup>iv</sup> there are concerns about how to empirically measure and then interpret the findings because the widely used revolution/normalisation framework (or perhaps, more accurately, discourse) lacks nuance (Wright, 2012).<sup>v</sup> It would appear that systematic theoretical frameworks for analysing e-democracy experiments remain wanting<sup>vi</sup>, and this study will directly contribute to these broader debates. Smith’s framework is an explicit response to the deductive strategies that tend to dominate political science. Smith starts from the widely held perspective that there is a harmful disciplinary divorce between normative theoretical approaches and empirical political analysis (Beetham, 1999, p. 29; Fung, 2007, p. 443). Following Saward (1998), Smith (2009, p. 10) criticises deductive studies of democratic innovations because they force the researcher to commit ‘to one particular theoretical position or model of democracy.’ On the one hand,

Smith (2009, p. 10) argues that no single democratic innovation can meet the ‘rigorous demands of any particular theoretical model’, while on the other hand suggesting that theoretical models of democracy are often ‘incomplete [...] and drastically oversimplify the complexity of democratic practice.’ Smith’s concerns are reflected by Fung (2005, p. 2): ‘The complexity of contemporary governance structures and the challenges they face frustrates both the deductive and inductive approaches to theorizing about participation.’ Indeed, Smith’s framework builds on Fung’s Democracy Cube, as has the more recent comparative study of online consultations across various local governments by Åström and Grönlund (2012).

Deductive approaches are also problematic because democratic innovations are often designed to appeal to different models of democracy – for example, bringing together direct and deliberative variants (Fishkin, 2009; Saward, 2001). This is particularly true with e-democracy tools and thus, when combined with the concerns about how to empirically analyse and interpret political participation online, Smith’s approach could be particularly valuable. To overcome these issues, Smith has developed a framework for analysing democratic innovations based around four “democratic goods” (inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement and transparency) that are fundamental to most conceptions of democracy, and two further institutional “goods” (efficiency and transferability) that are central to the practicality of an innovation. To be clear, this is not an atheoretical approach. The “goods” framework is a theoretically informed response to what Smith – and several prominent democratic theorists (including Fung, Saward and Beetham) see as limitations with work to date. The framework is designed to enable comparisons to be drawn between different types of democratic innovations, and across different countries – as Smith has

thoughtfully done, and thus the framework may allow the researcher to make broader recommendations. There are, however, some potential limitations that must be discussed.

First, as noted, the framework was primarily designed for, and has only been applied to, wide-ranging comparative analysis of existing studies. Can such data be retrofitted into the model? As Åström and Grönlund (2012: 77) note: ‘the quality of the data in any case survey is only as good as the quality of the case studies from which the data come’ and because ‘the original case studies are produced by different authors and for different purposes, they tend to leave gaps in the data.’ While using the framework to conduct new empirical research should overcome this issue, can it be directly transferred to case studies? Second, it can be argued that the framework effectively forces square pegs into round holes. As one person commented: is considered judgement really relevant to e-petitions? Smith’s argument would be an emphatic yes because the more informed the judgement, the stronger the output should be. Put another way, if it is not relevant to the case, it *should* be. Third, Smith’s framework places significant onus on the researcher, because they must weigh up the extent to which the different “democratic goods” have been met and there may be a lack of detail as to how to balance these together in practice. Are all “goods” equal? Following this logic, 3 broad research questions are posed:

- 1) How effective is the “democratic goods” analytical framework for case study research?
- 2) How successful was Downing Street E-petitions as a democratic innovation?
- 3) What lessons can be drawn for E-petitions systems going forward?

## **Methodology**

To answer the research questions, a multi-method approach was adopted as several aspects of Downing Street E-petitions needed to be analysed. First, elite interviews were conducted with three people involved in setting up and running Downing Street E-petitions. These interviews explored the policy background, rationale, structure, evolution and impact of E-petitions.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, lasted an average of 68 minutes and were face-to-face. Two further, semi-structured interviews were conducted with creators of the most signed petitions. This is supplemented with data from a mixture of over 100 qualitative surveys and online interviews with affiliated<sup>vii</sup> petition creators whose petitions received more than 500 signatures and should, thus, have received a response (Wright, under preparation). Second, qualitative and quantitative content analysis was used to map patterns of participation; rationales for rejecting petitions (n = 1,000, randomly selected); the nature of official replies; agenda-setting; and the most popular petitions. Samples were varied to cope with the volumes involved. Over-arching statistics were produced from all visible accepted petitions in December 2010 (n = 33,062) and rejected petitions (n = 38,264).<sup>viii</sup> As it was not possible to use a screen-scraping tool, the data was extracted by hand, cleaned and analysed using Excel. The more detailed, 3-month qualitative content analysis was counter-coded (.91% intercoder-reliability) and the coding frame is available on request. The coding period was selected randomly and the sample size was 2,057, with 178 official replies. The research was conducted after the closure of Downing Street E-petitions because it enabled a relatively complete analysis, covering all accepted and rejected petitions (even where replies took more than a year) and ensured that respondents had the time to make informed judgements about the benefits and limitations of the process, and what impact, if any, their petition had.

## **Downing Street E-petitions**

Downing Street E-petitions was launched during the Blair administration, under the strategic lead of Ben Wegg-Prosser, and was designed and set up by My Society (a charity that builds civic websites). The decision to accept an e-petition service was controversial.<sup>ix</sup> The broad goal was to reinvigorate petitioning by making the process easier and more transparent. More specifically, the aims were 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, which is basically an empowerment issue. It's about enfranchisement. The e-petitions system is, relatively speaking, very simple to use. And then the second purpose is for central government to also be able to gather, if you like, (pause) I guess it is like dipping your toe into the water of public sentiment. So, in order to actually understand what issues are of concern to the public, and what level of support certain ideas or proposal or concerns have.<sup>x</sup>

The system allowed anyone to submit a petition that had access to the Internet. Some posting guidelines were put forward, such as to keep petition texts brief and to provide more details in a separate section. Each petition was reviewed by Downing Street's Digital Communication team to determine whether it met specific criteria. All accepted petitions were then published. Of all the accepted petitions, 511 received only one signature (i.e. the creator), while the largest petition (on road tax) received 1.8m signatures. The average number of signatures per petition was 375, though this figure is distorted by the large number of petitions that received less than 10 signatures. The process for signing a petition was deliberately kept simple to ensure a low participatory barrier. However, this left the system open to manipulation: it only checked whether an email address had been used to sign the petition previously and thus an

individual with multiple email addresses could sign the same petition several times. Having outlined the background and development of Downing Street E-petitions, it is now necessary to analyse the practice starting with Smith's first category: inclusiveness.

### **Inclusiveness**

Inclusive participation is important to the democratic legitimacy of an innovation and refers to both who participates, and how people participate. There are numerous approaches to achieving inclusiveness, and they all have advantages and disadvantages. For example, using a representative sample is, at face value, inclusive. However, any decisions reached may not be seen as legitimate by the broader population and a minority could still dominate proceedings in a deliberative context. While Smith's discussion of inclusiveness is rich, he does not offer any guidance as to which method of achieving inclusiveness he considers "best"; this must be determined on a case-by-case basis by assessing the patterns of participation delivered. Downing Street E-petitions had no filtering or sampling procedure: it was open to all who had the desire, knowledge and ability to participate. Of course, this is the norm for petitions but how inclusive was participation in practice? The worry is that unfettered participation can allow a small minority to dominate by creating or signing numerous petitions, while the digital divide means that a significant minority cannot sign e-petitions because they lack the access or skills.<sup>xi</sup>

Highly active, "dominant" minorities are virtually the norm online, yet detailed analysis of their actual impact is limited. In response, Wright and Graham (under review) have developed a typology of "super-participation" for online discussion forums. To facilitate the analysis of inclusiveness, the typology has been amended for e-petitions. Super-posters (SP1s) are the highly active petition creators and signers and their activity is principally measured by



quantitative counting of their behaviour. Given the lack of research on SP1s to date, it is difficult to set an informed benchmark. That they are called super implies that these posters go beyond the norm. Thus, a super-poster is defined as someone who has created more than 10 accepted petitions or signed more than 100 petitions. The vast majority of participants either do not create a petition, or create only one and thus 10 is exceptional. It is not possible to analyse over-arching petition signing because of the way the data was presented (and now archived), and thus a more arbitrary level has been necessary. Agenda-setters (SP2s) create new petitions on related topics, and are increasingly recognised as important to government-led participation innovations (see Kingdon, 2011; Bua 2012). SP3s are the moderators who set and enforce the rules on who can participate (in this case, civil servants in Downing Street) and the facilitators who mobilise support for a petition. The latter can range from individuals who set up Facebook groups or write messages in supportive discussion forums asking for signatures to campaign managers from major civil society organisations.

Attempts to focus petitioning on certain topics (SP2s) was limited by a rule blocking repeat petitions, but this was not strictly enforced. Some groups did deliberately target e-petitions (e.g. Sense with Roads and some unions), and some topics, such as Health (31 petitions), transport (30) and education (17) were much more popular than others. However, these were not necessarily the most successful in receiving signatures. On this measure, the leaders were media and culture (average 8960), foreign policy (average 6997) and International Law (5033). As noted, systematic analysis of all “signatures” was not possible. Rather, repeat petition signers were identified during the analysis and keyword searches were then conducted for their names to see how many petitions they had created. For petition creation, all accepted and rejected petitions are analysed. The data is presented in Tables A and B:

## **Insert Table A and B about here**

The findings suggest that there were numerous SP1s: the most prominent participant signed around 19% of all accepted petitions. For petition creation, the 230 people who created 10 or more petitions actually created 8% of all the petitions submitted (6% of accepted petitions). They were also, generally, comparatively successful when suggesting petitions. The most frequent petition creator had an 82% success rate compared with an overall average of 46%. However, one person submitted 19 petitions but none were successful and in total nearly 26,000 people had no success when attempting to create a new petition.

The analysis suggests that SP1s were stifling attempts by the broader citizenry to participate because of the rule blocking repeat petitions: they got in first on new topics. There are good reasons for this rule, which must be kept. To enhance inclusiveness, controllers of e-petition systems should consider capping the number of petitions any one user can create over a set period of time. This might encourage more selectivity and thought to be put into each petition, while allowing more space for the infrequent petition-creating majority. It may also help to limit the problem of data smog caused by the sheer volume of petitions. While some might perceive this as an unnecessary barrier to participation, e-petitions are very different from paper petitions, where repeat petition submission is virtually non-existent. If one of the main functions of political participation is educative (Pateman, 1970, p. 42-3), it is questionable what lessons citizens were learning.

One final area that can be seen as an indicator of inclusiveness is the extent to which “ordinary” citizens as opposed to organised interests were successful in achieving the required signature threshold. In total, 249 petitions received a reply during the analysis period and 73%

were from individuals. On average, successful petitions from individuals also received more signatures (1316/1942) and responses from the creators of such petitions suggest they did act as SP3s by posting in forums and social media. Nevertheless, the vast majority of petitions achieved only a small number of signatures, suggesting that in most cases there were no SP3s, or that facilitating mobilisation was more difficult than has previously been assumed.

## **Popular Control**

The extent to which there is popular control is important because if citizens take the time to participate, they normally expect something in return (Fung & Wright, 2003; Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker, 2006). Popular control also refers to the extent to which citizens set the agenda. If there is no popular control, innovations can be little more than tokenistic exercises that leave citizens frustrated (Coleman, 2001). Downing Street E-petitions were never intended to be a tool to achieve formal control over policy, though they did allow citizens to set their own agenda and in theory they could *influence* government policy and practice.<sup>xii</sup>

Initially, if a petition received 200 signatures it would receive a reply from government outlining their view and any actions taken. The signature level was subsequently increased to 500 because of the sheer volume and perceived importance of the topics: ‘there were an awful lot of petitions that were getting over the 200 signature threshold which, in fairness, you’d probably judge to be not really that worthy of time. And that’s really a taxpayer issue.’<sup>xiii</sup>

Petitions that achieved the signature threshold were sent out to the relevant department(s) to generate a reply. Replies were published on the petition website and emailed to signatories.

On 27 occasions, more than one reply was given, and sometimes these were personal letters or videos from the Prime Minister or other Minister (for example, Hillary Benn).<sup>xiv</sup>

While petitions normally (see below) received a reply if they received enough signatures, it is not clear what, if anything, happened to petitions in the vast majority of cases. Receiving a reply is clearly very different from popular control. The fear is that most were not fed into the policy process but kept within the respective communications teams because E-petitions had no formal constitutional role: there was no legislative requirement that the government, or specific departments, should respond to petitions, let alone that they might influence policy. It can, thus, be interpreted as a form of institutionalised ‘advocacy democracy’ (Cain *et al.*, 2003) or another tool or institution in the process of what Keane (2009) has described as a shift to ‘monitory democracy’: it allows citizens to engage with the processes of representative democracy, without having ultimate control over decisions.

Disentangling what impact an E-petition has had on policy is difficult because, obviously, most policy developments are complicated, with many factors balanced together in the final output. While they had no formal policy role, this did not mean they entirely lacked influence. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a detailed policy impact analysis, it is worthwhile highlighting some of the limited cases where they are widely thought to have had an influence and reflect on the reasons why.

#### *Case 1: Road Pricing (1,811,424 signatures)*

The most prominent example was also the largest petition: road pricing. This petition requested that the government did *not* introduce a proposed system of charges based on when, and for how long, people were using roads. It was set up by an individual with no formal political experience, and snowballed after emailing it to around 30 friends (Navarria, 2010). It is widely believed that the sheer volume of posts, and the related media furore, influenced the government’s *proposed* policy, which was eventually dropped (Millward, 2007; Mulholland,

2007; BBC News, 2007 2008). While the government was not obliged to listen, there would appear to be a tipping point after which the government felt it had little choice but to cede ground because the political damage would be too great. As the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair (2007) reflected: ‘it's not possible, wise or healthy for politicians to try and sweep them under the carpet.’

*Case 2: National Remembrance Holiday (531,400 signatures)*

The second largest petition had two related aims: for the government to create a new public holiday to recognise military sacrifices, and for that holiday to be on a Monday in November. The government was reviewing the matter at the time, and eventually opted to create a new holiday, but on a Saturday in the summer because of concerns over cost and competitiveness. It was stated that: ‘there is a clear link between one and the other, without it actually just being that the petition is somehow a legislative proposal that gets passed.’<sup>xv</sup> Robert Warner, the petition creator, acted alone, though considered himself politically interested and disaffected with the Blair government. He also emailed friends, but the petition took off after speaking with local media. He was disappointed with the compromise but understood that the government had to balance competing interests.<sup>xvi</sup> In this case, the petition broadly matched an ongoing government agenda and the compromise allowed them a way to achieve several goals relatively cheaply.

*Case 3: Alan Turing Apology (32286 signatures)*

This petition requested an apology for the treatment of Alan Turing. Turing was a scientist, perhaps best known for his work on the Enigma code-breaking machine during World War 2. In 1952 he was convicted of (then illegal) homosexual activity and opted to take the punishment of chemical castration and hormone treatments to avoid prison. He committed

suicide in 1954. An apology was more a request for government action than a specific policy demand. The petition received significant public support, but was not one of the biggest petitions (39<sup>th</sup>). The creator, John Graham-Cumming, was, again, an individual who used ‘web 2.0’ technologies and ‘media savvy’ to get so many signatures – though data (see below) suggests it was a BBC News Online story that made the biggest impact.<sup>xvii</sup> The petition ended with the Prime Minister calling the petition creator to thank him, and an official apology was published online. This was possible because the government: ‘didn’t have to go and consult stakeholders [so it] could act much more quickly and decisively to meet the request’; the bureaucratic and political costs were low. It also, clearly, struck a nerve within government.

### **Insert image A about here**

A number of factors led to these petitions broadly achieving their aims. First, there was the sheer scale of signatures. There would appear to be a tipping point after which the government found itself almost compelled to act – even though there was no statutory obligation. However, numerous petitions with more signatures than was received to the Turing case did not have the same impact, and this suggests that other factors were at play. Second, the petitions that had most impact generally struck a cord with government policy, or brought a new issue to light that the government had not previously considered. Third, as one interviewee bluntly put it: success: ‘is dependent to an extent on people sending in the right kinds of request...’. In other words, the Turing case was almost a standalone issue; it did not exist within the kind of complicated policy environment that many petitions do, and thus, once convinced of the case, it was relatively easy for the government to act. To provide more breadth to the study of popular control, a 3-month analysis of the official replies was

conducted. This focused on whether the government agreed or disagreed with the petition and what action(s), if any, were undertaken. The results are presented in tables C and D:

**Insert table C and D about here**

The analysis found that the government was much more likely to disagree than agree with petitions. In cases where they agreed, this was normally because they were already acting, or about to act; there was no evidence in the text of replies that the government was going to take an action that was not already being planned; and in this sense popular control can be seen as limited. Replies also often lacked detail (average length was 303 words – though 6 replies could not be accessed) and sometimes replies had to be corrected.

Finally, analysis of the official replies suggests that pre-moderation often failed to identify petition topics that were not government responsibility (Table D) and thus participatory efforts were wasted.<sup>xviii</sup> Shockingly, analysis of all the petitions that met the 500-signature threshold found that over 200 petitions with more than 750,000 signatures did not actually receive a reply.<sup>xix</sup> The petition with the least number of signatures to receive a reply had 6 signatures and asked that monkeys be provided on the National Health Service.<sup>xx</sup> When asked about this, it was noted that some were missed by departments and not followed up due to human error while others did not receive replies because the issue was resolved, or because the petition was open so long that by the time the reply was received the email database related to that petition had been deleted (which occurred after one year). While mistakes do happen, an Official Reply should still be posted on the website. Such errors and issues have the potential to further damage trust in government and political participation more generally, and undermine the perception and reality of popular control (Hay, 2007; Hay, Stoker and

Williamson, 2008). The perception and/or experience of government not listening when people participate is one of the biggest barriers to participation (Lowndes *et al.*, 2001) and anger towards the perceived inadequate response to petitions from government was widespread amongst “successful” petition creators (see Efficiency, below, Wright, under preparation).<sup>xxi</sup>

To summarise, Downing Street E-petitions did not achieve popular control, but this was never the aim. More worryingly, the vast majority of petitions also had no obvious influence on, or link to, formal policy-making. Where E-petitions did have an impact, this was due to the specific circumstances surrounding a petition. Arguably, though, the concept of popular control is unduly blunt for a generalisable framework. Popular control is the principal democratic output/benefit within the “goods” approach. However, there are a number of ways in which both participants and governments can benefit when participating. While many were scathing about the impact of their petition and the tone of the official replies, a minority also gained much broader benefits that are not captured by the popular control category. Civil servants similarly argued that the impacts were much messier than a “simple” popular control categorisation affords because of the complicated policy environment (John, 1998). The notions of dipping a toe in the water and not being able to brush public opinion under the carpet speaks to the actual function of e-petitions for government; they are seen as a barometer of public opinion, particularly as citizens define their own agenda (Herbst, 1998; Kingdon, 2011; Bua, 2012).

### **Considered Judgement**

The extent to which participants are empowered or facilitated by the democratic innovation to make a considered judgement about the issue at hand is widely accepted as crucial to its



democratic legitimacy (though there are normative disputes about how this should be achieved). In coming to a considered judgement, participants must have an awareness of the “facts” and consider the views of the people who will be impacted. Downing Street E-petitions are not particularly effective in this regard. In the vast majority of cases, there is only the petition text (average 24 words) and a more details section (average 91 words). While it is possible that the petition creator did attempt to include alternative positions, this may not be a fair reflection of the issue. On some occasions, Downing Street chose to publish corrections while the petition was still happening, and this was reinforced by the number of official replies that also corrected mistakes (Table C) – again suggesting that signees were not making an informed decision. However, the Internet is a relatively active technology; people must proactively go to the website, find the petition (though people often send links to speed this process up) and enter their details. This suggests that they had some time to consider the topic at hand and cared sufficiently to act.

There was evidence that some (particularly super) participants did not take the process seriously. Petition signers had the freedom to write anything in as their name. While the texts of petitions and name of creators were moderated, signatures were not. Many people chose not to put their name, but made some kind of statement, while others put their name and a statement – sometimes leading to debates.<sup>xxii</sup> A number of people asked other participants to sign their own petition after putting their name – even if this appeared to contradict petitions that they had signed previously.

Furthermore, on numerous occasions people actually wrote in the name box that they disagreed with the petition or thought it stupid, suggesting that people did not think the e-petition would have an impact. Similarly, there was evidence of offensive “names” that appeared to contravene the rules. Such activities were not that frequent, but they must be

noted when considering the quantitative statistics. Finally, this suggests that there was an appetite to engage in debate, and that the ability to counter petition (that is, to sign that you disagree with the petition) would have been popular. Such activities might facilitate considered judgements. The Scottish E-petitioner system does include a space for deliberation, but was not favoured. Petitions are often described as a “blunt instrument”<sup>xxiii</sup>; such changes would soften the edges and might serve to strengthen the democratic value. Changes in this vein were considered by Downing Street, but were rejected because it was felt they would change it from being a petition.

### **Transparency**

The transparency of a democratic innovation is important because citizens must be aware of the structure and conditions under which they participate; it is crucial to their broader legitimacy. As anyone can theoretically sign E-petitions, the conditions must be publically available. Compared with other e-democracy experiments (Coleman *et al.*, 2002; Wright, 2006b), the e-petition process was designed with a significant degree of transparency. First, all accepted *and* rejected petitions were published, alongside the criteria and reason for the decisions. If a petition was rejected, an email was sent explaining the decision and sometimes revisions were suggested. Second, all the replies were published and thus missing replies were put into the public domain. However, the extent to which e-petitions fed (or not) into the decision process was never really clarified to participants while raw data can be difficult for citizens to interpret.

### **Efficiency**

The efficiency of a democratic innovation can be determined by a form of cost-benefit analysis: do the costs for both the institution and citizens outweigh the benefits? The costs for

citizens of creating or signing a Downing Street E-petition were deliberately kept low, though arguably slightly higher than for someone signing a petition in the street. Analysis of the perceived benefits of signing a Downing Street E-petition amongst the general public was not possible, but the majority of successful petition creators perceived the process as inefficient. While this was partly because the government opted to not act on their request, the tone of the replies came in for particular criticism: [the response] was almost sinister. [...] 'It was deeply arrogant in its tone [...] it contained glaring inaccuracies and showed absolutely no understanding of the issues we were attempting to champion. It left a bad taste in our mouths.<sup>xxiv</sup> Previous research has found that most people do not expect the government to do exactly what they want, but they do expect the government to listen to their views (Coleman, 2005; Hansard Society, 2010). The official responses indicate that the government could hear the voice of the people, but the tone of replies led many petition creators to believe that they simply were not listening.

The system was relatively cheap for the government to run when compared with other participatory exercises. My Society was paid a fee to run the technical aspects of around £13,000 per annum. The day-to-day running of E-petitions came as an addition to other jobs; no extra resources were provided. It took up about 5% of the time for 2-3 members of staff. This had knock on effects for these staff and the costs for their time are unclear. This can be compared with the German E-petitions system, which had around 80 staff (Lindner and Riehm, 2008: 11). While Downing Street was clearly cheap in comparison, this does not necessarily mean it was efficient. There were particular issues with the moderation of E-petitions.

One of the most time consuming and difficult tasks with any e-democracy exercise, efficient and effective moderation is crucial to the success of many democratic innovations. Fairly or unfairly, moderation of publicly submitted content can be perceived as government censorship: an earlier discussion forum on the Downing Street website suffered from such accusations and there is a ‘shadow of control’ where government monitors such content (Edwards, 2002; Wright, 2006b). Publishing both the criteria and rejected petitions helped to limit this problem. Nevertheless, ineffective moderation can undermine the whole process, making what is at face value an efficient mechanism into one that is deeply flawed.

In the case of E-petitions, Downing Street’s moderators (SP3s) reviewed each petition against nineteen separate criteria. It is worth noting that the sheer volume and diversity of petitions put them in a difficult position. The criteria evolved somewhat, but in June 2010 it was stated that petitions could not contain:

- ‘Party political material’
- ‘potentially libellous, false, or defamatory statements’
- ‘information which may be protected by an injunction or court order’

They also reserved the right to reject petitions:

- ‘that are similar to and/or overlap with an existing petition or petitions’
- ‘things outside the remit or powers of the Prime Minister and government’
- ‘petitions which are intended to be humorous’<sup>xxv</sup>

Interviewees noted that there were difficulties: ‘when it was set up there was some rejection criteria established but to an extent these were just educated guesses. When they were put into

practice it was very, very difficult to be consistent.<sup>xxvi</sup> One of the most famous examples was a “humorous” petition to make Jeremy Clarkson (a TV presenter famous for his strong, often right-wing opinions) Prime Minister that received 49,457 signatures. The official response was an in-kind humorous Youtube video that led to some criticism.<sup>xxvii</sup> There was an internal and external debate about the *raison de etre* of E-petitions, and how to moderate them: ‘in the early days the moderators thought well, look: this is supposed to be an open forum. It is light-hearted. We shouldn’t be kind of het up about these things. Fine, let people have their say.’ But:

when you’ve got hundreds of those kinds of petitions coming through the inboxes, then actually you have to take a stand and say in truth this isn’t a serious matter for government. It is potentially crowding out those people who are submitting petitions that are of more legitimate concern. So about 8 months into the e-petitions life we started I guess to be a little bit more strict about the way that we applied these criteria and we started to maybe explain that a bit more clearly in terms of the responses we sent back to individuals.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Given the resource limitations, it is understandable, though less than ideal, that moderators had: ‘to just fly through it as much as we can making what we hope are informed and consistent decisions – but we are not experts about every single area of national life.’ There is a significant issue here: Downing Street officials had to decide whether or not the issue to which the petition relates was actually real. Once a petition was accepted, there was a tendency to assume that it was true and it could take on a life of its own.<sup>xxix</sup> On several occasions, Downing Street officials posted corrections to petitions while they were still open, but also left it open to further signatures. For example, a petition was accepted that asked the

Prime Minister to ‘Allow the Red Arrows to Fly at the 2012 Olympics’, and it received over 500,000 signatures. However, while it was open a statement was added: ‘This allegation is not true. The Government has not banned the Red Arrows from the London 2012 Olympic Games....’.<sup>xxx</sup> Another example was a petition about alleged: ‘plans to build a £100 million mega Mosque’ that received 250,000 signatures and led to a flurry of denials and corrections to ‘untrue’ reports.<sup>xxxi</sup> The analysis suggests that while it was relatively cheap to run, the limited resources did serve to undermine the efficiency of the tool for both government and citizens.

### **Transferability**

The transferability of a democratic innovation is important because the successful application of a particular innovation may have more to do with the particular context than to the innovation itself. More specifically, it may be possible to use an innovation on a very small scale but impractical at the national or international level. As noted in the introduction, E-petitions have spread across a number of countries, with the perceived success of Downing Street acting as a driver. In the UK, parliament came close to adopting an E-petitions system in response to the perceived success – and encroachment – of Downing Street E-petitions (Miller, 2009; HC 136, 2008; CM 7193, 2007). After an extensive scoping period the initiative was put on hold because of concerns over the estimated cost of £1.25m, plus staff and printing costs (HC 136, 2008: paragraph 134)) – a figure which puts the costs of Downing Street E-petitions in stark relief. Second, the *Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009* legislated that all primary local authorities ‘must provide a facility for making petitions in electronic form to the authority.’<sup>xxxii</sup> Third, the coalition government has delivered on its promise to reinstate an empowered e-petitions service. There is now a formal link between petitions and parliamentary action: ‘any petition that secures 100,000 signatures

will be eligible for formal debate in Parliament. The petition with the most signatures will enable members of the public to table a bill eligible to be voted on in Parliament.’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p. 27) Clearly, the development and empowerment of e-petitions is a matter of significant contemporary political importance and the rapidity of change indicates a dynamic policy environment. It also suggests they are highly transferable. Of course, different institutional structures and underlying governing cultures impact both how e-petitions are developed in different countries (for example linked to the executive or to parliament), and how widely used they are. The particular success of Downing Street E-petitions would appear to be linked to the highly centralised (and leader-focused) political system.

## **Conclusion**

The “democratic goods” analytical framework has proved to be useful for case study research. The only significant limitation was that the ‘popular control’ strand is unduly blunt for a generalisable framework. While this may be a significant democratic good in terms of output legitimacy, and the benefits for governments and citizens therein, it constrains the researcher when considering other democratic outputs. It is suggested that a scale could be adopted, such as the Extent of Authority and Power arm of Fung’s Democracy Cube. This is linked to a broader issue: more guidance could have been given about the practicalities of applying the framework for new research and how to bring the different parts of the framework together in the final analysis. To this end, a typology of super participation is put forward to help guide future research. A more formal combination of the “democratic goods” and democratic cube approaches may also be fruitful, as it would enhance the structure.<sup>xxxiii</sup> One final concern is something that the framework does not directly cover, but is very important to many democratic innovations: security. Stopping the corruption of democratic innovations is crucially important to the legitimacy of any outputs. While security cuts across several of the

goods, it is not clear where it fits – and could be added as a seventh good. Of particular concern is that the Downing Street system had very limited controls to stop one person submitting multiple signatures and that it was easy for people to falsify their identity and location, drawing into question who constituted the public. Overall, while further research is necessary to test the theoretical underpinnings of the framework (and variant) on other cases, it clearly has considerable promise for scholarly research. Having considered the framework, it is necessary to draw together the analysis of Downing Street E-petitions.

As has been widely noted, Downing Street E-petitions was highly successful when measured in terms of the number of participants (Navarria, 2010; Escher, 2011). However, as Wilson (1999, p. 252) argues: ‘Activity and effectiveness are not the same thing. [...] It is clear that ‘more participation’ is not the same thing as “more democracy”’. While Chadwick (2012: 61) is right to argue that low participation rates are sometimes wrongly ignored in studies of online deliberation and that more focus must be placed on numbers, the Downing Street case suggests that it is equally wrong for researchers to draw conclusions from baseline participation statistics alone. Analysing the relative success of Downing Street E-petitions using the “democratic goods” framework has highlighted a number of flaws with how it was operationalised and institutionalised that served to undermine it as an effective e-democratic innovation. First, participation was often highly unequal, with a number of super-posters (SP1s) evident. The regular petition creators were particularly harmful because they posted on new topics quickly and Downing Street would block subsequent petitions on similar topics. Many thousands of people attempted to become active citizens only to find their petition (and often several) rejected. However, the rule blocking repeat petitions limited the chance for people to dominate the agenda (SP2) while still allowing people to set their own. Moreover, many individuals were able to mobilise mass support. Interviews with successful petition



creators suggest that they were effective SP3s, using techniques such as social networking and posting in supportive discussion forums – while actively garnering media coverage was crucial to many of the largest petitions. However, there was a very long tail of petitions that received only a few signatures, suggesting that most either did not facilitate petitions, or that they were unsuccessful in doing so.

Downing Street E-petitions did not achieve a high level of considered judgement. Most petitioners gave limited information to support their petition, and there was no formal space for debate or to counter petition. However, participants had to actively go to the website and sign a petition, and this may have afforded the time for the type of reflection that is important to considered judgement (Goodin, 2003). Downing Street E-petition's was much more successful with regard to transparency and E-petitions are clearly highly transferable. While Downing Street E-petitions was cheap compared to other systems, the lack of resources undermined its efficiency and limited the “democratic goods” produced. The final area to consider is the extent to which popular control was achieved. Downing Street E-petitions were not intended to achieve formal control. While there were a small number of cases where e-petitions influenced policy, the vast majority disappeared into a vacuum and this was reflected in the perceptions of petition creators. However, for some petition creators, broader benefits were accrued from their petition. Overall, while Downing Street E-petitions had strengths, they were far less successful than some have assumed.

As the framework is built on broad-based “democratic goods”, it is possible to make recommendations for the future adoption and development of E-petitions in different contexts. At the most basic level, e-petitions systems need careful planning and adequate resourcing. Some of the early decisions served to undermine the “goods” produced and appear to have

created what turned out to be unrealistic expectations that led some petition creators to be upset at the result. Clarifying the legislative position and making this clear to participants from the start would help to control expectations. While the rule blocking repeat petitions limited agenda-setting (SP2), it was not particularly well enforced due to the lack of resources. Careful, well-resourced moderation is a must for an effective e-petition system. To facilitate this, and limit super-posters, capping the number of petitions one user can create (perhaps over a set period) would enhance the inclusiveness of e-petitioning systems. To strengthen considered judgement, the designers of petitioning systems need to draw on different theories of democracy in an attempt to sequence them together (Saward, 1999, 2003; Parkinson, 2006; Goodin, 2005). Specifically, adding a deliberative space where people can share information and discuss issues in-depth – such as exists with the Scottish E-petitioner system – has significant potential. More simply, petition creators could be offered the chance to reply to the people who signed the petition. In this reply they could link to websites or Facebook groups. This would facilitate the building of networks, allowing broader “goods” to be achieved and potentially enhance transparency. At the most basic level, counter petitions could be formally allowed as this would arguably enhance inclusiveness and the potential for a considered judgement. Finally, following the argument that the popular control category needs more nuance, the range of potential actions and outputs formally afforded by e-petitioning systems could be diversified. For example, to account for the complexity of the policy-making environment that exists in most countries, petitions that reach a set number of signatures could trigger a consultation.

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<sup>i</sup> The data are available from the author upon request. In addition, the data will be uploaded on the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics'* Dataverse site (<http://dvn.iq.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jitp>) upon publication.

<sup>ii</sup> Coleman, 2005; Power Inquiry, 2005, p. 33; Hay, 2007; Whiteley, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> For example, Hay (2007) cites data suggesting a decline in the signing of petitions, while the Hansard Society Audits of Political Participation generally report increased levels of petitions signing, and this is backed up by Stolle (*et al.*, 2005).

<sup>iv</sup> For an overview see Smith (2009) or Chadwick (2006). For specific cases see Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Chadwick, 2011; Pratchett, 2006; Wright, 2006a, b, 2007, 2008.

<sup>v</sup> For example, most empirical studies of political debate online use elite, idealistic models of deliberation (Davis, 2005) that virtually guarantee a negative finding while there is also a tendency to frame results with the so-called Revolution/Normalisation dichotomy (Hindman, 2008; Davis, 2009) and this can distort the interpretation of empirical findings (see Wright, 2012).

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<sup>vi</sup> A recent debate on the Do-Wire e-democracy list involving a number of prominent scholars suggested that limited progress has been made in recent years. Last accessed 17<sup>th</sup> January, 2012:  
<http://groups.dowire.org/groups/exchange/messages/topic/5rg7KyWZyqLm1CMBC18gIm>

<sup>vii</sup> This includes organised groups, businesses and informal networks.

<sup>viii</sup> Note: the numbers of listed accepted and rejected petitions has changed slightly since this analysis was conducted in December 2010: as of 10 April 2012, the website shows 33,058 accepted petitions and 38,264 rejected petitions. While the system officially closed, there was still some activity: official replies continued to be made, and it appears as though many official replies were removed. It is assumed this is because after the 2010 General Election, government policy changed and the replies were no longer considered to be an accurate reflection of government policy.

<sup>ix</sup> Talk given under Chatham House rules. See also (Geoghegan, 2007; Winnet & Swinford, 2007)

<sup>x</sup> Interview with Senior Downing Street official.

<sup>xi</sup> Responses from petition creators noted specific issues with the digital divide: petitioners often linked paper and electronic petitions, printing off electronic signatures and adding them to a paper version (with a danger of double counting). Another respondent noted that they set up a laptop in the village Post Office so that people without internet access could sign a petition.

<sup>xii</sup> The structure of Downing Street E-petitions can be compared with the Scottish *E-petitioner* system, which has a formal basis and structure (Lynch & Birrell, 2001; Macintosh *et al.* 2008) that arguably affords greater popular control. However, concerns have been raised that ‘seemingly pedantic decisions about procedure’ have had a negative impact on procedural trust, while the expectations of petition creators did not meet the realities (Carman, 2010, p. 740, 747).

<sup>xiii</sup> Interview, senior Downing Street official.

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/HeathrowRunway/>

<sup>xv</sup> Interview, senior Downing Street official.

<sup>xvi</sup> Interview with Robert Warner.

<sup>xvii</sup> This is an interesting account of what happened, and highlights the journey that petition creators can go on. See: <http://radar.oreilly.com/2009/09/how-alan-turing-finally-got-a.html>.

<sup>xviii</sup> <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page18842> last accessed 16 nov. There were particular problems with petitions asking for people to be given honours such as knighthoods. Such decisions are not formally under the remit of the Prime Minister (managed by Honours and Appointments Secretariat in the Cabinet Office) and should thus have been rejected. Initially, however, such petitions were accepted, and given a formulaic answer but this was subsequently changed.

<sup>xix</sup> Analysis conducted 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2011. After initially saying that they would not reply to petitions received before the election, the government changed its mind. The analysis takes into account replies received after the deadline. Of course, replies may continue to be made, but several months have passed since e-petitions was closed. Moreover, of the missing responses, 149 closed before the end of 2009. The analysis focuses on petitions with 500 or more replies as it is unknown when the threshold changed.

<sup>xx</sup> <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/NHSMonkeys/>. Last accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November 2010.

<sup>xxi</sup> It should also be noted that some interviewees did not know that their petition had received an official reply (Wright, under preparation).

<sup>xxii</sup> <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/Banallangling/>; <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/Ban-The-Bar/>

<sup>xxiii</sup> Interview with Senior Downing Street official.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Simon Charlesworth, [www.dep-o.co.uk](http://www.dep-o.co.uk) magazine.

<sup>xxv</sup> <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/terms>.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Interview with Senior Downing Street official.

<sup>xxvii</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNy1w4DV5Hw>;  
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page16590>

<sup>xxviii</sup> Interview with Senior Downing Street official.

<sup>xxix</sup> One person (talk given under Wilton Park rules) noted that, for the most part, petitions would appear after stories were published in the press, though journalists did monitor the website looking for stories.

<sup>xxx</sup> <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/RedArrows2012/>

<sup>xxxi</sup> <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/ScrapMegaMosque/>

<sup>xxxii</sup> This potentially significant and costly piece of legislation was repealed shortly *after* it came into force. Given the government’s austerity drive, it is rather bemusing that it was withdrawn only after councils had been obliged to invest significant resources to research and buy in software and set up management procedures. The repeal was announced as part of the Localism Bill, which legislated to allow binding local referendums to be launched on the back of a (paper or electronic) petition. A sceptic might draw a link between the two.

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> A further practical difficulty is its sheer breadth. It is hard to do justice to all 6 sections of the framework within the space constraints of most journals.