



Opportunities for Petitions: White Paper

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Executive summary

- The democratic deficit is a major problem for Swedish Democracy and something that Local Authorities are taking action about
- Petitioning is a simple democratic mechanism which is easily understood by Citizens. They are by definition non-deliberative and this simplicity makes it an ideal starting point for a programme of democratic engagement
- Petitioning translates well to the internet and can reach new groups of citizens
- Effective petitioning schemes will promise clear outcomes and encourage positive behaviours
- The resource requirements of a petitioning scheme can be managed through the scope of the scheme which makes it a an achievable mechanism for all sizes of organisation.
- There is an important role for representatives to play in this process and they need to be actively involved in any petitioning scheme

Introduction - scope and content of document

A petition is a short request for action or information from a citizen or resident to a democratic body

Petitioning is perhaps one of the simplest democratic mechanisms that we have available to us. The idea that an individual can make a statement, gain the support of their fellow citizens and then ask for it to be considered within a formal democratic process gives all citizens an entry point to decision making in-between the cycle of voting. This is not to say that the petitioning should ignore the role of the representative but it does give individuals an easily understood starting point for engagement in the process where they are currently lacking that connection to democracy.

It is this simplicity which also makes petitioning peculiarly suited to work in an online context where signing a petition can not only show your support for an idea but also connect you to the wider process as you receive updates and outcomes of the petition. Petitions can be processed on or offline but the ease and cost effectiveness of online transactions means that this connection to the wider process is greatly enhanced with an online system.

In looking to address the problems of democratic deficit which are common to all European states petitions offer an opportunity to link the informal debates and campaigns that can be seen on the social web into the formal decision making process which requires due process and deliberation to be delivered.

This paper discusses the role for petitions in addressing this question of democratic deficit with specific reference to ePetitions and the potential for online democratic engagement. We go on to offer some ideas as to the role of the representative and some consideration of the nature of a robust petitioning system. Finally we look at ways of connecting the act of petitioning to a wider programme of citizen engagement.

Current context: Why worry at all?

Political Context

The term 'democratic deficit' is being used specifically because although the instruments of the European democratic process such as Local and National elections, consultations, select committees and scrutiny processes are fully functional in European democracies the reduction in voter turnout and general participation in the deliberative process of democracy, and for example the diminishing numbers of citizens prepared to stand for civic positions such as local or parish councillors, calls into question the legitimacy of the position of representatives elected with a proportionally small mandate to govern. This legitimacy is further challenged by reduced levels of trust in the political process and the politicians within that process at all levels of government. It is the combination of these two things which causes concern.

Elected representatives need citizens to participate in the whole democratic process, and not just as voters, in order to be able to effectively represent their constituents. Without this participation, trust is diminished as decisions are not scrutinised and citizens do not gain a sophisticated view of the actions needed to govern. Without trust and without participation from citizens a representative system of democracy is in a weakened state.

Technological Context

At the same time as democratic participation is diminishing there is increased participation online. There are many loose definitions of the current stage of internet development characterised by these sites; 'web 2.0' perhaps being the most prevalent. Within this paper the term used is 'the social web' as this best encapsulates the current developments on the internet in terms of being driven by user generated content and social sites where people talk to each other rather than the initial broadcast or transactional phases of web development. The social web is therefore a term which loosely groups together social networking technologies and websites. It represents a shift from websites which have a broadcast emphasis and moves towards far more collaborative online spaces and content. The idea of the social web fits within the framework of the network society which provides the back drop for any research into effects and behaviours online. Membership of these websites is growing exponentially as are the proportions of leisure (and work) time people are spending on these sites. This growth is more exaggerated within certain demographics,

such as the 18-35 year old age group, but can also be seen to be true in a much wider section of the public.

Conclusion

There is a wide acceptance of the existence of an increasing democratic deficit in all European Countries at the same time as an acknowledgement of the fact that people are increasing participating actively online as they contribute to social networking spaces. While these two facts are not necessarily connected there is a widely perceived benefit to looking at ways in which online participation can be used in order to increase democratic participation. This is true in Sweden perhaps more than in any other EU country as the success of the pirate party and their recent success in European Parliament elections shows us the possibilities for engagement when politics is truly 'web native'.

What are we trying to achieve?

One of the problems of democratic engagement is one of measurement – it is in deciding what ‘good’ democratic behaviour is. More engagement is not necessarily better engagement and there are issues of balance, access and appropriateness which need to be considered if you want to have an effect on democratic engagement. Overall our objective could be described as ensuring that the citizen has a ‘good democratic experience’ which can be characterised simply as an experience:

- where they clearly understood what would happen and what the benefits are participating could be
- Where ‘government’ has done what was promised
- Where they do not necessarily get what they ask for but they understand the outcome
- Where they have worked with other citizens to influence government and join the debate

There are many mechanisms which can fit this description from community meetings, processes of redress, participatory budgeting or formal consultations. Petitions are obviously just one mechanism for but their simplicity and directness makes them an ideal starting point for a programme of democratic re-engagement.

(Lena: this would connect generally to a discussion of citizen empowerment and more general community engagement work – is this relevant in the Swedish context?)

What makes a good petition?

In defining a ‘good’ petition we need first to describe our overall objectives. These could vary but will usually refer to the need to address the issue of democratic deficit and to get more people involved in the process of government. However this is not enough, there also needs to be a quality measure as just weight of numbers of petitions or signatories will not make a ‘good’ petition. Defining your goals will help you manage the petitioning scheme and also the expectations of the citizens who are participating. Petitioning schemes will be different for each organisation but will usually include the following elements:

- **A list of potential outcomes:** You need to be able to clearly define what are the possible outcomes of a petition being submitted to your organisation

- **A description of what makes a valid petition:** You must make sure that citizens understand what can and can't be the subject of a petition. For example most organizations will exclude petitions which are 'against' named individuals or petitions on issues which are already under consideration in another process or consultation.
- **An indication of petition thresholds:** You may need to make decisions about how many signatures you need to see in order to react and also what constitutes a valid signature. You need to consider age, residency and relevance to the issue in doing this.
- **An indication of appropriate behaviour:** You may want to define a 'code of conduct' which describes appropriate language and tone to ensure that the petitioning process is open and accessible to all
- **Confirmation of processing times:** it is important that you give a clear indication of how quickly you will process a petition so that you set the expectations of your petitioners correctly.

Petitioning schemes need to be written in clear understandable language and need to get the support and sign-off of politicians as well as officers within the organisation.

What is different about ePetitions?

Petitioning is a democratic mechanism which works well online. In a straightforward conversion to an online delivery channel the following benefits can be shown:

- Signing a petition is a straightforward task to carry out – there is no need for the signatory to learn new skills in order to participate
- The fact that petitions need to be simple statements works well in the 'sound bite' focused online world
- As an administrator you are able to actually read and process the details of signatures as these are usually illegible in the main part on paper petitions

But the process of petitioning can also be considered to be enhanced by being carried out online. These enhancements are seen in three main areas:

- **Opportunity for pre-petition moderation:** With paper petitions the organisation will probably have no interaction with the petition or the petitioner until it is submitted. With ePetitions it is possible (and desirable) to interact at the pre-petitioning phase in order to moderate the petition. This pre-petition phase is invaluable as it increases the number of valid and actionable petitions which you receive.

- **Ease of updates:** Both the organisation and the lead petitioner are able to easily stay in touch with the signatory. This gives both parties the opportunity to keep the participants far more involved in the process and then the outcome of the petition and helps contribute to providing a 'good democratic experience' to all of the participants and not just focus on the lead petitioner as might happen with a paper petition.
- **Potential for identity validation:** Checking the identity of paper petition signatories is a time-consuming and laborious process which is rarely undertaken. Basic identity checking with ePetitions is simple and can be extended to connect to digital signatures and more sophisticated forms of identity management should this be required.

Petition moderation

Moderation of online content is frequently undertaken to ensure that user-generated content complies with a code of conduct on a website and that it meets the site guidelines. In a democratic context, moderation can also be seen to be helping citizens to achieve good democratic outcomes which help educate participants about the processes and mechanisms of democracy and to help them to take part in the democratic sphere.

Moderation will always be a balance between educating and helping people to get the most out of the process and at the same time avoiding any political impact on the process from the person carrying out the moderation. In this way, moderation can be considered to be more art than science and is a skill that needs honing and practicing over time. A clear petitioning scheme will help you to carry out effective moderation and any new scheme should be tested with a series of potentially difficult petitions in order to ensure that it is able to support the process of moderation.

ePetitions provide the opportunity to moderate - once you have access to a petition prior to the collection of signatures, then you have the opportunity to help the petitioner to create an effective and well-written petition. This in turn will help the petitioner to gain signatures and will ensure that you are able to process the petition effectively once it is submitted. You can also use this opportunity to check for duplicate petitions and connect like-minded petitioners to each other. Finally, you are also able to ensure that a petition is the most appropriate democratic mechanism for the issue being raised and to direct petitioners to more effective tools where appropriate.

What are the benefits of using petitioning as a core part of the democratic dialogue?

Democracy is, at its heart, a process of a community coming together in some way in order to make decisions about their common life. This paper is not intended as a discussion of democratic models but this idea of the community coming together is central to the reason why petitions can be seen to be of benefit to a process of democratic dialogue.

Petitions are by their very nature not deliberative – and this may be their greatest strength in terms of strategic benefits to a shared democratic process. By this we mean that rather than having to deal with the complexities of a discussion where all sides need to be represented and heard in order to be democratic a petition, or rather a ‘good’ petition, is just one idea with a number of people supporting it. A petition will rarely be the end point of a democratic dialogue but it is an excellent start point which supports citizens adding new ideas and concerns to the political agenda rather than being dependent on representatives to raise concerns. This brings with it a sense of immediacy and direct action which is missing from so many democratic activities. A recent evaluation of the Scottish Parliaments petitioning system¹² concluded this:

“the (*petitions*) Committee has provided a real and effective route into the Parliament for a wide range of people and organisations to raise a broad range of issues. It listed significant “successes” that petitioners have had using the system, but also mentioned that for many the success is being able to be heard at the heart of the Parliament in the first place, regardless of outcome.”

This directness is one of the reasons why citizens choose to raise a petition as it gives them an opportunity to be heard.

What is the role of the representative?

Many organisations will create a petitioning committee which will examine petitions but we should also seek to involve representatives in the petitioning process as participants as this gives them an opportunity to work more closely with their constituents on issues which are

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<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/petitions/inquiries/petitionsProcess/Engagingthepublicinthepetitionsprocess.pdf>

² <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/petitions/reports-09/pur09-03.htm>

of concern to them. This ensures that all petitions are looked at by elected officials and also involves those representatives in the concerns and issues raised by citizens and thus raises the level of democratic legitimacy afforded to the petitions process.

However this can be seen as the representatives merely acting as gatekeepers to the process and does not address one of the weaknesses of a petitioning process which is the potential for it to be 'de-coupled' from the representative process. Online tools often tend towards direct rather than representative forms of democracy and petitions are no different as large numbers of citizens sign petitions which are in conflict with the current position of the political groups that have been elected. However if we view petitions as a starting point for re-engagement it is essential that we ensure that there is a meaningful role for the individual representative in nurturing the petitions as well as in processing them so that they can be taking part in the democratic engagement rather than just dealing with its outcomes. A simple way of doing this is to involve the petitioners' local representative in the petitioning process and ask them to help the petitioner to both form and promote the petition.

What are the risks?

Risks around any democratic engagement process break down broadly into risks of success and risks of failure. Risks of failure tend to centre around problems associated with failing to deliver a good democratic experience to petitioners and risks of success will centre around resourcing and outcomes. Some examples of these are found in the table below with suggestions as to how to mitigate these risks:

Risks of Failure	Management / Mitigation
Technological or process failure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careful project management of project launch • Pilot testing of the technology and process prior to a full petitions launch
Lack of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research into why citizens are not participating; reasons could range from lack of trust to lack of access and would be addressed in different ways • Well planned and ongoing marketing for the system • Communication of the benefits of petitioning
Citizen dissatisfaction with outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that all promised outcomes are both adhered to and communicated • Clear communication of the potential outcomes

Risks of Success	Management/ Mitigation
Dissatisfaction with outcomes (also a risk of failure)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close communication with the lead petitioner
Excessive numbers of petitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the scope of the petitioning scheme • Divert 'traffic' to other mechanisms
Too many inappropriate petitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve petitions guidance • Review the scope of the petitioning scheme

What are the resource and support implications?

As with any democratic engagement process petitions will tend to provide benefits in proportion to the amount of resources available to support them. Where petitions differ to the norm is that as a simple process they are able to be processed in bulk and lend themselves well to a more streamlined management process than many more deliberative mechanisms. Put crudely it is possible to vary the number of petitions being introduced by managing the scope of the petitions scheme as well as by matching marketing efforts to the resources available to process petitions.

However a resource analysis for a petitioning scheme will highlight the following requirements:

Stage of project	Resource requirement
Set-up (one off tasks pre-launch)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design of a petitioning scheme • Installation and management of supporting technology • Training of staff in petition moderation • Creation of petitions committee or other organizing body
Launch (one-off tasks required to launch)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot testing of the scheme and supporting technology • Marketing and Press launch
Ongoing management (ongoing resource requirement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing marketing • Administration of scheme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pre-Petition moderation ○ Processing and summary of completed petition ○ Presentation to the committee ○ Dissemination of outcomes

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for the petitioning committee (if required) • Ongoing evaluation of outcomes of the scheme
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Resourcing examples:

- **Malmo Stad:** the Malmo initiatives are managed and administered by the communications team. Most of the work is carried out by 2 members of staff with additional support from the technical team.
- **Bristol City Council:** Bristol petitions are administered by the consultation team. There is one member of staff working on the system with support from others in the team where required.
- **Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames:** The Kingston petitions are managed by the Democratic services department. There is one main administrator with support from the technical team where required.

Technical considerations

As has been described here we believe that Petitioning works well online and ePetitions should be introduced alongside any paper based petitioning system. In choosing a petitioning system you should consider:

Criteria		Requirement
Design and scope	Ease of use	The signing of the petition and its administration needs to be simple and direct. This is not a difficult process and the technology should reflect this
	Accessibility	Any petitioning system which you choose should be fully accessible to anyone using assistive technologies.
	Design	Are you happy to have a generic look and feel or do you need the site to be closely integrated with your main website – despite the additional costs this will bring?
	Which channels do you want to use to collect signatures?	Are you just considering web based working (which is simplest) or do you want to reach more people through the use of mobile phone and television interfaces. You should also consider whether or not you want to also administer paper petitions in the same system.
Resource requirements	Internal capacity	You need to match the complexity of the administration and management with the complexity of the system. There is no point in having a sophisticated piece of software if you are only going to have resources for the most basic administration.
	Internal IT provision	You should match your system to your internal IT capacity. Many solutions can be hosted for you or even shared with other organizations if this is appropriate.
	Support and system availability	Do you require 24/7 support and are able to pay for this either internally or externally? DO you

		consider the system to be 'mission critical' or is a slower response time acceptable. As part of your specification process you should describe the service level which meets your needs
Audit and due diligence	Signature verification	To what extent do you need to be able to verify signatures and addresses? Are you happy with self-supported data or do you need to use some kind of external verification or digital signature?
	Audit trail	You should consider how auditable you want the system to be – for example do you want to keep the history of the petition moderation?
	Management information	You should be able to specify your key performance indicators. This could include numbers of petitions, break down of signatories by location or further information about who is initiating or signing petitions. The management information needs to support your success criteria for the petitioning process.
Integration with other systems and process	Connecting to your main website	You should define how you want the petitioning system to work with your website. Will it just be a link, will it be embedded in the navigation or do you want to be able to sign petitions directly from your own site.
	Using other consultation tools	One of the benefits of petitions is the fact that you can use them to suggest other democratic engagement activities. One good example of this would be to encourage people to join an online discussion once they have signed a petition. Other examples could be formal consultations or surveys.
	Connecting to external websites	How do you want petitions to be represented on other websites? You may want to define the functionality that can be transported and embedded on other sites.

Where do petitions relate to other engagement and democratic initiatives - what is the wider opportunity?

One of the reasons for highlighting petitioning as a democratic mechanism is the ease with which it can be used to connect people to other more in-depth democratic processes. In some ways it can be considered to enable you to create a 'democratic mailing list' which you can use to propose other opportunities for engagement to the participants. As with a commercial mailing list you need to ensure that suggestions are relevant and timely but by the same principal that makes successful online stores offer you recommendations and suggestions based on other people's behaviour's a democratic website should be able to offer other engagement opportunities based on topic or location.

We are not proposing that complex systems be built up around petitions. eParticipation is a relatively new field and excessive engineering of solutions which connect engagement activities together is not yet appropriate and anyway does not respond to the social nature of people's behaviour online. The question of 'what next' for someone signing a petitioning can be kept simple with the following principles:

- In order to ensure that participants are not lost to the system one of the initial emails to petitions signatories should ask them to 'opt-in' to a democratic mailing list
- Use the ZIP code information gathered when signing the petition to manage the list based on a geographical basis
- Consider connecting the mailing list of a discussion forum which can be used for general democratic debate. You should not expect all of the list to actively participate but by using a discussion forum you are giving them the opportunity to discuss the issues in the petition on more depth
- Audit your existing online activities around survey's and questionnaires and suggest these as opportunities to your mailing list

These are all simple ideas which are intended to ensure that the single democratic act of signing a petition is not 'wasted' by happening in isolation.

Conclusions

There is no silver bullet to the problem of reduced democratic engagement and it would be naïve to suggest this of petitions. However in a complex field with a multi-faceted problem it is often useful to focus on the simple and achievable.

A petitioning scheme, particularly one with an online option is a very direct way of offering citizens a connection to the heart of the democratic process where they can raise issues which are of importance to them rather than waiting for politicians or formal consultations to ask them about pre-decided topics.

It will require extra resources from the organisation but these are manageable and can be linked to the size of the organisation rather than being an 'blank cheque'.

Most importantly by gathering the contact details of people who have participated in this simple way you are able to connect to citizens who may be prepared to do something else – your more engaged citizens. This is why we suggest petitions as a starting point for an engagement strategy or as a valuable addition to existing programmes.