Chapter 8

Digital Democracy through Electronic Petitioning
e-petitioner

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Abstract: The International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University has designed an innovative e-democracy toolkit to support participation in the democratic decision-making process. Electronic petitioning is one of the web-based applications in the toolkit. It can be found at www.e-petitioner.org.uk and has the functionality to create petitions; to view/sign petitions; to add background information, to join discussion forum; and to submit petitions. On 14th March 2000, the Scottish Parliament agreed to allow groups and individuals to submit petitions using the e-petitioner system for a trial period. The special arrangement between the Teledemocracy Centre and the Scottish Parliament has allowed both parties to start to evaluate the use and civic impact of electronic petitioning in Scotland. The development, deployment and evaluation of e-petitioner have demonstrated how straightforward computing techniques can enhance public participation in the newly established Scottish Parliament. As well as the system being used to submit e-petitions to the Scottish Parliament, it is also hosting the first ever e-petition to the British Prime Minister at No.10 Downing St.

Key words: electronic petitions, e-petitions, e-democracy, digital democracy, e-government

1. INTRODUCTION

Widespread claims have been made that democratic politics is in crisis as a result of public apathy, low turnout at elections, and poor levels of public participation. These claims have coincided with the arrival of ‘digital government,’ which has brought with it the now widespread concern that a digital divide is widening in society. Our work is derived from a perceived need to investigate how and to what extent information and communication
technology can enable a more participative system of governing, supporting both governments and citizens. “Digital Democracy through Electronic Petitioning” focuses on the design, development, and evaluation of information and communication technology to support civic representation and participation in the democratic process. This chapter describes how the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University has been working collaboratively with the Scottish Parliament to deploy and evaluate the e-petitioner system for the benefit of citizens in Scotland. By investigating the development and use of electronic petitioning, the Teledemocracy Centre seeks to reveal the conditions that would encourage and assist different sections of society to participate in government through the use of digital democracy systems.

Following this introductory section, section 2 in this chapter overviews the meaning of petitioning in a Scottish context. It does this by examining the petitioning processes for the Scottish Parliament and explains how electronic petitioning was introduced to the Parliament.

Section three considers the e-petitioner system in more detail. The system is one component of a web-based e-democracy toolkit, being developed in partnership with British Telecom, to motivate and facilitate public participation in governance. The toolkit is an exemplar of e-democracy applications, and comprises three web-based tools. As well as e-petitioner, the other tools are: e-consultant which is being used by the Scottish government for consultation over the internet and e-voter which is being used by Highland local authority to elect young people to a Youth Council. A prototype version of the e-petitioner system was developed in late 1999. The final system has the functionality to create petitions; to view/sign petitions; to add background information, to join discussion forum; and to submit petitions. On 14th March 2000, the Scottish Parliament agreed to allow groups and individuals to submit petitions using the Centre’s e-petitioner system for a trial period. The special arrangement between the Centre and the Scottish Parliament has allowed both parties to monitor the use of electronic petitioning in Scotland. Section 4 considers the e-petitioner system from the perspective of the Scottish Parliament and describes the benefits and initial reactions of the Public Petitions Committee of the Parliament to the system.

The evaluation of the system has demonstrated how straightforward computing techniques can enhance public participation in the newly established Scottish Parliament. In our concluding section we summarise our research findings and look ahead to new developments.