The e-challenge to democracy

Electronic petitioning might turn into a new political force

By Giovanni Navarria

In November 2006, in collaboration with MySociety.org (a non-partisan, London-based organization), the UK government, under the leadership of Tony Blair, launched a new service in the form of a website (http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/) to allow citizens to create new or sign up for existing petitions addressed to the Prime Minister's Cabinet.

Petitions are not new in the United Kingdom. The right to petition the Monarch for redress of personal grievances dates back to the *Magna Carta,* sealed by King John in 1215. However, compared to traditional petitions, which often follow a complex (sometimes cumbersome) bureaucratic process, and must rely on a certain degree of organization and financial commitment to be successful, setting-up an online petition on the UK government website, literally, takes no longer than five minutes of a petitioner's time, and even less to sign it.

Since its launch the website has proven very successful. In its first year it published more than 14 thousand petitions, which gathered nearly six million signatures. To make a comparison with traditional means of petitioning, according to official data, between 1989 and 2007 the yearly average number of petition received by the British Parliament was just 327, a number far below its online counterpart.

Blair praised the success of the e-petition website as a good sign of health for democracy in Britain. He also pointed out the positive impact the internet has on the way in which dialogue between representatives and citizens is organised. Others – and among these the current Prime Minister Gordon Brown – were less than impressed with the effects of the new service on government's business.

A closer look at the story of one particular online petition can provide us with a blueprint of the ambivalent challenges the use of the internet in the politics of everyday life can pose for a representative system like Britain.

The case in question is that of the Road Tax, so far the most successful example of online petition in the UK. Between the end of 2006 and the early months of 2007, the petition managed to collect almost 2 million signatures. The pressure generated from its impressive success was crucial in the government's decision (one year later) to postpone *sine die* its plans for a new road tax scheme that many considered an unpopular but necessary path to safeguard the environment.

The Road Tax petition

Started by Peter Roberts, an accountant manager of an English manufacturing company, the Road Tax was a direct challenge of the government's intention to tackle road congestion and reduce CO_2 emissions by introducing a nationwide pay-as-you-drive tax for all motorists. Robert's online petition, submitted through the Cabinet's website, asked the Prime Minister to scrap the new scheme on the grounds that it was inappropriate and entirely unfair to motorists. In fact, Roberts argued, a stealth congestion charge was already in use through taxation on fuel: 'The more you travel, the more tax you pay.'

The petition's success went beyond any expectation. With just a few e-mails sent to a handful of friends (29) and some links posted on a number of websites that dealt with drivers' issues, by the end of the first week the petition already had over 14 thousand signatures. Eventually by its deadline, February

Kurz gefasst

Elektronische Petitionen

Die Online-Petition zur Road Tax in Großbritannien wurde 2007 von fast zwei Millionen Menschen unterzeichnet. Die dadurch erwirkte Aussetzung dieser Steueränderung durch die Regierung zeigt das enorme Potenzial dieses neuen Instruments. Dieses ist gleichzeitig eine Herausforderung für die repräsentative Demokratie. Wird eine Balance zwischen der Unabhängigkeit der Repräsentanten und der Willensbekundung der Wähler gehalten, kann diese neue Form der Partizipation ein Gewinn für die Demokratie sein.

20, 2007, the final tally had surpassed the 1.8 million signatures mark. In fact, at a certain point the petition generated so much web-traffic that it crashed the Prime Minister's website.

Without debating the merits or disadvantages of Roberts' views on the environment, what is interesting about his petition is that, in a short period of time, with little organizational effort and no financial commitment, a citizen with no previous experience in either politics or petitioning managed to achieve something unthinkable for any traditional petitioner under the same conditions as Roberts: it attracted the attention of a considerable number of people and of the media, and generated enough public pressure to eventually force the government to forego its plan for a new tax scheme. Quite remarkably, as noted by Tony Blair, Roberts succeeded in generating a national debate with just a few clicks of a mouse.

Consequences of the petition

In the initial phases, despite the impressive rising number of signatures, the UK Cabinet attempted to minimize the significance of the petition. However, by its deadline, Prime Minister Blair could no longer avoid addressing the issue publicly: to explain the government's position, Blair wrote an article in *The Guardian* and personally responded, via email, to each of the petition's signatories, reassuring all of the interested parties that the proposed scheme was not about imposing 'stealth taxes', and, most importantly, that the government had not yet made any final decision about it.

Nonetheless, the clamour surrounding the petition did not wither away. Its unparalleled success and its location (the government website), in the hands of the media and of the opposition in the Parliament quickly turned those electronic signatures into a national referendum, the unmistakable mark of the public's will and its hostility towards the new tax scheme.

The Telegraph, a conservative-leaning newspaper, used the petition as the foundation of its active and pressing campaign against the government, *The Road to ruin*, which lasted several months. By the end of 2007, it was the current Prime Minister Gordon Brown who at last decided to listen – as the *Telegraph* put it – 'to his constituents' and instructed his Cabinet to ditch the scheme. *The Telegraph* and other dailies emphasized the role played by the e-petition in Brown's decision. Subsequently, in March 2008, Ruth Kelly, the Transport Secretary, told the BBC that the government was finally withdrawing its proposal: 'People legitimately raised concerns about privacy, fairness and how any scheme would be enforced. We don't have all the answers to those questions yet.' Hence, she concluded, the government must put the scheme on hold until all those questions were answered.

Peter Roberts said that the new service was clearly a benefit for the quality of democracy in Britain, without it the government would have certainly gone ahead with its plan. Others, like Steve Richards, chief political columnist of *The Independent*, labeled the Transport Secretary's decision 'a classic case of a necessary policy killed by cowardice'. In fact, notwithstanding that new laws are much needed to safeguard the environment, the electronic *cry wolf* of a tiny minority of the population managed to send the government into a frenzy and decisively affected the rights of the silent majority who did not sign the petition, or express its view on the matter. In a country of sixty million people, the journalist pointed out, this is hardly a sign of a healthy democracy.

These two views represent the extreme sides of a complex issue: is the web good or bad for democracy?

Democracy and the internet: a doomed marriage?

Started off in the Seventies as a closed niche for computer geeks, the internet has evolved into a complex communication network used nowadays by more

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Summary

The Road Tax online-petition that in the early months of 2007 attracted almost 2 million signatures on the UK Government e-Petition website is a blueprint of the challenges the internet can pose for representative democracy. If the balance is kept between the independence of action of the representatives and the need for assessment of the electing constituencies, this new form of participation might be an asset for democracy.

than a billion people worldwide. It forms the critical backbone of a broad range of activities ranging from communicating with peers to working; from shopping to learning, from leisure to politics. Many, quite rightly, see in this network not only a formidable driver of social or economical change, but also a powerful political instrument that can significantly alter the traditional role citizens play in established democratic systems.

Consider the UK, for instance: a typical representative system where, traditionally, the fundamental role of citizens is to take part in regular elections to choose representatives who then govern on their behalf. That simple act of casting a vote, of choosing one candidate (or one party) over others has two main advantages: it gives the people a chance to periodically evaluate their political leadership and, at the same time, it gives the members of that political leadership enough time to earn their voters' trust for a new mandate. In this context, ideally, citizens should rarely be called into action between elections.

For its persistent expansion, for its scope and reach in our society, for its embedded resistance to political control, the internet instead has the potential to crucially affect the balance of that system: it allows citizens to alter the periodicity of that major cycle and easily break it into a stream of continuous public acts of assessment which are potentially as politically significant as an election can be but, contrary to the latter, the formers are never predictable and can be quite sudden. To what extent and in which ways this never-ending and unregulated process of evaluation affects the quality of the democratic process is difficult to say.

Broadly speaking, the internet affects the functioning of a representative system at least on two different levels: it provides a whole new range of tools and spaces that, on the one hand, enables citizens to constantly monitor those in power and, on the other hand, increases their chances to be more directly involved in the politics of everyday life.

The case of Britain provides us with some good examples of this dual effect: through the internet citizens can access websites that feed them with crucial information to constantly monitor what their representatives are doing on their behalf (for example *Theyworkforyou.org.uk* is a non-partisan website that records the daily activities of the Members of Parliament – i. e. voting record, texts and videos of speeches); blogs and free video-sharing services (such as *youtube.com*) provide access to independent media platforms that allow citizens to denounce wrongdoings, and openly question who gets what when and how without relying on a public service broadcasting to do that on their behalf. One of the most famous of such examples is certainly Guido Fawkes's blog, which attracts over a hundred thousand monthly visitors and is devoted to uncovering 'parliamentary plots, rumors and conspiracies'.

And since 2006, thanks to the e-petition website, citizens have been given an official tool to engage directly with their Cabinet. The new tool is a perfect example of the challenges the internet can pose to a representative system. The website, aimed at strengthening the government's relationship with the public, certainly has a laudable intention. However, a web-tool that allows citizens to record their own views, or cast a vote on important and complex issues in a manner and speed that is unprecedented, can gradually corrupt the whole idea of governing through representatives. In fact, it opens up the doors to the worst form of plebiscitary democracy.

To make things worse, by hosting it within its official website, the government gave the new service a public seal of recognition. This increased the political weight of the petitions submitted through the site and put the government in an awkward position in the eye of the public and of the media. It was as though the government publicly announced: let the people speak out loud through this new service, their voices will count. Unsurprisingly, once the people spoke, the media and the opposition parties legitimately asked the government: Why are you not listening?

Putting citizens in a position to continuously scrutinize the use (and abuse) of power, assess their representatives' work, and openly question the policies they advocate, can guarantee a certain degree of transparency and accountability, which are indeed fundamental elements of a healthy democratic system. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the excessive use of fashionable new people-power tools in government business can sometimes bring a representative system to a standstill and crucially hinder the quality of its very essence: the elected representative at the core of this system is never simply the echo chamber of his/her own constituency's will, but he/she must play a more important and proactive role of mediation between the will of the people and the need of the state. The successful exercise of such a role can only be guaranteed by a fine balance between the independence of action of the representatives and the need for assessment of the electing constituencies.

The marriage between the internet and a representative system is only doomed if and when that fine balance is significantly altered, as indeed happened in the case of the UK government's questionable choice of equipping its own website with an e-petition tool, clearly without having properly understood the long-term consequences of that choice. In all other instances, instead, the facility with which political dissent is organized and cultivated through the internet can only be an asset for democracy, one to protect and nurture.

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