

# E-petitioning: Exploring Citizen's Contributions to the Policy Making Process

Catherine L. Dumas  
College of Computing & Information  
University at Albany  
State University of New York  
1400 Washington Avenue  
Albany, NY 12222  
518-935-8064  
cdumas@albany.edu

## ABSTRACT

Our research aims to reveal patterns of e-petitioning co-signing behavior that are indicative of the political mobilization of online "communities" in the case of We the People (WtP), the first web-enabled petitioning system developed by the US Federal government. This internet-based tool enables users to petition the Obama Administration and solicit support for policy suggestions. This poster will highlight our previous studies [1, 2] involving 33 petitions that were initiated during the week the week after the Sandy Hook shooting (December 14-21, 2012) involving gun control and collectively received a response from President Obama. We applied Baumgartner and Jones's [3] work on agenda setting and punctuated equilibrium, which suggests that policy issues may lie dormant for periods of time until a "focusing event" triggers attention from the media, interest groups, and elected representatives. We used techniques from market basket analysis and social network analysis and found evidence of the mobilization of online "communities" for and against gun control laws and alternative policy proposals to address the Sandy Hook tragedy.

## Keywords

E-petitioning, agenda setting, collective action, market basket analysis, social network analysis.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to provide ways for the public to become more actively involved in government, particularly the policy development process, has been increasingly recognized by government leaders. One example of this is the Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative launched in July 2011, through which the Obama Administration and leaders of seven other countries created "a global effort to encourage transparent, effective, and accountable governance" [4]. Obama's first National Action Plan for the OGP was released in September 2011, featuring an innovative tool for citizen engagement. In an effort to "promote public participation in government" and to give "all Americans a way to engage their

government on the issue that matters to them"

(<https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/>), the first web-enabled petitioning system for the US federal government, We the People (WtP), was launched.

E-petitioning sites present one avenue for public expression that is unmediated. Any individual can propose and disseminate a petition that may be successful without mediation by a political party, the media or interest groups. These e-petitions provide a useful source of insight on what the public is thinking about. The value of this is not yet understood and needs to be explored.

The goal of our research is to contribute to the development of tools to aid policy analysts for inquiry on sets of existing e-petitions and/or forecasting the probable path of diffusion over time of selected petitions.

## 2. RELATED WORK

### 2.1 E-petitioning and Public Influence on Policy

E-petitioning systems have emerged as a contemporary and potentially effective way for citizens to communicate with their governments about policy issues and have facilitated making public participation in policy discussions more easily accessible. Petitioning systems such as this that enable the public to have an effect on policy development have only recently been a focus of study [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10].

However, citizens' rights to petition their governments are not new. The act of petitioning dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and has long since been a way for people to communicate with local, national or parliamentary governments. With the advent of the Internet and advances in ICTs, e-petitioning has emerged as a mechanism for citizens to participate in the policy-making process in the United States as well as other countries (e.g. U.K., Germany, Scotland, Australia, Norway). Germany's Bundestag's e-petition system has demonstrated that these systems are at the "forefront of official, fully operational e-participation opportunities provided to citizens by governments and parliaments" [11]. The purpose of petitioning is to change public policy, demand officials to make statements, or induce public institutions to take action [12]. E-petitioning provides a safe "playing field" for citizens to take part in the policy-making process and is well-suited for a representative democratic society

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[13,14].

An example of e-petitioning by the public effectively influencing policy making in the US is evident in a recent case involving WtP. In January 2013, the petition “Make Unlocking Cell Phones Legal” was created on WtP by Internet activist, Sina Khanifar, asking the Obama Administration to make cell phone unlocking legal. The petition was a response to a decision by the Library of Congress in October 2012 to remove unlocking of cell phones (a process that allows cell phones to be used on any network) from the exceptions to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA). Within the 30 days that is allotted for a petition to receive a response, over 114,000 signatures were collected crossing the 100,000 threshold. The Obama Administration supported the petition and in early August 2014, Obama signed legislation to make it illegal to lock cell phones [15].

## 2.2 Our Previous Work

In two previous studies using WtP petition data [16, 17], we focused on 33 petitions that were initiated the week after the Sandy Hook Shooting (December 14-21, 2012) involving gun control and that collectively received a response from President Obama. We applied Baumgartner and Jones’s [18] work on agenda setting and punctuated equilibrium, which suggests that policy issues may lie dormant until a “focusing event” triggers attention from political figures, interest groups, and the media.

The focusing event in these two studies took place on Friday, December 14, 2012 when a man with a gun walked into the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut and fatally shot 20 children and 6 school personnel. Within a few hours a national conversation about gun control began on WtP. People started creating and signing petitions supporting gun control laws and other issues involving mental health care and putting armed guards in schools. In the six days that followed, several other petitions were created by individuals in support of maintaining the status quo of the current gun control policy. On Friday, December 21, 2012, President Obama issued a response to a total of 33 petitions that advocated for and against gun control and that made alternative policy proposals in response to the Sandy Hook shootings. There were a total of 503,125 signatures to the set of 33 petitions.

We divided the petitions into two groups differentiating between those that expressed a clear preference for “pro” gun control and those that expressed other preferences; this produced a cluster of 12 “pro gun control” petitions, and a remaining group of 21. The group of 12 “pro gun control” petitions were sorted further into three thematic clusters: a group in support of gun control laws which we labeled “establish gun laws”; a group advocating banning the sale and use of assault weapons which we labeled “assault weapons”; and a final group consisting of only one petition calling for Congress to repeal the second amendment, labeled “repeal the 2nd amendment”. We also sorted the remaining group of 21 petitions into three thematic clusters: a group in support of law-abiding gun owners (“support law abiding gun owners”); a group advocating investment in the improvement of mental health care (“invest in mental health care”) and a final group advocating using firearms to guard our schools (“guard our schools”).

In one study [19], we focused on the 12 “pro” gun control petitions and in another study [20] we looked at the 21 petitions that argued against gun control, advocated improvements in mental health care, and proposed arming protectors within the

school system. Techniques from market basket analysis were used to explore questions about whether individuals who signed one “pro” gun control petition also signed other “pro” gun control petitions. We also used some methods from social network analysis to determine if there were groups of individuals who signed similar “pro” gun control petitions, thus suggesting the creation of “communities” of individuals whose actions were similarly aligned in support of gun control policy proposals. We did the same analysis for the other 21 petitions. In both cases we found evidence of the mobilization of online communities for and against gun control laws and alternative policy proposals to address the Sandy Hook tragedy. Figure 1 gives us a temporal sense of when these two groups (“pro” gun control and those who expressed other preferences) signed the 33 petitions.

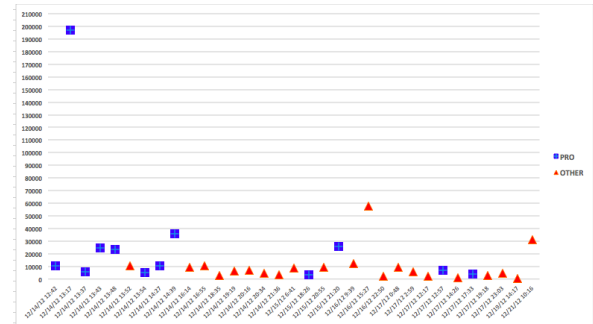


Figure 1: Signature Count Over Time for 33 Gun Control Petitions

Figure 2 is a visualization of the confidence values of various association rules from the market basket analysis. Each node represents one of the 12 “pro” gun control petitions. The colors represent the three thematic clusters.

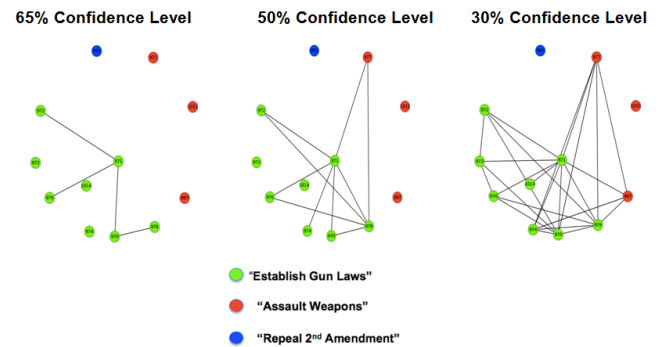


Figure 2: Associations Between the Petitions at 65%, 50% and 30% Confidence Levels

## 3. FUTURE WORK

Using WtP data, I will focus on 39 petitions initiated over a six-month period (August 10, 2014 to February 17, 2015) after the fatal shooting death of Michael Brown, an 18 year-old black man by Darren Wilson, a 28 year old white Ferguson, Missouri police officer on August 9, 2014. This event set off weeks of protest and initiated a national dialogue about police use of force and their relations with minority communities.

I have created a timeline mapping key events to the 39 petitions. In my preliminary analysis, it appears that there are at least three clusters of petitions that map to specific events. This case is more complex than our previous studies involving the gun

control petitions. The petitions in this case cover a span of six months where the gun control petitions were initiated within one week. I am interested in exploring to see if there are communities mobilizing through e-petitioning behavior using market basket analysis and social network analysis. The diffusion of petition information through social media, namely Twitter and Facebook, will also be explored.

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