

REDISCOVERING THE CIVIC AND ACHIEVING BETTER OUTCOMES IN PUBLIC POLICY

Policy Briefings Number 2

Title: Information Nudges and Online Petitions

Brief Description of the Project:

A randomised controlled trial (RCT) in partnership with the Oxford Internet Institute testing whether providing information with an online petition affects participation.

It was expected that where very low numbers of people have signed a petition, the information will have a negative impact on signing, as they may consider it a hopeless cause. Where very high numbers of people have signed, the information may have a positive impact, generating excitement, social pressure and a feeling that they can be part of change.

The researchers approached 668 people who were presented with a screen which asked them to examine a number of issues and then asked to (a) express their willingness to sign a petition supporting the issue and (b) donate a small amount of their participation fee to supporting the issue.

Subjects were randomly allocated across a control group and three treatment group with information of low, medium and high numbers of other signers.

Key Findings:

- 62.5% of the petitions presented to the control group were signed

- Of the petitions presented with low numbers, slightly less (-1.9%) were signed and for those presented with medium numbers, slightly more (+1.9%) were signed
- For those presented with high numbers, 66.7 % were signed (that is, 4.2% more than in the control group) and this result is statistically significant ($p=0.015$)
- Petitions with information about petitioners greater than a million are more effective
- Two-thirds of those who signed a petition went on to make a donation. But there was no impact of information on donations

Policy Relevance and Implications:

- These findings have relevance for the design of the web site of any organization that endeavours to attract civic participation, such as major NGOs (e.g. Oxfam, Amnesty International); online activism sites (Avaaz.org, Moveon.org); government petition sites; community development groups; and social enterprises developing sites such as fixmystreet.org and writetothem.org. Such web sites vary in the extent to which they provide feedback information on how many people have participated.
- Our findings suggest that to maximize participation, such organizations should withhold information about other participants when numbers are small but provide it when they are high.
- Further research of this kind could refine the type of guidance that might be given to such organizations. For example, feedback information for potential participants might be tailored for the specific context of civic activities, such as the percentage of people in a given locality who have undertaken the activity or the percentage of users of a service who have complained.

- These findings also demonstrate the centrality of information provision to the effectiveness of 'nudge' techniques. The potential of the internet to provide real-time feedback on the participation of others opens up major new possibilities for 'nudging' civic participation.

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