

The Art of Conversation: How can MPs "listen informally"

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What are the current problems?

- Widespread Political disengagement amongst citizens
- Difficulty in communicating with large numbers at same time
- Engaging the hard to reach and avoiding the 'usual suspects'
- Educating citizens as to what happens and what is possible
- Resolving these problems with limited resources and a busy schedule!



What can result from these problems?

- Politicians can feel citizens do not understand the real issues
- Citizens can feel politicians do not listen to their concerns
- Citizens can either disengage or campaign against politicians
- Politicians can either disengage or retreat into their 'bunker'
- The democratic process breaks down!



Two key challenges

- Informing citizens about the political work and activity in a clear, engaging and comprehensible manner
- Hearing the views of citizens on this work and demonstrating engagement with them



Current methods of politician to citizen communication

- Media - print, online, television
- Existing contact lists
- Political/election literature
- Public meetings

All methods limited by quantity, time and reach



Current methods of citizen to politician communication

- Correspondence - letters/email/telephone calls
- Constituency meetings/surgeries
- Democratic elections and voting
- Petitions

All methods limited by reach, quantity, time and depth of interaction



What is e-Democracy?

- Using new technology channels (SMS, email, internet) to
 - Create a 2-way dialogue with citizens
 - Educate citizens in an engaging manner
 - Create stronger relationships between groups and individuals (e.g. knowledge sharing)
 - Empower the public
 - Create better governance
 - Create a stronger democracy



Conversation - the solution?

- To resolve the challenges and problems identified, politicians and citizens need to enter into genuine and consistent conversation with one another
- This conversation needs to be widely accessible, multi-level, available 24/7, with low cost in the long term and easily maintained
- E-democracy meets all of these criteria, in ways that conventional methodologies cannot



Conversation - a democracy 'party'

“Imagine you’re at a party and meet someone for the first time. You ask them questions and give them information, they do the same to you. The process is continuous until a natural conclusion is reached.”

This is also the essence of e-conversation



Bringing about conversation

- Conversation needs the following elements
 - Information provision, both static and real time “What is issue x all about?”
 - Channels for discussion “What could we do about x?”
 - Channels for context/background “Why do you think that about x”
 - Channels for conclusion/debate finalisation “What shall we do about x”
 - Channels for outcome promotion “What have you done about x?”



‘Debate in a box’ - proposed conversation toolkit

- ‘Debate in a box’, a set of e-democracy tools currently in development
- Designed to be a complete solution to provide a one stop portal for citizen/politician interaction
- Allows greater engagement, understanding and communication as well as clear conclusions



‘Debate in a box’ - key features

- Accessed through single URL
- Each user builds online profile - photograph and personal information
- Information provision - Politician weblog, resource upload/download, background pages
- Communication - live chat, discussion forums, e-surveys and quick polling
- Allows citizen/politician and citizen/citizen interactions
- Continuous dialogue allows politicians to ‘take the temperature’ in an informal manner.



Existing tools

- ‘Debate in a box’ can contain tools such as:
 - www.citizenspace.com
 - www.delib.co.uk/dblog
 - www.picturepoll.org
 - www.demgames.org
 - <http://www.electricdecember.org/05/calendar/8/>

The overall vision is to provide a customised e-portal for an individual politician to interact in many ways with a wide of citizens



Key advantages

- Widely accessible, allows different levels of participation
- Quick and simple to engage with and maintain
- 24/7 access to information and debate
- Cost effective - 1 user costs as much as 1000 users
- Combine information provision with public dialogue and debate



End notes

- E-democracy is an essential part of e-government and modern governance
- It is a scaleable solution based on existing time and resources
- Not just about “people power” as such, but about creating a dialogue
- Important NOT to be afraid of e-democracy.



Further information

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