electorate

Document Control

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Platform: https://e-lectorate.co.uk

Mobile app: Apple & Android

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Executive summary

A social networking application built around democracy, politics, and the public sector. The e-lectorate project aims to see if people will interact with public institutions, constituencies, and vote on a social network that is dedicated to the topic of politics. The idea behind e-lectorate project is that it fills a space in current social network market where existing social network brands and organisations are not currently focussed. Current social networking organisations are pitched as connecting people socially and professionally. The e-lectorate project is pitched as a network that interacts with society and societal structures. Fundamentally the e-lectorate project is based on the same technology as modern social media companies. However, the difference is in the focus of the platform. We recognise that political institutions are active on existing social media sites and can post content on these platforms for people to engage with them. But these platforms are not set up in manner which organises the content by ward, constituency, region, or country - existing platforms are a global free-for-all whereby anyone can post any content. This is how these platforms are designed: maximum content, maximum users, any content goes. Naturally there are controls in place to prevent users posting harmful content and some social network brands have a more dedicated focus on an element of society (e.g. professional social networks), but we do not believe that there is a dedicated social network for politics and democracy. This is what e-lectorate project is designed to be.

Research questions

These research questions underpin the project:

Will people in the UK interact with a social network centred around politics?

We are trying to establish if there is an appetite from the general public to participate on a social network which is centred around politics. We are aware that there are some applications which try to do something similar available at the moment (e.g. Parler and "Matt Hancock") however these are tend to lean towards a specific political voice i.e. Conservative. We are trying to make e-lectorate project politically agnostic so that all people of all affiliations can participate freely without fear of being marginalised. This is one of the reasons why we have chosen to call the application "e-lectorate" because it is a phrase that applies to all people that can vote in an election.

We have focussed this study on the UK population as a testbed because we want to see whether UK residence will adopt e-lectorate project. We believe that allowing people across the world to participate in e-lectorate project will dilute the opinions thoughts and votes on the platform. Preserving a national opinion is important for the system of government. If we allow a global population to influence the thoughts, opinions, and decisions on the platform we risk the e-lectorate project not achieving its aims. The Office for National Statistics ("ONS") reported that in 2020 there were approximately 67,081,000 people that make up the UK's population[1]. A proportion of this figure will be children and people who do not actively use modern devices (smartphones, internet etc.) to access social networking tools. In 2021 Parler reported to have 15,000,000 users[2]. We are not offering access to the e-lectorate project to people under the age of 13 due to limitations on offering information society services without parental consent – this further affects the number of the UK population we can legitimately target as users of the application. We believe that our maximum potential

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[1] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/annualmidyearpopulationestimates/latest

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parler#:~:text=As%20of%20January%202021%2C%20Parler%20reported%20having%2015%20million%20total%20users.

users we could legitimately have using the e-lectorate platform is in the region c.35,000,000. We have certain goals which we would like the platform to achieve in order to measure the success of interaction on e-lectorate.

Level of success	Active UK user figure
Total success	35,000,000
Highly successful	15 million < 25 million plus
Successful	5 million < 15 million
Moderately successful	1 million < 5 million
Partially successful	500,000 < 1 million
Unsuccessful	0 < 499,999

These figures are approximations and may not reflect the true adult population of the UK.

An **active user** is defined as:

A person who registers an account and conducts any type of interaction on the platform at least once per month.

We have selected 'once per month' as the activity period because we do not anticipate that the e-lectorate application will be an application that is used every day by users.

An **interaction** is defined as:

An action by the user which results in a clear engagement with the platform. Such engagements can include:

Logging in to their account

Voting on a post

Commenting

Following a page

Posting content

Can e-lectorate project improve engagement in politics?

We know that people interact with politicians and organisations through existing social networking brands which have a deeply entrenched user base that has been built up over a number of years. The posts that are produced by politicians and public sector bodies can get a significant amount of reach and engagement with some posts receiving thousands of comments and reactions. We know that people are willing to engage with political institutions on social networking technologies but we want to see how we can make this better and more inclusive. When we looked at some of the social networks available to people we noticed a few areas which cast doubt over the legitimacy of using these as public platforms:

- Using 'real names' and other 'real identifiers' could dissuade people from voicing their political opinions for fear of further consequence.

- A number of users can be 'robotic' and be posting deliberately inflammatory content.

- People could fear that their employer may see the content they post and think negatively of it leading to disciplinaries and withdrawal of work contracts.

- Platforms focus on engagement to drive algorithms and so marginalised 'small' voices may not get the same reach as other larger institutional voices.

- Some existing social networks have been marred with privacy concerns.

- Some users post deliberately inflammatory, aggressive or confrontational content to boost their own reach and social networking organisations are either passive to this or boost these user's content.

To be the social networking platform of choice for people to engage with the political system, e-lectorate platform must be able to navigate and mitigate these risks effectively but will struggle with doing this in the early stages of the project because the project does not have the funds, size or scale or existing social media technologies to mitigate these risks. It will have to be done on a 'best endeavours' basis.

The answer to this question may be more subjective and difficult to get to a conclusion to because we would need a comparison data between all posts made by public institutions on all platforms. We would like to see similar levels of interactions on e-lectorate platform as is on the more mainstream social networking platforms.

Can e-lectorate project improve representative democracy?

A representative democracy is a system in which the electorate vote for politicians to represent their views on their behalf. In this system the electorate is one-step removed from the political process as their elected representatives make decisions on governance on their behalf. This makes sense because not everyone can or wants to be a politician. Not everybody can spend all of their time going around and getting everyone's opinion and vote on every matter - it would take far too long and be overly bureaucratic we would never get anything done. This is the current state without the implementation of any social networking technology.

The e-lectorate project aims to bridge the gap between elected representatives and the electorate. An elected representative is put in place to act on behalf of the people they represent but questions can be asked about the effectiveness of a representative democracy. How can one person represent the views of many? How can the many give their views to the elected representative? If the representative does not know which way their electorate wants them to vote on a particular matter, how can they be representative?

e-lectorate project can help elected representatives get a reading on what the users are feeling about a certain policies or events. This enables elected representatives to better represent the electorate when the are in a governing position. They can truly act as a representative because they know what their people want and do not want. This helps them make more democratic decisions about governing and enhances the democratic system we as a society uphold.

Our measurement for success on this research objective will be if an elected representative actively states that they use e-lectorate platform to influence their decision making.

Can e-lectorate project create a more direct democracy?

Direct democracy first began in Athens where people who were eligible gathered to vote on matters. Since then direct democracy has become less-and-less achievable as populations have grown and people are more spread geographically. Direct democracy can be seen as the purist form of democracy because it allows the people to have their say on issues which directly affect them. The system has promoters and detractors. Some detractors may argue that not everyone who votes will have sufficient knowledge on a topic to make an informed decision before casting their vote. A democracy absolutist would state that whether the person is informed or not, it is still their right to vote.

The purpose of e-lectorate project is not to install a system of direct democracy. It is to see if people will interact with the public sector on a social networking web application. If, as a consequence, e-lectorate project helps give people a more direct voice in government then that is seen by the project as a positive thing.

The measure to see if the project has helped to improve direct democracy is if the e-lectorate platform meets its 'Total success' active user target and the representative democracy measurement for success is also met.

Could people vote online?

Voting is a key part of any democratic system. Voting is a process whereby people express their choice on a matter. In the UK this can be done in general elections, local elections, referendums and on an almost daily basis within Parliament.

Voting is a very straightforward process. It is doing something to express your wishes on a matter. In a local or general election the electorate go to the their local polling station to cast their vote on a ballot. In this system the electorate mark their ballot paper with an 'X' next to their desired choice. This is a relatively simple process and can easily be replicated via web.

Breaking the process down we view a 'vote' as an indication of wishes on a particular topic. The e-lectorate platform will allow users to express their opinion on posts by having a vote-up, vote-down and indifferent option. The indifferent option is neither a like or a dislike. It is the equivalent of people 'abstaining' or having no opinion on the matter. We want to see if people will use this option. We are comfortable with dropping this option if it does not become used. We will be allowing people to express their views on any post using these features. Additionally, we will be building a voting feature which allows people to vote on certain actions.

There can be several measures of success for answering this research question depending on where we want to set the bar.

If we were to set the bar at the lowest point, our measure of success will be any user that interacts by voting-up or voting-down a post that poses a question or choice.

If we were to set the bar at the highest point, our measure of success will be if Parliament use our voting module to request the electorate formally cast a vote on a topic that is either debated in Parliament or an election.

Methodology

The methodology for the e-lectorate research project will follow a basic flow:

1. Create a platform
2. User testing
3. Mid-point evaluation
4. Wider promotion
5. Continuous evaluation

Platform

The platform will exist as a mobile and web application. To build the platform we will commission work of freelancers using the Fiverr application. The reason for selecting this route to development is because no one in the core e-lectorate project team has full stack development experience to build the product from scratch. Freelancers on Fiverr also tend to charge a lower rate than development studios in the UK and so we will be able to build the application at a cheaper rate using freelancers on Fiverr. The goal of the initial development is to create a Minimum Viable Product ("MVP"). This MVP will contain the minimum features we believe necessary to operate as a social networking application.

MVP features

- Create an account
- Post content (polls, text, photo, video)
- React to content up, down, indifferent, and comment
- Follow other users
- Public sector profiles
- Public profiles post content by RSS feed
- Receive notifications
- Create pages
- Create events
- Create and join communities

We have selected these minimum features as we believe a social network cannot operate without them.

Enhanced features

- Petitions – allows people to create petitions, these have no legal standing as petitions to Parliament
- Constituency – A dedicated page for each constituency
- Debate & Vote – users can create dedicated pages to debate and vote on issues.
- Interactive map – users can navigate an interactive map showing them the boundaries of key UK regions including constituencies

These enhanced features will be deployed as fast-follow features because they are not integral to the core platform but do provide uniqueness and a USP which we think users would value.

User Acceptance Testing (UAT)

During this phase of the project we will look for users to test the platform and find bugs. As we are not a conventional development house we do not have a team of people who can conduct UAT by playing out specific user stories. Therefore, we will take the unconventional approach of conducting UAT on our live system by members of the public. We want several user demographics to help us conduct UAT. In order of priority and preference to us these are:

1. The general public.

    This is the most important group for us because we have built this platform for them.

2. Members of Parliament (MP).

    This group is elected to lead the general public and so it is important we get their views on how they have found engaging with the platform.

3. Public bodies and institutions.

    These entities are built to serve the public. They will have a profile which will be automatically posting content. We would like them to engage with the platform and provide their views.

We recognise that groups 2 & 3 may not be best happy that we are creating profiles on their behalf on our platform. Whilst their potential relative discontent is not ideal it is important for these groups to understand that their office comes before their personal opinions on what we are trying to achieve. The people of the UK are the bedrock of these institutions and they will need to learn to respect that all of their actions are in the public interest. As part of this project we will automate as much posting of content from groups 2 & 3 as possible.

We will ask these primary user groups to participate in UAT by either:

a) Contacting them directly on a publicly available email address or by writing to their physical address.

b) Broadcasting that we are looking for people to conduct UAT.

Option 'a' will be more relevant to groups 2 & 3 whereas option 'b' will be the approach we take with group 1.

The UAT groups will be assessing the platform against key criteria:

Sign up journey

It is important for us to be able to create a frictionless experience for our users. We want them to score and provide qualitative feedback on how they found the sign-up journey to be. This will be more relevant for group 1. Users will provide a score 0 (bad) to 5 (best) as well as qualitative feedback.

Design and branding

We want to understand how our users felt and reacted to the branding and design of the site/app and get their thoughts on what they would like to see improved.

Theme

We want to see how users feel about a politically themed social networking application.

Features

We want to understand how the users found using the features.

Mid-point evaluation

Once we have received feedback responses we will commence the mid-point evaluation. This evaluation is dependent on the e-lectorate project hitting the following milestones:

1. A working web and mobile application.
2. A user base.
3. Feedback responses.

If we do not have all of these components in place then the e-lectorate project's efforts will be to revisit each of these and improve them.

If the e-lectorate project has successfully achieved the three milestones then we will complete the below evaluation scoresheet.

Evaluation Scoresheet

This is the blank scoresheet. Options for evaluation are:

1. Successful or clear opportunity for growth
2. Partially successful or some opportunity for growth
3. Unsuccessful or no clear opportunity for growth

Topic	Evaluation	Next action
User adoption		
User engagement		
Delivering the aim		
Value to the user		
Long term sustainability		

Wider Promotion

The platform will continuously look to grow its user base and functionality. Once we clear mid-point evaluation we will begin in earnest promoting the site and its capabilities to the general public.

The channels of promotion that we will use are:

- Word of mouth: this is our preferred method of promoting e-lectorate project. As the platform is new and innovative we hope that people will spread the message.

- Press: we will contact press organisations to see if they want to cover the e-lectorate project. By appearing on TV, radio and print media we hope to get greater exposure.

- Twitter: this platform is already vibrant with political discourse and we believe we may be able to grow organically by posting on the platform and interacting with users of this platform.

We will need to rely very heavily on our users to promote e-lectorate project and platform.

Ongoing Evaluation

We will continue to assess the platforms growth, user uptake and feedback to continually improve the platform.

Risk Assessment

This risk assessment highlights the risk identified with the e-lectorate project's platform proposition.

Risk description	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigations
Costs may be too great and the platform can become unsustainable.	**High** The platform has a small amount of start up funding <15k GBP. It will not be sustainable for the project to operate at scale.	**High** Without sufficient funding the platform will not be able to operate.	• Pursue funding streams (in order of preference): 1. NFT sales 2. Donations 3. Investors
Content moderation will be difficult with a limited number of support staff.	**High** The project does not have a large number of staff who can conduct content moderation.	**High** The platform could contain harmful content.	• Report post feature on the platform.
Lack of user adoption of the platform	**Medium** We think there is a large portion of the population that would sign up to the platform as it would interest them. However, we recognise that most start up platforms are unsuccessful at generating user interest. Due to the nature of the platform we will start with c.3k automatically created users and c.650 of those users will automatically be posting content.	**High** Without sufficient users the platform will not be successful and the research project will fail to prove that democracy can live online.	• Once baseline product is established, all efforts will be made to grow the user base. The activities to do this include: o Online promotion using social media tool Twitter. o Contacting broadcast media institutions to see if they want to cover the research project including TV networks, radio stations, and print media

Risk description	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigations
Interference by non-UK persons and entities.	**Medium** Our preference is that the platform is only accessed by persons in the UK. We cannot guarantee that this will be the case initially.	**Medium** Accounts from outside of the UK could influence opinions on the platform.	• Restrict access to the platform by only allowing it to be accessed from UK IP addresses and the app is only available on the UK app stores.
Application functionality may not be appealing to users.	**Medium** Although we have built the product around what we believe users will want out of the platform we cannot guarantee they will like the features and functionality we have designed.	**Medium** Users may not use the platform if they don't enjoy the functionality.	• Obtain user feedback If users are not engaging with the platform then we can safely conclude that the project's research questions are answered in the negative.
Verifying users are real people.	**Low** The goal of the platform is not to 'know' people. It is to provide a safe space to voice their political views which they can do anonymously if they wish. We do not want to marginalise people with unconventional views if they are not prepared to disclose their own personal details.	**Medium** If users perceive the platform is plagued with fake users.	• Introduce account verification whilst still preserving anonymity. • Obtain user feedback.