SmartParticipation
Successful management of online public commenting

The search for tools to support informed and thoughtful online discussion of public policy issues has been ongoing for more than a decade. There has been considerable success in developing applications to support brainstorming, ideation and crowdsourcing, but there continue to be few options for online participation tools that

- help participants become informed about the policy issue and the policymaking process
- enable focused discussion of the issues
- encourage deliberative participant interaction
- mentor effective commenting behaviors and discourage unproductive levels of incivility
- support both relatively unsophisticated participants and those who are experts and/or experienced in policy discussion

Meeting these needs requires

- design informed by research in psychology, communications, information science, human computer interaction and deliberative democracy, and tested in real policy engagements
- a platform with a modular structure that allows adaptation to different types of users (e.g., federal agency, city planning department) and policy settings (e.g., proposed consumer regulation, revision of land use plan)
- sufficient robustness to reliably handle high volumes of participant traffic

CeRI, a cross-disciplinary group of Cornell University, has developed SmartParticipation™ to meet the demands of a robust, adaptable, effective online civic participation system. The system has been tested and improved over seven years of hosting online public commenting in live federal agency policymaking on the www.RegulationRoom.org site.

This real world testing engaged predominantly participants with *no prior experience* in such policy processes (65%-95% self-reported newcomers). The result has been broader, better public participation useful to agency decisionmakers and rewarding to participants

Our goal is to find a way to make SmartParticipation™ more broadly available. The system comprises:

1. The technology. A robust and well-tested Drupal-based platform that offers not only an innovative public commenting interface but also a moderator interface that supports facilitative moderation of the discussion.

2. The know-how.   How to recruit new voices to policy discussions, prepare information about the substantive issues in a way comprehensible by a broad range of participants, and use facilitative moderation to encourage a broader range of effective participation.

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Mentions from our agency partners:

One way is by experimenting with pilot projects to adapt the principles developed by some brave souls at Cornell University who have designed what they call the e-Rulemaking Initiative. This approach starts from an easy-to-read summary of the proposed rule's main provisions and then allows people to comment, in a relatively informal way, on the provisions. A moderator is available to answer questions and, where appropriate, to frame questions to the commenter. That interactive process produces a level of engagement that deepens knowledge on both sides, and allows citizens to actually participate in the rulemaking process by means of a controlled forum."
-Richard Cordray, Director, CFPB

"[W]e have begun a groundbreaking partnership with Cornell University to make commenting on this proposed rule easier and more transparent…. This new Cornell e-Rulemaking Initiative (CeRI) provides an online public participation environment where people can learn about and discuss proposed federal regulations and provide effective feedback to DOT. With its interactivity, the Regulation Room is even more accessible and dynamic than Regulations.gov [the official rulemaking portal]. President Obama promised to open your government to more effective transparency, participation, and engagement. This partnership is another important step toward keeping that promise."
- Ray LaHood, Secretary of Transportation

Media mentions:

"Consumers can submit comments at Regulations.gov. But a far easier place to learn about the issues and problems with debt collection is RegulationRoom.org, which is not a government-run site. Instead, trained students and staff at Cornell Law School run it. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is working with Cornell to make it simpler for people to submit comments about debt collection.
Even if you aren't interested in commenting, you can learn a lot about debt collection practices and your rights. In discussion forums, people can submit comments, and moderators keep things civil and provide background information. They also probe, asking follow-up questions to those who submit comments or gripes in order to dig deeper into the issues they face."
*- **Michelle Singletary, Washington Post***

"Regulation Room is a cool example of how e-rulemaking can solve a problem and get more people involved. It is impressive to see it getting traction and a lot of visitors."
*- **Steve Ressler, president of GovLoop***

User Comments:

"I applaud these proposed rules and thank you for allowing the public to comment so easily."

"Thank you for giving me a voice during this difficult time."

"First, I want to thank you for your response. I'm never sure if anyone reads this stuff or cares."

"Love your web site! You give me hope."

"It's a very comprehensive site and I wish this technology were being employed to lobby our lawmakers. The participants had some sterling suggestions and I congratulate Cornell for developing the site."