Public Comment "Toolkit" for Regulatory Agencies Launched at UMass Amherst

October 30, 2009
Contact: Dr. Stuart Shulman, stu@polsci.umass.edu, 413-545-5375 (w) 413-230-1255 (c)

Amherst, MA - Researchers in the Qualitative Data Analysis Program (QDAP) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the University of Pittsburgh have launched a free, Web-based beta version of the Public Comment Analysis Toolkit (PCAT) to enable government officials to listen to and engage with the American public about regulations that impact their lives and businesses. The software builds on the concept of transparent and participatory "open" government advocated by the White House.

According to PCAT's inventor, Dr. Stuart W. Shulman, the toolkit augments the government's existing notice and comment database, the Federal Docket Management System (FDMS). "PCAT extends the best Web-based features of the FDMS, while offering novel additions that enable easy, team-based searching, sorting, and memo writing about important public comments. Taken together, PCAT and the FDMS help streamline the federal notice and comment process and make citizen input more accessible."

The new software assists agencies in searching, analyzing, and responding to citizen comments submitted to federal regulatory agencies through sites such as www.regulations.gov. Regulations.gov is a centralized federal portal that enables "citizens to search, view, and comment on regulations issued by the U.S. government." PCAT is designed to work seamlessly with bulk downloads from regulations.gov. It allows agency officials to review the hundreds, thousands, or at times hundreds of thousands of comments submitted to agencies in response to the several thousand federal rules proposed each year.

Analysts using PCAT can export coded comments for use in other documents, enabling officials to more easily incorporate citizen feedback in their regulatory response. The software keeps track of comments that have been read and categorized. It helps rule writers ensure that key concepts contained in citizen comments are identified and considered in final decisions. PCAT's duplicate detection features will make it more likely that important individual comments are not buried by duplicative or less well-formulated comments.

Shulman is an Assistant Professor of Political Science, Director of the Qualitative Data Analysis Program, and Associate Director of the National Center for Digital Government at UMass Amherst. He is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*.

PCAT is based upon Shulman's award-winning Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT), also developed by QDAP. CAT enables researchers to code, validate, and analyze large digital, text-based datasets. CAT is designed for use with any digitized text dataset, whereas PCAT is tailored to improve analysis in the rulemaking process. "PCAT is an example of successful technology transfer from an academic laboratory to the government sector. It speaks to the needs of federal officials who must be responsive to the increasing volume of public comments in the new digital landscape." The PCAT software research and development was funded by the National Science Foundation, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. To test PCAT, visit http://pcat.qdap.net.

###