



Research Paper



E-petitions

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Contents

- Introduction..... 1
- 1. Background..... 2
- 2. Victoria’s existing petitioning arrangements..... 3
- 3. E-petitions..... 4
 - Types of e-petition models 6
 - 3.1 Queensland 7
 - Procedural arrangements..... 7
 - Security and data retention..... 8
 - Outcomes..... 9
 - 3.2 Scotland..... 10
 - Procedural arrangements..... 10
 - Security 11
 - Outcomes..... 11
 - 3.3 United Kingdom 12
 - Procedural arrangements..... 13
 - Security 13
 - Outcomes..... 13
 - 3.4 Germany..... 14
 - Procedural arrangements..... 14
 - Outcomes..... 16
 - 3.5 United States..... 16
 - Procedural arrangements..... 16
 - Outcomes..... 17
 - 3.6 Other jurisdictions..... 18
- 4. Critiques of e-petitions 19
- 5. Conclusion 20
- References..... 21

Introduction

Electronic petitions (e-petitions) have been introduced in Australian legislatures and internationally to improve public engagement with the political process and to make democracy more accessible, participatory and responsive. In Victoria, both houses of Parliament accept only paper petitions in accordance with relevant standing orders, however, several parliamentary committee inquiries have recommended the introduction of e-petitions.¹ On 8 June 2016, the Legislative Council supported a motion by the Hon. Fiona Patten MLC to introduce e-petitions to the Legislative Council.²

This paper examines the potential for e-petitions to enhance the political engagement function of petitioning and assesses the procedural and technical requirements that have to be taken into account in planning an e-petition system.

There are several models of e-petitions, with varying degrees of online functionality. The minimal model involves presentation of a printout of a petition hosted by an independent platform, such as GetUp!³ or Change.org⁴ to the legislature. In this model, the online platform is hosted externally. The basic online model essentially replicates the paper petition process as principal petitioners are required to print out a petition application form, complete it manually and then submit it. This requires parliament to create a website so that users can check on the status of a petition, as well as the number of signatures that have been added and whether a ministerial response has been made. The advanced online model has form functionality, which means users can input petition details online rather than printing out and manually completing a request form.

A common feature of the e-petitions models is the transparency they provide, including all information related to the petition, such as when it closes, how many people have signed it and when a ministerial response is received. This is a much greater level of transparency than the paper petition system, in which there is no mechanism for informing signatories of the outcome of a petition, regardless of whether a ministerial response is provided. E-petitions are also more dynamic than paper petitions as they provide a greater degree of interactivity by enabling users to monitor the status of a petition, choose to be notified of its progress, as well as participate in related discussion forums.

This paper examines how e-petitions have been introduced in Queensland, Scotland, the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States and how effective these have been in fostering engagement with the political process. It addresses the difficulty in gauging what makes a petition successful, as well as the concerns about the limitations of e-petitions. Findings from other parliaments suggest that the advantages of easier communication between people and parliament, greater transparency in the petitioning process and increased opportunity for responsiveness by parliament seem to outweigh any disadvantages.

¹ Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (2008) *Report on Strengthening Government and Parliamentary Accountability in Victoria*, Melbourne, The Committee, April, p. 69; Scrutiny of Acts and Regulation Committee (2005) *Inquiry into Electronic Democracy*, Melbourne, The Committee, p. ii; Standing Orders Committee (2009) *E-petitions*, Melbourne, The Committee, May, p. 4.

² F. Patten (2016) *Motion on e-petitions*, *Debates*, Victoria, Legislative Council, 8 June, p. 2779.

³ GetUp! website, accessed 27 July 2016.

⁴ Change.org website, accessed 27 July 2016.

1. Background

A petition is a complaint, a demand for action, or a reaction to a decision made in parliament or another representative body, by a citizen or association.⁵ Aside from voting, petitioning is the most popular form of political participation.⁶ Petitions typically advocate for a change to the law, the reconsideration of an administrative decision or redress of a local grievance. They enable people aggrieved by a particular policy to express their views on the operation and impact of that policy. In doing so, they create a link between citizens and parliament. Petitions foster a sense of community engagement with the political process and an effective petitions system can enhance the perception of parliament as a representative institution. Petitions are distinguished from other forms of political participation as they are initiated bottom-up by citizens and typically don't have complex formal requirements.⁷

The right to petition parliament is seen as one of the most ancient and fundamental rights of citizens, with the right to petition parliament dating back to the 13th century. In 1688, the UK Bill of Rights reiterated the right of citizens to petition parliament, stating, '... it is the right of the subjects to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal.'⁸ Australian citizens inherited the right to petition parliament from English law, which forms the foundation of the Australian legal system.

There are various mechanisms for addressing personal grievances and holding elected representatives to account, including ombudsmen, commissions, tribunals and courts. The media also facilitates government accountability by defending the public interest more generally. People can also make representations to Members of Parliament or give evidence to a committee, however, a petition remains the only means by which an individual or group can directly ask the parliament to take action. Furthermore, as structures of modern government become increasingly complex, petitions systems can help ordinary citizens navigate and engage with government and government agencies.⁹

While petitioners may intend to influence policy change, there are other positive outcomes that are considered important functions of the petitioning process. These include:

- increased awareness of an issue;
- publicity;
- galvanising support;
- creating a sense of solidarity within a community;
- empowering citizens;
- fulfilling a sense of civic duty;
- increasing government understanding of how policies affect people;
- providing a direct link between elected representatives and those they represent; and

⁵ European Parliament's Committee on Petitions (1997) *Report on the Deliberations of the Committee on Petitions for the Parliamentary Year 1996 – 1997*, Brussels, European Parliament, p. 2.

⁶ J. Teorell (2006) 'Political participation and three theories of democracy: A research inventory and agenda', *European Journal of Political Research*, 45(5), p. 789.

⁷ R. Lindner & U. Riehm (2011) 'Broadening participation through e-petitions? An empirical study of petitions to the German Parliament', *Policy & Internet*, 3(1), p. 3.

⁸ House of Commons Information Office, *Public Petitions Fact Sheet P7*, viewed 11 July 2016.

⁹ R. Hough (2012) 'Do legislative petitions systems enhance the relationship between parliament and citizen?' *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 18(3), p. 480.

- fostering a perception that government is responsive and accountable.¹⁰

Petitions also serve to keep Members of Parliament informed about issues of community concern and help to gauge the degree of this concern. This can facilitate the responsiveness of parliament to community concern which can, in turn, improve levels of trust in parliament.

2. Victoria's existing petitioning arrangements

The process for presenting a petition to parliament and the requirements in terms of form and content are detailed in the standing orders of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council.

A petition must be addressed to either the Legislative Assembly or the Legislative Council, but not both, and the issue it addresses must be within the jurisdiction of the House. It must be respectful and not offensive, and contain a brief paragraph giving the reasons for the petition and numbered signatures on each page. Signatories must be from Victoria, each person must include their name, signature and address, and all signatures must be original and handwritten. Petitions that do not meet these requirements are ruled out of order and are not presented to parliament.¹¹

The principal petitioner must obtain sponsorship for the petition by a Member of the Assembly or Council. The Clerk must certify that the petition conforms with the Standing Orders. The Clerk then presents the petition during formal business, announcing the name of the Member who lodged the petition, who the petitioners are, the subject matter of the petition and the number of signatures. The Clerk then sends a copy of the petition to the responsible minister for consideration.¹² Alternatively, a Member can read the terms of a petition to the House and a copy can then be forwarded to the responsible minister for consideration.¹³

The standing orders of both houses provide the opportunity for consideration of a petition as a Member may move that a petition be taken into consideration at a future date. In her review of petitioning in the Victorian Parliament, Karen Ellingford, Executive Officer of the Education and training Committee, found that 125 petitions presented to the Legislative Assembly in 2006 were ordered to be taken into consideration, however none were eventually considered.¹⁴ No petitions presented in the Legislative Council were ordered to be considered.¹⁵ Ministers are not required to respond to petitions and there is no process for informing principal petitioners or signatories in the event that they do. A report by the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee found in 2008:

... this lack of response potentially undermines public confidence in Parliament, especially as members of the public often invest a lot of time and energy collecting signatures and presenting petitions on issues the signatories may feel strongly about. The Committee finds that the lack of response to petitions is unsatisfactory, and undermines the important role of petitions and Parliament's accountability to the Victorian public.¹⁶

¹⁰ S. Wright (2015) 'Success' and online political participation: The case of Downing Street E-petitions', *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(6), p. 850.

¹¹ Legislative Assembly of Victoria (2004) Standing Orders, [Chapter 7: Petitions](#), Parliament of Victoria; Legislative Council of Victoria (2014) Standing Orders, [Chapter 10: Petitions](#), Parliament of Victoria.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ K. Ellingford (2008) 'The purpose, practice and effects of petitioning the Victorian Parliament', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 32(2), p. 101.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

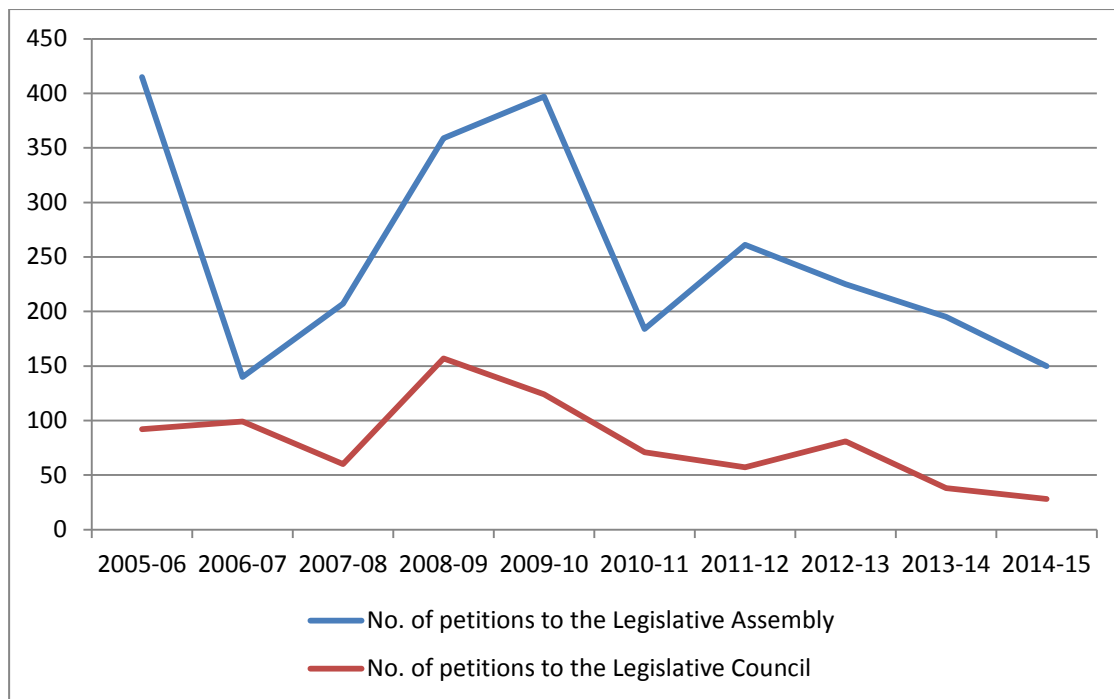
¹⁶ Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (2008) *op. cit.*, p. 65.

In observing that the parliaments of New South Wales, Tasmania and the Northern Territory require ministers to respond to public petitions, Ellingford concludes that:

‘the Victorian practice of simply referring a petition to the responsible minister is a simple, tokenistic gesture that really does not provide the petitioner with a satisfactory outcome.’¹⁷

Figure 1 below shows a decline in the number of petitions presented to both houses of the Victorian Parliament in recent years. This suggests that there is an opportunity to improve the petitions process in Victoria and thereby strengthen the connection between people and parliament through greater community involvement in the political process.

Figure 1: Number of petitions tabled in the Parliament of Victoria, 2005-6 to 2014-15



Source: Compiled from Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council Annual Reports, 2005-06 to 2014-15

3. E-petitions

E-petitions have been introduced in Queensland, Tasmania, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Portugal, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Finland, Ukraine, Romania, Latvia, South Korea and the European Union, as well as in Norwegian municipalities.¹⁸

E-petitions are a more transparent and responsive method of petitioning that makes it easier for representative institutions to connect with the public, which is increasingly important in the context of declining levels of political engagement.¹⁹ The incorporation of information communication

¹⁷ Ellingford (2008) op. cit., p. 103.

¹⁸ K. Böhle & U. Riehm (2013) ‘E-petition systems and political participation: About institutional challenges and democratic opportunities’, *First Monday*, 18(7), p. 7.

¹⁹ Dr Paul Williams in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, (2009) *Electronic Petitioning to the House of Representatives*, Canberra, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, pp. 8–9.

technologies makes the petitioning process more accessible, convenient and efficient. This is particularly beneficial for groups who are less likely to participate in the democratic process, such as young people, people with a disability and people living in regional and remote communities.²⁰ A journal article examining petitioning in the Victorian Parliament noted that parliaments that fail to adapt to modern forms of communication and service delivery risk being perceived as increasingly irrelevant and/or inaccessible institutions.²¹

E-petitions systems typically enable users to submit petitions, to share information about petitions on social networks, sign existing petitions and receive governmental responses to petitions.²² As with paper petitions, e-petitions must meet procedural requirements to be eligible for receiving signatures. In many jurisdictions, a specified threshold of signatures must be met to trigger an official response.²³

E-petitions are sometimes part of a broader e-democracy agenda. E-democracy refers to a wider use of information and communication technologies in the business of government, where the focus is on increasing citizen participation in the public decision-making process.²⁴ As a recent Demos report stated, 'new digital technology creates new opportunities to make politics and governance more democratic, transparent, accountable, inclusive and accessible.'²⁵

E-petitions are also used outside of parliament by community groups and advocacy bodies on a wide range of issues, broadening the scope of and participation in petitioning. Citizen generated e-petitions have proven successful in eliciting widespread support for causes of community concern. In 2015, over 172,000 people added their signatures to a Change.org petition, an online petitioning platform that allows users to generate and distribute e-petitions, calling for the melanoma drug Keytruda to be placed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.²⁶ The petition was started by Melbourne man Shane Raisher who could not afford the \$10,500 for a three-week dose of Keytruda.²⁷ In June of 2015, Keytruda was listed on the PBS.²⁸ That same year, 3.4 million Australians signed or started an e-petition on Change.org.²⁹ Community advocacy group GetUp! also engages in online petitioning on a range of issues, such as human rights, environmental sustainability and tax reform, amongst others. These e-petitions elicit strong levels of engagement as they enable users to share links to them to their networks through social media, including Facebook, Twitter, email, Google+, instant messaging and Skype.

²⁰ New South Wales Legislative Council Procedure Committee (2011) [Report Relating to Private Members' Business, the Sitting Pattern, Question Time and Petitions](#), Sydney, New South Wales Parliament, p. 20.

²¹ Ellingford (2008) op. cit., p. 103.

²² J. Shkabatur, et al (2013) *E-petitions: Giving Voice to Citizens*, Global Integrity, Independent Information on Governance & Corruption, World Bank Institute

²³ In the UK, the Government responds to petitions with 10,000 signatures and those with 100,000 are considered for debate by Parliament; petitions that receive 100,000 signatures in the United States within 30 days receive a response from the White House.

²⁴ F. Hogarth (2014) *Engaging Communities Online – A Queensland Perspective*, Brisbane, Department of Communities, Queensland Government.

²⁵ J. Bartlett & H. Grabbe (2015) '*E-democracy in the EU: the opportunities for digital politics to re-engage voters and the risks of disappointment*', London, Demos, December 2015, p. 41.

²⁶ J. Stark (2016) '[People power: 10 online petitions that changed Australia in 2015](#)', *The Age* online, 3 January .

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

Types of e-petition models

There are several ways in which e-petitions are currently being presented to parliaments in Australia and internationally:

- The minimal model involves presenting a printout of a petition hosted by a public website, such as those hosted by government departments and community groups, including GetUp! or Change.org. The Australian Senate accepts e-petitions, however, very few have been presented to date.³⁰
- The basic online model involves a principal petitioner downloading and completing an e-petition request form from the parliamentary website, then submitting the form manually.
- The advanced online model includes form functionality, meaning users can input petition details directly into the form fields and submit online.

As the table below indicates, there are various elements of an e-petition model. This includes whether an e-petition system operates on parliament's website or on an independent platform, whether there is online form functionality, whether decisions and responses to petitions are published online and whether there is a committee to oversee the process.

Table 1: E-petitions models worldwide

Country	Separate e-petition website	Submission by online form	Petitions/decisions on the website	Parliamentary petitions committee
Austria	✓	–	✓	✓
Canada	✓	✓	✓	–
European Parliament	✓	✓	✓	✓
Germany	✓	✓	✓	✓
Italy	✓	✓	–	–
Ireland	✓	✓	–	–
Lithuania	✓	–	✓	✓
Luxembourg	✓	✓	✓	✓
Netherlands	✓	✓	–	–
Portugal	✓	✓	✓	✓
Australia - Queensland	–	–	✓	–
Romania	–	✓	✓	✓
Scotland	✓	✓	✓	✓
South Korea	✓	✓	✓	–
Australia - Tasmania	–	–	✓	–
Ukraine	–	✓	✓	–
United States of America	✓	✓	✓	–
Wales	✓	✓	–	✓

Compiled by the Victorian Parliamentary Library & Information Service

The following analysis is an overview of the models of e-petitions model used in Queensland, Scotland, the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States, including the procedural arrangements and security measures adopted, as well as outcomes achieved. It is important to note that each jurisdiction has retained the paper petitions process alongside e-petitions.

³⁰ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, (2009) op. cit., p. 7.

3.1 Queensland

Queensland's e-democracy agenda was designed in response to decreasing levels of public trust and confidence in government and politicians, increased expectations of government accountability and transparency, and increased expectations that citizens should be involved in deliberations that affect their lives.³¹ Other initiatives include internet broadcasting of parliament and online community consultation via the *Get involved* community engagement website.³²

The Queensland Parliament uses the basic online e-petition model it developed in 2002. E-petitions are published on a website under the direct control of the Queensland Parliament. Through the website, users can initiate a petition, join a petition and find out the status of a petition. This model was adopted by both houses of the Tasmanian Parliament in 2004.

Procedural arrangements

A principal petitioner must go to the Queensland Parliament website to download, print and manually complete an e-petition request form to initiate a petition. The form requires the following information:

- whether the principal petitioner intends to have a Member of Parliament or the Clerk of Parliament sponsor the petition;
- the principal petitioner's name and address;
- the eligibility of the principal petitioner (citizen, resident or elector);
- the proposed details of the petition in 250 words or less; and
- the closing date of the petition.

The completed form is then forwarded to the Member's or the Clerk's office. The Clerk checks that the petition conforms to Standing and Sessional Orders and, petitions that conform are published on the Queensland Parliament website.³³ Both current and archived e-petitions are published. The Clerk will advise the sponsoring Member when a petition does not conform to the Standing and Sessional Orders. This ensures that signatures are not collected on a petition that may be determined to be out of order by the Clerk. Paper petitions, conversely, are submitted for assessment by the Clerk after signatures have been collected, which means a petitioner may go to the effort of obtaining signatures only for the petition to be determined to be out of order.

According to the Standing Rules and Orders, electronic petitions may be posted to receive signatures between a minimum of a week and a maximum of six months from the date of publication on Queensland Parliament's website. Since October 2009, ministers have been required to respond to a petition within 30 days of tabling according to standing orders.³⁴ Responses are published online. Users can choose to be notified when a response is published. They will receive an email notification generated by the Parliamentary Service with a link to the response and are also informed that their personal details will be deleted.

If no response is published within six months of the e-petition being tabled, signatories receive an email notification informing them of this and advising that they visit the e-petition website at a later

³¹ Hogarth (2014) op. cit., p. 2.

³² [Get involved](#) Queensland Government website, accessed 27 July 2016.

³³ [Current e-petitions](#), Queensland Parliament website, accessed 27 July 2016.

³⁴ Legislative Assembly of Queensland (2011) *Standing Rules and Orders of the Legislative Assembly*, Parliament of Queensland, p. 28, section 125(3).

date to check for a response. They are also informed that their details will be deleted in accordance with the data retention policy.³⁵

Table 2: Current Queensland e-petitions

No.	Summary	Number of Signatures	Closing Date
2608-16	Greyhound Racing	81	31/08/2016
2607-16	No consumer protection rights exist for buyers who buy structurally defective residential property in Queensland	53	
2606-16	Flashing school zone lights at Russel Island State School	30	04/11/2016
2600-16	Advancing Eastern Standard Time by 30 minutes	87	29/11/2016
2597-16	Pedestrian crossing – Birkdale Road and Main Road, Wellington Point	54	04/08/2016
2596-16	Corella Range Complex for Gympie	248	31/08/2016
2594-16	Category D for Sporting Shooters	1585	20/11/2016
2593-16	Thorough community consultation regarding proposed light rail route through Palm Beach	250	31/08/2016
2592-16	Action on Caloundra Road traffic congestion	227	31/10/2016
2591-16	End the ‘Gay Panic’ defence	353	31/08/2016
2587-16	Sound proofing all rail corridor from Coomera to Helensvale	22	15/08/2016
2581-16	Age-appropriate education for happy, healthy children and teachers	5275	05/08/2016
2580-16	Public transport for the Woodlands and vale Estates	202	15/08/2016
2569-16	Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill	2812	16/08/2016
2567-16	Audio in the public galleries of all open Queensland court proceedings	41	31/07/2016

Source: Queensland Parliament (2011) ‘Current e-petitions’, Queensland Parliament website (accessed 21 July 2016)

Security and data retention

People joining an e-petition are required to enter a machine-generated verification number, displayed as a non-machine-readable image known as CAPTCHA. This protects the petition from being targeted by robot software or ‘bots’, which are applications that run automated tasks that are often used to send spam or to probe websites for security vulnerabilities.

Figure 2: A non-machine readable image CAPTCHA



Source: The Official CAPTCHA Site (accessed 27 July 2016)

The website also performs internet protocol (IP) address checking to guard against machine-generated, duplicate and fraudulent signatures.³⁶ The system also prevents people from adding

³⁵ S. Finnimore (2008) ‘E-Petitions – the Queensland experience’, presentation to the Australia and New Zealand Association of Clerks-at-the-Table Seminar, Hobart, January, p. 5.
³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 6.

multiple signatures through an automatic submission program that generates a unique ID for each e-petition submission. The ID is displayed prior to the sign-on petition submission screen and must be included in the submission form. The generating program monitors the IDs issued and each ID may only be used once.³⁷

Outcomes

An evaluation of the 12-month trial of the Queensland e-petitioning system from 2001-2002 found a high level of support within the community and amongst Members for the system. Although Ministerial responses did not become compulsory until 2009, the Queensland Parliament reported that the number of such responses increased significantly with the introduction of e-petitioning.³⁸

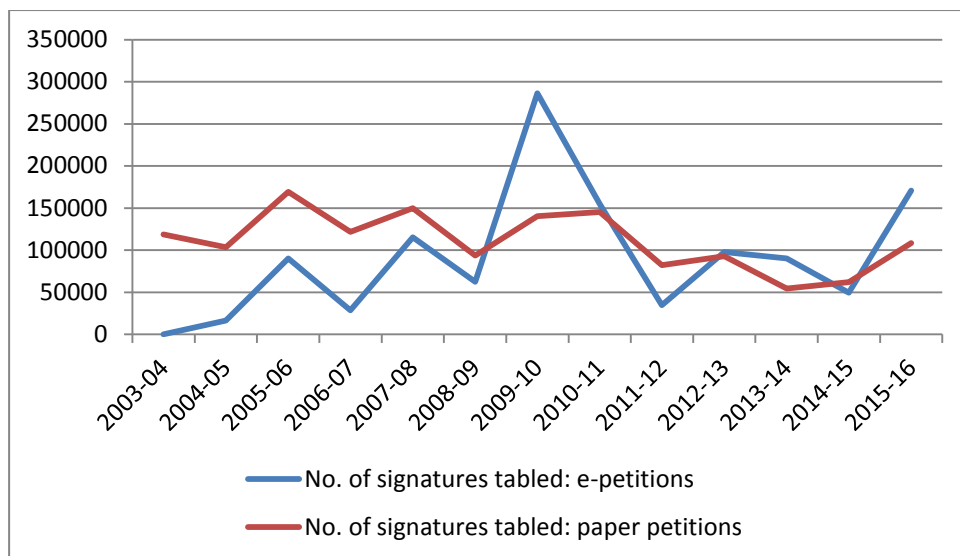
A survey taken between April 2003 and May 2005 showed that respondents generally found the e-petitioning process to be simple and 97 per cent agreed that e-petitions offer an additional opportunity for input into government decision-making.³⁹ Seventy-two per cent of respondents said that they returned to the e-petitions website to view the ministerial response.⁴⁰

Reasons cited by respondents as to why they joined an e-petition included:

- convenience (43 per cent)
- the ability to view a Ministerial response to an e-petition (24 per cent)
- having the time to consider the petition compared to the immediacy of requests to sign paper petitions (24 per cent).⁴¹

The following graph illustrates the number of signatures included on e-petitions and paper petitions. The fact that paper petitions continue to receive a significant number of signatures indicates merit in maintaining paper petitions process alongside e-petitions.

Figure 3: Number of petitions presented to Queensland’s Legislative Assembly



Source: Queensland Parliament⁴²

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ G. Griffith (2010) *Petitioning Parliament*, e-brief 14/2010, NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service, p. 6.

³⁹ S. Finimore (2008) *op. cit.*, p. 12.

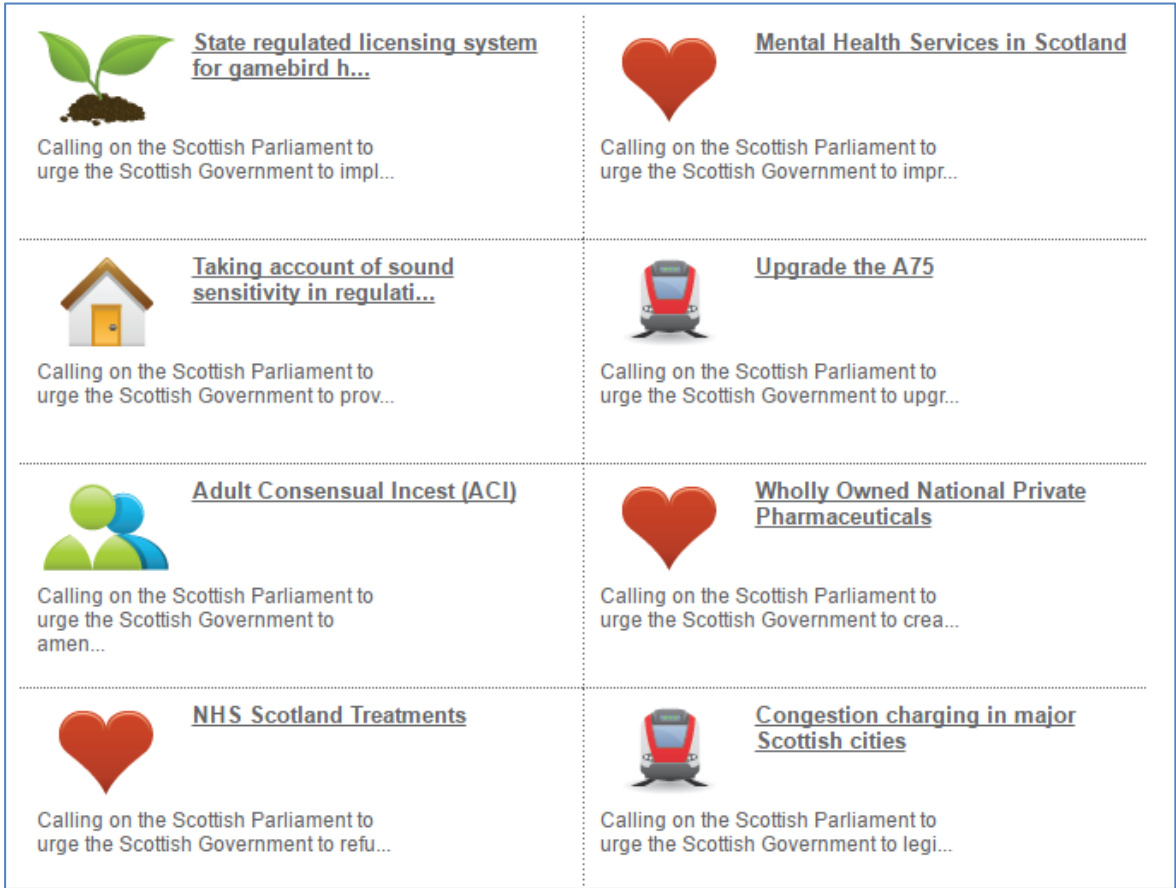
⁴⁰ S. A. Palmieri (2008) ‘Petition Effectiveness: Improving Citizens’ Direct Access to Parliament’, *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 23(1), p. 134.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 13.

3.2 Scotland

The Scottish Parliament was the first jurisdiction to introduce e-petitions.⁴³ The Scottish Parliament advanced e-petition model is one of several e-democracy initiatives aimed at fostering community engagement with the Parliament. As with Queensland’s e-petition system, users can find out the status of a petition, join a petition and initiate a petition on the Scottish e-petition website. Details include the closing date and the names of signatories, as well as background information provided by the principal petitioner and previous action taken to resolve the issue.

Figure 4: Current e-petitions at the Scottish Parliament



Source: Scottish Parliament ‘Latest Petitions’ website (accessed 27 July 2016)

Procedural arrangements

All petitions are overseen by the Public Petitions Committee, which consist of seven Members of the Scottish Parliament.⁴⁴ A principal petitioner is required to complete an online form explaining what action they want the parliament to take, what previous action has been taken to address the issue and provide any relevant background information. As an advanced online e-petition model, the user inputs the information directly into form fields on the platform, rather than printing out and manually submitting a form. The Public Petitions Committee determines whether a petition is

⁴² S. Musch, email, 14 July 2016.

⁴³ R. Linder & U. Riehm (2009) ‘Electronic Petitions and Institutional Modernization’, *eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government*, 1(1), p. 1.

⁴⁴ [Public Petitions Committee](#), Scottish Parliament website, accessed 27 July 2016.

admissible and then seeks responses from government agencies and peak bodies. The principal petitioner is invited to comment on any responses.

If a more detailed investigation is considered necessary, the Public Petitions Committee can refer a petition to the relevant subject committee. Otherwise, the Public Petitions Committee reports to parliament on action taken and, where appropriate, makes recommendations. Signatories receive email updates on the progress of petitions, including any submissions and ministerial responses that are provided. This information is also published on the e-petition website. Although the Government is not formally required to respond to a petition, it typically does so when asked by a committee, especially as the Public Petitions Committee has exercised its right to call ministers before it where it has been dissatisfied with a government response to a petition.⁴⁵

The Scottish e-petition system also has discussion forums beneath petitions, enabling people to leave comments and engage in a dialogue on a specific issue, providing a greater level of interactivity than other models examined. There are also live broadcasts and transcripts of committee meetings in which petitions are assessed,⁴⁶ as well as a newsletter and a 'watching brief' on the operation of the petitions process.⁴⁷

Security

Parliamentary staff monitor the e-petition website and the discussion forums to ensure that processes are not being abused. The e-petition system also performs routine checking for duplication of signatures and what are called 'rogue signatures', such as 'Mickey Mouse'. The Committee has accepted that this process is not foolproof, however, it also points out that the same concerns apply to paper petitions and it has stated that there has been little abuse of the system.⁴⁸

Outcomes

The e-petition website receives roughly 1 million hits per month.⁴⁹ A survey of e-petition users found that 82 per cent of respondents thought the system was easy to understand.⁵⁰ Roughly two-thirds of petitions in Scotland are now e-petitions.⁵¹ An analysis of e-petitions in 2011 found that 12.7 per cent were closed as a result of the issues raised being implemented, suggesting that although policy change is not probable, it is nonetheless possible.⁵²

The Public Petitions Committee held an inquiry into cancer drug treatments in 2010 in response to a petition calling on the Scottish Parliament to set up a drugs fund to pay for new and expensive cancer treatment. This resulted in the Better Cancer Care Report and the introduction of significant changes to the funding of cancer treatment.⁵³ The Public Petitions Committee stated:

⁴⁵ Hough (2012) op. cit., p. 491.

⁴⁶ Scottish Parliament (2012) [How to submit a public petition](#), Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

⁴⁷ Public Petitions Committee (2016) [Public Petitions Newsletter](#), Scottish Parliament.

⁴⁸ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions (2009) op. cit., p. 45

⁴⁹ Public Petitions Committee (2009) Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions, *ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵⁰ C. J. Carman (2008) [The Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions System 1999 – 2006](#), Glasgow, Scottish Parliament Information Centre for the Public Petitions Committee.

⁵¹ K. Sampford (2009) ['A Petitions Committee for Queensland – An Idea Whose Time has Come?'](#), Brisbane, Paper submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the Australia and New Zealand Association of Clerks-at-the-Table Parliamentary Law, Practice and Procedure Course, Queensland University of Technology, p. 21.

⁵² S. Wright (2015) 'E-petitions,' in S Coleman & D Freelon (eds) [Handbook of Digital Politics](#), Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar, p. 142.

⁵³ Health and Social Care (2010) [Better Cancer Care Progress Report 2010](#), Glasgow, NHS Health Scotland, p. 2.

Without the petitioner and the energy of both individuals directly involved, we would not be seeing the real improvements that I am sure the petition will effect throughout Scotland in respect of patients accessing newly licensed medicines...we should reflect on the fact that all of those real improvements throughout Scotland have been effected through the simple process of lodging a petition.⁵⁴

To promote public engagement and transparency, the Public Petitions Committee publishes a legacy paper, reviewing the petitions process and recommending that petitions that have not been closed be considered by the next parliament. It also publishes an annual report, which details all petitions lodged or considered by the Committee and the public hearings, workshops and Chamber debates it conducted.⁵⁵

An independent analysis of the Scottish e-petition system in 2011 concluded:

It has facilitated public debate with the Parliament, and given a new outlet for citizens and groups to voice their grievances and concerns. Increasing public participation in the democratic process was one of the goals of the new Scottish Parliament and the development and use of its e-petitioning system has fulfilled this function.⁵⁶

3.3 United Kingdom

The United Kingdom House of Commons has had several variations of e-petitioning. The first system operated on the No. 10 Downing Street website and ran from 2006 – 2011, during which time it received more than 12 million signatures.⁵⁷ The subsequent platform was developed for the DirectGov portal,⁵⁸ rather than the No. 10 Downing Street website, and was operated by the Office of the Leader of the House.

This was replaced in 2015 by the existing model which is jointly owned by the Government and the House of Commons through a Petitions Committee, which has similar functions to Scotland's Public Petitions Committee.⁵⁹ The Petitions Committee has discretion to correspond with petitioners, to call on petitioners to give oral evidence, to refer a petition to a select committee, to seek further information from the Government and to put forward petitions for debate.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee (2011) [Public Petitions Committee Official Report 8 March 2011](#), Scottish Parliament, Col 3554.

⁵⁵ [Committee Reports](#), Scottish Parliament website, accessed 27 July 2016.

⁵⁶ R. D. Cotton (2011) '[Political participation and e-petitioning: an analysis of the policy-making impact of the Scottish Parliament's e-petition system](#),' *HIM 1990-2015*, Paper 1215, Orlando, University of Central Florida, p. 48.

⁵⁷ T. Yasseri et al. (2013) '[Modelling the rise in Internet-based petitions](#)', University of Oxford, Oxford Internet Institute, p. 2.

⁵⁸ [UK Government](#), UK Government website, accessed 27 July 2016.

⁵⁹ R. Kelly & S. Priddy (2015) [e-Petitions](#), Briefing Paper No. 06450, House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, p. 33.

⁶⁰ House of Commons Procedure Committee (2014) [E-petitions: a collaborative system](#), House of Commons, UK Parliament.

Figure 5: Current UK petitions

<p>3,472 petitions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ EU referendum rules triggering a second EU referendum 4,139,662 signatures▪ Consider a vote of no confidence in Jeremy Hunt, Health Secretary 339,726 signatures▪ Stop spending a fixed 0.7 per cent slice of our national wealth on foreign aid 234,679 signatures▪ No more school penalty fines and bring back the 10-day authorised absence 201,556 signatures▪ Hold a general election in 2016 176,611 signatures▪ Hold a public inquiry and a referendum over turning all schools into academies 156,428 signatures

Source: [Petitions](#), UK Government and Parliament website (accessed 21 July 2016)

Procedural arrangements

A principal petitioner is required to complete the online form, detailing what action they want taken, any background information on the issue. As an advanced online model of e-petitions, users directly input this information into the form fields on the platform rather than printing out and manually submitting an application form. Upon confirming the petition, the user must confirm that they are a UK citizen and provide their name, email address and postcode.⁶¹

A principal petitioner is also required to provide the email addresses of four people who support the petition, who must then confirm that they support the petition. The Petitions Committee then assesses the petition to check that it conforms to requirements and, if it does, it will be opened for signature for six months. An email is sent to a principal petitioner whose petition does not meet requirements explaining how this decision has been reached. The Government is required to respond to petitions that receive 10,000 signatures and petitions that receive 100,000 signatures are considered for debate in parliament.⁶²

Security

The UK Government and Parliament e-petitions website⁶³ retains the name, email address and postcode of all users to ensure no duplications on petitions and to prevent against bots. Information is kept according to the Cabinet Office personal information charter, which prohibits selling of information, emailing users information unrelated to the petition they signed and publishing a user's details when they sign a petition.⁶⁴

Outcomes

During its operation, the Downing Street e-petitions platform received 33,000 petitions with 12.4 million signatures and Downing Street gave 3258 official replies.⁶⁵ The most popular e-petition on the Downing Street platform, calling on the Government to abandon a proposed system of road pricing

⁶¹ [How petitions work](#), UK Government and Parliament Petitions website, accessed 27 July 2016.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ [Petitions](#), UK Government and Parliament Petitions website, accessed 27 July 2016.

⁶⁴ [Privacy and cookies](#), UK Government and Parliament Petitions website, accessed 27 July 2016.

⁶⁵ Wright (2015) *op. cit.*, p. 846.

based on when people were using roads, received 1,811,424 signatures in 2007.⁶⁶ While it is difficult to discern what impact, if any, the e-petition played in the Government's decision to abandon the proposal, Prime Minister Tony Blair stated at the time, 'It's not possible, wise or healthy for politicians to try and sweep them [petitions] under the carpet.'⁶⁷

In the first year of the launch of the joint platform in 2015, 36,000 petitions were submitted.⁶⁸ Of these, however, only 15,600 were valid and subsequently opened for signatures.⁶⁹ This suggests that perhaps further investment in raising awareness about the function and requirements of an e-petition is necessary to improve the efficacy of the e-petition process in the UK.

The e-petition website received a total of 13 million unique visitors, 17 million site visits and 68 million pages were viewed.⁷⁰ Of those who visited the e-petition website, 38 per cent signed a petition with a total of 6,400,000 signatures.⁷¹ Ten petitions attained over 100,000 signatures. The Government responded to 258 petitions and 30 were debated in the House of Commons.⁷² A perhaps more telling statistic is that in 2012, the e-petitions receiving less than 1,000 signatures stood at 97.7 per cent.⁷³

3.4 Germany

An e-petition pilot project was introduced to Germany's Federal Parliament, the Bundestag, in 2005 and, after a successful evaluation, the platform was formally launched in 2008.⁷⁴ The Bundestag has an advanced online model of e-petitioning⁷⁵ that improved upon the accessibility and functionality from the initial pilot phase with more user-friendly and intuitive software.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, no information could be found relating to security for the e-petitions system.

Procedural arrangements

A principal petitioner is required to complete the online form detailing the issue they want addressed, their name and email address. As with the advanced online models of Scotland and the UK, principal petitioners in Germany enter their details into form fields on the platform rather than printing out and manually submitting an application form. The petition is assessed for compliance with requirements and, where successful, it is then published and opened for signatures for six weeks.⁷⁷ Once a petition closes, it is forwarded to the relevant Federal Ministry or authority for a response.

This response is then assessed by the Petitions Committee, made up of 26 members of the Bundestag,⁷⁸ which can either conclude that the response satisfies the claims of the petition or it

⁶⁶ S. Wright (2012) 'Assessing (e-) Democratic Innovations: "Democratic Goods" and Downing Street E-Petitions', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 9(4), p. 459.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Kelly & Priddy (2015) *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² [Petitions](#), UK Government and Parliament Petitions website accessed 27 July 2016.

⁷³ Kelly & Priddy (2015) *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁷⁴ J. Schmidt & K. Johnsen (2014) *On the Use of the E-Petition Platform of the German Bundestag*, Discussion Paper No. 2014-03, Berlin, HIIG Discussion Paper Series, p. 8.

⁷⁵ [Petitionen](#), German Bundestag website, accessed 27 July 2016.

⁷⁶ T. Saalfeld & R. Dobmeier (2012) 'The Bundestag and German Citizens: More Communication, Growing Distance', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 18(3), p. 15.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ [Members of the Petitions Committee](#), German Bundestag website, accessed 27 July 2016.

brings a recommendation for a resolution on how the petition should be dealt with before the plenary of the Bundestag. It is compulsory for the Petitions Committee to arrange a public hearing of representatives of the petitioners if a petition is signed by at least 50,000 people.⁷⁹ The Petitions Committee can access all documents, information and the premises of the Federal Government and administrative agencies as required, with the exception of issues of national security.⁸⁰ It can also call witnesses and experts,⁸¹ including members of the Government and complainants.⁸² Once the resolution has been adopted by the plenary, the petitioner is sent an official reply setting out the decision reached and the grounds on which it was taken.⁸³

The Petitions Committee submits a monthly report on the petitions dealt with to the Bundestag, together with recommendations for each. The Committee also publishes an annual report accounting for the number and type of complaints, as well as its responses.⁸⁴

Figure 6: Bundestag e-petition homepage

Mitzeichnungsfrist	Titel	Id-Nr.	Mitzeichnungen	Forum
noch 3 Tage bis Mon Jul 25 03:00:00 CEST 2016	→ Arbeitslosengeld II - Änderung des §§ 11 und 12 Zweites Buch Sozialgesetzbuch (Zu berücksichtigendes Einkommen/Vermögen)	65980	43	→ 10 Beiträge
noch 3 Tage bis Mon Jul 25 03:00:00 CEST 2016	→ Private Krankenversicherung - Verbindliche Einführung von Uni-Age-Tarifen in der PKV	66151	36	→ 59 Beiträge
noch 3 Tage bis Mon Jul 25 03:00:00 CEST 2016	→ Familienleistungsausgleich - Zahlung von Kindergeld/Sozialleistungen an nicht-deutsche EU-Bürger nur unter bestimmten Bedingungen	66266	98	→ 20 Beiträge
noch 3 Tage bis Mon Jul 25 03:00:00 CEST 2016	→ Familienfragen - Einführung bzw. Anerkennung des Berufs der Hausfrau/des Hausmannes	66344	49	→ 20 Beiträge
noch 4 Tage bis Tue Jul 26 03:00:00 CEST 2016	→ Reisevertragsrecht - Keine Zuschläge bei Flugreisen (außer gesetzlich vorgeschriebene Steuern/Abgaben)	65009	39	→ 3 Beiträge
noch 4 Tage bis Tue Jul 26 03:00:00 CEST 2016	→ Ladenzeitrecht - Keine Ladenöffnung an Sonn- und Feiertagen	65951	65	→ 32 Beiträge
noch 4 Tage bis Tue Jul 26 03:00:00 CEST 2016	→ Straßenverkehrs-Ordnung - Aufnahme eines Verkehrszeichens mit dem Hinweis auf einen Beschleunigungstreifen außerhalb von Autobahnen und Kraftfahrstraßen	66120	16	→ 4 Beiträge
noch 4 Tage bis Tue Jul 26	→ Telefondienst - Mitnahme von Festnetznummern nach § 46 Abs. 4 S. 1 TKG analog zur Regelung für	66240	45	→ 4 Beiträge

Source: [Petitionen](#), German Bundestag website (accessed 21 July 2016)

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Law on the Powers of the Petitions Committee of the Germany Bundestag, 19 July 1975, Section 1.

⁸¹ *ibid.* Section 4.

⁸² Saalfeld & Dobmeier (2012) *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁸³ The Petitions Committee (2007) *Serving the Citizen: A seismograph for Parliament*, Berlin, German Bundestag.

⁸⁴ Saalfeld & Dobmeier (2012) *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Outcomes

Between October 2008 and February 2013, the Bundestag's e-petition platform had over 1.32 million users and 3.48 million signatures had been received.⁸⁵ As other jurisdictions have found, paper petitions in Germany remain the most popular form of petitioning, with 66,079 petitions submitted during this time, compared to 2,654 e-petitions.⁸⁶ Since October 2008, a total of 11 petitions reached the quorum of 50,000 signatures. The most popular e-petition was against the *Access Impediment Act*, which received 133,445 signatures.⁸⁷ This Act, which aimed to restrict access to child pornography on the Internet, was criticised for enabling the creation of a framework that would allow police and government to censor websites without due process.⁸⁸

The German e-petition website has discussion forums⁸⁹ beneath each petition, similar to Scotland's system, so users can provide personal experiences and evidence on the issue. Participation in discussion forums is trending upward, with 16,000 postings in 2006 up to 58,000 postings in 2009.⁹⁰ An important outcome brought about by the introduction of e-petitions in Germany is greater transparency of the petitioning process. Prior to the introduction of e-petitions, once a petition was submitted to the Bundestag, no information was provided to the public about pending petitions.⁹¹ Only the principal petitioner received an acknowledgment of receipt and, after the petitions committee made a final decision, an official notification.⁹²

3.5 United States

The White House launched its e-petition platform, *We the People*,⁹³ in 2011, in the context of strong engagement by US citizens with independent online platforms such as *Change.org* and *Avaaz.org*.⁹⁴ As with the German model, no information relating to data security of the *We the People* platform could be identified.

Procedural arrangements

Principal petitioners are required to enter a title for the petition, provide a description of the goal of the petition and include additional information or research to support it.

Principal petitioners can choose tags to help categorise the petition to help others better understand what it relates to. Once the petition is published, the principal petitioner receives an automated email with a link that can be forwarded to others so they can sign the petition.

Petitions that receive 100,000 signatures in 30 days will be reviewed and put to the appropriate policy experts for an official response.⁹⁵

⁸⁵ Schmidt & Johnsen (2014) op. cit., p. 13.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸⁸ A. Jungherr (2015) *Analyzing Political Communication with Digital Trace Data*, Berlin, Springer, p. 170.

⁸⁹ [Petitions forum](#), German Bundestag website, accessed 27 July 2016.

⁹⁰ Lindner & Riehm (2011) op. cit., p. 10.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 8.

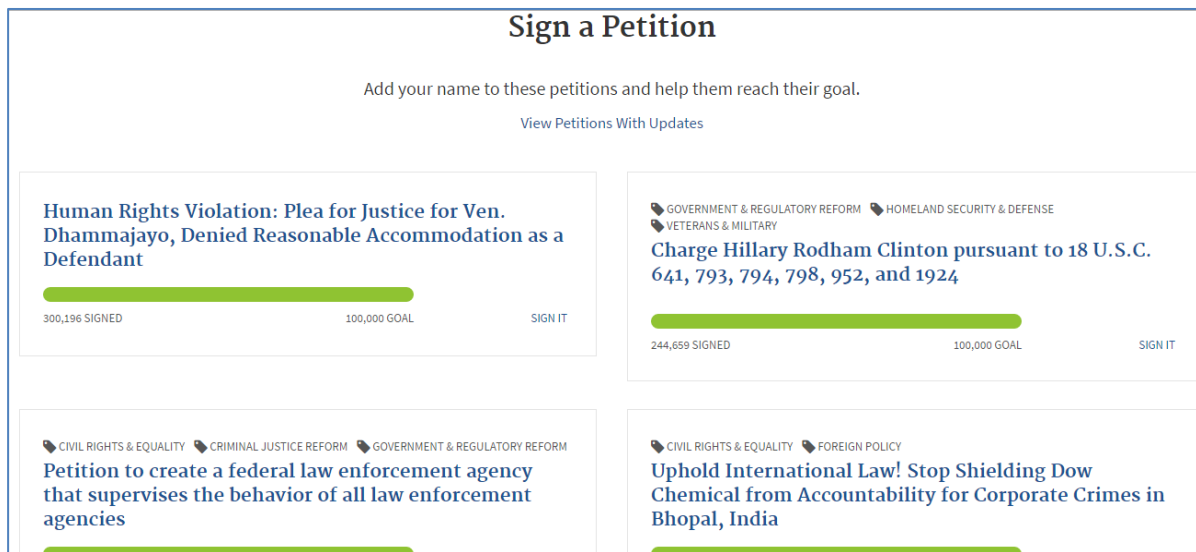
⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ [We the People](#), The White House website, accessed 27 July 2016.

⁹⁴ [Change.org](#) website; [Avaaz.org](#) website, both accessed 27 July 2016.

⁹⁵ [We the People](#)' op cit.

Figure 7: Current US e-petitions



Source: [We the People](#), The White House website (accessed 27 July 2016)

Outcomes

From its introduction in September 2011 through to January 2013, We the People grew from 2.8 million users to more than 10.2 million users.⁹⁶ During this period, a total of 141,310 petitions were submitted.⁹⁷ As of July 2015, We the People had received 411,546 petitions for a total of 27,771,912 signatures.⁹⁸

The threshold to trigger a response from the White House has increased on several occasions. At the time of its launch in September 2011, the threshold of signatures to receive a response was 5,000. By October, this was increased to 25,000. In 2013, the threshold was again raised, this time to 100,000 signatures.⁹⁹ While the White House framed the changing threshold of signatures as a good problem to have because the site's popularity surpassed expectations, critics suggested that the petition site has been commandeered by frivolous calls for action. One such example is the petition to deport TV host Piers Morgan, which received 109,334 signatures.¹⁰⁰

Nonetheless, We the People has also been successful in raising awareness of legitimate issues. A 2013 petition calling for the Government to make unlocking mobile phones legal received 114,000 signatures.¹⁰¹ The Obama Administration responded by supporting the petition, calling on the Federal Communications Commission, wireless carriers and Congress to make sure copyright law didn't stand in the way of consumer choice. In August 2014, President Obama signed a bill into law that made it legal for consumers to unlock their mobile phones.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ M. Compton (2013) 'We the People is Two Years Old', *The White House Blog*, 27 September.

⁹⁷ M. Drapeau (2013) 'Across the threshold: Evolution of the White House "We the People" open government platform', *Publicyte*, 21 January.

⁹⁸ We the People (2015) 'We the People, By the Numbers', *The White House Blog*, 28 July.

⁹⁹ M. Garber (2013) 'The White House petition site is a joke (and also the future of democracy)', *The Atlantic*, 16 January.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ E. Mechaber (2014) 'Here's How Cell Phone Unlocking Became Legal', *The White House Blog*, 15 August.

¹⁰² *ibid.*

A 2014 survey of We the People users found that 64 per cent thought it was helpful to hear the Administration’s response to their petition, 45 per cent said they learned something new and 79 per cent said they would use the service again.¹⁰³

3.6 Other jurisdictions

Canada has also recently introduced an advanced e-petition model,¹⁰⁴ which requires users to create a petitioner’s account, then write and submit a draft and receive the support of five Canadian citizens or residents, similar to the UK e-petition process. The petition must be sponsored by a Member of Parliament and is then reviewed by the Clerk of Petitions for conformity with petition requirements. If approved, the petition is published on the website for signatures to be added for 120 days. If there are at least 500 signatures, the petition is presented to the House of Commons and the Government must table a response.¹⁰⁵

Principal petitioners and people wanting to join a petition are required to create a user account and provide their name, email address, phone number, province and postal code and verify that they are a Canadian citizen or a resident of Canada. As with the advanced online models of Scotland, the UK and the US, Canada’s e-petition system has form functionality, which means users enter their details in the form fields online, rather than printing out and manually submitting an application form.

Figure 8: Current Canadian e-petitions

The screenshot shows the 'SIGN OR VIEW an e-petition' website. At the top, there is a search bar with the text 'SEARCH' and a placeholder 'SUBJECT / PETITION # / CONTENT'. Below the search bar are two tabs: 'Open for signature' (selected) and 'All petitions'. A message explains that e-petitions can be signed for 120 days and that this section shows both open and closed petitions. Below this, three petitions are listed:

- e-450 (Aerodromes)**: 287 signatures, 42ND PARLIAMENT. Keywords: Airports, Environmental protection, Land management, Moratorium, Municipal government, Provincial government, Public consultation. Sponsored by Ruth Ellen Brosseau. Open for signature until October 26, 2016.
- e-70 (Afghanistan)**: 727 signatures, 42ND PARLIAMENT. Keywords: Afghanistan, Canadian Forces mission in Afghanistan, Inquiries and public inquiries, Prisoners of war abuse. Sponsored by Kennedy Stewart. Government Response Tabled on June 16, 2016.
- e-106 (Anaphylaxis)**: 596 signatures, 42ND PARLIAMENT. Keywords: Airline passengers, Anaphylactic reaction, Transportation safety. Sponsored by Hedy Fry. Waiting for Certification.

On the right side, there is a 'Refine Your Search' sidebar with 135 results found. It includes options for XML and CSV, and a 'Clear all filters and criteria' link. The sidebar lists:

- RELATED KEYWORDS**: Environmental protection (9), Ban (5), Mental health (5), Pipeline transportation (5), Public Service and public servants (5), more.
- SPONSOR (MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT)**: Elizabeth May (11), Kennedy Stewart (11), Don Davies (7), James Bezan (4), Fin Donnelly (4), more.
- STATUS**: Open for Signatures (80), Certified (23), Presented to the House of Commons (14), Not Certified (11), Waiting for Certification (3), Government Response Tabled (3), Closed (1).

Source: E-petitions, Parliament of Canada website (accessed 24 July 2016)

¹⁰³ We the People (2015) ‘We the People, By the Numbers’, *The White House Blog*, 28 July.
¹⁰⁴ E-petitions, Parliament of Canada, accessed 27 July 2016.
¹⁰⁵ House of Commons (2015) *The Path of an E-Petition*, Parliament of Canada.

The Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly introduced e-petitions in 2013 using the same basic online model as the Queensland Parliament.¹⁰⁶ In June 2016, the Western Australian Procedure and Privileges Committee recommended that the Legislative Council adopt a temporary order for an e-petitions trial.¹⁰⁷ Brisbane City Council has an advanced online e-petition system in which users can input details into the form fields online rather than printing out and manually completing an application form.¹⁰⁸ No Victorian local councils have implemented e-petitioning.

Some parliaments have not introduced e-petitioning but have taken the step towards greater transparency by publishing paper petitions online. For example, the Northern Territory and New Zealand parliaments do not have e-petitioning, however, they do publish petitions on parliamentary websites, including the name of the principal petitioner and who it has been referred to for a response. Subsequent responses are also published online. Whilst this is a much more basic level of online presence than the e-petition models discussed, it does provide for greater transparency by enabling people to check the progress of a petition and access a response.

4. Critiques of e-petitions

There are varying views on the value of e-petitions and to what extent they achieve the goal of greater participation in the political process and a more responsive parliament. A key criticism of e-petitions is that they offer easy but shallow engagement with the political process and have been criticised as broadly ineffective ‘slacktivism’.¹⁰⁹ ‘Slacktivism’ refers to action performed on the internet in support of a political or social cause, but which requires little time or involvement.¹¹⁰

This is premised on the idea that a successful petition is one which effects policy change, however, as previously discussed, others argue there are many more reasons as to why a person may start or join a petition. As an evaluation of the Downing Street e-petitions concluded, ‘Scholars need to adopt more nuanced definitions of success, moving beyond the unduly blunt policy change-oriented definitions to capture the broader ways that people perceive benefit from political participation.’¹¹¹

Another criticism of e-petitions is that they can easily be appropriated for frivolous purposes. A petition on We the People calling on the US Government to secure funding for the construction of a Death Star, as depicted in the Star Wars films, received 30,000 signatures which was above the threshold required at the time for a White House response.¹¹² Whilst problematic in the sense that they overshadow the legitimate functions of an e-petitions system, commentators have expressed the view that these trivial uses do not eclipse the value that many derive from the petitioning process.¹¹³ In generating awareness for an issue, raising support for their cause and presenting an issue to elected representatives, petitioning continues to play an important part in empowering people at a time when engagement in political processes is in decline.

¹⁰⁶ [Petitions](#), ACT Legislative Assembly website, accessed 27 July 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Legislative Council Standing Committee on Procedure and Privileges (2016) *E-petitions*, Perth, Parliament of Western Australia, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ [Petitions](#), Brisbane City Council website, accessed 27 July 2016.

¹⁰⁹ E. Morozov (2009) ‘[The brave new world of slacktivism](#)’, *Foreign Policy*, 19 May; S. Shulman (2009) ‘The case against mass e-mails: Perverse incentives and low quality public participation in US federal rulemaking’, *Policy & Internet*, 1(1).

¹¹⁰ Oxford Dictionaries (date unknown) ‘[Slacktivism](#)’, Oxford Dictionaries website.

¹¹¹ Wright (2015) op. cit., pp. 845 – 846.

¹¹² K. Stewart et al. (2013) ‘[Electronic petitions: A proposal to enhance democratic participation](#)’, Ottawa, *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 9, p. 11.

¹¹³ Hough (2012) op. cit., p. 491; Wright (2015) op. cit., p. 846.

E-petitions have also been criticised for failing to broaden the participation of marginalised groups in the petitioning process as the typical users are the same as those for paper petitions, namely middle-aged men with an above average level of formal education.¹¹⁴ This issue has been countered by commentators who suggest that the fault lies not with e-petitions as such, but with oversight bodies that have failed to engage those who do not ordinarily participate in the political process. Several issues that have arisen in other jurisdictions, for example the number of invalid e-petitions in the UK and the proportion that receive fewer than 1,000 signatures, suggest that community education could bolster effective engagement with online petitioning.

5. Conclusion

There are important lessons that can be learned from the introduction of e-petition systems throughout the world and within Australia, as well as a range of factors that need to be considered in designing an e-petition system.

The minimal online model in which printouts of petitions published on independent platforms are accepted is undoubtedly the cheapest means of providing for an online element to petitioning. It is, however, quite limited in its effectiveness as a tool for improving transparency as it does not enable users to check the status of the petition, to sign online or to check for a response. The fact that there has been little uptake of this option where it has been introduced also raises questions as to its efficacy as a tool to meet the changing needs of the community. The basic online model, as deployed in Queensland and Tasmania, requires web development, however, this is minimal compared to the advanced online model, in which e-petitions are hosted on their own websites and include online form functionality. As an online model, this option is quite limited as users are required to print out a petition request form, complete it manually and then submit it. This may present an obstacle to users seeking to engage with e-petitioning. The advanced online model, as is used in Scotland, the UK, Germany, the US and Canada, provides the greatest level of accessibility and interactivity. This is particularly true of Scotland and Germany which also have discussion forums beneath each petition so users can provide anecdotal evidence. The role of a Petitions Committee, comprising Members of Parliament, in overseeing the petitioning process, for paper and e-petitions, is another element of an e-petitions system that should be considered.

In their analysis of e-petition systems and political participation, e-democracy experts Knud Böhle and Ulrich Riehm observed that the 'continuous communication between petitioner and petition body during the process might be the most important change at the procedural level facilitated by electronic communication media.'¹¹⁵ It is in this context that e-petitions present a unique opportunity for the Victorian Parliament to address shortcomings in Victoria's existing petitioning process, at the same time as fostering political participation and enhancing the public perception of parliament as a responsive and representative institution.

¹¹⁴ Böhle & Riehm (2013) op. cit.

¹¹⁵ Böhle & Riehm (2013) op. cit.

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