Ms Lucy Wicks MP
Chair Standing Committee on Petitions
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

19 November 2018

Dear Ms Wicks,

We are writing with a submission to the inquiry into the future of petitioning in the House.

Our research team involves senior academics from the Australian National University and University of Sydney. We are currently undertaking a major research project on online petitioning in Australia with a particular focus on Change.org.

In particular we would like to highlight:
- The increasing prevalence of online petitioning as a way for citizens to participate in politics;
- The relative lack of government support for online petitioning at the national level, compared with other countries like the United Kingdom and United States; and
- The consequently greater role for private companies like Change.org in the platform infrastructure enabling online petitioning.

You may be interested in a recent article we published in the Australian Journal of Political Science, 'Online petitioning and politics: the development of *Change.org* in Australia'. If you have any questions please feel free to contact us directly.

Yours sincerely

Professor Ariadne Vromen (Sydney University)
Professor Darren Halpin (ANU)
Michael Vaughan (Sydney University)

Submission

    1. Online petitioning as increasingly common

The starting point for any discussion about the future of petitioning must be the increasing prevalence of online petitions, with or without engagement by government. For example, the below diagram reproduced from Sheppard (2015) uses data from the Australian Election Study (up until 2013) to provide a longer-view historical view of the changing relative popularity of the two forms of petitioning.
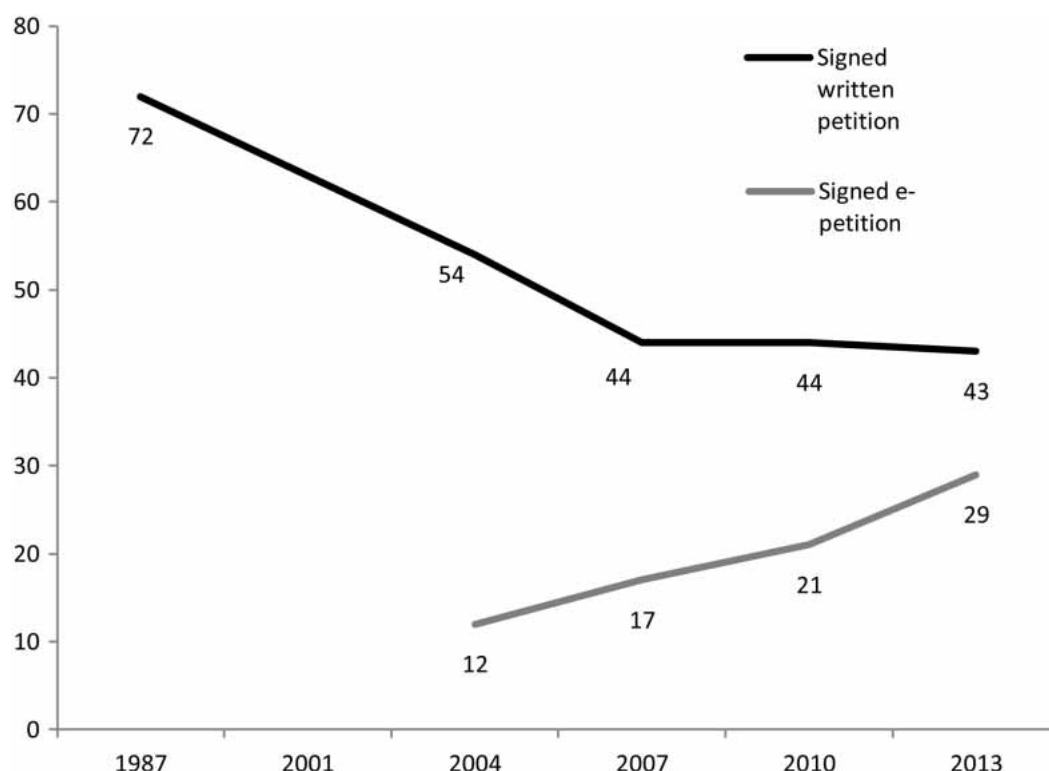
The trend has continued in more recent years, suggesting that online petitioning is increasingly common and should be regarded as just as important to paper petitions in facilitating political expression by Australian citizens. Additionally, there has been research to suggest that traditionally underrepresented groups may be more likely to use online petitions, such as women (Sheppard 2015; Mellon et al 2017) or people from low socio-economic backgrounds (Elliot and Earl 2016).

In our own research on Change.org in Australia we have studied the characteristics of users who create and sign petitions. In our data set of over 17 000 petitions we found that over three quarters (76%) of signers only signed one petition, contrary to the popular image in some strands of public debate about "keyboard warriors" signing hundreds of petitions. Although there are a small number of highly active users these are not representative of online petitioners in general. The story is similar for petition creating, where over 95% of all creators only launched a single petition. The average number of signatures for a Change.org petition is 2510, and although we have not conducted a similar analysis of the Australian Parliament House site we would expect that to be significantly higher on average than available governmental sites. We have also collected social media sharing data using CrowdTangle to determine the interaction between online petitioning and social media. This data shows that some online petitions are shared hundreds of thousands of times, suggesting a

significant interrelationship between the two platforms where social media integration can act as a multiplier on the participatory affordances of online petitioning itself. We suggest that social media platforms are an integral feature of contemporary online petition platforms, and any future governmental petition sites should maximise the potential for citizen sharing through their own networks in this way.

We have also examined the kind of policy issues which attract online petitions on Change.org and have found significant variation across a wide range of topics (see http://www.comparativeagendas.net/ for the topic categorisation we used). No single topic exceeds 10% of all petitions, however Law/Crime, Education, Health, and Transportation are the largest. The smallest topics are Macroeconomics, Defence and Foreign Trade, each comprising less than one per cent of petitions. The distribution of these topics suggests that those political issues which enter concretely into individual lived experience through service delivery (like health and education) are more amenable to online petitioning than more systemic and abstract policy areas like macroeconomics.

2. Lack of national governmental support for online petitioning

Online petitioning can occur on a range of platforms which have significant subsequent effects on democratic participation. In particular the academic literature distinguishes between government, non-governmental/not-for-profit, and commercial platforms (Wright 2015). Australia has lagged significantly behind other countries in terms of a national online petition site, e.g. 'Downing Street' petitions in the UK, 'We the People' in the UK or the petitions site of the German Bundestag.

We note that there are different levels of support for online petitioning at a state level among different Australian jurisdictions, however as we summarise below there is a specific demand for online petitioning around specifically national policy issues. Our research finds that of the 17000 petitions created on Change.org in Australia, 24% target the Australian federal government. This is greater than the 17% directed at respective state governments or the 11% at local government. It is clear then that citizens' demand for online petitions is highest at the national governmental level, which would ideally be reflected in the level of institutional support for this kind of engagement – particularly given the issues of scale which make digital platforms more feasible at a federal than state level.

Although there is the capacity for citizens to create "e-petitions" through the Australian Parliament House website it appears that the numbers of petitions being created and signed is low, particularly in the context of increasing general rates of online petitioning. Some differences between the current APH e-petitions site and other sites like Change.org which may be barriers to participation include:
- The lack of a dedicated separate petitions site. The current URL is https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Petitions/House_of_Representatives_Petitions/Petitions_General/Request_a_new_e-petition, whereas the equivalent sites in other jurisdictions usually read "www.petitions.aph.gov.au";
- The mandated 4 week timeframe for collecting signatures which does not apply to other online petition platforms;
- The requirement that online petitions are considered by the Petitions Committee before being listed on the website which may create a perceived increased barrier to

participation by the petition creator, and a delay between the issue being highly salient among the public and the online petition being available to sign.

3. The role of Change.org in online petitioning

The combination of the increasing prevalence of online petitioning along with the lack of national governmental infrastructure means that Australians currently overwhelmingly use commercial platforms like Change.org. As the Petitions Committee would be aware, the way that Change.org facilitates petitioning creates some challenges for the Australian Parliament in effectively responding. For example:

- Change.org petitions are often directed towards party leaders or ministerial portfolio-holders, rather than local members of parliament. The lack of physical addresses provided by Change.org petitions means that it is unlikely local representatives are even aware of their constituents' views, let alone able to respond or follow up;
- Change.org petitions do not require any formal response even when reaching high thresholds of signatures, as opposed to the general convention of government online petition sites. The requirement for a range of formal responses depending on the number of signatures (e.g. a letter or a parliamentary debate) is an important mechanism to ensure citizen participation is not met with unresponsiveness, which can lead to disengagement or alienation.

References

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Sheppard, J. (2015). Online petitions in Australia: Information, opportunity and gender. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 480-495. doi:10.1080/10361146.2015.1049512