

Inquiry into the e-petitioning system of the House of Representatives Petitions Committee
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Time Frame – Four Weeks is Not Enough

Four weeks is not enough to allow for proper public engagement with e-petitions. E-Petitions allow geographically sparse and time engaged communities to be politically active, yet people still need to have the opportunity to embrace the current e-petitions. It takes time to prepare and run a e-petition and adjustments need to be made during campaigns. Australians need a longer time frame to adequately have opportunity to voice their opinions. To extend the period available well beyond four weeks will be beneficial to campaigners and signees.

There needs to be more time available to e-petitions to make it fairer for those collecting e-petitions rather than paper petitions. At present there is an indefinite period has available when collecting signatures for a paper petition. One can collect signatures for a year or more (which some MPs have even done). Yet current e-petitions are for four weeks. This means that if one were to choose to collect signatures via an e-petition one would have added conveniences and advantages, but would be gravely disadvantaged in time compared if one were to collect in paper.

Having only four weeks disadvantages campaigners. Campaigners need time to properly prepare their petition campaign and opportunity to be responsive to any changes that may need to be made. It takes time to develop and purchase promotional material, to advertise, and to gain support from potential signees. Online advertising does not always work on time, nor promotional material printed quickly. Having only four weeks means that to maximise on the time available this needs to be done before the e-petition has even been approved, which could mean a great deal of expense on the part of the campaigners if they prepared for a e-petition and were not accepted in their application. It also means it is quite rushed and restricts who can campaign as well as means everything has to work perfectly, and those who are otherwise busy or inadequately provided for during that short four week period may not be successful in obtaining the adequate signatures. The cost and time all greatly disadvantages campaigners who are restricted to campaign in the four week provision for e-petitions.

Having only four weeks disadvantages potential signees. People who potentially may sign an e-petition may only be able to check the website once in the four week period, or even less. They may be forced to investigate the issue right at the moment, and make a decision at that point in time. One of the advantages of e-petitions is it provides the convenience of people visiting anytime. Yet by having a limited period of time that restricts how much is available to people to consider a particular issue. It also means they may not be able to go away and reflect upon it and come back and sign it again at a later stage. A longer time frame, more than four weeks, would allow people to research issues at their convenience and respond at a time comfortable to them.

It is possible for Parliament E-Petitions to allow for longer time frames and successfully operate. Queensland's, Tasmania's and Victoria's Parliaments all allow up to a maximum 6 months for a term of an e-petition. This is a more desirable period. Anyone e-petitioning the QLD, TAS, or VIC Parliaments could presently have more than six times duration to organise and collect signatures than a Federal e-petition. The Federal Parliament in learning from other constituencies should take this on as an example and consider using the same time frame within its own e-petition system.

Four weeks is not enough for the Australian House of Representatives E-Petitions system. It disadvantages campaigners who have to rush and potentially overspend to be successful for their campaign. It also restricts the capacity of potential signees to adequately research at their convenience and respond when they feel comfortable. The four weeks is gravely unfair as it is far less than the indefinite period, allowing people to collect for a year or more, with paper petitions. Yet there are successful e-petitions systems that use longer than 4 weeks that should be observed and considered when reforming the Federal House of Representatives E-Petitions system and its time frame.