Submission

Standing Committee on Petitions Inquiry into the E-Petitioning System of the House of Representatives

Petitions are a vital tool of a healthy democracy providing a direct link between government and the people. As Australia continues to grow digitally it is essential that petitions also adapt to remain an easily accessible tool to as much of the population as possible. Presently the E-Petitioning System of the House of Representatives, whilst a positive first step, is lacklustre both in technical and procedural standards.

Australia needs to look toward the United States of America and the United Kingdom as examples of effective, efficient and technologically advanced systems of digital petitioning.

Example 1, The United States Platform - *We the People*

The United States Government has the online petition platform 'We the People'. This form allows Citizens to create petitions to the executive government in a sleekly designed website. Each petition has a set runtime of 30 days in which a petition must gain 100,000 signatures to guarantee a response from the White House.

All petitions created receive their own dedicated webpage on the platform with a unique URL and built in share buttons for Twitter, Facebook and E-Mail make accessing and sharing a petition simple and accessible. Petitions are also assigned 'tags' so that petitions may be grouped and searched by area of interest allowing Citizens who have similar concerns to find already existing petitions thus unifying their voice with others.

https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/

Example 2, The United Kingdom Platform – *Petitions UK Government and Parliament*

The United Kingdom's approach is similar to that of the United States, however it does not have time limits on petitions. What is most interesting about the UK's approach to digital petitions is the inclusion of set goals for number of signatories.

10,000 signatures will see the petition responded to by the current government, 100,000 signatures, the petition will be allotted time for debate in the House of Commons. This provides clear goals for petitions and assists in providing a clear response to the issues considered of importance by large groups of the populous.

What is also unique about the UK's petition system is the ability to search petitions by postcode allowing Citizens to find petitions created by others in their local area again, creating a level of unity in the petition signing process similar to the U.S tagging system.

Key Elements for consideration

1. Ability to share and find petitions

    Digital petitions have excellent potential to connect concerned citizens no matter where they are geographically, however, a digital petition needs to be easily accessible and discoverable. This can be achieved by allocating petitions clear and easy to follow URLs such as aph.gov.au/petition/petition_for_more_funding

    Popular petitions should also be easily seen from the main E-Petitions webpage and petitions should be able to be sorted by location that they were created from and topic they address.

2. Commitment to response

    Australia should implement thresholds that, once reached, are met with some kind of response from the Government or House of Representatives.

    This could be, 5,000 signatories see the petition raised to the Government and a Government response. 10,000 signatories receive a period of time in which the petition is raised in the House of Representatives for debate. Whilst these numbers may seem low consideration must be made for rural areas and townships where larger numbers would create an undue bias on smaller populations.

3. Accessibility to platform

> It is paramount that the focus in designing a digital petition platform is the accessibility to create petitions. Petitions should be able to be created with minimal setup and as little 'sign up' steps as possible. A cumbersome system only limits those who are less skilled in computers to create petitions and have their voice heard.

In summary

Digital petitions are the future in engaging with the Parliament and Government, especially for groups in society such as the youth who are extremely accustomed to digital methods being available for most services.

It is essential that the system is easy to use, has as little steps or bureaucracy impeding its use and has thresholds that mandate response. This will allow petitions to remain a viable and active part of Australia's democracy and allow the people of Australia to have their voices heard.