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ARTICLE



Online petitioning and politics: the development of *Change.org* in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Online petitions are an important feature of contemporary political engagement in advanced democracies. In this paper we report on a unique data set – covering a five year period and over 17,000 petitions – documenting the development of the *Change.org* platform in Australia. Australia presents an interesting case as, until very recently, there was no national government hosted online petition site. Our analysis results in three findings that advance scholarship on online petitions. First, we find the majority of petitions are in fact targeted at government, and that their issue area is of a political nature. Second, we find that most signers of petitions sign a single petition – they are not serial participants. Finally, we show that ‘super users’ of the online petition system engage broadly as well as often. Together these findings demonstrate that online petition creation and signing – even on commercial platforms – is a distinct and important part of citizen engagement in politics.

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Online petitions; political participation; digital politics; advocacy

Introduction

The affordances and architecture of innovative digital platforms have many implications for politics, especially for political engagement beyond elections. Research has focussed on the emergence of new advocacy organisations, the role of social media (mainly Twitter and Facebook), and the advent of online activism (Bennett and Alexandra 2013; Bimber, Flanagan, and Stohl 2012; Karpf 2012; Vromen 2017). Others analyse the emergence of online participation by individuals alongside off-line, conventional participation (e.g. Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Theocharis and van Deth 2016; Vissers and Stolle 2014). This burgeoning literature on digital politics has also examined the distinct role and political contribution of online petitioning platforms (Earl and Kimport 2011; Karpf 2016; Margetts et al. 2015), which is the focus of this paper.

Signing or creating petitions is not a particularly novel form of political participation. Surveys of the forms and incidence of political participation have long asked respondents to indicate if they have signed petitions (predominantly paper-based in nature) (see discussion in Theocharis and van Deth 2016). Beyond voting, and alongside political

discussion with others, signing a petition is the action a majority of Australians are most likely to have undertaken (Evans and Stoker 2016). The 2016 Australian Election Study (Cameron and McAllister 2016) found that 44% of Australians signed an offline petition in the last five years, while 39% signed an online petition; Sheppard (2015) used the AES to demonstrate that over time there has been a decrease in offline signing and a concomitant increase in online signing. Petitions themselves have long been recognised as underpinning the ‘logic of numbers’ in social movement repertoires as a means to indicate the numerical strength and breadth of public support for claims made by movement organisations (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 171–173). The digital context is highly salient for the pursuit of petitioning because it allows campaigners and petition creators to reduce costs of gaining attention from the mass public, and overcomes spatial and logistical boundaries to petition signing. Yet existing research into petition signing by individuals does not ask whether the petition was political, what issue it was about, or who was the target. We therefore have an incomplete understanding of how online petitions platforms are being used by individuals to either start or sign-on to campaigns on issues that matter to them.

Digital technology has allowed this long-standing mode of political organisation and participation to take on novel dimensions. Online petition platforms have in common the functionality allowing petitioners – usually at no cost – to register, create and/or sign petitions on a range of political (and non-political) matters. Yet, petition platforms *do* differ significantly. We can usefully differentiate among (a) government, (b) not-for-profit and (c) commercial platforms. Some platforms are established by governments and legislatures with binding political agenda effects, and others to simply seek input on ideas that matter to governmental agendas (see Böhle and Riehm 2013). In this mode they might be considered as complementary components of the political system (Puschmann, Bastos, and Schmidt 2017, 2). Other petition sites are commercial in nature and seek sponsorship or crowdfunded donations from (some of) those creating and signing petitions. While a third form are run by not-for-profits (NFPs) or campaigning groups, who create and promote petitions on issues from a particular ideological or partisan perspective. As will become clear below, research has predominantly focussed on governmental platforms. In this paper we complement this work by extending existing analysis, via a study of the dominant commercial online petition platform in Australia: Change.org.

Scholarship on online petitioning platforms in Australia has been limited. However, Jill Sheppard (2015) used longitudinal data from the Australian Election Study and other social surveys to explain variations in the use and individual signing of petitioning more generally. Others have noted the absence of government sites at the national level in Australia via a focus on these platforms in the US and the UK contexts, and also commented on the strength of NFP use of online petitions in Australia, pioneered by digital campaigning organisations such as GetUp (Vromen and Coleman 2011; Wright 2015a). We contribute to and develop this important direction in Australian political science research through systematically documenting the growth and dynamics of the online petition site used by the largest number of Australians, *Change.org*. At the same time we set out to make an important contribution to the international scholarly analysis of online petition platforms. Here, the overwhelming empirical focus has been governmental petition sites (see Wright 2015b). The Australian context, where a national governmental

online petition platform was only established by the House of Representatives in mid 2016, is a distinct case. Our focus on a commercial site complements existing international analysis.

We analysed a unique dataset of online petitions created by citizens and organisations in Australia on the *Change.org* platform. We ask two core questions: What is the volume, topic, and target of petitions over time in Australia? What patterns of signing do we find from those who sign petitions on this platform? The paper is structured as follows: a brief introduction to existing research on online petitions, introduction to our case study and methods for accessing online petition data, and our results that are built on analysis of petition topics, signatories, and petition agenda setting role; and lastly a conclusion which positions our findings against existing literature that diminishes the contribution of online petitioning contemporary politics and citizen engagement.

Existing research on online petitions

There is a rapidly growing research community studying online petition platforms. The apparent popularity of online petitions with government, and the sheer scale and volume of petitioning activity, means they are hard for scholars interested in contemporary politics and political participation to ignore. Yet, it is also quite diverse in disciplinary focus and substantive research interest, as there are computer scientists, social scientists, and humanities focussed communications scholars working in the area. Consequently, it is important that we contrast how different questions and framings contribute to understanding this contemporary political phenomenon.

Classification of platforms

Not all online petition platforms are the same. Research has consistently differentiated between government, non-governmental/NFP, and commercial platforms (Wright 2015b). A great deal of attention has been paid to governmental sites such as the 'Downing Street' petitions in the UK (Wright 2012), 'We the People' site in the US (Dumas et al. 2015), and the petitions site of the Bundestag (Puschmann, Bastos, and Schmidt 2017). Another important distinction is between organisation-led online petitions (such as those pioneered by online campaigning organisations MoveOn, Avaaz and GetUp) and citizen-created petitions. Most existing data analysis has tended to concentrate on governmental sites where citizens can start petitions, while in this paper we focus on a commercial, for profit site¹ that is predominantly used by ordinary citizens to create online petition campaigns. Arguably platforms that are housed within a government domain will constrain petition agendas to only target the central level of government (e.g. the national government rather than state or local government in federal systems) and issue agendas under its purview. By focussing on a platform that is *not* government based it is possible to examine whether other actors are targets of petitions, and whether non-political issues start to crowd the issue agenda. Through focussing on a platform that allows citizens to follow their own agendas by *creating* petitions (rather than only allowing *signers* to join petitions as is the case for most NFPs who create petitions for their campaign work), we can also assess what kind of citizen agendas are most popular. That is,

Table 1. Summary of Social Science Research on online petitions.

Theme	Research questions	Exemplar research
Participation	Do online petitions increase the breadth of political participants or reinforce existing demographic biases? Do they increase the depth of political engagement or displace more substantial political acts?	Lindner and Riehm (2011); Schumann and Klein (2015); Vissers and Stolle (2014); Sheppard (2015); Theocharis and van Deth (2016)
Creators	How do petition-creators (individuals, organisations and platforms) strategically use online petitions, particularly with reference to the broader hybrid media system?	Karpf (2016); Chadwick and Dennis (2017); Wright (2015a)
Signers	What are the profiles of online petition signers in terms of: the number of petitions and issue areas; the network relationships with other users; social media use?	Puschmann, Bastos, and Schmidt (2017); Sheppard (2015); Dumas et al. (2015)
Success	How do we measure the success of online petitions (number of signatures vs policy influence vs self-reported efficacy)? What factors contribute to this success?	Margetts et al. (2015); Wright (2016); El Noshokaty, Deng, and Kwak (2016)

to see how this platform represents public opinion, via a logic of numbers, and gives insight into policy agenda salience.

The existing research on online petitions can be usefully organised into several focus areas: each with a primary research question(s). We present these in Table 1, alongside an indicative list of studies that represents the sub-area and are generally well cited. This categorisation is not intended to be exhaustive but indicative of where our research fits.

First, there is a growing body of research that places online petition signing into the repertoire of action used frequently by those who participate in politics. In older political participation research petitioning was positioned as an outsider activity akin to protest and other social movement repertoires of action (for example Norris 2002). More recent research normalises the signing of petitions as an individualised, symbolic participatory act facilitated by the digital context (e.g. Evans and Stoker 2016; Theocharis and van Deth 2016; Vissers and Stolle 2014). Others have distinguished between high and low threshold participatory acts where the risk (perceived or real) to participants is reduced. Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) suggest that donating money and boycotting are low threshold *internet-supported* actions, and signing an online petition is a similarly low threshold, but *internet-based*, tactic. Thus the use of low threshold tactics within campaigns has the potential to lower the risk and costs of active participation for citizens (see Schumann and Klein 2015).

It is worth acknowledging that some equate the act of signing an online petition with a form of ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ (see Shulman 2009). Halupka (2014, 116–117) acknowledged that ‘clicktivism’ is often used as a derogatory term to describe a group of online actions, such as signing online petitions, content sharing, and using social buttons (e.g. Facebook Likes or Twitter Retweets), and to construct them as problematic simplification of participatory processes. The ‘low threshold’ nature means that they are sometimes considered to be a less valuable or significant form of political participation than traditional modes of participation that require face-to-face interactions. However, Halupka (2014), interestingly, tries to positively reclaim the concept of clicktivism as political participation based on a heuristic with seven features relating to

individual acts, that are distinct from any organisational or online platform context. This normative debate is not one we can resolve here, but we also note that the act of *creating* and subsequently promoting and sharing a petition is arguably not a low-threshold act. And, as will become evident in our results below, there is significant evidence that most individuals are not clicking hundreds of petitions – in fact most are selectively signing a single petition on a topic that presumably resonates with them. We will also not use the term clicktivism to describe online petition engagement due to the continuing pejorative connotations; and do not want to confuse the analysis, as we are studying an online petition platform with the unit of analysis being petitions, and individual actions being mobilised within that context.

Second, another thread of recent research focuses on *petitioners*² as the unit of analysis (see Jungherr and Jürgens 2010; Puschmann, Bastos, and Schmidt 2017). Here scholars puzzle over what proportion of all signatures are accounted for by a small number of ‘super participants’ (Graham and Wright 2014). Do signers spread their attention across a range of topics, or focus narrowly on a single set of issues that concern them the most? And, from a normative perspective, evaluating what the role of frequent signing or large numbers of signers of petitions means for political participation and a vibrant democracy? A related theme for us, but underexplored in existing research, concerns understanding who *create* petitions – not only the act of signing petitions created by others.

Third, assessing the ‘*success*’ of online petitions has almost exclusively been undertaken with respect to government online petition platforms. This is often difficult given that the machinery of government has many moving parts, and that isolating the specific impact of one act – such as petition creation/signing – is problematic. Nevertheless, some have shown the impact of petitions through tracing whether core claims are accepted and/or action taken (see Cotton 2011 with respect to Scottish Government petitions, and Wright 2012 on UK petitions). Some research has emphasised the ‘*success*’ of petitions conceptualised as attaining a pre-prescribed goal or threshold. For example, Margetts and colleagues chart the prospects of petitions attaining the threshold of 10,000 signatures that would trigger it being presented to the UK Parliament’s petitions committee (Margetts et al. 2015). Another study looks at the daily signing rates of petitions, seeking to model how contagion effects drive (or not) the final number of petition signatures (Bottcher, Woolley-Meza, and Brockmann 2017). Similar work on *Change.org* explores the role of moral, cognitive and emotional factors in petition messaging for explaining petition ‘*success*’ – defined as reaching ‘*Victory*’ (El Noshokaty, Deng, and Kwak 2016). What draws these analyses together is the emphasis on endogenous, individual-level mechanisms that drive the uneven spread of signatures across petitions. While these analyses are methodologically innovative and interesting, it does risk ignoring the more ‘*democratic considerations*’ that underpin a basic commitment to a petition system at all (see discussion in Puschmann, Bastos, and Schmidt 2017, 5). Leaving to one side normative discussions as to whether online petitions *should* have any impact, or their role in policy making, existing research has tended to focus on their broad impact. Some investigate whether petitions do have any public policy impact (Shulman 2009); others demonstrate how petitions fit into the broader repertoire or strategies of campaigning and advocacy organisations (Karpf 2012).³

Classifying petition topics and targets

Existing research has tended to treat petitions' topic distribution or issue of concern or policy agenda, as a second-order concern. For the most part, studies have utilised the in-built topic-like coding that is applied by the platform itself. For example, in the case of their study of the German *Bundestag* petition scheme, where topic categories are pre-determined, this leads Jungherr and Jürgens (2010, 154) to remark 'While very precise, these topical categories do not map very successfully onto the shared interests of cosigners, and are therefore only partially useful for categorising petitions for the purposes of this paper'.⁴ Previous research on *Change.org* petitions has utilised the inbuilt set of topics that the platform provides, which has significant limitations. First, the vast majority of petitions are actually 'unspecified' by petition creators (El Noshokaty, Deng, and Kwak 2016, 1982), leading to a large volume of missing observations. Second, if we want to systematically compare the topics and agenda of online petitioners vis-à-vis other institutions, common topics need to be applied.

An alternative approach has been for scholars to generate bespoke code-schemes that fit to the data they have to hand. For instance, in his work on online petitions, Karpf (2016) inductively generated topic codes that match what he has collected across six months' worth of data on three different platforms in the USA. This is certainly defensible given the research question Karpf pursued, yet the weakness of such an approach is that it makes subsequent comparison more difficult, especially where there are no categories for emerging or established topics. Usefully Karpf (2016) also developed a more extensive list of targets in his comparison of a government, an NFP, and a commercial petition platform, and we have largely adopted his target list for our analysis.

Data and methods

Scope of case

We report on a dataset created by the authors covering all online petitions created through the *Change.org* platform in Australia. On its website *Change.org* claims to have over 236 million active signers in 196 countries, with approximately 24 successful petitions each day. It has quickly become the leading online petition site in Australia. As discussed above, we recognise that there are three broad types of online petition platforms, and that these are often quite different in scope, aims and content (Wright 2015b). Our decision to focus on *Change.org* reflects its reach and status globally, particularly in Australia. Moreover, the absence of a well-established national governmental site renders this choice logical for an understanding of the Australian case.⁵ At the same time, our decision also allows us to fill a significant gap in the international literature, which has disproportionately focussed on governmental platforms.

Change.org is a commercial for-profit company, established and based in the US. According to Karpf (2016), a key differentiating factor of for-profit platforms is that they originated from a funding model centred on 'sponsored petitions': campaign organisations pay *Change.org* for the details of signatories to online petitions that they 'sponsor', meaning the campaign group can build a list of future donors or supporters. However, individuals can freely register as a user with *Change.org* and create or sign petitions without a sponsorship payment. Karpf (2016) suggests that *Change.org* – as a commercial

entity – is incentivised to actively promote certain petitions that it thinks will expand its user-base, which in turn it can leverage to potential petition sponsors. Unlike governmental petition platforms where the aim is to attract sufficient signatures to trigger a formal response, *Change.org* petitions are deemed ‘successful’ (or a ‘Victory’ in their parlance) when the creator deems the substantive original aim or outcome to have been achieved. Also noteworthy is that the ‘Goals’ – the number of signatures a petition creator seeks to achieve – can be changed over the life of the petition.

Change.org launched in Australia in 2012 and has played an important role in mainstreaming online petitioning as a form of political participation for citizens, and a possible political advocacy strategy for organisations, in the Australian context. Existing research notes the distinctive nature of commercial for-profit platforms (Karpf 2016; Wright 2015b), yet there have been surprisingly few studies analysing *Change.org* petitions. In fact, beyond Karpf’s comparative platform analysis, we have found just three other published studies using data from this platform (El Noshokaty, Deng, and Kwak 2016; Huang et al. 2015; Mellon et al. 2017), the first two are by computer scientists, and all three have a primary focus on estimating petition ‘success’. For example, ‘success’ of petitions is defined as whether the creator judges that action sought has been achieved – listed by *Change.org* as ‘victory’ (El Noshokaty, Deng, and Kwak 2016); and 99% of all petitions never attain the status of ‘victory’ (see Huang et al. 2015, 211). Huang et al. (2015, 211) found that ‘To be successful, online petitions need signatures – our data shows that victorious petitions on *Change.org* receive, on average, 20 times more signatures than non-victorious petitions’. Our study is the first of *Change.org* to code extra variables to be able to systematically analyse the topics and targets used in petition campaigns.

Compiling our dataset

Using the free API from *Change.org* we extracted data of all petitions, creators and signatories in May 2017. We then parsed those petitions that appeared to originate in Australia. The *Change.org Australia* data set we report on here utilises datasets that take both petitions and petitioners as the unit of analysis. The former is structured as a petition per line of data, with variables covering date created, creator, target, signatories, status and so on. The latter is structured as a unique signer per line of data, with variables covering, number of petitions signed, and the number of topics covered by these petitions.

We added additional variables that were not already embedded in the data we extracted from *Change.org*. As reported in the Annex, we manually coded variables for the topic of the petition and its target. In terms of the range of topics, we used the Dowding, Hindmoor, and Martin (2014) Australian Policy Agenda codebook which details 19 different policymaking and political topics covering issues like health, education and the environment. The policy agendas coding framework is used broadly in political science (see <http://www.comparativeagendas.net/>), ensuring standardised coding of the policy content of bills through to policy topic of media coverage. We added two extra codes: first, for consumer petitions (these ranged from ethical-political consumerism petitions like boycotts to less political consumer preferences such as music fans asking a band to tour in Australia); and second, for non-political and non-consumer petitions. The policy agenda topic coding scheme is designed primarily to classify the topic content of legislation or government spending, and the speeches of political elites. As such, it does not anticipate content

that is non-political or which refers to market/consumer themes. Even in the context of Governmental or Parliamentary online petition platforms, this is also not a consideration, as the target and focus of petitions is on the behaviour of such institutions. However, in the case of *Change.org*, there is plenty of scope – and a journalistic expectation – that petitions focus on non-political themes. Drawing the line between what is political and what is non-political is not an easy matter – conceptually or empirically, as we discuss below.

The scale of petition creation

In this section we focus on petitions as the unit of analysis. Specifically, we explore the distribution of petitions by, targets, topics and political nature.

Growth of petitions

Our data set comprises just over 17,000 petitions spanning the period February 2012 until February 2017. As explained above, *Change.org* was launched in Australia during 2012, and we can see from [Figure 1](#) that the number of petitions created grew rapidly in 2015 and through 2016 (the diagram graphs these as 3 monthly aggregate totals). There is a slow drop off in the frequency of petitions created in the first half of 2017. This tailing off in 2017 may indicate *Change.org*'s funding model change, the growth of other rival

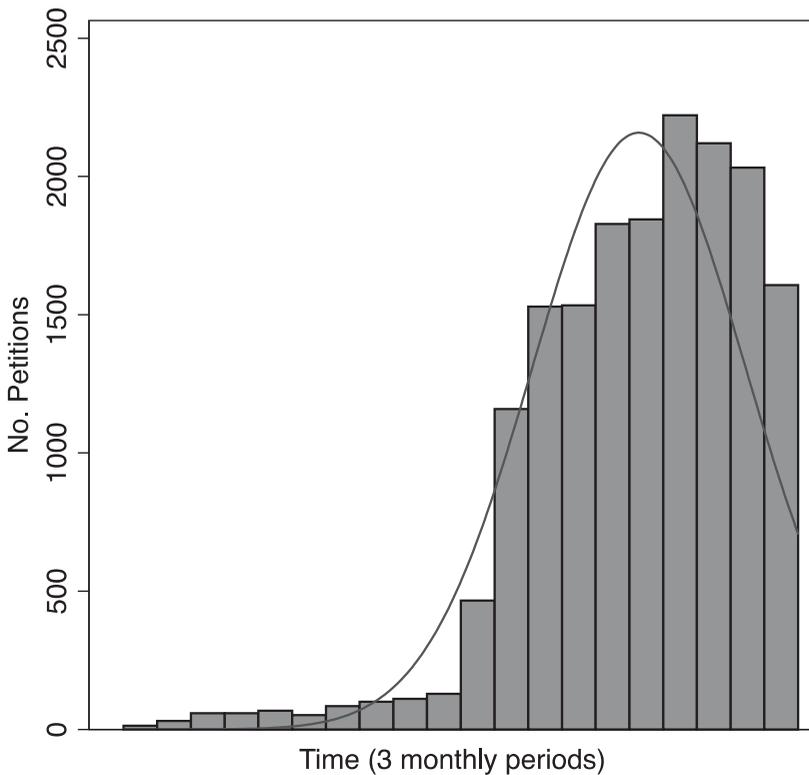


Figure 1. Distribution of Petitions over time, Australia 2012–17.

NFP platforms (e.g. the new platform Megaphone run by the trade union movement), or the introduction of the House of Representatives online petition portal, not to mention the decline in novelty of online petitions in Australia and their subsequent mainstreaming as a campaign tactic.

Approximately 5% of all petitions in our dataset are claimed as a Victory, and this increases to 10% of all Closed petitions (around half the dataset).⁶ In this article we are not primarily interested in evaluating petition ‘success’ solely with reference to a claimed Victory. Existing research on *Change.org* petitions – indeed on online petitions in general – has predominantly focussed on ‘success’, and as such has removed all petitions that are ‘Open’ from analysis as their outcome is not yet known. The norm is then to deploy two dependent variables – a dummy of ‘Victory’ (0, 1) and continuous measure (count of signatures) (El Noshokaty, Deng, and Kwak 2016; more generally see Margetts et al. 2015). While for governmental sites this makes sense, as there are clear thresholds which once achieved trigger a governmental or parliamentary response, this is not the case for commercial sites that have broader targets and more variation in potential outcomes. In the context of *Change.org* ‘Victory’ as self-reported by petition creators may not be an accurate reflection of actual outcomes.

The *Change.org* platform allows us to view the name of the creator of a petition. We examined whether petitions are created by individuals or by organisations.⁷ This is important as petitions created by organisations are likely to be part of a broader advocacy strategy, and thus may generate more attention. And, as has been speculated in the broader literature (Karpf 2012), petitions are used by advocacy organisations not simply to mobilise for policy change, but to ‘list build’. Just over 16% of all petitions were created by organisations. As we will discuss below, there is no clear relationship between who creates a petition and the topic area it pertains to, or the individual or institution in targets. Yet we do see that individuals tend to disproportionately create petitions that are consumer related or non-political. This underlines the need to broaden the scope of what we understand as the role of online petitions in political advocacy and participation.

What targets and policy topics do petitions address?

The dominance of studies of government-led online petition platforms is to some degree driven by the clear promise that they will serve as a complementary tool for policy prioritisation and change (Hough 2012). In the case of non-government platforms such as *Change.org* the case is less clear-cut. The coverage of petitions in the mass media often highlights personal stories and tragedies, or the eye-catching or curious, and this creates an expectation that the platform is not about formal, institutionalised, or community-based politics. Of course, this distinction between the political and non-political is not straightforward, as we see in long-standing debate about what forms of individualised participation count as ‘political’ (see Hay 2007; Marsh and Akram 2015; Theocharis and van Deth 2016). A related thread treats signing petitions – and online petitioning in general – as a flimsy and inconsequential form of participation. Pejorative pronouncements on clicktivism and slacktivism are indirectly based on the widespread assumption that these petition sites are predominantly preoccupied with petty or trivial non-political concerns. This, however, also ignores the logic of numbers that suggests micro-acts of individual participation are aggregated to a broader form of public opinion and potential political

Table 2. Frequency of Petitions, by Target.

Target	Freq.	Percent
National Govt.	4135	24
Corporate	3140	18
State Govt.	2897	17
Local Govt.	1852	11
Individuals	919	5
Public Instit.	924	5
Civic Instit.	656	4
Overseas Govt.	514	3
NA ^a	2008	12
Total	17,045	100

^aNA includes petitions that are aimed at individuals or are too general to code target. By and large they were from the non-political category of petitions.

impact (Margetts et al. 2015). Thus, instead of operationalising a definition of what made a petition political (or not), we coded the target of the petitions *with* the policy or issue area it focussed on, to help reveal the extent of politics in online petition creation debate.

A consequence of the dominant focus on governmental petitions in existing research means that the ‘target’ for creators and signers is already set: the parliament/legislators or government. This no longer holds for commercial platforms such as *Change.org* where the target can be diversified. By contrast, some scholars speculate that targets tend to be ‘government agencies and business organisations’ without systematically coding them (El Noshokaty, Deng, and Kwak 2016, 1979). As shown in Table 2, we distinguish across the three tiers of Australian government, overseas governments, public institutions (e.g. hospitals, schools), civic institutions (like NGOs and sporting clubs), corporations, and other individuals (adapted from Karpf 2016, 89). We found that over 50% of petitions do target one of the three tiers of Australian government. Just over 18% of all petitions are, however, targeted at corporations. A noteworthy example of such a petition was one asking the retail store Target to stop stocking the video game *Grand Theft Auto 5* on the basis of its sexual violence. We found no significant association between the target of a petition, and whether the creator was an individual or an organisation.

As discussed above, the international research has tended to focus on petition ‘success’, which means that the substantive policy topic focus of petitions has remained a second-order concern. In our project, we devoted considerable effort to elaborating the substantive topic focus for the petitions that are policy related. For the most part, existing studies have utilised the in-built topic-like coding that is applied by the platform itself (e.g. Mellon et al. 2017).⁸ To gain more leverage over the topic substance of *political* petitions, we applied the Australian Policy Agendas code-scheme (see Dowding, Hindmoor, and Martin 2014). Table 3 shows that there are petitions across a wide range of topics. No single topic exceeds 10% of all petitions, however Law/Crime, Education, Health, and Transportation are relatively large topics.

How does the topic area relate to the target of petitions? Focussing in on those topic areas with the largest number of petitions (greater than 900), we found they were more likely to target state and local government- the arenas of formal politics closest to citizens themselves. Indeed, transport, education, law, and hospitals are all the purview of Australian state governments. This suggests that, compared to national government-run platforms dominant in many other countries, *Change.org* provides a valuable conduit for citizen mobilisation to target multiple tiers or venues.

Table 3. Frequency of Petitions, by Topic.

Topic	Freq.	Percent
Political	12,440	73.0
Law, Crime, and Family Issues	1351	7.9
Transportation	1115	6.5
Education and Culture	1070	6.3
Health	1046	6.1
Community Development	992	5.8
Agriculture	981	5.8
Labour, Employment and Immigration	967	5.7
Civil Rights, Min. Issues, and Civil Lib.	757	4.4
Banking, Finance, and Commerce	741	4.4
Government Operations	737	4.3
Environment	655	3.8
Public Lands, Water Mgmt., Colonial Aff.	537	3.2
Space, Science, Tech. and Comm.	385	2.3
Social Welfare	336	2.0
International Affairs and Foreign Aid	284	1.7
Energy	176	1.0
Macroeconomics	152	0.9
Defence	108	0.6
Foreign Trade	50	0.3
Consumer Petitions	2693	15.0
Non-political	1912	11.0
Total	17,045	100.0

Above we noted that by and large individuals are initiating these petitions. Our data allows us to drill down somewhat further into this pattern of petition creation. We located 13,912 discrete petition creators in our data set.⁹ On average, these creators are responsible for just over a single petition (mean = 1.06), SD = 0.3), but this ranges from a single petition to a maximum of 7. Over 95% of creators launch a single petition. By contrast, just 28 unique creators launched 4 or more petitions in our data set. The platform does not report demographic data on petition creators, however using a standard algorithm we created a variable for gender.¹⁰ We find that overall, 45% of creators are male versus 36% female (we were unable to infer gender in 19% of cases). In relation to the largest topic areas with more than 1000 petitions or more, we see no difference in gender of creators. However, interestingly, the majority of petitions in the Non-Political category are by men. The same holds for Consumer petitions.

Patterns of petition signing

In this section we explore the petition data from a signer perspective – how active are signers, how frequently and broadly do they engage in creating and signing petitions? Our purpose here is not to explain individual signing behaviour, or to place that in the context of other forms of political behaviour. As important as those questions are, our present focus is on aggregate patterns of engagement for which our data is uniquely placed to address because it focuses on petitions as the unit of analysis.

Our data set of over 17,000 petitions includes 3,325,325 unique signers who in total account for 6,366,077 signatures. The top 5% of signers (by frequency of signing) account for over 30% of all signatures in our data set. The engagement of signers is skewed: of all the signers, just 707 signed over 100 petitions during the period we examined. Nearly 2.5 million of the 3.3 million signers we identified (76%) signed only one

single petition. As suggested above, this finding is highly salient for the debate on online actions and clicktivism. Scholarly and journalistic accounts paint a picture of ‘keyboard warriors’ simply clicking casually on all sorts of petitions that come into their social media timelines. Of course, this is likely how many individuals discover petitions, but our data show persuasively that very few individuals sign more than a single petition. They undertake the transaction costs of signing up to the *Change.org* platform and sign only once. Based on this data, we can surmise that the individual decision to publicly sign a petition, mostly using their real names, is not an unthinking casual act. While definitive assessments require future research using surveys with signers, this finding suggest reason to reconsider pejorative accounts of petition signing as ‘mere’ clicktivism.

The *Change.org* platform does not report demographic data on signers. As such we inferred gender from the signer name using the same algorithm we used for creators. We collapse the results of this processing into three categories – female, male and unknown. Just over 50% of signers are female, 37% male, and the balance unknown. This supports Sheppard’s (2015) finding that women are more likely to sign online petitions than men, in her analysis of Australian Election Study data from 2010 (notably before the growth in use of *Change.org*). Similarly, Mellon et al.’s (2017) worldwide study of *Change.org* petitions finds that women are more likely to be signatories than men, and that men are more likely to be creators of petitions. We also know the location of signers – a field that signers complete when they are registered. As we have selected Australian petitions, it is no surprise that just over 69% of all signers are located in Australia. Just over 10% are from the US, with just under 5% from the UK, almost 3% from New Zealand and just under 2% from Canada. This seems to confirm that signers of petitions become aware of petitions through online sharing (see discussion in Margetts et al. 2015), as the online platform creators encourage petition creators to do.

Given the variation in the number of petitions individuals sign, we distinguish between types of signers based on the total volume of petitions they sign. While there is no clear convention in the field, we follow the broad approach of Puschmann, Bastos, and Schmidt (2017, 8) who distinguished between ‘Singletons’ (those who sign just one petition), ‘Returnees’ (the residual category between Singletons and more active signers), and ‘Highly Active’ (most active 1% of signers¹¹). Transposed onto our data set (see Table 4), we recode signers with one signature to ‘Singletons’, those with between 2 and 120 signatures as ‘Returnees’, and signers with greater than 120 signatures (the highest was 2089) as ‘Highly Active’.

While we have shown that petitions are generated around a wide range of topics and issues, to date very limited attention has been paid to aggregate patterns. Some research on *Change.org* petitions has utilised the in-built coding (Mellon et al. 2017), but these categories are not often adopted by those who create petitions. Moreover, this approach means we can only know petition-level topics, and not the patterns of activity by signers

Table 4. Signer Categories, Australia (Freq.).

Signer Category	# Signers	% of total Signers
Singletons	2,472,714	74
Returnees	820,103	25
Highly Active	32,508	1
Total	3,325,325	100.0

Table 5. Signer Categories, Breadth and Frequency of signing.

<i>Type of Signer</i> Topic Breadth	Signing Activity			Total
	Singleton	Returnees	Highly Active	
Specialists	1,483,506 (60%)	362,184 (44%)	197 (1%)	1,845,887
Focussed	0	307,314 (37%)	8,687 (27%)	316,001
Broad	0	12,219 (2%)	23,610 (72%)	35,829
Total	2,472,714	820,103	32,508	3,325,325

Table 6. Signer Categories, and % of Breadth of signing.

<i>Type of Signer</i> Topic Breadth	Signing Activity			Total
	Singleton	Returnees	Highly Active	
Specialists	80%	20%	0	1,845,887
Focussed	0	97%	3%	316,001
Broad	0	34%	66%	35,829
Total <i>N</i>	2,472,714	820,103	32,508	3,325,325

in relation to topics. Put another way, do people who sign multiple petitions do so within a narrow topic of interest? Or, do they spread their attention broadly? We adopted a similar approach to that applied to the frequency of signatures. Specialists are those who signed a petition in one topic area only. Those who signed petitions between 2 and 4 topic areas are called ‘Focussed’ signers. We reserve the term ‘Broad’ signers for those who signed petitions across more than 5 topic areas (the highest was 13 different topic areas). Note that our measure does not weight the signing activity: we are interested only whether a signer signs any petitions in a topic area (regardless of how many petitions this may be). The results show that the more active a signer is across petitions, the more likely they are to also engage across broad issue contexts (see Tables 5 and 6). There is a positive and relatively strong correlation between the number of signatures by a signer and the number of topics across which they are distributed (pearsons 0.53, $p < 0.05$).

As outlined above, we also found that very few individuals or organisations created petitions multiple times. Indeed, we found that over 95% of all creators launched just a single petition. In combination with our findings on signers, this suggests that change.org is not attracting ‘keyboard warriors’ or ‘clicktivists’. Rather, it is a platform that is engaged with on a one-off basis by those seeking to start an issue-based campaign, and by those sympathetic to the campaign and are persuaded to sign-on.

Conclusion

The petition is one of the longest standing forms of political participation in advanced democracies, particularly for those who seek to bring an issue to the attention of the public and policy makers. The advent of digital technology has transposed and transformed this tradition: making it both easier to sign, and easier for creators to broadcast a petition to a larger audience. And, as is well documented, the online petition is now a ubiquitous part of the political landscape in many democratic countries.

As we outlined at the outset of this paper, the scholarly analysis of this development has focussed predominantly on government petition platforms, and on the ways in which petitions attract (or not) signers in the pursuit of established threshold targets. Our research has sought to complement existing research by focussing on this less well studied commercial petition site. In so doing we make three contributions.

First, we show that the profile of the petitions created on *Change.org* in Australia are quite broad and mixed in relation to target and topic. Arguably *Change.org* as a citizen-led petitions site enables a broader range of topics than more directed platforms such as those maintained by NFPs and are linked with existing campaign priorities. Following Karpf (2016) we might expect to see substantial differences in target and topic between platform types. In relation to topic, we see that petitions span the full range of governmental fields – economic, social and identity issues. Moreover, we also see many petitions that address non-political and consumer issues. While popular accounts of petitions often suggest that they are predominantly focussed on personal or frivolous issues we find that most are targeted at political institutions (national, state and local) or corporations. Yes, we do see the petitions asking someone to ‘Get a haircut’, but by and large we see that even on a commercial platform, the bulk of petitioning is political in nature: both in respect of topic and target.

Second, our research does suggest caution in supporting popular framing of individual online petition creation and signing as simply ‘clicktivism’. We show that by and large petitions are created to address political issues and that signers are engaged by only one petition. That participants undertake the transaction costs of signing onto the *Change.org* platform to sign a single petition (and presumably ignore many future email invitations to sign subsequent petitions) at the very least suggests caution when supporting popular claims that petition signing is an unthinking form of ‘clicktivism’.

Thirdly, we show that the signers in our data set conform to the broader picture produced by previous work, whereby a small number of signers account for a large volume of signing. We too identify the ‘super user’ – defined as those signing a high number of petitions – but we add the additional focus on the topic breadth of that signing behaviour. This innovation is useful, as it shows that those who sign more often also tend to sign more broadly rather than staying within their core area of interest. The willingness of signers to move beyond issue niches is relevant to discussions of on-line participation as ‘echo-chambers’ of like-minded persons. We see some hint that individuals are willing to range across the issue spectrum. We also find that women are more likely to sign online petitions than men, similar to what Sheppard (2015) found, and thus challenging longstanding gender-based inequities in public voice and participation. Obviously, this behaviour – and its antecedents – is something that can only be explored in a broad-based manner with the data we have. Further work is needed using individual level surveys and interviews to fully understand the meaning participants attach to their petition signing and creating.

Notes

1. *Change.org* is a registered B Corporation: a social enterprise run with commercial principles. Revenue is raised from advertising (promoting petitions like Facebook advertising), organisational sponsorship of campaigns, micro-donations, and large donations from business people. However, as Karpf noted in mid 2016 they started to move away from sponsored

campaigns to crowdfunding from supporters and signatories <https://civichall.org/civicist/in-shift-from-sponsored-petitions-to-crowdfunding-change-org-changes-everything/>.

2. The literature often refers to ‘users’, however in this paper we prefer the terms petition creators and petition signers. Change.org itself uses petition starters and petition supporters.
3. Recent historical work has similarly argued that the purpose of petitions was not so much to change policy as to mobilise constituencies and organisation build (see Carpenter 2016).
4. They nevertheless use this in-built coding system for their descriptive analysis.
5. There are multiple e-petition systems that are operated by State and the Federal Parliament. However, these are rudimentary and take a minimalist approach in contrast to the internationally well known and well developed platforms.
6. NB: the difference between a petition being designated Closed or Open is not clear. There are many petitions in our dataset with a large signatory base (i.e. over 40,000) that were started 3-4 years ago and are still Open.
7. We manually examined each entry for creator in our data set. Where a creator is named we assume that an individual created the petition. Where it is clearly an organisation we coded it as such. Where the field indicated ‘null’, we assumed the creator to be an organisation. This approach is not without potential error. Those listed as ‘null’ may be individuals and not organisations (even though we assume the reverse). Finally, an individual may create a petition on behalf of an organisation. We cannot guard against this potentiality, but we see its impact as likely to be random and not lead to systematic errors in our data.
8. Creators of petitions on the *Change.org* platform can assign a range of topics to petitions, however this field was absent for the majority of the petitions. Moreover, the available categories were sparse, and omitted many topics actually covered by the petitions.
9. The meta-data associated with each petition provides a creator_id. For this analysis we assume that each unique id number is a different individual/organisation.
10. We applied the algorithm <https://pypi.python.org/pypi/SexMachine/>. The results from applying this algorithm allocate the user names to categories of andy (androgynous), male, female, mostly_male, or mostly_female. We recoded missing names and ‘andy’ to unknown. We recoded ‘mostly-male’ or ‘mostly-female’ to ‘male’ and ‘female’ respectively.
11. Puschmann, Bastos, and Schmidt (2017) had a final category of ‘Hyperactive’ (most active 0.1% of signers), which we collapsed into Highly Active. We chose not to strictly apply the actual numerical thresholds in the work of others, simply because as the time periods included in studies varies so too will the utility of thresholds. We have a larger data set than Puschmann, Bastos, and Schmidt (2017), and the top and tail of our distribution is of a different magnitude.

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Annex 1: Coding and Reliability

The two variables added to this data set by manual coding are 'Target' and 'Topic'. A team of five extra coders under the supervision of one of the authors were trained on a codebook for these two variables. An important step was to identify the range of topics the petitions addressed. To do so, we used the Australian Policy Agenda codebook which details 19 different topics covering issues like health, education and the environment. The authors trained a team of six coders to apply this code scheme. Inter-reliability analysis on a sample of 100 petitions for our team of six coders using the Fleiss' Kappa statistic was found to be $Kappa = 0.67$, meeting accepted thresholds in the literature for drawing some conclusions (Krippendorff 2013, 325). In terms of coding for target we differentiated between governments (national, local and state), corporations, public institutions like hospitals, civic institutions like NGOs and individuals. Inter-reliability for the target coding was found to be higher at $Kappa = 0.78$. A separate data set was created based on 'signer' data, where we added a variable on gender (see details below).