

E-PETITIONS: ENHANCING REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

Research at the University of Lincoln has transformed how the UK House of Commons manages e-petitions, helping to establish the Petitions Committee and shaping the experience of the 23 million people who signed an e-petition between 2015 and 2019.

University of Lincoln research has:

- Recommended the key features implemented in the House of Commons e-petitions system, introduced in 2015.
- Developed a conceptual framework to assess the extent to which petitions systems in political representative institutions are underpinned by broader ideas around voice, decision-making and transparency.
- Advised on the establishment and development of an electronic petitions system in the Canadian Parliament.



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For centuries the public have raised grievances by submitting paper petitions to the House of Commons. In 2011 the Government introduced a new e-petitions system, allowing the public to launch and sign petitions online. While the new e-petitions system was immediately popular with the public, in practice it promised more than it could deliver, offering petitioners little or no real participation, empowerment, or prospect of bringing about change.

Dr Catherine Bochel, from the Lincoln Parliamentary Research Centre at the University of Lincoln, highlighted the flaws in the Government's e-petition system and directly advised on the development of a new collaborative e-petition system led by the House of Commons. Dr Bochel's recommendations on how to communicate with the public, and the establishment of an accompanying Petitions Committee, were adopted and have become core features of the new e-petitions system.

PETITIONING PARLIAMENT

In the UK and across the world there has been a growing interest in using petitions systems as a means of enhancing **representative democracy**. Through interviewing petitioners, committee clerks and members of elected bodies in the Westminster Parliament, the devolved legislatures and local government, Dr Catherine Bochel explored the extent to which petitions enable different degrees of participation. Whilst identifying significant challenges to the effective operation of petitions systems, she concluded that such systems have the potential to act as a significant input to representative democracy.

From her research, Dr Bochel was able to distinguish between 'descriptive' systems, which for the most part simply accepted and recorded petitions, and '**substantive**' systems, where the emphasis is on the content of the petitions, which are able to act upon them, and which therefore have the potential to influence social policies. This informed the recommendations she made for the new e-petitions system.

E-petitions in the new system received almost 23 million unique signatures between 2015 and 2019 – more than 1 in 3 of the UK population.

Lincoln research has been an integral part of creating this successful tool for the public to engage with their legislature.

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

Dr Bochel has developed a conceptual framework based on the principle of Procedural Justice to shape how the new e-petitions system **engages and communicates** with petitioners. This is important because large numbers of people submit and sign petitions, yet many are unlikely to achieve the aim of their petition. Therefore, petitioners' experience of, and treatment by the system is important, and may affect not only how they view petitions systems, but potentially also wider political and governmental processes. This framework shaped the new e-petitions system, through key features such as the establishment of a **Petitions Committee** and the different ways the Committee can respond to petitioners.

IMPACT ON POLICY

Dr Catherine Bochel has directly shaped the House of Commons e-petition website, with her recommendations on key features adopted and incorporated into the new system. These recommendations included statements about what petitioners can and cannot achieve be included on the website for the new Committee, and the use of a variety of tools to communicate the purpose of the new system including a short video of the website to set out the process of submitting a petition and potential outcomes for petitioners.

Dr Bochel's research has also been cited in the consideration and establishment of e-petitions systems across the world, including in the Canadian Parliament where she was called upon to share her expertise in oral evidence to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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