Effective petitions systems

A summary

Catherine Bochel

School of Social and Political Sciences

In the twenty-first century, petitioning is one of the most common forms of political participation. This research focused on petitions systems in the light of the increasing use of petitioning as a participatory tool. It drew upon case studies of petitions systems from the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, Wolverhampton City Council, an urban unitary council in England, and Renfrewshire Council in Scotland. While it did not set out to examine the e-petitions system introduced at Whitehall and Westminster by the Coalition government following the 2010 general election, as it was launched during the period of the research it was given some consideration in the context of the other systems.

The research was funded by the University of Lincoln and took place from 2009 to 2011. It considered a number of issues, ranging from the purposes of each system, access, usage, the extent of participation, and the scope and powers of the individual systems, through to influence, outcomes and the impacts of petitions.

Findings

This research suggests that as a tool for participation petitions systems have the potential to act as a significant input to representative forms of democracy by providing a mechanism to enable the public to express their views to those in elected representative institutions. However, the extent to which individual petitions systems are successful in enabling this is dependent on a range of factors, some of which are discussed below.

The purposes of petitions systems – each of the systems sought to set out parameters for their work, and in all, apart from the Coalition government's e-petitions system, which states 'e-petitions are an easy, personal way for you to influence government and Parliament in the UK' (http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/ [accessed 17/12/2013]), there was some attempt to manage the expectations of petitioners by explaining what they could (or could not) expect from the process.

Access to petitions systems – all of the systems provided direct access for petitioners to submit their petition, apart from that in the House of Commons, which requires petitioners to find an MP who is willing to submit a petition on their behalf.

Usage – unsurprisingly, the number of petitions received was greatest at the national tier, with the e-petitions system created by the Coalition government being reported to have received approximately 22,000 petitions in its first five months, and least at the local tier. This may be for a number of reasons, including the geographical area and population covered by each system, the range of powers exercised or perceived to be exercised by each body, and, potentially, their differeing degrees of visibility to the public.

The extent of participation – all of the systems enabled members of the public to express their views to those in elected representative institutions. In the House of Commons, if an MP agrees to present a petition on behalf of a member of the public it is recorded in *Hansard* and a copy is sent to the relevant government department and to the appropriate Select Committee. There is no debate or discussion of the petition, the issue

is unlikely to be progressed further, and the extent of participation is therefore effectively limited to writing and signing the petition. In the Coalition government's e-petitions system, any petition that secures more than 10,000 signatures should receive a response from the relevant government department which is published online. Petitions that pass the 100,000 signature threshold are eligible for a debate in Parliament. Those petitions are then passed to the Backbench Business Committee to see if any MP is willing to sponsor a debate on the petition and take part in it. If no MP is willing to sponsor a debate the petition goes no further. One key issue with this system is that for the majority of participants it looks likely to afford citizens the opportunity to air their views, but with little or no 'real' participation or empowerment. Petitions with fewer than 10,000 signatures do not receive a response, and thus petitioners may feel that their participation is a waste of their time. In the devolved bodies and the local authorities examined for this research, each petition, assuming it meets the admissibility criteria, is considered in depth by a Petitions Committee and receives a response based on the deliberations of the Committee. At a minimum, petitioners will have had the opportunity to have their petition discussed by a Petitions Committee and thus have had some opportunity for their voices to be heard.

The scope and powers of each system – in the devolved legislatures and in the local authorities the Petitions Committees do not make policy decisions, but they do enable the public to raise issues, to have access to decision makers, and thus to potentially influence policies. In the House of Commons all substantive petitions will normally receive a response from the relevant government department. Whilst all of the other systems discussed here are located within representative institutions, the e-petitions system introduced by the Coalition government is located in both government, which is responsible for the collection of petitions, and in Parliament, in the form of the Backbench Business Committee of the House of Commons, which has the power to decide which of the petitions that pass the 100,000 signature threshold should be debated. This hybrid character serves to highlight the somewhat confused nature of the system, perhaps reflecting the fact that there was no consultation with the House of Commons on its introduction, there was no debate in the House of Commons, and it was not voted on.

Actions – in the local authorities and in the devolved legislatures the Petitions Committees are able to take a variety of actions. While they vary from system to system, they included:
- inviting petitioners to give evidence to the Petitions Committee
- requesting further information from relevant bodies and organisations (the most common action in the devolved legislatures)
- forwarding the petition to another committee or organisation
- calling for further work to address the issue raised in the petition
- holding a roundtable evidence session
- commissioning inquiries
- requesting that ministers and officials attend the Petitions Committee to answer questions/give evidence
- requesting a debate as part of normal business in the Parliament or the Assembly
- agreeing to the petitioners' request
- taking no further action and closing the petition.

Outcomes, levels of participation and influence – defining a 'successful' outcome for a petition is clearly difficult. It is likely to depend on who you are, what role you have within the petitions system, what expectations petitioners have, the extent to which the petitions system is fulfilling its stated aims, and so on. For example, for some petitioners 'success' might be measured by outcomes such as policy change or getting action on a particular issue, while for others it might be the opportunity to be listened to, to have raised the profile of the issue they have submitted a petition on, or something else. Gauging the 'success' and 'impact' of petitions systems and of individual petitions is therefore perhaps inevitably problematic. However, there are a number of criteria which can contribute to more effective petitions systems. These include:

- a clear statement of purpose
- clear ownership of the petitions system
- direct access to the petitions system
- the opportunity for petitioners to receive advice or guidance on their petition before it is submitted
- a low signature threshold
- the integration of the petitions system into the broader system of the elected body or government within which it operates
- a mechanism such as a Petitions Committee to consider each petition and to make a decision about how to progress the petition
- the opportunity to engage with the political system and perhaps to learn more about how it works.

The following four examples of petitions are drawn from the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

Scottish Parliament

Knife crime – this petition called on the Scottish Parliament to introduce mandatory sentencing for persons who are found carrying knives or other dangerous weapons in public. It led to a debate in the Parliament's chamber on how to address the problem of knife crime, and enabled individuals and organisations concerned with the issue to have the opportunity to question Scottish government ministers, the police, parliamentarians and representatives of the legal profession. It raised awareness of the issue not just amongst the public, but helped illustrate the realities of knife crime to those who make policy, and received considerable publicity in the media.

Shine on Scotland campaign – this petition was submitted by a teenager with the aim being to help prevent future generations suffering from multiple sclerosis. It called for new guidelines on vitamin D supplementation for pregnant women and children, and for an awareness campaign to ensure that people know what level of supplementation they should be taking. In response the Scottish government agreed to coordinate a programme of action with NHS Scotland to produce guidance on vitamin D. This *inter-alia* included a campaign to educate women on its importance and to ensure that health professionals provide consistent and accurate information on vitamin D.

National Assembly for Wales

Banning plastic bags – the petitioners gave evidence to the Petitions Committee, which then referred the petition to the Sustainability Committee which agreed to carry out a full inquiry. It recommended to the Welsh Assembly Government that a levy be introduced for single use plastic bags. This was accepted, and from November 2011 a 5p charge on all single use plastic bags was introduced.

Equality for the transgender community – this petition sought to raise the profile of the issue. The petitioners gave evidence to the Petitions Committee and as a result was the Committee wrote to the First Minister highlighting concerns about a wide range of issues, including access to health services, employment, public awareness and hate crime and called for further work to address some of the issues.

Conclusions

This research has identified a number of features which can help contribute to making petitions systems effective. It suggests that the petitions systems operating in the devolved legislatures, in particular, can broadly be seen as models of good practice. They enable petitioners to bring issues to the attention of policy makers and politicans, to get their issues on the agenda and to receive an outcome. The emphasis in each of these systems is primarily on the content of the petitions, each petition is considered by a Petitions Committee which is able to act upon them, and they therefore have the potential to influence policy and policies. They also provide one way of enabling and enhancing engagement with the political system.

Further reading

Bochel, C. (2013) 'Petitions Systems: Contributing to Representative Democracy?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 798-815.
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Carman, C. (2006) 'The Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions System 1999-2006, Commissioned by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre for the Public Petitions Committee, Edinburgh, Scottish Parliament.
Fox, R. (2012) *What next for e-petitions?*, Hansard Society, London.

Further research

The work reported here is part of ongoing research into petitions systems. For further information please contact the author.

University of Lincoln
Brayford Pool
Lincoln
LN6 7TS

Telephone: +44 (0)1522 886098
Fax: +44 (0)1522 886026
Email: cbochel@lincoln.ac.uk
www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/socialsciences/