# Process matters: petitions systems in Britain's legislatures

A short summary

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## The research

In the twenty-first century petitioning is one of the most common forms of political participation. At the national and devolved levels petitions systems now exist in the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. However, despite their popularity with the public, the introduction of such systems have not been an unalloyed success. In particular, there is likely to be a gap between aspiration and reality for petitioners, because the vast majority of people who petition an elected representative institution are not going to get what they ask for. It is therefore important that political institutions that wish to use petitions systems as a tool for public engagement recognise that petitioners' experience of, and treatment by these systems is important.

This research uses the concept of procedural justice, with its emphasis on the fairness of the process by which decisions are made, as an analytical tool to explore four case studies: the e-petitions system introduced by the Coalition government, the recently established collaborative UK government and Parliament system, and the more long-standing systems in the Scottish Parliament, and the National Assembly for Wales.

## What is procedural justice?

There are different theories of procedure and authors define and interpret them in differing ways. Drawing on wide ranging literature on the application of procedural justice to fields including law, psychology, political science, social policy, business and management, and criminology, this research identifies a number of key characteristics of procedural justice and makes a distinction between 'system' and 'perception' characteristics. The research focuses on the system characteristics – voice, decision making and transparency – because these are the processes established by the individual systems, and it is these that are likely to facilitate, or hinder the extent of procedural justice. The latter are effectively judgements on the 'system' characteristics, and whilst these may be important they do not affect the extent to which the systems can be seen to facilitate a procedural justice approach.

## Findings

The systems in the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the UK government and Parliament offer a greater degree of procedural justice than did the Coalition government's system. The research highlights that while power over decision making in all of the systems considered is ultimately retained by elected representatives, it is possible to identify different degrees of opportunity for voice, and to a more limited extent for influence over decision making and the process of decision making, with those systems that have established petitions committees, provide support for petitioners in developing their petitions, and which are able to take a variety of actions, offering a greater degree of procedural justice.

## Conclusions

Overall, the application of ideas of procedural justice to representative political institutions not only provides us with a useful tool for analysing petitions systems, but also potentially provides a framework of ideas from which petitions systems, and perhaps other participatory initiatives, may learn. This is significant because petitions are clearly popular with the public as a method of engaging with elected bodies, as illustrated by the quantity of petitions submitted to each body and the numbers who sign them. They can also achieve a range of different outcomes (Bochel, 2012). However, given that most people who petition are not going to get what they ask for, their experience of, and treatment by the various systems is very important, and reinforces the view of Fox (2009, p. 682) 'that the political process may be as important as policy outcomes'.

## Further reading

Bochel, C. (2013) 'Petitions Systems: contributing to representative democracy?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 798-815.

Bochel, C. (2012) 'Petitions: different dimensions of voice and influence in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales', *Social Policy & Administration*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 142-160.

Fox, R. (2009) 'Engagement and Participation: what the public want and how our politicians need to respond', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 62, no. 4, pp. 673-685.

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