**Parliamentary petitions as a voice for local communities**

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The Parliamentary petition has existed as a means of expressing citizens’ concerns since the establishment of Victoria’s legislature in the 1850s. While a lot has changed since that time, you might be surprised at how much has remained the same.

One of the earliest petitions presented to the Victorian Legislative Council in 1851 requested gas lighting for the City of Melbourne. Another petition requested funding for a new bridge that would cross two sides of a creek. Another called for a proposed Bill for stronger punishment toward “idle and disorderly persons” not pass the parliament. Many of the issues outlined in these historical petitions have similarities to those presented today. Issues like roads, taxes, healthcare, agriculture, funding and changes to laws remain prominent in petitions today as they did more than a century and a half ago.

Of course, there are obvious differences between then and now. Petitioning platforms like Change.org exist to harness these concerns through digital means, even when parliaments do not recognise petitions organised through these third-party platforms as valid. Digital methods of communication have increased the number of ways available to citizens to contact, pressure or perhaps even harass Members of Parliament. Additionally, social media platforms provide spaces for communities to discuss and organise around issues of local interest.

With this in mind, how much relevance does the parliamentary petition have today? My forthcoming paper argues that petitions continue to have importance in parliamentary democracy despite the emergence of other mediums available for citizens to express their concerns to parliament and government. This will be demonstrated through computer-assisted analysis of the thousands of petitions presented in Victorian Parliament across five recent terms.

**Value of Research**

The public’s distrust in parliamentarians and governments is not a new revelation by any means. However, this distrust does not seem to flow through to democracy as a political idea, with several research papers finding that support for a democratic system continues to be high. At the same time, recent years have seen a decline in local news coverage as outlets become less financially viable. [The Public Interest Journalism Initiative](https://piji.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2406-AND-June-2024.xlsx) in Australia has documented 65 Victorian news outlets that have closed their newsrooms, ceased their print format, merged with another outlet, reduced their service or closed entirely since the onset of the pandemic. These outlets may have traditionally acted as a forum to voice local concerns, and their demise makes understanding democratic participation of local communities even more important.

**Methodology**

To carry out the research, we first needed to collect the details of each petition presented to parliament within our allocated 20-year timeframe of 2002-2022. To do this, we built a script written in the Python programming language that would take the minutes and proceedings of each house in PDF format, use certain patterns in the PDFs – such as looking for the phrase “Mr Smith presented a petition…” – to identify when a petition had been presented, extract relevant text and store it in a spreadsheet.

After creating the spreadsheet, another Python program runs through and picks out what it suspects are the names of geographical locations or organisations that would otherwise have an address, in a process known as named-entity recognition. This is by no means a foolproof system and certain locations or places have certainly been missed. Prior to this research being published more formally, it’s likely that certain elements in this pipeline will be tweaked in order to improve the accuracy.

**Quality or quantity?**

The number of signatures on the petitions included in this research span from one to 67,000. For those interested, 43 of these petitions had but one signature. Was the MP who presented the petition just looking for some more attention? It’s not for me to say. However this does bring into question how we weigh the importance of an issue as expressed through these petitions. Should it be based on the frequency of petitions presented on the issue, or the number of signatures affixed to that issue? What if the issue only affects a small community of people, such as a rural town, and would naturally affect a smaller number of citizens compared to a state-wide issue? There are various lenses through which we can interpret this data.

**Findings**

Firstly, let’s begin with some high level statistics. Between 2002 and 2022, the 55th and 59th Victorian Parliaments, there were 3,893 petitions tabled in the Legislative Assembly and 1,424 in the Legislative Council. There was noticeable difference between the mean and median signatures per petition in each parliamentary term, which suggests that a select group of petitions gained a significant number of signatures and dragged the mean much higher than the median. On many occasions, multiple members of parliament would submit the exact same petition but with varying numbers of signatures, presumably because they were sourced from different constituencies.

The Legislative Assembly, the lower house, saw a rather large decline in the number of petitions presented over the 20 years. In contrast, the number of petitions in the Legislative Council, the upper house, remained relatively stable. Despite this, there was a noticeable increase in the median number of signatures per petition over the two decades across both houses, and the total number of petition signatures in the Legislative Council generally did increase over the five terms. This suggests that members of the public continue to be invested in the petitions process, but that there has been a concentration of efforts. This is certainly an area for future research.

**Entities**

The named-entity recognition process identified 1,150 addresses, places, landmarks and other locations across 921 unique petitions. Again, due to the diversity of the petitions and their content, we can safely assume that not every place or location was picked up through this process and that there are many petitions containing entities that haven’t been counted. However, we can be confident that at least one in every six petitions makes a reference to a location.

When geocoded – that is, assigned latitude and longitude coordinates – we can get understand the kind of areas being highlighted in petitions. Around 900 of the 1,150 entities were successfully geocoded, so this is not an exhaustive list. However, this is what it looks like on a map. It comes as no surprise that most of the entities included in petitions are concentrated within Greater Melbourne. However I would like to draw your attention to the vast number of entities mentioned outside of Melbourne, and indeed even outside of regional hubs such as Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong. Roads, towns, train stations, schools and parks are among the kinds of entities included in these petitions. This speaks to how communities near and far use the parliamentary petition system to call for action from their elected representatives.

If I can present one example: the petition with the fifth largest number of signatures within this time period, with over 24,000 signatures, called for the government to abandon its plans to establish a youth detention centre in the Melbourne suburb of Werribee South. An issue like where to place a new detention centre presumably wouldn’t concern residents dwelling too far out from the affected area. Additionally, this petition was presented by a minister of the government that had proposed the detention centre in the first place and was paper, not electronic. It demonstrates the power of local communities to use the petitions system in current times to draw attention to a concern.

Other petitions with a similar theme and a high number of signatures include abandoning a plan to place a toxic waste facility the rural city of Mildura, abandoning a plan to build a tram track around Lake Weerona in the rural city of Bendigo, and rejecting a proposal to build a waste management facility in the rural locality of Baddaginnie, population 347. In each of these examples, we’re again seeing large attention being devoted to concerns that revolve around a particular community.

**Summary**

To wrap up, petitions continue to act as a method of writing the concerns of a local community into the public record, and reaching the people who are most capable of addressing those concerns. These issues may not normally travel further than the communities that are directly affected by them otherwise.

There are some immediate limitations that I believe are worth considering. Firstly, for a petition to be presented in either house, it must be sponsored by an MP. This means that a petition that puts forth an idea not deemed to be in the interests of any MP in the house is unlikely to go very far, even if it is in the interest of a certain community. Already, we can see a political dimension having an affect on what concerns are and aren’t voiced in the chamber on behalf of local communities. Petitions that aren’t sponsored by MPs are not included in minutes or proceedings, so this makes it difficult if we wished to widen our scope.

You may have noticed I haven’t made any references to electronic petitions so far and how they’ve influenced petition activity. The Victorian Parliament was really behind the eight ball when it came to introducing e-petitions; they were only introduced in the Legislative Council in 2017 and the Legislative Assembly in 2021. Within that time, you may be aware a large global event took place that would have overwhelmingly favoured digital petitions over paper ones. For this reason, I believe we’re a few years away from truly understanding how e-petitions have changed the Victorian petitions system. However, I have no doubt as e-petitions mature, communities around the state will find it a helpful tool in having their voices heard.