



Briefing into petition platforms and citizen engagement

Report of the Petitions Committee

Fifty-third Parliament
August 2023

Presented to the House of Representatives

Hon Jacqui Dean
Chairperson

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Briefing into petition platforms and citizen engagement

Recommendation

The Petitions Committee has considered a briefing into petition platforms and citizen engagement, and recommends that the House take note of its report and we encourage a future Petitions Committee in the 54th Parliament to consider this report alongside our report on the Briefing into ministerial and Government responses to petitions.

1 Background

We requested a briefing from Professor Ariadne Vromen of the Australian National University on her research into petition platforms and citizen engagement.

Our committee was established in the 53rd Parliament as a specialist committee. This was a recommendation of the 2020 Review of Standing Orders in response to the increase in the number of petitions created on the Parliament website.¹ As a new committee, we are keen to collect information about how petition processes work in other jurisdictions. We took this opportunity to learn from her research, and to review our work.

Professor Vromen met with our committee both formally and informally, and provided a summary of her research. This included an assessment of different petition platforms on the websites of the Parliaments of six countries, including New Zealand. We enjoyed hearing from Professor Vromen and are grateful for her time.

In this report, we first summarise key insights from Professor Vromen's research. We then outline the New Zealand petitions process, and consider her specific findings about our work. We end with some reflections on what we have learned from this briefing and how it may inform the work of future Petitions Committees.

¹ 52nd Parliament Standing Orders Committee, [Review of Standing Orders 2020](#), 3 August 2020.

2 Online petitions as citizen-led political engagement

Professor Vromen researches the growth of online petitions as a new form of citizen-led political engagement. Her approach considers the consumer perspective, which is to say, the perspective of petitioners and people who sign petitions.

Professor Vromen's Australian research has found that, after voting, signing petitions and donating to a social cause have become the two most frequent forms of political engagement by members of the public. We heard that online tools are enabling new forms of political engagement and transforming the way that citizens seek to engage with political issues. Professor Vromen's research indicates that citizens believe petitions are a normal part of democracy and an effective way to express their opinion on political issues.

Small citizen-led acts of engagement

Professor Vromen told us that small, citizen-led acts of engagement, such as signing and sharing a petition, have become important to citizens as a way to use their voice within the political system, and to share information with their networks about issues they care about. She noted that this can lead to shallow, ad hoc forms of political participation, which she contrasts with deeper forms of engagement, such as co-design of policy and programmes by public and community institutions. However, she notes that these deeper forms of engagement may privilege people with greater educational resources and the most time, whereas petitions and other forms of citizen-led engagement are more accessible.

“The paper petition is a dying art form”

Professor Vromen said an online shift has occurred, and that “the paper petition is a dying art form”. She said her research shows that citizens who want to have a voice now, in general, think “digital first”.

We were told that the shift to digital technology has been accompanied by a shift to a “crowdsourced logic”. Professor Vromen said that petitions, as a form of collective advocacy, were often traditionally started by people within formal organisations that would build a sustained campaign based on research and data. However, as a crowdsourced activity, she said petitions may now be started by an individual who uses social media networks to build a community around an issue, often for a short-term focus. These crowdsourced campaigns may focus more on personal experiences and stories than research and data.

Professor Vromen said it is important that political decision-makers meet citizens in the forms of engagement they choose to use, rather than assuming it is the citizens who should adapt their processes.

Insights from Australian research on petition signatories

The Australian research found that 68 percent of Australians have signed a petition. This included 31 percent who had signed one in the previous 12 months. Of those who had recently signed a petition in Australia, 90 percent signed an online petition, and just over half shared a petition on social media.

According to Professor Vromen's research, in Australia 80 percent of people who signed a petition signed on the online petition platform Change.org. By contrast, a quarter signed a petition on a union or non-government website. Only 15 percent signed a petition on a parliamentary website. However, despite this, 60 percent of signatories said the petitions they signed were targeted at government.

Online petitions are not just a “clicktivist” phenomenon

Professor Vromen acknowledged that some political and media commentators have dismissed online engagement, such as signing or sharing online petitions, as “clicktivism” (a portmanteau of “click activism”). This is a pejorative term which implies these interactions involve little thought or engagement.

Professor Vromen said online petitions should not be dismissed as a temporary “clicktivist” phenomenon; for many citizens, they are now part of the political process. Professor Vromen's research indicated that two-thirds of Australian signatories on Change.org signed only one petition. When they signed more than one petition, it tended to be in a similar area of interest. Only 1 percent of signatories signed multiple petitions across multiple interest areas.

Demographic differences

We heard that petition-signing is an activity that occurs across all age groups. However, the increasingly digital nature of political engagement is being driven by younger people.

Professor Vromen said older Australians are more likely than younger Australians to engage in traditional political activity, such as contacting a member of Parliament. However, she said there is a gap in access for older people who do not necessarily find the new forms of digital engagement attractive.

Professor Vromen's research shows that, although more women than men sign petitions in Australia, more men than women create petitions. In the Australian context, she found that more First Nations (indigenous) respondents engaged with petitions and crowdsourced donations than the general population.

Formal responses to petitions

Professor Vromen noted that some petitioners may regard the key indicator of success as achieving the outcome requested in their petition. However, her research indicated that this is not the only measure of success for petitioners and signatories. Petitioners may also consider a petition successful if it:

- elicits a response from the person or group the petition was addressed to

- raises awareness of the issue among members of the community
- results in media coverage of the issue
- brings together a community of interest around an issue
- results in further action by government, corporations, or community organisations.

Professor Vromen told us that, in her Australian research, the response rate on Change.org from government or corporations to whom petitions are addressed is 10 percent. This does not necessarily mean that a petition is successful in achieving its policy aims, but that a responsible decision-maker has responded to the petitioner.

Contrasting traditional and crowdsourced models of engagement

Professor Vromen contrasted institutional forms of engagement with crowdsourced forms of engagement. Traditionally or institutionally, she said, people who want to have a voice do so through voting and joining – for example, joining a political party, joining a union, or joining an organisation. However, a crowdsourced form of engagement focuses instead on sharing and donating. In the crowdsourced framework, good citizenship is understood as sharing information, engaging with friends, and donating to causes that a person believes in.

Institutionally, Professor Vromen said, the focus has shifted from joining and supporting formal community organisations to engagement with digital platforms. She said many formal community organisations now also first engage digitally with their members and supporters, demonstrating that the shift has also taken place within organisations.

Institutionally, longer-term, permanent policy processes now interact with a crowdsourced form of engagement that may be short-term and temporary. Professor Vromen said crowdsourced engagement “bubbles up around issues that matter to people”. She described a “contradiction between ongoing policy processes and temporary crowds”.

Lastly, we heard there has been a shift in power between stable, vertical institutions, and changing, horizontal networks. Professor Vromen said that citizen-to-citizen or peer-to-peer information sharing is prioritised in horizontal networks. She contrasts this with the top-down giving of information or instructions from professional experts in vertical institutions, in which citizens may be regarded only as passively receiving information given by others.

3 Assessing online parliamentary petition systems

Building trust and efficacy

Professor Vromen told us that distrust in the political system can be a motivator for signing petitions. She said the challenge for parliaments and politicians is how to build trust through the forms of political engagement in which people choose to engage. Equally important, she said, is building efficacy, which is about building the belief and experience of citizens that their voices are heard and their actions are effective. She sees opportunities for governments and parliaments to better engage with non-governmental petition platforms, and to learn from what makes these platforms attractive to petition signatories.

Professor Vromen's approach and criteria

An explanation of terms

Professor Vromen's research compares the experiences of citizens who use non-governmental online petition platforms with those who use governmental or parliamentary online petition platforms. Her work considers experiences across a range of different systems of government.

In this report, we adapt Professor Vromen's terms so that it is clear to a New Zealand readership how her work applies in the New Zealand political context. In her work, the term "government" is sometimes used in situations that, in the New Zealand context, refer to the executive branch of government (Cabinet and Ministers), while in other situations it may refer to the legislative branch of government (Parliament). For example, she uses the term "government response" to refer to any form of official response. However, in our context, we consider it important to distinguish between a response from the House of Representatives, and a response from a Government Minister.

To avoid confusion, in this report:

- **Government** refers to the executive branch of government, including Cabinet, Ministers, ministries, and government agencies
- **Parliament** refers to the legislative branch of government, which is the House of Representatives, including the work of select committees.

Minimalist and maximalist approaches

Professor Vromen's research distinguishes between minimalist and maximalist approaches to parliamentary petition platforms. She describes minimalist approaches as simply transferring traditional paper-based processes for petitions to online contexts. In contrast, a maximalist approach takes on characteristics of the new forms of non-government online petitions. Professor Vromen told us this may include making it easy for citizens to initiate petitions directly, and to easily share petitions via social media. It may also include providing opportunities for online community forums and discussion.

Professor Vromen uses these approaches to assess parliamentary petition platforms according to their accessibility and how interactive they are from the perspective of citizens. She advocates that maximalist online petition systems provide benefits for citizens over minimalist models.

Criteria for assessing parliamentary petition platforms

These are criteria used by Professor Vromen in assessing parliamentary petition platforms:

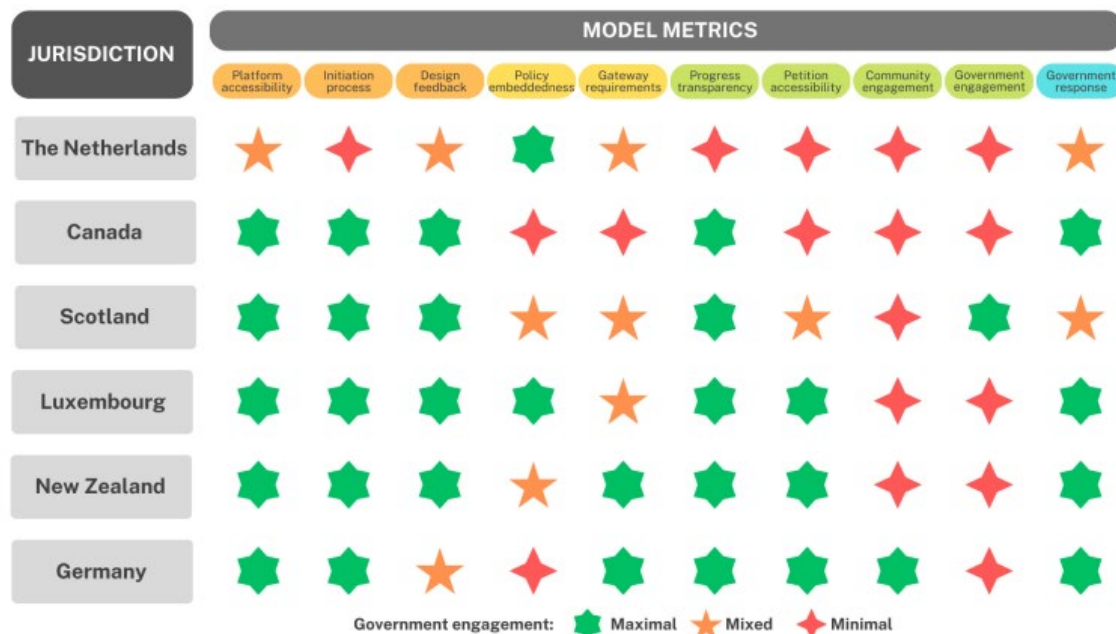
- Embeddedness – Is online petitioning embedded within a broader policy of citizen engagement?
- Accessibility – Can citizens easily find and use online petition platforms on Parliament websites?
- Gateway requirements – Does a person have to be a citizen to start a petition, or are there requirements which screen out certain petitions or subject areas?
- Initiation of petitions – Is there an online process of starting an online petition, or does a petitioner have to download and return a paper form?
- Design feedback – What interaction takes place with petitioners during the design of their petition, for example around wording?
- Progress transparency – Is information clearly provided about the progress of the petition?
- Petition accessibility – Are there restrictions on who can sign a petition, such as citizenship or age? Is it easy to share a petition on social media?
- Community engagement – Does the petition platform provide space for community discussion about the subject of the petition?
- Government/parliamentary engagement – Is there an opportunity for government or parliamentary engagement, such as fact-checking or information sheets?
- Government/parliamentary response – Is there transparency about the form of official response to a petition?

Comparison of parliamentary petition systems

Professor Vromen shared her assessment of the petition platforms of the Parliaments of New Zealand, Germany, Luxembourg, Scotland, Canada, and the Netherlands. Using the above criteria, Professor Vromen rates the parliamentary petition platform of the Netherlands as having the most minimalist approach. The parliamentary petition platforms of New Zealand, Germany, and Luxembourg share the highest ratings for maximalist approaches.

The New Zealand Parliament petitions system was rated highly for platform and petition accessibility, petition initiation, design feedback, transparency of progress, and government/parliamentary response. Areas where Professor Vromen's research team considered New Zealand had a more minimalist approach to petitions were in policy embeddedness, community engagement, and government/parliamentary engagement.

Government/parliament online petition scorecard²



Professor Vromen emphasised that her research team's assessment considers these questions from the perspective of citizens and consumers, rather than from the perspective of Government or Parliament. She encouraged us to view our petition process through the eyes of citizens.

We will provide some background about petitions in the New Zealand Parliament before sharing our consideration of Professor Vromen's assessment.

² Professor Ariadne Vromen, *The Future for Government Online Petition Platforms*, ANU.

4 Petitions in the New Zealand Parliament

Past and present practice

Following Westminster tradition and practice, since its first meeting in 1854 the New Zealand Parliament has accepted petitions from individuals and organisations.³ Petitions may raise issues such as seeking amendments to legislation or changes to policy, or asking that the House undertake public inquiries into issues or events of concern. Numbers of petitions to Parliament have increased and decreased over the years, historically reaching peaks in 1906 and the mid-1980s.

Online petitions

In 2018, the House of Representatives introduced an online petition system on the Parliament website. The House continues to accept and consider traditional written petitions, as well as petitions hosted on the Parliament website, after they are presented by a current member of Parliament.

The New Zealand Parliament does not formally recognise online signatures collected on other platforms, such as Change.org, Action Station, or other non-governmental advocacy organisations. However, where such petitions have the support of a member of Parliament, the Office of the Clerk works with the organisers of petitions collected on other platforms to help them present a petition to the House that acknowledges the existence of those informal petitions.

Consideration of petitions

Every petition presented to the House of Representatives is referred to us. We may choose to consider a petition ourselves, or to refer it to a subject committee. We also have the option of referring a petition to a Minister for response.

After a petition is referred to a committee, the general practice is that petitioners are invited to submit a written submission in support of their petition. Each committee considers whether to seek additional written evidence, such as submissions from government entities or specialist groups. A committee may decide to hold a hearing of evidence to hear oral and written submissions from the petitioner and other organisations.

After a committee has completed its consideration of a petition, it will produce a report that is presented to the House. Standing Orders provide that every petition presented to the House of Representatives is reported back, either by a select committee, or by a Minister.⁴

³ [Parliamentary Practice in New Zealand, Chapter 36: Petitions.](#)

⁴ [Standing Orders 369 to 380 outline the rules for petitions in the New Zealand Parliament. Standing Orders are available on the Parliament website.](#)

Responses to petitions

When a petition is referred to a Minister, Standing Order 380 requires the Minister's response to be reported to the House as a parliamentary paper within 60 working days. If a select committee's report contains a recommendation to the Government, the Government is required to respond. Government responses to committee recommendations are expected to be reported to the House within 60 working days.

In summary, responses to petitions may be from:

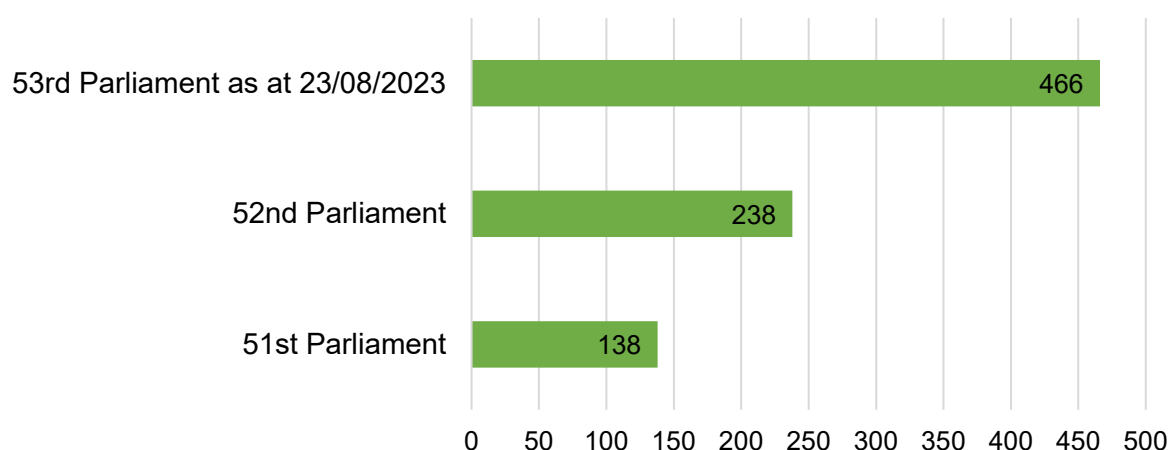
- Parliament, in the form of a report to the House from a select committee
- Government, in the form of a ministerial response to a petition, or a Government response to a select committee recommendation.

The Petitions Committee may also recommend a debate in the House on a petition report. This has happened twice in the 53rd Parliament. A special debate on COVID-19 immigration and border policies took place on 13 May 2021,⁵ and one on digital exclusion was held on 28 July 2022.⁶

Numbers of petitions

The number of petitions presented to Parliament has grown since the introduction of the online parliamentary petition platform. Our website shows that in the 51st Parliament (September 2014 to August 2017), 138 petitions were reported back to the House of Representatives. This increased to 238 petitions in the 52nd Parliament (November 2017 to September 2020). By August 2023, in the 53rd Parliament (November 2017 to September 2023), 466 petitions had been reported back to the House of Representatives.

Number of petitions reported back to the New Zealand House of Representatives⁷



⁵ The transcript on the special debate on COVID-19 immigration and border policies [is available on the Parliament website](#).

⁶ The transcript on the special debate on digital exclusion [is available on the Parliament website](#).

⁷ These statistics are taken from [the Parliament website](#).

5 Assessing our practice: Areas rated highly

As noted above, in Professor Vromen's assessment, the New Zealand online parliamentary petition system rated highly for:

- platform and petition accessibility
- petition initiation
- design feedback
- transparency of progress
- Government/parliamentary response.

Platform and petition accessibility

We were pleased to have positive feedback about the accessibility of the New Zealand parliamentary petition platform. We can see that people are more engaged with us because, since we established the online petition system, petition numbers have significantly increased. Professor Vromen's paper notes that the New Zealand Parliament website provides guides to the petitioning process in 13 languages, as well as in simplified English.

Petition initiation and design feedback

We discussed with Professor Vromen the process by which petitions are moderated when they are lodged on the parliamentary petitions platform. Professor Vromen's paper gives New Zealand as a good example of providing explanations where petitions do not meet requirements, and offering advice on how a petition may be made to align with requirements. Staff of the Office of the Clerk work with petitioners to ensure that petitions use respectful language, are addressed to the House of Representatives, request something that Parliament can do, and only contain facts that can be authenticated.

Professor Vromen also noted that another positive aspect of New Zealand's parliamentary petitions platform is that the New Zealand Parliament website has few constraints on who can start or sign a petition. Unlike some other jurisdictions, New Zealand has no restrictions for age, nationality, or residency for petitioners or signatories of petitions. There is no minimum number of signatures required before a petition can be presented to Parliament, considered by a select committee, or debated in the House.

Transparency of progress

Professor Vromen's paper notes that New Zealand provides a strong explanation on the website of the petition process and the kinds of responses that a petition may receive from Government or Parliament.

The New Zealand Parliament website also displays the number of signatures on each petition while it is open for signature. A petition's progress is visible through the stages of opening and closing for signatures, being presented to the House, and being considered by a select committee. Finally, at the end of the process, the website shows whether a petition has been reported back or referred to a Minister. Copies of the committee report or Government response are available on the website.

Government/parliamentary response

We were pleased to have a positive assessment for government/parliamentary response. We note that, compared to the 10 percent of petitions Professor Vromen told us receive responses on Australian non-government websites, 100 percent of petitions that are presented to the House of Representatives receive a response.⁸

We do not expect that all petitions will receive a positive response. Even when we think a positive response is merited, we can only make recommendations to the Government, and the Government is not required to act on these. Our aim instead is to ensure that petitioners feel heard and know that their request has been considered.

New Zealand Parliament responses may range from a brief report noting the petition has been received, to more extensive examination of written and oral evidence from the petitioner and relevant government ministries or departments.

⁸ Under Standing Order 380 petitions referred to Ministers are required to receive a response, but we note they do not always receive one.

6 Assessing our practice: Areas in which we could improve

In Professor Vromen's assessment, areas in which the New Zealand online parliamentary petition system could improve are:

- policy embeddedness
- community engagement
- government/parliamentary engagement.

Policy embeddedness

We were told that our petition system could be improved by providing greater clarity about how petitioning Parliament fits within a wider policy of engagement.

Professor Vromen explained that maximalist online petition platforms seek to maximise citizen engagement in the petition process. She says ideally this is underpinned by a formal position statement on the importance of public engagement. This could highlight the importance of citizens' right to have their voices heard in the political process, including by petitioning, and the importance of their representatives listening and responding to them. She points to the People's Opinion Matters page of the House of Representatives of the Netherlands as a good model.⁹

Community engagement

We were initially surprised at receiving a lower graded assessment for community engagement, as we feel that our engagement with petitioners is strong. However, we then understood that this criterion assesses citizen-to-citizen engagement.

Professor Vromen's community engagement assessment compares parliamentary petition platforms with those of non-government petition platforms, such as Change.org. Many non-governmental petition platforms actively encourage people to continue to engage and participate after they have signed a petition. For example, some platforms make provision on the petition page itself for community discussion about the subject of the petition, similar to posts on social media. Signatories may be encouraged to explain why they support the petition, and to share their stories within the petition platform. They may also be encouraged and enabled to share the petition with friends and contacts on social media.

Professor Vromen said few parliamentary petition platforms provide the same capacity within their platforms for citizen-to-citizen discussion. She said petitions on parliamentary petition platforms are often harder to access, harder to find, and harder to share than petitions on

⁹ *The people's opinion matters!*, House of Representatives of the Netherlands

non-government platforms. She said most do not have tools that could enable petitioners and signatories to easily share petitions through social media networks.

Professor Vromen acknowledged the difficulties of enabling community participation on formal Parliament platforms. However, she encouraged us to continue to understand how members of the community prefer to engage. She said this continues to change dramatically. Although this change is often citizen-led, Professor Vromen advocated to us that governments and academic institutions also have a duty to create responsible and accessible spaces. She said this would ensure that public policy discussions are not just for those with time to spare, but can enable all citizens to feel they have a voice, however they choose to participate.

We noted that for community discussions about petitions to be hosted on the New Zealand Parliament website, considerable resources would be required for monitoring and moderating content. For example, Standing Orders require that respectful language is used in petitions and submissions, that facts are authenticated, and that there is a right to natural justice if an allegation is made against another person or organisation.

Our experience is that not all people who engage with Parliament, including some petitioners, use respectful language all the time or self-moderate their communications. We were concerned that providing space for online community forums to be hosted directly on the Parliament website could potentially allow for the sharing of disinformation and misinformation. The Standing Orders Committee explained in its Review of Standing Orders 2020 that statements made in petitions needed to be authenticated:

As proceedings of Parliament, petitions are covered by the protection of parliamentary privilege. This is important, as it protects both petitioners promoting legitimate petitions, and the House's consideration of such petitions. However, it also opens up the possibility for petitioners to use the petitions process to make damaging allegations under the protection of privilege. For that reason, statements made in petitions, which are covered by privilege, must be able to be authenticated.¹⁰

Some of us questioned whether enabling community engagement on the Parliament website is our role. We noted that our parliamentary petition process provides support for petitions that were established on other platforms. We asked whether it would be more appropriate to improve our engagement with non-government petition platforms which already provide forums for community discussion.

Some of us felt there could be an opportunity to promote engagement with petitions, and potentially community discussion about the subject matter of petitions, on Parliament's social media accounts. It was noted that this could potentially help to connect petitioners and signatories interested in the same topic. This could have the advantage of reducing instances where multiple petitions on the same topic are initiated at the same time.

¹⁰ 52nd Parliament Standing Orders Committee, Review of Standing Orders 2020, 3 August 2020 Recommendation 38.

However, we also noted that Parliament must be even-handed about how it communicates about petitions. It is important that any decisions to highlight some petitions on Parliament's website or social media channels are perceived as non-partisan and impartial.

Government/parliamentary engagement

This criterion considers whether Government or Parliament engages with citizens throughout the petitioning process. For example, Professor Vromen asks whether citizens are provided with information on the topic of the petition through the online platform, such as policy statements, information sheets, and fact-checking. She encourages parliamentary online petition platforms to consider engagement through the whole process of a petition, not only after a petition is formally presented to Parliament.

We are not convinced that parliamentary platforms are the right place for this type of engagement. It would not be possible to provide information and policy sheets about all petitions we receive, and, in the same way as there is a risk in highlighting or promoting petitions, there is a risk of appearing partisan if parliamentary staff select one or two petitions to provide this extra support for.

Some of us noted that the changing nature of petitioning means that citizens can be left on their own to research the basis for petitions. An example was given that in the past, with paper-based petitions, a potential signatory may have had a face-to-face conversation in a public place with a person holding a copy of the petition and asking them to sign it. We noted it is helpful for politicians and decision-makers to understand these changes in how people are engaging, and to consider how to assist people seeking to engage on these issues.

7 Committee comment

We thank Professor Vromen for bringing to our attention her research on the changing nature of petition platforms and citizen engagement. We are grateful for the perspective she brings about how our New Zealand parliamentary petition platform compares with those in other jurisdictions.

We note that Professor Vromen praised the accessibility, feedback, and transparency of the New Zealand parliamentary petitions system. She has challenged us to think further about citizen-to-citizen engagement, engagement throughout the whole petitions process, and embedding the petitions process within a policy of wider engagement.

We continue to think that the Parliament website is not an appropriate place to host citizen dialogue. However, we can see that Parliament could consider ways to use social media and build relationships with community organisations that already host that kind of community forum. We also see benefit in clarifying how petitioning Parliament fits within a wider vision of citizen engagement. Professor Vromen's work also informed our work with Professor Michael Macaulay in reviewing ministerial and Government responses to petitions.

We hope that this report provides some areas of reflection and guidance that could be useful for future Petitions Committees of the New Zealand Parliament.

Appendix

Committee procedure

We met between 8 December 2022 and 24 August 2023 to consider this briefing. We received written and oral evidence from Professor Ariadne Vromen of the Australian National University.

Committee members

Hon Jacqui Dean (Chairperson)
Rachel Boyack (to 8 Feb 2023)
Dr Liz Craig (from 8 Feb 2023 to 3 May 2023)
Steph Lewis (23 August 2022 to 8 Feb 2023)
Nicole McKee
Sarah Pallett
Jamie Strange (from 8 February 2023)
Teanau Tuiono
Hon Poto Williams (from 3 May 2023)

Rachel Boyack continued to participate in this item of business.

Evidence received

We received the following documents as evidence for this briefing. They are available on [the Parliament website](#).

- Ariadne Vromen (Briefing into petition platforms and citizen engagement)
- Ariadne Vromen (Briefing into petition platforms and citizen engagement) Supp 1

A video of our hearing with Professor Vromen is also available online:

- [Hearing of evidence 9 May 2023](#).