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# ARE E-PETITIONS OPERATIVE FOR CHANGE? ON THE EFFECTIVENESS AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF E-PETITIONING

## Abstract:

During the last decade, with the progress of new information and communication technologies, electronic petitioning systems have emerged as a productive way for individuals to communicate with the authorities or policy makers about diverse issues.  Although, they are designed to enable citizens to influence decision–making in the policy making process, there is an ongoing discussion on their effectiveness:  one side of this discussion regards e-petitions as a new form of activism that enables greater political participation, and hence fortifies democracy. According to this view, e-petition campaigns can be an operative tool to help citizens to put issues on the political agenda, they are capable of producing a desired result, and thus they can cause a change over and transform political decisions. On the other side of this discussion, there is an opposite view that considers the transformative potential of an online petition as very moderate.  Within this study, this transformative potential, the effectiveness of e-petitions, is discussed and analysed. With this aim, the paper uses the case studies from change.org.tr to determine the extent to which e-petitioning worked when ending a campaign successfully.

## Keywords:

online petitions, e-petitions, e-petitioning, effectiveness, change.org

## Introduction

The term petition can be defined as a "request to a public authority, usually a governmental institution or parliament" (Lindner & Riehm, 2011). In most liberal democracies, it is the citizen's right to petition and in some, this right is also protected under law. The citizen's right to petition has a long history that "dates back to 13th century" (Dumas et al, 2015). According to the records from the UK House of Commons Information Office, "the right to make formal requests to an authority through a petition has been a staple of citizen government interaction since the early 1400s when the practice of government petitioning became widespread under King Henry IV of England" (Goldstein et al, 2013).

In essence, there are two kinds of petitions which can be identified depending on their focus: *Res publica* and *res privata*. While *res publica* petitions concern political issues in a narrow sense, the focus of *res privata* petitions is on individual cases of hardship and protection of personal rights and interests (Bohle & Riehm, 2013). Although concerns may vary, it can be argued that in democratic terms, in general, petitions refer to a specific form of political participation. Lindner and Reihm (2011) delineate three main characteristics which distinguish petitions from other forms of participation: 1) Petitions, in contrast with hearings or consultations, are initiated from the bottom-up by citizens; 2) Valid petitions usually do not need to meet complex formal requirements such as specific forms or respites, and are free of cost; and 3) Most petitions are addressed to institutions that typically function as intermediaries.

There is a commonly held view that "the rise of the Internet spurred the growth of e-democracy tools, which promised to make democratic participation more convenient, accessible, and interactive" (Goldstein, 2013). Therefore, in the current era, alongside traditional methods of petitioning, electronic petition systems set up by governments have emerged in many liberal democratic countries as a contemporary tool that promotes an effective way to communicate with the governments about policy issues and facilitates making public participation in policy discussions more easily accessible (Dumas et al, 2015). In addition to official e-petitioning systems, new communication technologies also allow for the existence of e-petitioning platforms such as change.org and avaaz.org which are supported by private organisations.

## Functions and Effectiveness of Petitioning / E-petitioning

Petitions aim to fulfill different political and democratic functions. According to Lindner & Reihm (2011) the purpose of petitioning is to change public policy, demand officials to make statements or induce public institutions to take action. But questions have been raised as to whether they really fulfil such objectives. To answer this question, firstly, one should fully analyse the functions of petitioning and e-petitioning.

**Table 1: Functions of Petitioning**

| PETITIONER (S) | PETITION BODY | POLITICAL-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM |
|---|---|---|
| -Protection of rights and interests<br>- Political participation<br>-Mobilisation<br>-Personal "Self-Realisation" | -Control of Administration<br>- Advocate / mediator<br>-Strengthen the petition body's standing | -Seismographic function<br>-Increased Responsiveness |

*Source:  Bohle & Riehm, 2011.*

As shown in Table 1, Bohle & Riehm (2013) argue that at least three perspectives need to be taken into account while trying to determine the functions of petitions or petitioning, i.e. those of: 1) the petitioner; 2) the petition body; and lastly 3) the political administrative system. Considering the first perspective, according to Bohle & Riehm (2013), it is widely accepted that the petition system fulfills two essential functions for the petitioners. These two core functions are the protection of individual rights and interests on the one hand, and the possibilities of active participation in political decision-making and policy implementation on the other. There is also a further function of petitions for the petitioner, namely, that of what may be termed mobilisation. If a petitioner or a group of petitioners make their concerns public and ask for support, the petition serves to generate public attention, to initiate debate, to influence public opinion and to win supporters. According to the above authors, a further sub-function of mobilisation is that active participation has effects on the self and the consciousness of citizens (Bohle & Riehm, 2013).

Considering the second perspective, that of the petition body (or addressee), two core functions can be determined: that of control and mediation of the administration. According to Bohle and Riehm (2013), the control function is essential since although it is a weak form of political control, the petition body nevertheless exerts a supervisory function in the area for which it is responsible. The second function of the addressee, intermediation, requires the addressee to reconcile the interests of the citizen and the executive or to advocate the cause of the petitioner. There is, additionally, one more sub-function which "is the interest of the petition bodies to strengthen and expand their visibility, reputation, competence and power" (Bohle & Riehm, 2013).

Lastly, from the perspective of the political/administrative system, the seismographic function and increased responsiveness are the main functions. "By receiving petitions the petition body and further political bodies involved obtain information about the minor and major problems of each area and it is called as seismographic function" (Bohle & Riehm, 2013).  In terms of increasing the responsiveness function, the "political–administrative system presumes that the petition system is more than a listener and in conditions to work effectively on behalf of the petitioners" (Bohle & Riehm, 2013).

Another study (Lindner and Riehm, 2011) describes the functions of petitions as individual level functions, intermediate-level functions and system-level functions. At the individual level, even though effectiveness is relatively limited compared with other channels in terms of remedying administrative wrongdoings, petitions can still effectively function to mobilise supporters, NGOs and interest groups. At the intermediate level, petitions fulfill some distinct functions such as supporting parliamentary control of the executive, delivering useful information or acting as indicators. And lastly, at the system level, petitions and petitioning "can potentially contribute to the system functions of integration and legitimacy" (Lindner and Riehm, 2011). In other words, by providing citizens with a formal channel to submit requests, citizens' integration into political systems can be facilitated and thus political decision making can be improved (Lindner and Riehm, 2011).

These are the anticipated functions of e-petitioning, all of which refer to e-petitions' potential effectiveness regarding policy issues and their impact on decision making processes. Dumas et al (2015) state that the effectiveness of e-petitions depends on their impact on political action. To the writers, e-petitioning pulls together two forms of political action: 1) the public expression of policy proposals; and 2) the ability to mobilise collective action – which takes place when individuals transition from a private domain of interest to a public one.

According to Macintosh (2004: 3) there are 5 high-level stages involved in the policy life-cycle: 1) agenda setting; 2) analysis of the agenda; 3) creating the policy; 4) implementing the policy; and lastly 5) monitoring the policy. E-petitioning campaigns function at the first level, that of agenda setting, which refers to "establishing the need for a policy or a change in policy and defining what the problem to be addressed is" (Macintosh, 2004:3). In a similar manner, Dumas et al (2015) use concepts from agenda setting theory to conceptualise how e-petitioning may contribute to the policy making process, which also refers to its effectiveness. Thus, they use such theories to answer the question of "why do some policy issues produce radical changes in legislation, while others are neglected entirely or become locked over time within stable and exclusive institutional contexts?" According to the writers, "policy agenda reflects the attention paid to particular issues which can be increased by focusing events that can cause issues to shoot high onto agenda in a short period" (Dumas et al, 2015: 5). New information technologies and media affect the attention processes that can "amplify and weight some information over others, prime audiences, with certain interpretational predispositions at the expense of others and they can contribute to positive and negative feedback cycles" (Dumas et al, 2015). E-petitioning platforms such as avaaz.org or change.org are one of the new information technologies that have the potential to bring issues to the forefront of the policy making agenda and have effects on the policy making process. Thus, citizens may be able to participate in the whole policy life cycle of decision making which also strengthens democracy.

## Methodology

Characteristics of using case studies as research strategies (Mills et al, 2010) include: 1) a focus on the interrelationships that constitute the context of a specific entity (such as an organisation, event, phenomenon or person); 2) analysis of the relationship between the contextual factors and the entity being studied; and 3) the explicit purpose of using those insights (of interactions between contextual relationships and the entity in question) to generate theory and/or contribute to extant theory.  As a strategy rather than a method or methodology, case studies often involve simply observing what happened; however, the methods used to study a case can rest within a quantitative, qualitative or mixed–method investigative paradigm and the data are gathered from a variety of sources (Mills et al, 2010).

According to Mills et al, (2010), "case study research samples are ideally selected strategically rather than randomly therefore researchers need to select cases that give a maximum of information about the research objective at stake" (Mills et al, 2010: 61). The criteria for the case selection depends on the type of research question. With descriptive case questions, the cases selected should give maximal information about the specific futures and characteristics of a particular social phenomenon. On the other hand, with an explanatory question, researchers should select cases to maximise the opportunities for developing hypothesis or theories that explain the social phenomena at stake. And lastly, with an exploratory question, the selection of the cases is deductively based on theoretical considerations (Mills et al, 2010: 61-62).

Drawing from these ideas, case study research as a strategy has been adopted within this work in order to explain the extent to which petitioning has worked when ending a campaign successfully. The research question of this work includes descriptive and explanatory characteristics. Three Turkey-based e-petitioning environmental campaign cases organized via change.org have been analysed: Case 1: The campaign which aimed to save the ancient city of Phaselis in Antalya (2015); Case 2: The campaign intended to protect olive groves in Turkey; and Case 3: The e-petitioning campaign intended to stop the HES (hydroelectric power plant) project in Kamilet Valley, Artvin, and to make the valley become a national park.  All three are *res publica* cases. The first reason to select these three specific cases is their success in reaching the goal which was the target at the start of the campaign and secondly, their ability to demonstrate the three level functions of petitioning, explained in the preceding section.  The data was gathered mostly from the website itself, but also other news sources, such as the organising committee's websites and daily newspapers which have been used in order to analyse the process fully.

## Case 1: Save the Ancient City of Phaselis in Antalya!

Phaselis is one of the best preserved of the ancient cities, located on a cove along the Mediterranean Sea in the  south of Turkey. In 2013, a hotel project named Dream of Phaselis and owned by Rixos, a hotel chain known – at the time – for its closeness to the government, was approved by local officials from the Environment Ministry.  The project was "slated to have 288 rooms, would have been built on the limits of the

Olimpos National Park (which includes the city of Phaselis too), while a significant part of the facility would be inside a first-degree archaeological site, where no construction is allowed under current legislation" (Hurriyetdailynews, 2014). Although an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report which all "establishments, institutions, and businesses that may cause environmental problems via their activities, are obliged to obtain", local officials from the Environment Ministry, who are responsible for approving such projects, decided not to demand an EIA report in this case.

The Ministry official's decision to dismiss the environmental assessment process despite legal constraints outraged environmental activists and lawyers alike (Hurriyetdailynews, 2015) and the e-petition campaign, "Save the Ancient City of Phaselis in Antalya!" was started by an evironmental activist, Melike Vergili, on *change.org*. Once the e-petition campaign had been started, Vergili and her friends who shared the same concerns, founded the Phaselis Initiative with the motto that the "right to life is superior to politics" (Vergili, 2015). Their effective social media campaign (see Facebook end Twitter accounts and YouTube videos of the Initiative) mediated the Initiative to become involved with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional chambers and local residents.

After the Phaselis Initiative started the campaign, Yıldıray Sapan, Deputy of Antalya from the CHP, the main opposition party, and Umut Oran, the Vice President of the CHP, issued two different parliamentary questions over the Phaselis case to the Minister of Environmental Urban Planning and also the Minister of Culture and Tourism (it should be noted that these parliamentary questions are good examples of petition's inter-mediated level functions: in this case, demonstrating parliamentary control over the executive). In addition, during the process, members and supporters of the Initiative, as Benmayer states (2015), did not stop at filing a court case to cancel the project; they also documented the ancient ruins on the land planned for the construction."

It is therefore clear that a trial process, i.e. a legal fight, was launched by the Initiative against the decision of local officers. After the Initiative filed a case against the decision of the governor's office, the Antalya 2nd Administrative Court issued an injunction on the decision, saying that an EIA report was needed. In another case on the Phaselis, the Antalya 1st Administrative Court issued an injunction on the allocation of the area to the company (Todayszaman.com, 2015). However, the social media campaign – including the e-petition on change.org with 95,000 signatories – which aimed to obtain more attention and support from the public was only a part – albeit very important, but still not direct part – of the whole process.

## Case 2: Protect Olive Groves in Turkey!

In January 2014, the Republic of Turkey Energy Market Regulatory Authority gave a preliminary permit for the Kolin Group's coal mine project. The Kolin Group was seeking to expropriate an olive grove area in the Soma district to build and operate a 510 megawatt coal-fired power plant (Hattam, 2015). Although legal applications to cancel the project were made by environmentalist groups and institutions such as

Greenpeace Mediterranean, the permission sparked protests in Soma, the coal capital of the Aegean.

The villagers in Yırca, a village near the Soma district with a population of 400, were supported in their fight by activists from the nascent environmental movement of Turkey which builds solidarity amongst those affected by multiple environmentally damaging projects of recent history (Hattam, 2015). While the legal process was ongoing, olive trees in Soma, Yırca, were bulldozed by the Kolin Group, resulting in more than 5000 trees being illegally cut. Following this event, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of main opposition Republican People's Party,  "called on the prosecutors to secure olive groves in Soma" (Cihan.com, 2014).

Meanwhile, Salih Madra, founding president of the Ayvalık Olive Producers Association, and a third–generation olive grower, launched a campaign on change.org (more than 200,000 people supported the campaign).  The signatures were sent to the Parliament Industry Committee and the Agriculture Committee while the campaign was still on-going. In addition, some of the mainstream media dealt with the subject in their daily agendas, which was important in building solidarity with and public support for the case. Finally, some international support was received from organisations such as Slow Food, which made the Kolin Group's illegal actions more visible internationally, a factor which can create greater pressure on the authorities of the country.

Eventually, in 2015, Turkey's Council of State ordered a stay of execution for a controversial change in regulation that opened olive groves across the country for the construction of energy facilities, because this new regulation contradicted existing legislation which protects olive groves and aims to increase the production of olives. With the support of the main opposition People's Republic  party, Manisa deputy, Greenpeace members and local civil society organisations, the villagers have now planted olive trees in the place where more than 5000 olive trees were felled for the Kolin Group's coal power plant construction. (Hurriyetdaily.com, 2015a).

## Case 3: HES (Hydroelectric Power Plant) Project in Kamilet Valley

Kamilet Valley, situated in Arhavi in the east region of Turkey, is a well preserved natural area with a unique biodiversity. In 2012, a private electricity company received a positive Environmental Impact Assessment report from local officers to build a hydroelectric power plant in the Valley. The plant was planned in order to carry water over a distance of 5 kilometers, through tunnels and pipes, potentially causing a great amount of harm to and destruction of the surrounding environment (Menafocus.qa, 2015). According to environmentalists, one of the major problems with hydroelectric power plants is that building dams, which are needed to produce hydroelectricity, can and will interrupt and disturb the river's flow. This is of environmental importance because open waters are a habitat for many organisms and damming will therefore harm or even destroy these aquatic ecosystems leading to a decrease in biodiversity (Ecoistmag.wordpress.com,  2014). Therefore, local people and environmentalist groups filed a case to a local court demanding the cancellation of the company's

operation in the area. Meanwhile, an e-petition campaign was started on www.change.org by Hatice Kestane, an enviromentally conscious local business manager. The addressed institutions were the Ministry of Environment and Forest and the General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks. More than 34,000 people signed it. After the local court cancelled the company's construction plan, the e-petition campaign announced its success.

As can be understand from the legal process in the case, the e-petition campaign clearly affected the success of this case, but – similar to the first two cases – this was not a direct effect. According to Kestane (gold.ajanspress.com, 2015), the campaign initiator, "change.org announced the campaign to other followers which was the greatest help". However, she then admitted that the demonstrations, meetings and press releases organised by local people and environmentalist platforms also had a significant impact alongside her invitations to and sponsorship by many TV channels, researchers and scientists introducing Kamilet Valley to public. She also emphasised that after the e-petition campaign, the authorities informed her indirectly (via the deputy of Artvin and their own delegates) about their intention to inspect the Kamilet Valley and make it a national park depending on the result from this inspection (gold.ajanspress.com, 2015).This emphasis is also important for demonstrating how e-petition campaigns can function between the three levels of the individual (the campaign initiator), the intermediate (the deputy of Artvin, the city where Kamilet Valley is located, and also the delegates) and the system (the Ministry of Environment and Forest, the General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks).

## Conclusion

In the analysis above, the three cases are able to demonstrate all three levels (*individual, intermediate and system levels*) of functions of e-petitioning which were explained in Section 2.   Although each e-petitioning campaign was initiated by individuals, they have been supported by civil society, non-governmental organisations and also other interest groups (*i.e. individual level functions*) which played an important part in defending the case. They have received support from local politicians and opposition party members in parliament (*i.e. intermediate level functions*). As a result, authorities cancelled all three projects (*i.e. system level functions*).

Considering that the effectiveness of e-petitions and e-petitioning depends on the impact on political action, all of the three *res publica* cases have reached the goal they aimed for. However, the impact of the e-petition campaign in all cases can be defined as an indirect one. In the three cases, the direct impact derived from the legal processes which were launched against the decisions of the authorities. In such cases, the e-petition campaigns alongside (or as a part of) social media campaigns specifically had an effect on the agenda setting cycle of the policy making process. Thus, e-petitions help to establish the need for a policy or (as it can be seen in our cases) a change in policy and to define the problem to be addressed.

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