

U.S.

Online Petitions Take Citizen Participation to New Levels. But Do They Work?

By CHRISTOPHER MELE DEC. 28, 2016

Online petitions are all over the place.

Some are political (like one asking members of the Electoral College to vote for Hillary Clinton as president instead of Donald J. Trump); others are unearthly (like one asking that “Star Wars: The Old Republic” series be shown on Netflix).

That first petition drew 4.9 million signatures on Change.org. Nonetheless, members of the Electoral College voted for Mr. Trump on Dec. 19. The second petition drew over 123,000 names.

There has been a proliferation of these petitions — Change.org has more than 100 million users in 196 countries — but are they effective? Do the intended recipients, often policy makers or elected leaders, pay attention?

Worldwide, Change.org users claim one victory per hour, A.J. Walton, a spokesman for the online petition forum, said in an interview.

Among them: persuading Arlington National Cemetery and other military cemeteries to bury members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, female aviators in World War II, and getting Florida transportation officials to install barriers between roads and lakes, ponds and canals to reduce the number of crashes that result in drownings.

In the case of the Electoral College petition, Mr. Walton said the person who started it, Daniel Brezenoff, was able to generate widespread interest and raise more than \$250,000 for his cause.

That a petition did not produce the desired outcome does not mean it failed, he added.

“Was he victorious? No,” Mr. Walton said, referring to Mr. Brezenoff. “Was he successful? I would say yes.”

Those who start a petition can deliver printed copies to the intended recipient. Those targeted do not receive emails every time a person signs, but they are often alerted by email that there is a petition directed at them.

The biggest benefit from a petition is raised awareness, Jason Del Gandio, a professor of communications and social movements at Temple University in Philadelphia, said in an interview. “In some ways it’s just the updated version of the letter-writing campaign to a representative that has been going on for years,” he said.

Successful petition drives do not exist in a vacuum, he added in an email.

“No president is going to do an about-face on a major policy because of 20,000 signatures,” he wrote. “But coupling that petition with other tactics like protests, rallies, phone calls, face-to-face lobbying, a well-organized media plan and community outreach creates an environment in which the goals of the signatories can become reality.”

Beyond seeking change, petitions serve other important functions, such as mobilizing supporters and reinforcing views, Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist and director of the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at the State University of New York at New Paltz, said in an interview.

The effectiveness of a petition drive depends on how many signatures are collected, who is signing and whether those being petitioned are in a position to make changes, he said. A petition with 300 signatures, for instance, would carry greater weight if it was aimed at a city council member, who would have fewer

constituents than a member of Congress.

Still, lawmakers on all levels pay attention to petitions because they demonstrate “either existing organizational strength or the ability to organize,” Scott Payne, who worked as a legislative assistant in Congress, said in an interview.

Mr. Payne, who also worked as an organizer for NationBuilder.com, a software company that among other things helps clients gather supporters and donors, said congressional staff members knew that if petitioners did not get a response, they could take their case to the news media.

A decade ago, when he worked for Representative John Hall, a Democrat from the Hudson Valley, the office received 5,000 emails and letters a week. Online petitions can take that level of communication to a larger scale by amassing signatures quickly and easily.

“Congressional offices are seeing a river of mail coming into their offices,” Mr. Payne said. “Petitions add a garden hose to that.”

Digital petitions are popularly used to build databases of names, emails and phone numbers of those who can be called on to act or donate. “It’s moved from an organizing effort to an intelligence-gathering operation,” he said. That granular level of detail also allows organizations to direct ads to supporters on Facebook.

Jeb Ory, chief executive of Phone2Action, which relies on technology to help those who want to reach their lawmakers, said digital participation has helped amplify the voices of citizens.

“All it takes is a handful of tweets and Facebook posts for lawmakers to realize there are real people in the community who care about these issues,” he said. “I think technology has done an amazing job of making these decision-makers and policy-makers accessible to the average person.”

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