ONLINE PETITIONS

Politics wins in battle for clicks, study suggests

Nigel Gladstone

Millions of Australians have helped each other to protest or pay for a passion project online, with the chorus of clicks now studied by academics and heard by politicians.

There have been 32,728 Australian petitions started on the change.org website since 2014, with more than 3.5 million people signing their name to support campaigns such as reduced parking fees at NSW hospitals, marriage equality and overturning laws in Queensland that allowed “gay panic” as a murder defence.

In 2017, the top five categories to gain support were: criminal justice, animal-related issues, health, the environment and human rights.

Ariadne Vromen, professor of political sociology at the University of Sydney, and Professor Darren Halpin of ANU have collected four years of data from change.org to study online petitions for a project funded by the Australian Research Council.

“This form of political engagement is both mainstream and important,” Professor Vromen said. “In Australia, GetUp! were really the pioneers of using online petitions and that was a bit of a shock to the system but politicians quickly became cynical.

“Change.org is different because citizens can start their own thing, so it is different to an advocacy group starting something.”

Calling people who use these platforms “slacktivists” is “a lazy form of analysis” because the way people engage in politics has changed, Professor Vromen said.

“We have some of highest rates of signing up for both old-fashioned and online petitions in the world. People aren’t making petitions around large-scale macro-economic issues.

“The loop between issues that matter to people are not the ones being debated in Parliament or by politicians ... that difference in agendas [Parliament and citizens] is important to think about. It’s about what people think is tangible in their lives, that they think could be changed. As soon as you set up a petition, it is asking for an outcome.”

Her study of 17,000 petitions is yet to be published but initial analysis found 75 per cent had some political or policy content and just over half were aimed at a level of government [federal, state or local] or a government agency.

Head of Change.org in Australia, Nathan Elvery, said since the last election, the Prime Minister, Opposition Leader, cabinet ministers and state premiers have all logged on to the platform to “listen and act on people-led campaigns”.

“At a time when trust in established institutions and authorities is crumbling, everyday Aussies are logging on to Change.org in millions to support each other, tackle injustices and take action,” Mr Elvery said.

A Herald analysis of the 3449 Australian Kickstarter projects started between November 2013 and November 2017 found that Australians backed technology projects with more of their money than any other category on Kickstarter.

But only two products – Sento Towel (a bath towel) and Scorl (a snorkel that enables up to 10 minutes underwater via a refillable hand pump) – got more than a million dollars in pledges.

Craft, dance, and journalism pitches were among the least likely categories on Kickstarter to attract money from people. Senior director of international at Kickstarter, Sean Leow, said many projects “reflect the local culture from which the creator lives, works and creates”.

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The Australian projects that received the most funds on Kickstarter

- **Art:** Glowing Galaxies | Glow-In-The-Dark Deep Space Artwork
- **Comics:** The Spider King - Graphic Novel
- **Crafts:** In the Folds sewing patterns: Slow sewing for modern makers
- **Dance:** The Sydney Flamenco Studio's project
- **Design:** "Oi" - The bike bell that doesn't look like a bike bell
- **Fashion:** Cobba | The World's First Non-Stop Shorts featuring AptGrip
- **Film:** Embrace - The documentary that will create global change
- **Food:** Bald Rock Beef Jerky is 100% Real Australian Beef Jerky
- **Games:** Satellite Reign
- **Journalism:** The Frustrated State
- **Music:** First crowdfunded classical world tour
- **Photography:** LIFE OF PIKELET the coffee table book
- **Publishing:** Golden Ratio Colouring Book
- **Technology:** nura: headphones that learn and adapt to your unique hearing
- **Theatre:** FIX THE FITZ