

Broadening Participation through E-Petitions? Results from an Empirical Study on Petitions to the German Parliament

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Abstract

Petitioning is a well established form of political participation in most liberal democracies. Yet, little is known about petitioners, their socio-demographics, motivations and assessments of petitioning processes. After the German parliament had introduced public e-petitions which are submitted, signed and discussed on the Internet in 2005, a survey of 571 traditional as well as 350 e-petitioners was carried out in 2007 as a part of a comprehensive evaluation study of the Office of Technology Assessment at the German Parliament (TAB). The results indicate that both petitioner samples are characterised by an above average level of general political participation and Internet use. Users of the e-petition system are younger than traditional petitioners, but the group continues to be dominated by men and those with higher levels of formal education to the same degree as among traditional petitioners. According to our findings, the Internet-based participation channel e-petitioning seems to amplify existing inequalities in participation patterns as they predominately attract highly mobilised and politically active individuals with a disproportionately high socio-economic status. Preliminary results of an ongoing follow-up study by and large confirm this conclusion.

Key words: Electronic petitions, e-petitions, petitioning, e-democracy, political participation, e-participation, e-parliament, socio-demographics, Bundestag, German Federal Parliament

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Broadening Participation through E-Petitions? Results from an Empirical Study on Petitions to the German Parliament

1. Introduction

The right to petition parliament has received unprecedented public attention in Germany during the last few years. Arguably, the reason for the heightened interest in this long-standing and constitutionally guaranteed right is related to a number of notable procedural innovations which at least are in part reliant on the Internet, and which have the potential to contribute to increased publicness and transparency of the parliament's decision-making procedures. In 2005, the German Federal Parliament (*Deutscher Bundestag*) initiated a two-year e-petitioning pilot scheme which enabled citizens to submit, publish, co-sign and discuss petitions online. The launch of the e-petition system was accompanied by the introduction of the statutory obligation of the *Bundestag's* petitions committee to hold public meetings with petitioners who collected 50,000 or more signatures supporting their cause. Due to the broad public approval and the positive evaluation of the pilot, the petition committee decided to continue to provide the e-petition system as a regular service in 2007. The "role model" for the Internet-related features of the reform was the Scottish Parliament's e-petition system, which was introduced in 2000, only one year after the re-establishment of the Scottish legislature (Macintosh, Malina and Farrell 2002). The close working relationship between the petition committees of the two parliaments is also signified by the fact that the *Bundestag's* e-petition system was based on the Scottish E-petitioner software until 2008.

An analysis of the *Bundestag's* e-petition system seems particularly promising due to two main reasons: First, e-petitions – not only in Germany, but also in other liberal democracies such as the UK – are clearly at the forefront of official, fully operational e-participation opportunities provided to citizens by governments and parliaments. Other forms of formal, institutionalized and legally codified forms of e-participation are rather exceptional, and the few existing examples appear to be less mature, tend to remain at an experimental stage or are confined to specific target groups (Lindner and Riehm 2009a). Moreover, official e-petition systems made available by public institutions seem to be better suited to grasp changing participation patterns associated with this form of e-participation due to their "real-life" conditions. Second, the reform of the German petitioning process, resulting in modified and Internet-based submission procedures, the introduction of new rights for petitioners and enhanced transparency and publicness, potentially affects parliamentary core functions. Thus, possible

impacts of e-petition systems on political legitimacy and responsiveness can be observed.

The reforms of the *Bundestag*'s petition procedures were the vantage point for the Office of Technology Assessment at the German Parliament (TAB) to conduct a comprehensive scientific evaluation focusing on different aspects of new media applications in parliamentary petitioning. Between 2006 and 2008, the TAB carried out the research project "Public electronic petitions and civic involvement" on behalf of the *Bundestag*.¹ The findings were published in 2009 (Riehm et al.). Since 2009, TAB is working on the follow-up study "Electronic petitioning and the modernisation of petitioning systems in Europe".² The empirical results presented in this paper were primarily generated during the first project.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight a selection of the main findings of this research. Particular emphasis will be put on the impact of e-petitions on political participation. Who are the users of the new e-petition system and what distinguishes them from initiators and supporters of traditional, paper-based petitions on the one hand and the public at large on the other in terms of socio-demographics? What are their motives to use the web-based features offered by the *Bundestag*, and how do they evaluate the e-petition system? Does the availability of an online petitioning channel change established patterns of political participation? Moreover, based on the overall results of the multiple research endeavours of the project, a brief assessment of the procedural innovation on the *Bundestag*'s decision-making processes with regard to increased transparency and responsiveness will be presented.

The evaluation of the e-petitioning pilot scheme centered on four main fields of investigation: (1) the software system, (2) the petitioners, users and the general public, (3) the staff of the parliamentary services and administration and (4) the petitions committee. A broad range of quantitative and qualitative methods was applied during the project, including usability analyses, workflow analysis, standardized surveys, semi-standardised expert interviews and discourse analysis (Riehm et al. 2009, 219ff.). Only a small portion of the empirical results can be presented in this paper.

The paper is organised as follows: First, a general definition of petitions and their main functions in representative democracies are presented. Due to the empirical focus of this paper, the German peculiarities of the petition process will be briefly outlined as well. The ensuing section lays out the main empirical findings of the evaluation study with regard to the socio-demographic profiles of petitioners, their Internet usage patterns, their degree of civic involvement and

¹ The English summary of the research report is available at <http://www.tab-beim-bundestag.de/en/publications/reports/ab127.html>

² <http://www.tab-beim-bundestag.de/en/research/u147.html>

their assessments of the (e-)petitioning process. Finally, a conclusion summarises the main findings and provides an assessment of the *Bundestag's* reforms of the petition system with regard to its impacts on political participation and parliamentary responsiveness.

2. Petitions: Characteristics and Democratic Functions

2.1 Definition and Legal Status

Generally, petitions are defined as formal requests to a public authority, usually a governmental institution or parliament. Petitions have the purpose to change public policy, call for an official statement or evoke a certain act by a public institution. In this sense, petitions can be distinguished from mere expressions of opinion. In most liberal democracies, the citizen's right to petition government, parliament and/or other public entities is codified in legal documents, in many instances even in constitutional law or practice.

Submitting and supporting petitions is a legally codified and conventional form of political participation. Due to their awareness-raising and agenda-setting character, and the fact that the decision on how to proceed with the request rests exclusively with the addressee, petitions qualify as a form of representative political participation. Three main characteristics distinguish petitions from other forms of political participation:

1. In contrast to hearings or consultations, petitions are initiated 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 costs in most countries;
3. Many addressees of petitions (e.g., parliamentary petitions committees) typically function as intermediaries between the petitioner and the public institution which is complained or called upon to act. As such, these intermediaries usually lack the formal powers to impose sanctions, repeal administrative decisions or change the law. Hence, the factual power of most addressees of petitions is comparatively weak. Political influence can usually only be exerted by the "power of convincing arguments" and by the means of institutional reputation.

In Germany, the right to petition any competent public authority and parliament is constitutionally guaranteed by article 17 of the Basic Law. It also specifies that petitions are required to be submitted in writing. Moreover, with article 45c of the Basic Law, which was amended in 1975, the parliamentary petitions committee became one of the *Bundestag's* four standing committees; procedural details and formal investigatory powers are stipulated in a separate

federal law (Gesetz über die Befugnisse des Petitionsausschusses³). A peculiarity of the German case is that petitions are explicitly attributed with two core functions: Petitions can either be a matter of an individual complaint (*res privata*) or a request to change public policy (*res publica*) (Korinek 1977). In international comparison these functions are often institutionally discrete as many ombudsman institutions tend to deal with rather individual complaints, while the political proposals fall into the realm of petition committees. Of course, a clear cut and unambiguous distinction between the two types of formal requests is not always feasible.

Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish between formal and informal types of petitions (Mosca and Santucci 2009): Formal petitions refer to institutionalised and at least to some extent legally codified petition systems made available by public institutions. Informal petitions, on the other hand, are initiated and managed by non-governmental, private organisations. Thus, the procedural requirements for launching informal petitions are not subject to public law. Of course, informal petitions usually seek to address public institutions after a certain number of signatures have been collected.

This distinction is primarily relevant for e-petitions. Empirically, two main types of informal e-petitions can be distinguished: e-petitions initiated by NGOs as part of political campaigns, and e-petition platforms operated by private organisations (both commercial and not-for-profit) which provide the internet-based infrastructure to initiate e-petitions and collect signatures online (Riehm et al. 2009, 190-195).

Moreover, we suggest distinguishing between the following types of formal e-petitions:

- Petitions submitted electronically: In the case of this most basic e-petition type, petitions are also accepted by the addressees if they are submitted electronically, either via e-mail or by using a web-interface. The person submitting the e-petition is usually required to include her/his name, address and other information as part of the identification procedure. Compared to traditional paper petitions, the novelty of this e-petition type merely refers to the initial submission phase.
- Public e-petitions: Irrespective of the way it has been submitted, a petition is defined as a public e-petition if the petition text is published on the Internet. The actual petition text can also be supplemented with additional background information concerning the petition issue and/or the different procedural steps related to and/or the decision on the petition.

³ Federal law according to Artikel 45c of the Basic Law, July 19, 1975, Bundesgesetzblatt I, p. 1921.

- Public e-petitions with additional participatory elements: In this case, the public e-petition is enriched with additional participatory opportunities made available to the public. The most widespread participatory element, which is also common place among all informal e-petition systems, is the opportunity to support a public e-petition with an electronically submitted signature. Not quite as common are Internet-based discussion forums which allow for public debates on the issues raised by a public e-petition. Beyond these participatory elements, other functions such as automatically generated e-mail alerts sent out to users once public e-petitions on related issues are submitted, or a “wiki-style” authoring of e-petition texts prior to an official submission are conceivable.

2.2 Political Functions

Petitions fulfil different political and democratic functions. International comparison shows that the concrete role and political significance of petitioning in a given political system is dependent upon socio-historical and institutional contexts. The most important general functions of petitioning in democratic polities are briefly discussed in the following.

Individual level: In comparative terms the chances to reach a private or political goal via petitioning is relatively low. In case of rather individual complaints (*res privata*) other channels to remedy administrative wrongdoings, such as the recourse to the courts, seem more promising. With regard to petitions aiming to change public policy (*res publica*), the formal political influence is limited as well. In effect, petitions can only put an issue on the agenda of the addressee. The ensuing debate and decision-making process usually takes place without the petitioner’s involvement. The procedural practice at the Public Petitions Committee (PPC) of the Scottish Parliament is an interesting exception: In many instances, the PPC invites petitioners to give oral evidence. However, petitioners are not entitled to this right (Riehm et al. 2009, 139f.). And in Germany, a minimum of 50,000 signatures are required to be heard by the *Bundestag*’s petition committee in a public session. Regardless of formal limitations, petitions may indirectly become politically influential. Particularly large signature campaigns can effectively mobilise supporters. Many NGOs and interest groups strategically initiate large signature drives as part of their issue-based campaigns in order to drum up supporters and capture media attention (Baringhorst, Kneip and Niesyto 2007).

Intermediate level: From the perspective of the addressee, petitions also fulfil a number of distinct functions. Petitions presented to parliament can support the parliamentary control of the executive. In the German case, this function is supported, for instance, by a number of investigatory powers vested to the

petitions committee (Vitzthum 1985). In addition, petitions can deliver useful information and perform as political indicators. From this perspective, petitions are a component of the communicative linkages between the represented and their representatives, and can potentially contribute to the responsiveness of parliament (Herzog 1989). Under certain circumstances petitioning can also fulfil the secondary function of expanding the competences of parliament vis-à-vis the executive. Historically it could repeatedly be observed that petitions were instrumental in the processes of strengthening parliament in political systems (Vitzthum 1985, 37). The European Parliament, for instance, was able to expand its legislative rights vis-à-vis the European Council by establishing the right to petition in the treaty of Maastricht in 1992 (Guckelberger 2004, 24).

System level: From the comprehensive perspective of the political system, petitioning can potentially contribute to the system functions of integration and legitimacy. By providing citizens a formal channel to submit requests, citizens' integration into the political system can be facilitated (Holtfort 1999). Similarly, if the addressees of the petitions decide to use the inputs delivered by the petitioners in a constructive way, political decision-making can be improved. In effect, indirect positive effects for the legitimacy of the political system might be achieved by the heightened input-legitimacy of the addressee and improved output-legitimacy of the public institutions involved.

3. E-Petitions at the German *Bundestag*: The Users' Response

3.1 From the 2005 Pilot Scheme to an Established Procedural Feature

3.1.1 Background

Since the early 1960s, the *Bundestag*'s petition system was subject to a number of reform proposals. Recurring issues included the competences and investigatory powers which should be assigned to the petitions committee, striking an adequate balance between *res privata* and *res publica*, establishment of a national parliamentary ombudsman, and the desirable degree of publicness in handling petitions (Banse 1973; Betz 1994; Bockhofer 1999; Ismayr 1999, 2003; Korinek 1977). The most recent wave of discussions concerning the petition system dates back to the year 2002 and resulted in *Bundestag*'s e-petition pilot scheme and other notable procedural reforms in 2005.

The decision to initiate a pilot scheme for electronic and public petitions was made in June 2005. Since September of that year, petitions addressed to the

Bundestag can be submitted online and, under certain conditions, be made public via the Internet.⁴

The confluence of several favourable factors allowed for this reform. Already in 2002, at the beginning of the 15th legislative period, the coalition agreement between Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens (Bündnis 90/Die GRÜNEN) called for an advancement of the petition system (SPD and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2002). During the course of the second social democratic-green government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (2002-2005), a number of noteworthy incidents paved the way towards the pilot scheme. In March 2003, a delegation of five members of the petitions committee visited the Scottish Parliament in order to learn more about their e-petition system.⁵ In November, the *Bundestag's* petitions committee received a petition by e-mail. With this petition parliament was called upon to allow petitions submitted by e-mail. Three months later, as part of the routine procedural assessment of this petition, the federal ministry of the interior declared that petitions submitted by e-mail were legally unobjectionable. Against the background of this important legal clarification, the coalition parties were able to commence with the reform. Subsequently, the coalition parties in parliament tabled three motions in November 2004:

- The first motion sought to permit petitions submitted by e-mail,
- following the Scottish example, the second motion proposed to set up a pilot scheme which would enable the public co-signing and discussion of petitions on the Internet, and
- the third motion contained the institution of public sessions of the petitions committee with active participation of petitioners if a quorum of 50,000 supporting signatures is passed.

The ensuing political debate indicated that the reform proposals enjoyed broad political support, including that of the opposition parties. At the same time, however, the *Bundestag* administration pointed out a number of serious technical and organisational obstacles for the realisation of the pilot scheme. Referring to the experiences made in Scotland and after a second visit in Edinburgh, the administration suggested to adopt the Scottish E-Petitioner for the purpose of the German pilot. Eventually, this solution was agreed upon and implemented by the end of August 2005, only a few weeks prior to the preterm dissolution of parliament. The first public e-petition was submitted on September 5, 2005.

On the whole, the pilot scheme was very successful. In 2007, the petitions committee decided to continue to make available the new features on a routine basis, thereby also taking the generally positive evaluation and some of the recommendations of the TAB-study into account. In order to be able to better

⁴ The URL of the *Bundestag's* current e-petition portal: <https://epetitionen.bundestag.de/>

⁵ The Scottish Parliament's e-petition portal can be reached at:
<http://epetitions.scottish.parliament.uk/>

cope with the high volume of traffic and improve user friendliness, a new software system replacing the Scottish E-Petitioner was commissioned and implemented in 2008, and rolled out in October of that year.

3.1.2 The Pilot Scheme's Features

The key elements of the pilot scheme were technical and procedural. Technically, the reform of the petition process involved

- the establishment of an online submission channel (both e-mail and web interface);
- the publication of certain e-petitions on the website of the petitions committee, including the title of the e-petition, the full petition text, the name and address of the principal petitioner, procedural information such as beginning and end of the signatory phase, and, at the end of the process, the petitions committee's final decision and its official statement of grounds;
- the functionality to co-sign public e-petitions online (during a six week signatory phase), and
- moderated online discussion forums associated with each public e-petition (live during the signatory phase).⁶

With regard to the procedural aspects of petitioning the *Bundestag*, the reform was well integrated in established processes. In effect, regardless of the submission channel, all petitions are by and large treated equally in terms of the formal process. The main procedural innovation and politically most far-reaching change compared to the previous situation was the introduction of public e-petitions. Prior to 2005, the content of the petitions and the parliamentary petition process were strictly non-public. Once a petition was submitted to the *Bundestag*, no information was provided to the public about pending petitions. Only the principal petitioner received an acknowledgement of receipt and, after the petitions committee had made a final decision on the request, an official notification. The reform achieved a higher degree of publicness of the petitioning process by two elements: the new requirement to hold public sessions in case a petition was supported by 50,000 or more signatures (regardless of the submission channel) and by the introduction of the public e-petition.

Between 2006 and 2009, the petitions committee held public sessions in eleven instances dealing with 81 petitions (Deutscher Bundestag 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). Examples for these successful mass petitions include a petition opposed to legislation introducing certain forms of Internet censorship (over 134,000 signatures), a petition calling for higher income for midwives (over

⁶ The moderation is limited to the observance of the compliance with the forum rules.

105,000 signatures), and a petition opposed to a ban on violent computer games (over 73,000 signatures).⁷

With regard to the public e-petition, the formal procedure deviates slightly from the traditional, non-public petition. If a petitioner wishes his/her e-petition to be made public, the petitions committee's back office checks whether the request meets certain criteria. Only e-petitions with a general political appeal (*res publica*) are admitted as public e-petitions. Moreover, the petitions committee's administration is entitled to refuse admittance based on technical or organizational grounds, if a similar petition has previously been tabled or the request will obviously be unsuccessful (Petitionsausschuss 2010). In short, the back office enjoys considerable discretionary power. Unsurprisingly, this particular practice has frequently been criticised. It should be noted though that those e-petitions not qualifying for the status of a public e-petition are nonetheless accepted and dealt with according to the traditional procedure.

3.2 (E-)Petition Statistics 2006-2009

Since the early 1990s, about 18,500 petitions are submitted to the *Bundestag's* petitions committee annually. The bulk of these are individual submissions, while some mass petitions attract the support of several thousand, in very few instances even over 100,000 signatures (Deutscher Bundestag 1980-2010). In order to cope with this impressive amount of petitions, the committee's back office employs about 80 full time staff.

Petition statistics are regularly made available in the annual reports published by the petitions committee.⁸ However, it should be noted that the statistical information for 2008 are incomplete due to the introduction of the new software system. Despite these limitations, the data allows for a number of noteworthy insights.

Table 1 summarizes the key statistics for the years 2006 to 2009. Contrary to what many had expected, the amount of submitted petitions has not changed significantly after the introduction of the e-petition system in 2005. So far, the total number of petitions remained within the normal fluctuation range. However, 2009 experienced a quite impressive rise in the total number of persons submitting or signing a petition (paper and online), up to almost two million from only 575,000 in the previous year. This growth was primarily – but not exclusively – caused by an increase in the number of online signatures supporting public e-petitions. The next years will show how sustainable this development will be.

The data also shows a growing acceptance and popularity of the possibility to submit petitions electronically. Within four years after their

⁷ For details on these petitions see <https://epetitionen.bundestag.de>

⁸ Cf. the most recent annual report: Deutscher Bundestag (2010).

introduction, the percentage of e-petitions submitted doubled, from 17.2% in 2006 to 35.7% in 2009 of the total number of petitions presented to the *Bundestag*.

This development is even more pronounced if only the submission rates of public e-petitions are examined: In 2009 over 5,000 public e-petitions were proposed, up from 761 in 2006. At the same time however, the acceptance rate for public e-petitions decreased considerably (from 37.3% in 2006 to only 13.7% in 2009). In view of the obviously strong appeal of public e-petitions for many petitioners, the continuing low official acceptance rate for public e-petitions becomes even more problematic. Nevertheless, the total number of eventually accepted public e-petitions more than doubled over the course of the four years. Yet, permitted public e-petitions still represent only a very small portion of all petitions submitted to the *Bundestag* (3.7% in 2009).

The usage of the discussion forums experienced an upward trend as well. The already high number of 16,000 postings in 2006 was amplified to a remarkable 58,000 in 2009. If the higher number of public e-petitions is taken into account, the intensified discussion activity occurred in relative terms as well: In 2009, the average number of postings per public e-petition was 83, up from 57 in 2006.

Broadening Participation through E-Petitions?

Table 1: (E-)Petition Statistics of the Bundestag, 2006-2009

	2006		2007		2008 ^{b)}		2009	
	total	%	total	%	total	%	total	%
Petitions								
Petitions submitted	16,766	100.0	16,260	100.0	18,096	100.0	18,861	100.0
<i>thereof e-petitions (e-mail, web interface)^{a)}</i>	2,878	17.2	2,782	17.1	3,710	20.5	6,517	35.7
Submitted as public e-petition	761	4.5	632	3.9	1,033	5.7	5,113	27.1
<i>thereof permitted as public e-petition</i>	284	1.7	243	1.5	306	1.7	701	3.7
<i>percentage of permitted on submitted public e-petitions</i>		37.3		38.5		29.6		13.7
Persons involved								
Total number of petitions and signatures	n.a.		600,000		575,100		< 2 million	
Signatures supporting public e-petitions	443,048	–	417,003	–	n.a.		> 1 million	
Newly registered users at e-petitions platform	–	–	–	–	–	–	525,000	
Online forums on petitions								
Forum postings	16,279	100.0	8,228		n.a.		58,000	
<i>thereof deleted by moderator</i>	4,635	28.5	n.a.		n.a.		n.a.	
<i>average number of postings per public e-petition</i>	57		34				83	

Notes:

a) Until Sept. 2008, public e-petitions could only be submitted by e-mail. Since Oct. 2008, both public e-petitions as well as non-public e-petitions may be submitted via web interface (<https://epetitionen.bundestag.de>). E-petitions submitted by e-mail are not accounted for in the official statistics from Oct. 2008 onwards.

b) The data for 2008 are incomplete due to the introduction of the new software system. Comparisons with the years 2006, 2007 and 2009 need to take this into account.

Source: Riehm et al. (2009, 222); Deutscher Bundestag (2007, 2008, 2009, 2010)

3.3 User Surveys, Socio-Demographics and Assessments

3.3.1 Approach and Methods

Empirical studies focusing on petitioning as a form of political participation are rare. Among the few exceptions is a representative survey of the public awareness and reputation of the German petition system. The results were recently published by Lippa, Kubicek and Bröchler (2009). For the Scottish petition system, the evaluations and analyses which were conducted on behalf of the Scottish Public Petitions Committee in the last few years also contained user surveys (Carman 2006; Ipsos Mori and Carman 2009).

As part of the TAB's research project "Public electronic petitions and civic involvement" (Riehm et al. 2009) a comprehensive survey of petitioners was conducted. For the first time in Germany, empirical data on the socio-demographics of petitioners, their underlying motives to participate and their assessments of the petitioning process was generated. Who are the people approaching the Bundestag with their requests? Why do they choose the petition system to accomplish their goals, and how do they evaluate the petitioning process?

In order to detect possible new developments with regard to participation patterns related to the introduction of the e-petition system, the survey was conducted for two samples: traditional petitioners and the presenter of the newly introduced public e-petitions. The surveys delivered comprehensive and detailed information about the socio-demographic composition of the two petitioner groups. Moreover, the socio-demographic items of the questionnaires were complemented by questions tapping the type and quantity of the respondents' media consumption, their interest in politics and their political participation patterns. Based on the data generated, answers to the question whether the availability of e-petitioning attracts previously underrepresented societal groups or represents a participation channel for those who are already politically active above average can be delivered. In addition, the surveys intended to find out whether the new e-petition system (online submission and signatures, discussion forums) actually meets political needs of the respondents.

Between February and March 2007, a random sample of 1,000 traditional petitioners and all known presenters of public e-petitions since September 2005 (N=698) were asked to participate in the surveys. The response rates were quite encouraging: 57% of the traditional (n=571) and 50% of the public e-petitioners (n=350) completed and returned the paper questionnaires.⁹

⁹ The surveys were conducted by Zebralog e.V., Berlin within the research project "Public electronic petitions and civic involvement" (Riehm et al. 2009) on behalf of the TAB (see also Riehm and Trénel 2009).

3.3.2 Socio-demographic Composition of the Respondent Groups

Many e-participation opportunities are promoted with the explicit aim to not only facilitate political involvement, but also to increase the degree of representativeness – both in terms of the participants' socio-demographic make-up as well as with regard to the issues placed on the agenda.

The results of the surveys show quite impressively that traditional petitioners and citizens using the e-petition system to submit public petitions deviate significantly from the average population in terms of key socio-demographic characteristics. In a nutshell, both petitioner groups are predominantly composed of men who have attained higher levels of formal education and are more frequently disabled than the average (Table 2).

If the two groups of petitioners are compared, noteworthy differences become apparent. Presenters of public e-petitions tend to be considerably younger than traditional petitioners. 32.7% of all e-petitioners belong to the age group of 20 to 39, which nearly matches this group's share in society at large, while only 13.2% of the traditional petitioners fall into this age range. With regard to the formal levels of education, e-petitioners tend to have attained even higher levels than the traditional petitioners, who already enjoy above average education degrees (share of respondents with university degree 43.7% vs. 31.7%).

These findings reveal that the introduction of the e-petition system at the *Bundestag* actually did attract different parts of society, but probably not in such a way some proponents of the reform had envisioned. The share of women, petitioners with formal educational degrees below college/university level, unemployed, and people with disabilities among presenters of public e-petitions is even lower than is already the case within the group of traditional petitioners. The aim to increase the societal representativeness of petitioning by introducing public e-petitions is only reached with regard to younger parts of the population, while existing biases in terms of gender and socio-economic status are even amplified.

3.3.3 Internet Usage

Most parts of the recent modernisation of the *Bundestag's* petition system are dependent upon the Internet. By providing an online channel for petitioning, the initiators of the pilot scheme also intended to respond to society's changing media usage patterns. In the following, the Internet usage of the two petitioner groups (traditional and public e-petitioners) will be examined. The analysis can provide answers to the question to which degree access to the Internet and media literacy help explain why petitioners decide to use the e-petition system.

Table 2: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

	Traditional petitioners	Public e-petitioners	Population (micro census)
<i>Sex</i>	<i>n=564</i>	<i>n=347</i>	
male	73.9	75.8	48.9
female	26.1	24.2	51.1
<i>Age</i>	<i>n=560</i>	<i>n=342</i>	<i>> 19 years of age</i>
20 – 39 years of age	13.2	32.7	33.2
40 – 59 years of age	40.4	52.0	35.5
60 – 99 years of age	46.4	15.2	31.3
<i>Education</i>	<i>n=571</i>	<i>n=350</i>	<i>> 14 years of age</i>
In school, vocational training, at college/university or without vocational qualification	8.9	10.6	30.6
Vocational qualification, vocational college	32.6	28.6	48.8
Master craftsman, technician or other professional training	19.0	11.1	6.9
University or college degree	31.7	43.7	11.8
Other degree	7.9	6.0	0.6
<i>Occupation</i>	<i>n=548</i>	<i>n=344</i>	
Employee, civil servant	25.5	45.3	39.8
Self-employed	8.6	19.5	6.4
Retiree	39.8	14.0	28.3
Permanently unemployable	6.9	1.5	3.5
Unemployed	12.0	8.7	7.1
Homemaker	2.6	1.7	9.2
Apprentice, trainee, pupil, student, Conscript	4.6	9.3	5.8
<i>Disabled</i>	<i>n=571</i>	<i>n=346</i>	
	35.9	15.6	8.0

Source: TAB survey data 2007; Statistisches Bundesamt (2008).

Table 3 shows that no or insufficient access to the Internet does not seem to be the main reason why traditional petitioners prefer paper petitions. Compared to the general population, members of this petitioner group have Internet access above average (67.3% vs. 63%). Similarly, traditional petitioners tend to use the Internet with greater intensity than the average. The only exception is their below average affinity to online games.

In order to be able to make use of an e-petition system, citizens do not only need access to the Internet, they also have to be informed about this participation channel. Only 16.9% of the traditional petitioners replied that they were aware of the existence of the possibility to submit petitions electronically. At the same time, 70.4% of this group declared that they thought submitting petitions online was “very interesting” or “interesting”. At least this figure seems to imply that there is quite some potential to attract additional e-petitioners from the group of traditional petitioners in the future.

Table 3: Internet Usage of Respondents (percentages)

	Traditional petitioners	Public e-petitioners	Population
Internet usage (even occasionally)	67.3	100.0	63
Since when are you using the Internet? (average years)	7.4	9.1	7
<i>Which Internet applications do you use... ?*</i>			
E-mail	86.3	95.9	79
Search engines	80.3	93.8	76
Homebanking	47.9	55.5	34
Discussion forums, chat	16.6	29.9	20
Online games	3.1	6.2	10

Note:

* Percentages refer to Internet users among petitioners or among the population of 14 years and older.

Source: TAB survey data 2007; Eimeren and Frees (2007).

3.3.4 Political Mobilisation of Abstaining Groups?

Are there any indications that the availability of an electronic submission channel for petitions mobilises politically rather passive parts of society? Can e-petitions help to empower underrepresented groups? Or are the main beneficiaries of the additional participation opportunities made available by the e-petition system the resource-rich members of society as the standard model of political participation (Milbrath 1965; Verba and Nie 1972, 125-137; Lindner 2007, 92-98) implies?

Table 4: Membership in Political Organisations, Participation in Public Protests (percentages)

	Traditional petitioners	Public e-petitioners	Population
Party membership	13.0	18.4	4.3
Trade union membership or professional association etc.	26.5	32.2	17.8
Participation in public protests, demonstration	47.8	59.3	29.2

Source: TAB survey data 2007; Allbus (2007).

Table 5: Political Participation On- and Offline (percentages)

	Traditional petitioners		Public e-petitioners		Population
	Yes, I already did this	If yes, also online	Yes, I already did this	If yes, also online	
Supported a signature campaign (n= 535, 302, 332, 285)	80.9	26.5	94.9	66.3	54.6
Submitted a petition, regardless of the most recent one (n= 536, 202, 326, 164)	54.3	28.7	54.0	53.7	–
Contacted media (n= 536, 230, 325, 219)	59.5	51.3	70.8	79.5	–
Contacted elected representative or administration (n= 539, 247, 326, 218)	71.1	36.8	73.3	69.3	20.9

Source: TAB survey data 2007; Allbus (2007).

The survey data clearly demonstrates that traditional and public e-petitioners alike are politically more engaged than the average population. The indicators to measure the degree of political involvement used in the surveys were party membership, membership in trade unions or other professional associations, participation in public protests or demonstrations, support of signature campaigns, petitioning, contacting media and elected representatives (Tables 4 and 5). Interestingly, a comparison of the two petitioner groups reveals that presenters of public e-petitions show higher participation rates in nearly all categories. In short, compared to the average population, both petitioner groups are politically highly experienced and actively involved in public affairs, and within the subgroup of e-petitioners this observation is even more pronounced. As to be expected, e-

petitions responded that they are more experienced in taking part in the online equivalents of participation activities than traditional petitioners. However, traditional petitioners are by no means strict “offliners” in this respect, as over 51.3% declared to have contacted media and 36.8% elected representatives via the Internet.

Instead of empowering politically underrepresented or disengaged groups, these findings suggest the contrary. Public e-petitions seem to amplify existing inequalities in societal participation patterns as they predominately attract highly mobilised and politically active individuals.

3.3.5 Public E-Petitioners’ Motives and Assessments

The survey data presented in the previous sections demonstrated that petitioners tend to be politically active and experienced. It can therefore be assumed that they are rather well informed about the chances to achieve ones goals by means of this form of participation. The survey questionnaires wanted to find out what motivates both petitioner groups to submit petitions. In addition, the presenters of public e-petitions were asked to assess the e-petition procedure.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents from both petitioner groups – 84.5% of the traditional petitioners and 93% of the public e-petitioners – stated that their petition was submitted with the intention to prompt legislative action. Accordingly, respondents from both groups are clearly in favour of making their petitions known to the public and the media (traditional petitioners: 80.5% (n= 483), public e-petitioners: 93.0% (n= 330)). The respondents’ strong political outlook is particularly noteworthy in the German petitioning context due to the continuing discussions about the desirable balance between *res privata* and *res publica* (see above).

Presenters of public e-petitions were confronted with additional survey items about their goals and objectives (multiple answers). Unsurprisingly, 89.6% (n= 335) hope that the issue of the submission will be taken into consideration by parliament. 83% (n= 311) would like to have their petition discussed publicly, and 80.8% (n= 313) believe that they could attract the most supporters with this instrument. Finally, 72.5% (n= 316) are convinced that public e-petitions are the best way to attract public attention.

The respondents were also asked to assess the petition procedure (Table 6). The data indicates that traditional petitioners seem to view the petition process quite positively: 76.4% stated that they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied”. The e-petitioners’ evaluation, on the other hand, was rather negative: only 41.6% of the respondents from this petitioner group were “very satisfied” or “satisfied”. It should be noted though that a direct comparison of the two groups is problematic because the respondents had to make their assessments in different phases of the petitioning process due to methodological reasons. While the traditional

petitioner's appraisal was based on the official submission confirmation issued by the petition committee, part of the presenters of public e-petitions could evaluate the complete process. Moreover, a quite plausible reason for the high level of dissatisfaction in this group might be the large share of rejections to publish the e-petitions (Table 1).¹⁰

Table 6: Satisfaction with Petition Process (percentages)

	Traditional petitioners (n= 475)	Public e-petitioners (n= 329)
<i>How satisfied are you with the handling of your petition so far?</i>		
Very satisfied	40.6	9.7
Satisfied	35.8	31.9
Not satisfied	13.3	34.3
Disappointed	10.3	24.0

Source: TAB survey data 2007.

3.3.6 Preliminary Results from the Ongoing Follow-up Study

Within the follow-up study “Electronic petitioning and the modernisation of petitioning systems in Europe”, which started in 2009 and will be published in 2011, a second survey wave of the two petitioner groups was conducted. As the research is still in progress, and the results are not yet approved of and published, only a limited set of preliminary findings can be presented in this paper.

With regard to the socio-demographics of traditional petitioners, the second survey revealed no significant changes compared to the 2007 data. The disproportionately large share of men within the group of public e-petitioners has increased even more. In terms of age, the composition of the public e-petitioners changed as well: While the younger cohorts increased their share to the level of the general population, the share of the generation “60plus” decreased. Concerning the levels of formal education attained by the two petitioner groups, the second survey delivered largely the same results as in 2007: Petitioners tend to have higher levels of formal education than the average population.

The questions about the petitioners' civic involvement were also repeated in 2009. Again, the second survey confirms the findings of 2007: Both petitioner groups are politically more active and experienced than the general population.

¹⁰ Preliminary results from the follow-up study show that the level of dissatisfaction of traditional petitioners asked after completion of the petition process is approximately the same as the level of dissatisfaction within the group of e-petitioners.

This observation is even more pronounced within the group of e-petitioners than has already been the case two years earlier.

Likewise, the 2009 survey data on the petitioners' Internet usage reveals more stability than change. As in 2007, traditional petitioners have access to and use the Internet. However, within this group, the share using e-mail or the web-interface to submit (non-public) petitions has increased.

To summarise, the initial results of the second petitioner survey seem to overwhelmingly confirm the trends already identified two years earlier. However, as the research is still in progress, it is too early to draw final conclusions.

4. Conclusions

The introduction of the e-petition pilot scheme in 2005 was an important step to modernise the *Bundestag's* petition procedures. This prize-winning innovation¹¹ has received broad approval and undoubtedly contributes to a higher public visibility of petitioning as a form of political participation in Germany. The reform did not only make parts of the petition process available online, but also added to its improved publicness, transparency and discursiveness (Lindner and Riehm 2009b; Riehm, Coenen and Lindner 2009).

As part of the evaluation study of the e-petition pilot scheme, two surveys examining the traditional petitioners' and the public e-petitioners' socio-demographic make-up, their civic involvement and their media usage patterns were conducted. In summary, the results show that the introduction of the e-petition system was successful to a very limited degree in attracting underrepresented societal groups. Public e-petitioners are indeed significantly younger than the average traditional petitioner. At the same time however, already existing gender and socio-economic biases are even exacerbated as e-petitioners tend to be predominantly men and have attained above average levels of formal education. Furthermore, both groups of petitioners surveyed are politically more engaged than the general population; a finding that is even more pronounced in case of the public e-petitioners. Instead of fulfilling the hopes of those who had sought to attract the politically disengaged by offering an online channel for petitioning, the results for the most part support the expectations of political sociology's well established standard model of political participation. The preliminary results of the follow-up study, which is currently being conducted by the TAB, generally confirm these conclusions.

¹¹ The *Bundestag's* petitions committee was awarded with the "politics award" in the category "innovation": <http://www.politikaward.de/gewinner2008/index.php>

On the whole, the introduction of public e-petitions can nonetheless be viewed as a success story. Statistics such as the increasing number of public e-petition submissions or the over 500,000 newly registered users of the *Bundestag's* e-petition portal show that the e-petition system is generally appealing to a growing number of citizens. And with regard to the newly introduced public e-petition, the survey data demonstrates a strong demand for making petitions public. If the petitions committee is serious about improving the societal representativeness of the petitioners, additional efforts, such as targeted information campaigns and outreach activities to underrepresented parts of society will be necessary.

Without question, for a comprehensive assessment of the different dimensions of the *Bundestag's* e-petition system, aspects such as the unsatisfying user friendliness of the software applications or the unsettled role of the discussion forums within the petition procedure need to be accounted for as well. The results of the TAB evaluation study on these and other issues are published in Riehm et al. (2009).

On a more general level, the overall direction of the petition system reforms has the potential to set forth positive impacts on the responsiveness of the *Bundestag*. Within the workings of representative democracy, a high degree of responsiveness goes hand in hand with intense and frequent communication exchanges between the rulers and the ruled. Parliaments can influence these vital communication relationships by improving the institution's information and communication capacities. For instance, the number and quality of access points for citizens can be optimised, additional capacities for communication and information exchange can be made available, and rules of procedure can be changed with the aim to increase transparency. Viewed from this perspective, the recent modernisation of the *Bundestag's* petition procedures qualify as a very small but nonetheless noteworthy contribution to increased institutional responsiveness.

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