ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the field of e-participation by studying e-petitioning on both formal and informal petition bodies. The aim is to contribute to the understanding of the features of formal and informal e-petition platforms as well as the characteristics of the e-petitions. A formal (kansalaisaloite.fi) and an informal e-petition platform (adressit.com) in Finland were compared using quantitative content analysis. By examining the differences between formal and informal platforms, this paper sheds light over citizens’ political behavior in the form of online petitioning. The varying formality of the platforms was reflected in their features and e-petitioning processes. Furthermore, formal and informal e-petitions differed regarding their initiators, text length, topics, preparation quality, rationality, affectivity and connections to other types of media. E-petitions on the formal platform are better prepared, show more signs of rational argumentation, and more often concern controversial topics.

KEYWORDS

Democratic Innovations, e-Participation, e-Petitioning, Formal and Informal Petition Platforms, Online Participation, Quantitative Content Analysis, Slacktivism

INTRODUCTION

Petition signing online is a relatively new form of political participation giving citizens a chance to bring issues on the agenda of democratically selected assemblies like the parliament. E-petitions can also be regarded as of form of expressive political behavior with less obvious connections to democratic institutions. Besides voting, petition signing is one of the more popular forms of political activities as an increasing number of people have signed a petition (Dalton, 2005; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). The introduction of national citizens initiatives in several countries in recent years position e-petitions as an interesting study objects in research about democratic innovations. Electronic petitions are a part of the debate about e-participation and slacktivism/clicktivism (Riehm, Böhle & Lindner, 2014) since e-petition signing is essentially political participation reduced to a simple
If we want to understand the political behavior of the modern citizen, analyzing e-petitions is an important starting point.

While we know that citizens use e-petitions, we know much less about how they use them and for what purposes. E-petitioning has a dual nature of formal and informal process (Mosca & Santucci, 2009), making it necessary to examine the role of the e-petition platform (Schmidt & Johnsen, 2014, p. 44) to understand the implications for political participation. This study adds to this research agenda by investigating the differences between formal and informal e-petitioning.

Previous research on e-petitions has mostly concentrated on formal petitions bodies, meaning there is a lack of research on informal e-petitions (Wright, 2015b, p. 147). Different areas of research have emerged: factors influencing the successfullness of petitions (Hale, Margetts & Yasseri, 2013; Margetts, John, Escher & Reissfelder, 2009; Wright, 2012; Yasseri, Hale & Margetts, 2013), initiators’ and signers’ motivation (Caren et al., 2010; Cruickshank et al., 2010; Lindner & Riehm, 2011), the European Citizens’ initiative (Sangsari, 2013), and the impact of petitions on policy-making (Cotton, 2012). Even though formal petition bodies are not the only ones used for political purposes, as informal e-petition sites like avaaz.org, 38degrees.org.uk, and moveon.org have been given tribute for their democratic qualities (see Yasseri et al., 2013, p. 3), few studies have investigated both formal and informal e-petition platforms. Riehm, Böhle and Lindner (2014, p. 27) argue that “research should consider not only the parliamentary petition bodies instituted at national level but also all other petition bodies that increasingly make use of the internet when providing their services” to understand the functions of e-petitions.

Finland launched the Citizens’ initiative in 2012 and made it possible to collect signatures in support of these through the formal petition site www.kansalaisaloite.fi. However, this was not the first e-petition system in Finland. The private, informal petition site adressit.com has hosted several popular petitions since its launch in 2006. The petition against gossip journalism about European Song Contest winners Lordi is probably the most popular informal petition in Finland; gathering 224,000 signatures (see Häyhtiö & Rinne, 2008). These two petition platforms differ in their connection to the authorities, one being instrumental and the other being more expressive to its nature. However, both present examples of citizen engagement online. Technological innovations have made it possible to simplify the gathering of signatures, and the act of signing a petition is becoming increasingly popular in several countries (Riehm, Böhle & Lindner, 2014).

To comprehend the dual nature of e-petitioning, there is a need to broaden the research to encompass both formal and informal e-petition platforms. By limiting research to either one of these two platforms, we might not capture the width of the spectrum e-petitions cover. Moreover, few studies (e.g., Brock, 2014; Schmidt & Johnsen, 2014) have investigated the actual content of the petitions; the petition texts. Thus, previous research does not sufficiently describe the differences between formal and informal e-petition platforms or the content of formal and informal e-petitions. This study adopts an explorative and descriptive approach to fill this research gap.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of 1) the features on formal and informal e-petition platforms as well as 2) the characteristics of the e-petitions on these platforms. I include both the features and use of e-petition platforms since “having a mechanism available on a website does not mean it will be used” (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008, p. 4).

PETITIONS

Petitions concern the relationship between citizens and political actors which gives them a fundamental political character (Riehm, Böhle & Lindner, 2014, p. 34). A petition can be described as an
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www.igi-global.com/chapter/emerging-online-democracy/39825?camid=4v1a