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Submission to the Inquiry into Standing Orders Relating to Petitions

To: The Chair, House Standing Committee on Petitions

From: Change.org Australia | [REDACTED] | [REDACTED]

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Introduction

Change.org Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry. As a major online petition platform that helps Australians raise issues and mobilise public support, we support reforms that preserve integrity while improving accessibility and responsiveness in the petitions process.

About Change.org

Change.org is the largest petition platform in the world, empowering millions of people to create the changes they want to see. With more than 420 million users worldwide, it provides the tools to mobilise people, make governments and companies more accessible, and drive transparency.

Change.org is an open platform with room for a wide range of perspectives so people everywhere can take action on the issues they care about. People and organisations around the world use Change.org to start campaigns, mobilise supporters, and work with decision makers to find solutions.



Key concerns with current provisions

- **Two-tier system (conforming / non-conforming):** External petitions (e.g. those hosted on third-party platforms) frequently receive lesser parliamentary status than petitions lodged through the official e-petitions site and are labelled as “non-conforming petitions”. This form-based distinction can disenfranchise large numbers of signatories whose only difference from a “conforming” petition is the collection method, and penalise petition starters who have campaigned, contacted decision makers and grown their signature count in good faith. It also leaves the decision of whether or not the petition is able to be recognised in parliament up to MPs and Senators, rather than allowing it to be driven by the will of the people.
- **Loss of momentum & duplication:** Often petition starters are told by MPs or Senators that they must restart their petitions on the parliamentary platform, meaning existing supporter bases are often lost and campaign momentum wasted. Procedural barriers that force duplication reduce public trust and discourage participation.
- **Limited shareability & engagement:** The official e-petitions site lacks many modern engagement features (easy sharing, updates to signatories, accessible formats), limiting reach, accessibility and ongoing civic involvement.

Technology: opportunities and risks

- **Opportunities:** AI and automation can increase accessibility for petition starters who might face barriers making it difficult for them to craft petition text or promote a campaign independently, and can help committees manage large volumes of petitions (clustering topics, summarising comments). Properly applied, these tools can widen participation and improve parliamentary understanding of public sentiment.
- **Risks:** Generative AI and automated bots can be used to fabricate or overwhelm petitions, risking false impressions of public support. Emerging technologies can amplify misinformation if not carefully governed. Deepfake images or videos may be used in petition campaigns to mislead people into signing under false pretences.

Recommended reforms

1. **Remove or reform the conforming / non-conforming divide.** Treat petitions tabled by Members (regardless of origin) as petitions of the House, subject to admissibility checks (jurisdiction, civility, legality), and ordinarily referred for response. Require reasonable, privacy-respecting verification where needed rather than blanket dismissal for form.

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2. **Enable practical integration with external platforms.** Explore formal, privacy-preserving mechanisms (e.g. opt-in data exchange, notification APIs, referral thresholds) so widely supported external petitions can be brought to parliamentary attention without forcing duplication.
3. **Introduce robust, privacy-aware fraud detection and verification.** Combine technical measures (rate-limits, anomaly detection) with manual review to guard against automated abuse on the parliamentary petition platform while keeping participation accessible.
4. **Require transparency about AI use.** Encourage (or collect) simple disclosure when AI tools materially assisted petition drafting. Promote guidance for responsible AI use and require petitioners to verify factual claims.
5. **Commission further research and pilot projects in partnership with civil society platforms.** Test technical integration, verification methods, and AI accessibility features in partnership with external platforms and civil-society stakeholders.

Privacy & platform considerations

Any reform that involves external platforms must respect signatory privacy and data-protection obligations. Change.org does not release personal signatory contact information without consent; practical solutions must be privacy-preserving and compliant with relevant laws.



Conclusion

Modernising the petitions framework will strengthen democratic engagement. By removing procedural barriers between petition collection methods, responsibly harnessing technology, and improving accessibility and feedback, the House can ensure petitions remain a credible, inclusive, and sustainable route for Australians to engage with their Parliament. Change.org Australia is willing to assist the Committee with technical input, pilots, or further evidence.

Respectfully submitted,
Change.org Australia