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Will a million online signatures push Congress to take up student loan debt relief?

by Kitty Felde

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 Fifty years ago, if you had an issue you wanted to fight for, you set up a card table and asked people for signatures on a petition, like the Chatsworth Junior Women's Club did to save oak trees in 1964. Today, the petitions are online - but are they more convincing? LA Public Library/Hollywood Citizen News/Valley Times Collection

It showed up in my Facebook account this morning: a link from a playwright friend that reads "Win This Campaign, Support the Student Loan Fairness Act ([H.R. 1330](#)).

That's the bill introduced late last week by Democratic Congresswoman Karen Bass from Los Angeles. It's the first House measure this session to address the trillion dollar debt carried by students around the country.

The bill promises to "increase purchasing power, strengthen economic recovery, and restore fairness" in financing higher education in the United States. It does that through student loan forgiveness and caps on interest rates on federal student loans, among other methods.

Signon.org signs on to the campaign

The Bass bill has support from the progressive website Signon.org. It's funded by by Moveon.org, and it features citizen petitions on everything—from "Tell Harry Reid Put the Assault Weapons Ban in Gun-Control Bill" (only 634 signatures) to "President Obama: Don't Appoint Villaraigosa" to a cabinet position because of his "disappointing" record (2,589 signatures).

As of this writing, more than 35,000 people have signed a petition urging Congress to pass the student loan measure.

Last year, Michigan Democrat Hansen Clarke introduced a student loan relief bill - H.R. 4170 - that had the same goals as the Bass bill. In fact, the language in both bills to describe their intent and their mechanisms for student loan relief is nearly identical.

And like the Bass bill, Signon.org launched a signature campaign in support of the Clarke bill. The effort netted more than a million signatures.

Impressive, but apparently not effective. Clarke's measure was referred to committee, but died before getting a single hearing. And Clarke was defeated in the November election.

Government by petition

Like, Signon.org, the White House tries to drum up support for issues through online petition campaigns.

Its current hot topic is a proposal aimed at campaign contributions to lawmakers. It would require members of Congress to "be transparent" about who may be influencing their votes by prominently displaying the names of individual, corporate, lobby financial backers "much like NASCAR drivers do."

The petition attracted nearly 10,000 signatures in four days. But don't look for members of Congress to start sporting corporate patches on their charcoal gray suits anytime soon.

The BBC reports that since the British government set up a website for online petitions in 2011, nearly 50,000 have been created. But only 19 petitions have gained the 100,000 signatures needed to trigger debate in Parliament.

Signon.org claims its online petitions helped push the state of Michigan to issue drivers licenses to DREAMers; convince Arizona lawmakers to kill a bill to let Arizona public schools teach climate change denial; and drive Congress to pass the Violence Against Women Act.

Online petition = passage?

But how much, if any, of these "successes" can be attributed to online signatures?

USC journalism professor Kjerstin Thorson says that's a hotly debated topic among those who study social media. Thorson, who teaches at the USC Annenberg's School of Journalism, is an expert in the effects of digital and social media on political engagement, activism and persuasion.

There's no good way to measure how representatives interpret the various messages their constituents send to them, she says. And there's a question of whether they discount online petitions because they're easier to send than a paper letter or even an email.

But Thorson says online petitions can attract a high volume of signatures, which can attract attention, which can lead to a discussion in the media to an issue that otherwise might be much easier to ignore.

She cites the example of the petition calling for the U.S. government to build a Death Star, similar to the one in the Star Wars movies. The petition created buzz in the media - and eventually a response from the head of the White House Budget Office's science and space branch.

"The Administration does not support blowing up planets" read the statement on the White House website. The Death Star petition, by the way, garnered 34,000 signatures.

Thorson says there's not enough data yet to see under what circumstances an online petition "works" to move hearts and minds on Capitol Hill—which is why student loan activists aren't stopping with an online petition.

Online petition backed by old school activism

Last year, former New York prosecutor Robert Applebaum received the first-ever $10,000 SignOn.org Opportunity Grant to continue lobbying online for student debt forgiveness.

He's formed a formal group called the Student Debt Crisis, with a website, data list and videos. But he's also tapping into old-school lobbying by asking petition signers to write letters to the editor, email the new federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to demand action—and perhaps most importantly—vote for candidates who pledge to do something for student loan debt relief.

Applebaum says "we're just getting started."

The first test could be whether the online petitioners can sway Congress into giving the Bass student debt bill a hearing in committee.

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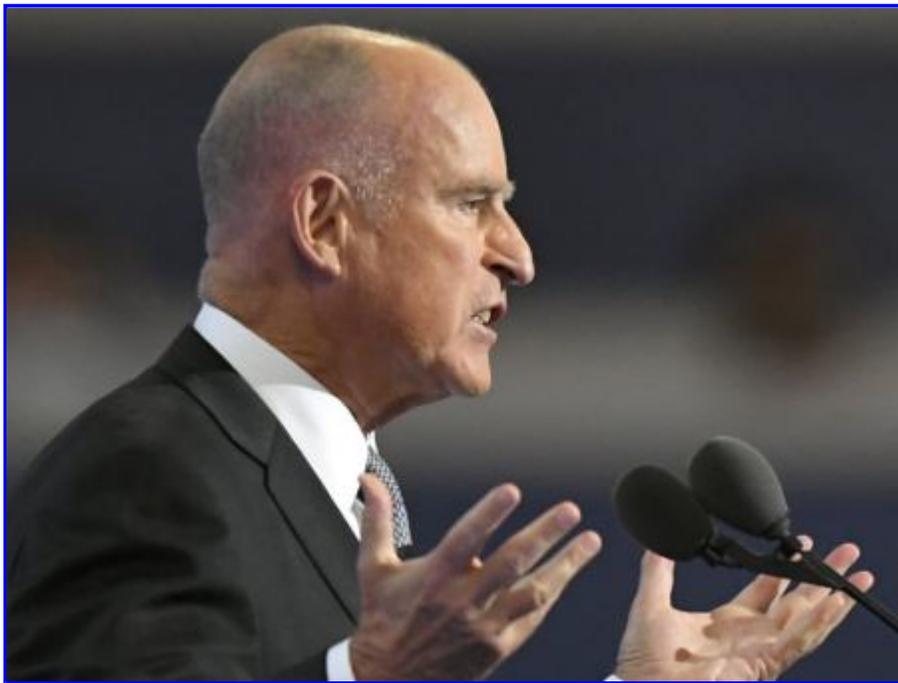
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