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BRINGING FREEDOM OF PETITION INTO A NEW DIGITAL AGE

// **SHANTHI KALATHIL**, SENIOR FELLOW, CENTER ON COMMUNICATION LEADERSHIP AND POLICY, USC ANNENBERG SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION AND JOURNALISM

It was a king's failure to address his subjects' grievances that set events in motion. "In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury," wrote a collection of irate English citizens 250 years ago in declaring their independence as a new nation, the United States of America. "A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people."¹

Today, freedom of petition gets little attention relative to other fundamental rights. Yet, behind the scenes, the right to seek accountability and a redress of grievances is a cornerstone of modern democracy. Voting is the bluntest of tools for accountability; in between election periods, responsive and vibrant democratic systems depend upon a regular push-pull between

Photo: Taiwanese people sign a petition during a protest in Taipei's C.K.S. Memorial Hall on January 11, 2006, to demand a thorough probe into Premier Frank Hsieh, first lady Shu-chen Wu, and other officials for their alleged roles in several high-profile corruption cases. (Getty Images/Sam Yeh)

governments and the public. These dynamics, in turn, depend on citizens having channels to demand redress without fearing reprisals. Where such channels are lacking, people are less likely to trust political institutions.² Democratic legitimacy can decay.

Around the world, the face of governance is changing amid a new round of digital transformation linked to artificial intelligence (AI) and digital public infrastructure (DPI). Frequently, modern citizens interact with their governments not face to face but computer to computer. As state institutions adopt a new generation of digital governance tools, these experiences are taking new forms. In this pivotal moment, it is worth taking stock: How is freedom of petition faring in the digital age?

In a moment of widespread public dissatisfaction, renewing the freedom of petition may provide a much-needed lift to democracy's fortunes.

The Digital Crossroads

In principle, being able to connect with government agencies at the click of a button seems like a windfall for “petitioners.” Civic technologies give people new ways to hold their leaders accountable and to push for transparent, open, and participatory governance. Technology expands access to deliberative approaches, like online assemblies or participatory budgeting, that let citizens have their say throughout the process, not just after concerns emerge—perhaps a more robust way to think about the freedom of petition.

In practice, however, even democratic systems have often struggled to realize technology's civic potential. Globally, the picture is worrisome: Democratic backsliding is hollowing out the mechanisms that would otherwise help keep governments responsive and responsible to citizens. Against this backdrop, democratic models face a challenge from authoritarian regimes that have coopted and warped the promise of freedom of petition.

Modern autocracies are offering their own digital models of state-citizen interaction. Their top-down approaches seem to promise smooth service delivery, and even limited channels for complaint—a feature that is perhaps even more central for citizens with no way to seek change at the ballot box. Yet pathways to backing these complaints with meaningful pressure for accountability stay closed—not only because these systems are operating in a wider authoritarian context, but also by design. Worse, authoritarian digital systems feed into a data-collection dragnet that reinforces the regime's power. Pervasive surveillance chills dissent and makes it easier to punish those who take petitioning too far.

The result is an authoritarian bargain that threatens to define the digital future: efficiencies and convenience paired with surveillance and repression. Autocratic regimes are imposing this “deal” on their citizens domestically and peddling it around the globe.

Democracies need a clearer alternative—one that can help to build systems that deliver, as well as keep citizens engaged beyond fleeting election cycles. Some

promising democratic experiments are already underway. As we see in places like Taiwan, civic leaders and tech innovators are exploring digital approaches that prioritize participatory, transparent, and demand-driven governance.³ Their efforts reflect a conviction that government functions best when everyday citizens have ways to speak out, challenge official assumptions, and ultimately hold leaders accountable for policies that do not serve the public interest.

Today, the future of freedom of petition hinges on this larger movement to make governments more accountable and receptive to the needs of their people. In a moment of widespread dissatisfaction with how democratic systems are working, renewing this often-overlooked fundamental freedom may provide a much-needed lift to the fortunes of democracy more widely.⁴ A closer look at how technologies are transforming the ways people and governments interact can help illuminate the opportunities—and pitfalls—the freedom of petition is likely to meet in the coming years.

Freedom of Petition in Modern Context

Freedom of petition has a long lineage, running back formally to England's Magna Carta and the idea that even the king could be held accountable by those he ruled. To help keep the new U.S. government more amenable to such appeals than England's King George III had proven, America's founders protected this right explicitly in the First Amendment. Legal scholars note that its interpretation has been largely subsumed within the Amendment's guarantees of speech and assembly rights.⁵ Its spirit, however, lives on in activities as varied as calling a Congressional representative, speaking at a public meeting, or collecting signatures for a ballot initiative.⁶

The idea of petitioning state authorities for redress is not historically unique to the Anglo-American tradition. In imperial China, for instance, commoners could report official misconduct to higher administrative levels, with the emphasis on appealing to the benevolence of superiors. Petitioning was revived by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1950s, with an eye to gathering information that might help maintain political control, and the theory and practice of formal petitioning continue to this day.⁷

Around the globe, citizens today still submit formal petitions to official bodies, usually online. But there is also an evolving array of other channels to demand accountability and responsiveness. People can join deliberations, submit comments on proposed regulations (and organize others online to do so), or even engage directly with political figures on social media, among many other options. New technologies have expanded possibilities for billions of people.

Yet not all digital interfaces between states and citizens work in the spirit of freedom of petition. To trace this freedom's development, we should ask whether digital innovations are providing opportunities for citizen voice and agency, amid the wider push for quick and efficient government functioning.

The answer to this question will depend on both the design of these digital systems, and their wider social and political environments. Civic freedoms are interconnected; formal channels for petitioning yield limited accountability where authorities suppress assembly rights, the press, or free speech more generally. Yet even where these freedoms are protected, digitalization that fails to design for voice, accountability, and redress can undermine government responsiveness and citizen trust.

Early Technological Promise

For some years now, public sectors around the world have been adopting digital management tools under the brand “e-government.” The emphasis has generally been on making state bureaucracies work better and faster. While these are worthy goals in their own right, democracy and good governance advocates have pushed for these technologies to do more. Thanks to their efforts, e-government systems have also become instruments for providing access to information, relaying citizen feedback, ensuring accountability within service delivery, and enabling participation in government processes like budgeting.

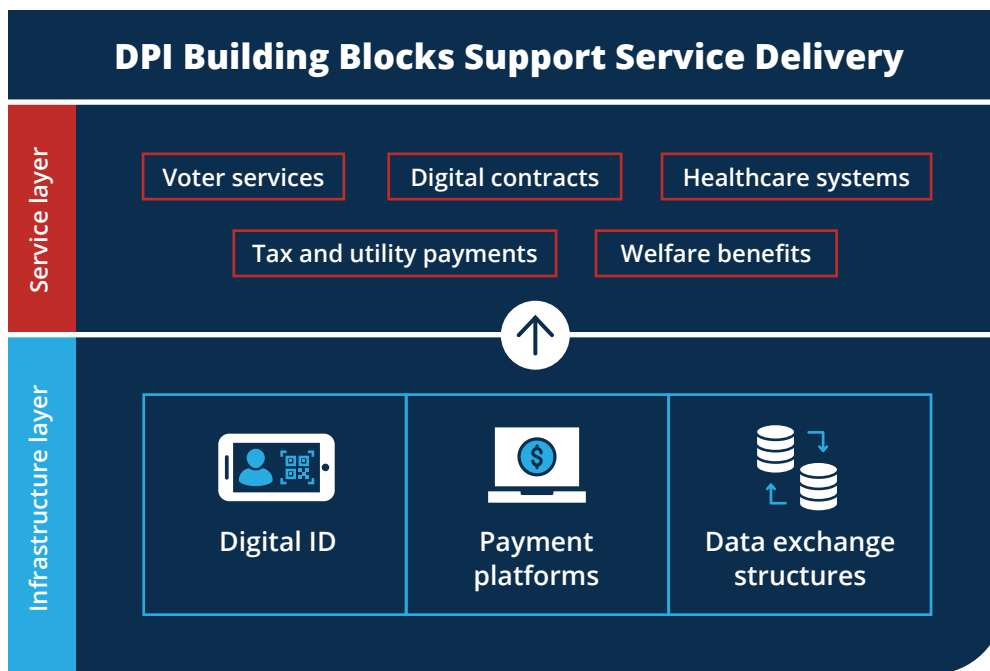
Civil society—people collectively exercising their freedoms of speech and association—thus helped win acceptance of a new commitment: Sustainable development should also mean using technology to amplify citizens’ voices and support the “demand side” of good governance. Today, aspects of accountability are, to some extent, baked into e-government definitions.⁸

Many early initiatives in this domain embodied freedom of petition ideals. These included websites in the Middle East and Asia where citizens could post complaints about specific aspects of government administration in their communities; one such portal in Malaysia would forward complaints to relevant authorities, then send follow-up emails to media organizations to name and shame nonresponsive officials into compliance.⁹ Rather than relying solely on official benevolence, civic innovators leveraged the other institutions of open societies (an independent press and the freedom of speech) to give freedom of petition teeth.

These kinds of efforts remain highly relevant today. Some newer platforms aim to bring marginalized communities and younger people into the formal processes of seeking accountability. SpeakUp Nepal, for instance, bills itself as the country’s first digital petition platform, letting users track petition progress in real time and build constituencies for reform. In 2025, the platform reported that, within 14 months, it had resolved 10 petitions, five of which reached Parliament.¹⁰ In parts of South Asia, where frustration with accountability gaps has been a key driver of recent Gen Z protests,¹¹ such efforts address a critical need.

Keeping these goals in mind will be vital as countries embark on a new wave of digital transformation: Over the past several years, enthusiasm for the concept of digital public infrastructure (or DPI) has swept the e-government

Civic innovators use technology to amplify citizens’ voices and support the “demand side” of good governance.



space. This framework refers to an interoperable set of foundational digital systems—generally including digital ID, payment platforms, and data exchange structures—that in turn underpin how citizens access services from healthcare to voter registration.¹² Such systems are now of wide interest: The World Bank, for instance, has a Global DPI Program supporting projects in more than 80 countries.¹³

Yet, as governments and international organizations make their plans, some aspects of voice, accountability, and redress are dropping out of the conversation. Accountability introduces friction; when the goal is primarily efficiency, rather than overall effectiveness, it can become tempting to design such speed bumps away. Meaningful civil society and public involvement can help ensure these basic principles are seen as fundamental to effective DPI. Losing sight of these questions could sap democratic vitality—as well as smooth the path for savvy authoritarian governments.

The Double-Edged Sword of Digital Governance

Authoritarian regimes have also eagerly embraced giving governance a digital overhaul. Yet their version, unsurprisingly, prioritizes efficiency and stability over accountability. Where opportunities for citizen voice exist at all, they are constrained by both system design and the wider political environment. Even more concerning, these systems abuse the same mechanisms that underpin service delivery—in democracies and autocracies alike—to feed autocrats' apparatus of repression.¹⁴

Examining such cases points us to a key paradox of digitalization: Even as they make it logistically simpler for citizens to raise concerns with governments,

modern digital interfaces also provide the building blocks for surveillance and control structures that can chill citizen voice. Where democratic safeguards are absent, the net effect may be to discourage participation in accountability initiatives that are not politically “safe”—whether inside or outside formal channels.¹⁵

In such cases, digitalization can actively serve to constrict the freedom of petition. Rather than embedding new infrastructure for citizen participation, service provision arrives with a side portion of surveillance.¹⁶

Of course, it is surveillance, rather than service delivery, that has been the chief characteristic of authoritarian regimes throughout history. The Stasi, or secret police, of East Germany famously collected information on millions of citizens, sifting through informant reports, phone records, and even garbage.¹⁷ Today’s authoritarians have jumped on the fresh possibilities afforded by emerging technologies—including the digital interfaces between state and citizen.

One such example is digital ID. These systems are both a DPI building block—a single credential allowing people to vote, pay utility bills, go to the hospital, or receive welfare benefits—and a tool that can make it easier for governments to track and profile citizens. This combination is a dangerous one under regimes inclined to punish those they profile as opponents.¹⁸

Under Burma’s junta, dissenters have been targeted for arrest with help from a central identity infrastructure that draws data from e-ID systems, financial and census records, and facial recognition cameras, among other sources.¹⁹ In Venezuela, the former Maduro regime tied essential services together with its information-collection project through the Homeland system, which includes an identification card, app, and web portal (and can also be linked to the election register). Nearly 90 percent of the population has enrolled in the system, which has become a prerequisite to access vital services like welfare payments and vaccines. Authorities have weaponized these linkages to incentivize regime-friendly behavior, such as voting in sham elections.²⁰

China’s Authoritarian Bargain

The most sophisticated regimes have long understood that authoritarianism is most resilient when it both surveils and mollifies its citizenry, such that meaningful, coordinated mass dissent is both anticipated and consistently neutralized. Venezuela’s politicized service provision offers a crude example of this model. Far more developed is its operationalization in the PRC.

China’s approach to these issues is often analytically oversimplified to extreme censorship (the Great Firewall standing between citizens and the global internet), extreme monitoring (increasingly sophisticated AI-powered biometric and other surveillance), or extreme social control (the social credit system). In reality, the CCP has over the years refined a system that combines aspects of each with extreme convenience, modernity, and promises of security. It has

done so partly by coopting China's homegrown private sector, including some of the biggest and most advanced tech companies on the planet. With the click of a button (or an even more seamless biometric scan), PRC residents can instantly get everything from high-end cuisine to street food delivered, pay bills and handle day-to-day tasks, message friends and stay socially engaged, create and view entertainment and lifestyle content, and buy just about any consumer good imaginable—often through a single super-app. In exchange, however, they are mandatorily conscripted into a system where the government can access their data, decide what level of privileges they enjoy in society, and shape their information diet.²¹

This system even offers controlled channels to vent: Authorities have made digital updates to China's old petitioning system. Yet within a wider landscape of repression, petitioning is a flimsy instrument for accountability. This much is clear from the fate of unlucky petitioners deemed to have overstepped the CCP's red lines. For many years, overly persistent complainants have figured prominently among the victims of forced psychiatric confinement, detention in off-the-record "black jails," and other abuses.²² Rather than freely amplifying citizen voice, petitioning in the PRC—where permitted at all—is a safety valve that ensures dissatisfaction remains safely trained on lower levels of government. Similar digital safety valves can be found in other repressive settings.²³

Under authoritarian models, when technologies bring state and citizen closer, the regime gains power at the individual's expense. Unfortunately, these models may find fertile ground, in part, because residents of democracies and autocracies alike are already used to the tradeoff of being subjected to digital surveillance in exchange for convenience.²⁴ People expect some surrender of personal data when they use commercial digital platforms, whether to shop for groceries, stream videos, or drive a car. They are far less accustomed to digital participation giving them a meaningful say in governance. The authoritarian model of citizen-state interaction, in which the principles of redress and accountability are dropped in favor of transactional ease and promises of security, is in danger of becoming the default.

Innovations in Participation: Ukraine, Taiwan, and Beyond

Yet that future is not guaranteed. Democratic defenders and activists continue to explore new forms of innovation, even in the toughest of environments.

Ukraine launched the Diia app to bring an array of government services to citizens in 2020. After the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, the app became a critical service node for citizens facing conflict and deprivation. Digital ID and passports expanded support for social payments, and, in a critical period, Diia enabled quicker transit through border checkpoints.²⁵

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Remarkably, democracy has not been forgotten. Ukraine has electronic portals to petition local authorities, the cabinet, or the president²⁶—with Diia authentication as the fastest way to sign—and Diia polls, online hearings and consultations, and participatory budgets remain critical tools for Ukrainians to demand accountability amid the hardships and horrors of war. In 2024, Ukraine scored an extraordinary first-place rank on the UN E-Government survey's E-Participation Index.²⁷

The introduction (and evolution) of AI has catalyzed fresh thinking on how technology can advance the principles of voice, accountability, and redress. Some see opportunities for technology-enhanced citizen assemblies and other new forms of community that open fresh channels for citizen voice,²⁸ bypassing calcified bureaucratic structures or insufficiently representative procedures. These approaches rest on exercising the freedoms of petition and association in tandem: Rather than each person making their views known in isolation, citizens engage with one another in ways that in turn inform the state.

Through the vTaiwan process designed by Taiwanese civic technologists, structured community networks used AI-supported deliberation tools to hold discussions on specific issues of public concern and uncover areas of policy consensus and divergence. These findings were then incorporated into targeted conversations to help stakeholders refine priorities and come up with actionable steps.²⁹ Proponents tout this approach as a way to break through what seems like intractable political polarization in many democracies, although critics have questioned the model's wider applicability and sustainability.³⁰

Others have proposed more dramatic changes in how we think about relaying our views to officials. With AI agents able to take on increasingly complex tasks, some posit scenarios in which personally designated AI agents or avatars might be delegated to express political views and engage in continuous political participation on behalf of individual citizens.³¹

Such possibilities raise questions about how increasingly complex AI tools will impact democratic functioning. If AI technologies are used to simulate individual or mass public opinion, what biases or distortions might they introduce, and can such deliberation—even if productive—be considered genuine public participation?³²

There are also fears that large language models will warp existing channels for exercising the freedom of petition. AI advances are making it easier to overwhelm procedures like public comment and notice opportunities with astroturfed “public” inputs that are impossible to distinguish from genuine human submissions. In such scenarios, the voices of real people who are trying to participate may be drowned out. It is not a far stretch to imagine the havoc a malign foreign actor could wreak by manipulating such opportunities.³³

Renewing Freedom of Petition for the Future

Underlying many of these scenarios lies a fundamental concern about the relationship between citizen and state in an era when more and more governance processes are being entrusted to technology. If AI tools are tasked with increasingly important decisions, where does true democratic accountability lie? To whom, and how, does one petition?

These scenarios are becoming increasingly less abstract—and civil society, policymakers, and anyone with a stake in our collective democratic future must grapple with them now, lest we let our fundamental freedoms slip away beneath our notice.

Yet with appropriate forethought and guardrails, there are ways in which AI could help rejuvenate or even reinvent the compact between citizen and state, at a time when faith in democratic governments is at historic lows around the world. Leveraging this potential to empower citizens and keep leaders accountable, rather than supercharging surveillance and repression, will require more than passively ceding relevant decisions to the designers of technology.

An intentional approach to digital tools, paired with a refusal to accept authoritarian futures as given, can pay dividends. The examples of Ukraine and Taiwan remind us that supporting citizen agency and providing truly effective public services are mutually reinforcing goals, not alternatives. Treating voice, accountability, and redress as core design principles, not just side concerns, can help carry the spirit of freedom of petition into a new technological era.

With appropriate forethought and guardrails, AI could help rejuvenate or even reinvent the compact between citizen and state.

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