Here's the roll call of online petitions so far this year:

- To the NKF (Former CEO)
  Mr T T Durai should step down — 43,654 signatures.
- To the Government: Don't legalise casinos — over 29,000 signatures.
- To Victoria School management: Don't go co-ed — 1,684 signatures.
- To PM Lee Hsien Loong: Open up the books of GIC and Temasek Holdings — 209 signatures.
- To cinema operators: Don't raise movie ticket prices — 628 signatures.
- To the Government: Abolish the death penalty — 214 signatures.
- To the Singapore Zoo: Stop using wild animals in your shows — 174 signatures.
- To traffic police: Draft safer laws for the road — 608 signatures.
- To the Government: Petition spot.com, and you'll be let to let male students bring their pop idols to Singapore.
- To the Government: Abolish the death penalty — 480 signatures.
- To NKF: Mr Populist has signed online petitions is here. Populist? Yes. Effective? Not really. At least that's the consensus.

Doubious

"There are certain credibility problems," said Dr Cherian George of NTU's School of Communication and Information.

"The fact that you can generate a long list so quickly and easily is precisely what makes them slightly dubious and open to manipulation. We can never be sure how reliable the names and numbers are."

That's why most recipients, he added, will want to do their own checks to verify that public opinion is indeed as strong as the petition claims.

Agreeing, commercial lawyer Michael Loh warned of deliberate attempts to pad up such lists.

"With hyperlinks and miracle of e-mail, it's painless and all too convenient to the point of being ridiculous," he told The New Paper.

"Out of thousands of signatures, how much of them are really people who have thought through it properly?"

"A good 20 per cent may have clicked on it because it was sent to them anyway. They may be caught up with the tide of emotion."

In other words, there's a spontaneous herd mentality at work.

"Which is exactly why 31-year-old marketing manager Fong Hoe Fang — the man behind the no-casino petition — went to the trouble of setting up his own dedicated website with specific safeguards.

Unlike the "anything goes" environment of mass portal sites, he insisted on people giving their full names and NRIC numbers before signing.

In the end, Mr Fong and his team actually deleted some 18,000 dodgy entries before submitting the list to the President.

"I'm sure 95 per cent of our final figure of 19,500 signatures were valid," he said confidently.

Would he do it again, if another burning issue comes along?

"Yes, provided the right checks are in place," he replied, adding that he still believes online petitions "offer Singaporeans a good platform to air their views".

"We must choose our fights," Mr Fong stressed.

Mr Loh, however, isn't as keen — either to start or to sign one.

He said: "Before I exercise the power of my right forefinger, I must be convinced that this is the same position I would take if I had to use ink and paper to write my own letter."

In contrast, one commentator who has signed online petitions is SMU's Associate Professor Kirpal Singh — on issues like the death penalty and global warming.

But he warned: "My sense is this — after some time, people are going to tire of this. I'm not so sure our society at this time is ready to exercise such influence, in the sense that online communities
Once in a blue moon, signatures are enough to change things. But in most cases, much more is needed for the earth to move.

— Mr Tan (left) of the Institute of Policy Studies

It’s part of the process of Singaporeans rediscovering their voice. Is it passive? Yes certainly, but it’s less passive than doing nothing.

— Dr George (left) of NTU’s School of Communication and Information

After some time, people are going to tire of this. I’m not so sure our society at this time is ready to exercise such influence.

— Associate Professor Kirpal Singh (left) of SMU

become powerful lobby groups. In the list above, only the NKF petition seems to have “succeeded”. But even then, analysts say, other factors — like the 15,000 donor cancellations — may have been the clincher.

On his failed no-to-casinos attempt, Mr Fong himself believes “half a million signatures wouldn’t have made an iota of difference”.

KIASU

But surely, if more Singaporeans would let their fingers, rather than their mouths, do the talking, the authorities would be forced to take notice?

Not so simple, Mr Tan Tiam How believes.

A senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, the former political journalist even labels the ease and anonymity of online petitions a “relatively kiasu and kiasi way of doing things”.

Rather than being a triumph for grassroots democracy, “most are doomed to die a natural death in the cyber-graveyard,” he said.

“Once in a blue moon, signatures are enough to change things. But in most cases, much more is needed for the earth to move. Leadership, organisation, passion, following through, taking risks and expending effort and money”.

His bottom line: “How many will turn up to sign a similar pen-and-paper petition, say, at the Speakers’ Corner?”

A glance at the ongoing pro-Andrew Kuan petition, for example, proves his point.

Apart from the expected sentiments in support of Mr Kuan, it’s also filled with angry, highly defamatory (and unpublishable) comments about President S R Nathan and the Government — comments clearly typed in frustration, which the signatories, it’s safe to say, will never utter openly in a physical, as opposed to a virtual, environment.

This is quite a departure from the spirit of earlier efforts like 2001’s Save Chek Jawa or 2003’s Save Colbar petitions.

So is it, to put it bluntly, a lazy form of activism, with little long-term benefit for civil society?

On this, Dr George is diplomatic.

“It’s part of the process of Singaporeans rediscovering their voice. Is it passive? Yes certainly, but it’s less passive than doing nothing.”

He added that even if petitioners know there’s zero chance of success, the aim may not be to change a policy or reverse a decision, but just to plant an idea in the public’s mind.

Look again at the list at the start of this article. You be the judge.