The White House is answering online petitions again, but does it still matter?

The past month has seen a lot of political whiplash, particularly around gun control — with President Donald Trump seemingly declaring support for substantial reform, then basically abandoning his earlier position, and restarting an old debate over video game violence along the way. The past month has also seen the White House resume operations of We the People, answering questions for the first time since Trump took office. It's underlined one of the weirder aspects of the administration: asking the White House to take a position on something, once considered a key purpose of We the People, no longer means very much.

After temporarily shutting down We the People in December and relaunching earlier this year, the White House began posting responses last month to seven petitions that hit the 100,000-signature threshold. That list includes a couple of the most controversial petitions, including a request to release Trump's tax returns and to designate the anti-fascist "antifa" movement a domestic terrorist organization.

If you're looking for policy revelations or hints at future political action, however, you probably won't find it in these updates. They're mostly boilerplate that sticks to explaining the letter of the law. For a petition about legalizing hemp growing, for example, the White House simply describes an existing exception for research institutions. It completely evades the question about tax returns, too:

> *Thank you for signing this We the People petition.*

> *Please note that this petition is not within the scope of the Terms of Participation of We the People, as the President's decision regarding whether to release the tax returns does not address an action or policy of the Federal Government.*
>
> *Thank you, again, for contacting the White House.*

On the other hand, the White House hasn't proposed anything alarming in them, either. For the antifa request, it just notes that there's not a formal designation system and generically condemns "violent individuals and groups." (It doesn't mention that agencies can describe incidents as "domestic terrorist violence," and have apparently done so with antifa protests.)

> *President Donald J. Trump has repeatedly said that hatred and violence have no place in America. Our country must unite in condemning violence and recognize that the bonds of love and loyalty that bring us together are stronger than the wicked forces trying to divide us.*
>
> *Although Federal law provides a mechanism to designate and sanction foreign terrorist organizations and foreign state sponsors of terrorism, there is currently no analogous mechanism for formally designating domestic terrorist organizations.*
>
> *Nonetheless, law enforcement has many tools at its disposal to address violent individuals and groups. The Department of Justice routinely charges violent individuals, of all types, with a variety of offenses, including arson, threats, fraud, tax violations, hate crimes, murder, and offenses related to the misuse or illegal possession of firearms and explosives.*

There are still lots of requests awaiting responses, including "do not repeal net neutrality," "declare George Soros a terrorist," and "Donald Trump: resign as president of the

United States.” Based on the answers we’ve already gotten, they’ll very likely also get brushed off. But I guess if you really want the White House to say *something* — no matter how non-specific — about an issue, at least We the People still has you covered.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/20/17143536/white-house-we-the-people-online-petition-answers-back