WHAT'S THE POINT OF *petitions?*

What the last century reveals about petitioning and people power in modern Britain

Underlying research:

This report summarises findings from the AHRC-ESRC 'Petitioning and People Power in Twentieth-Century Britain' research project (AH/T003847/1). A forthcoming academic book will provide a fuller account of findings, sources, and evidence.

Durham University · UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS · HANSARD SOCIETY · UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council · Economic and Social Research Council · UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL · Research Retold

Foreword

Over the last two decades, the Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement showed that the public was generally more likely to sign a petition than they were to engage in most other forms of democratic activity apart from voting.

This report highlights why petitions have been such a popular form of political participation since the dawn of mass democracy. It illustrates how the petitioning process developed over time from being focused on political institutions, particularly Parliament, to become a popular and convenient form of mass campaigning, helping to attract public and media attention to issues large and small.

Petitions have been a valuable mechanism to bring 'ordinary' voices, particularly those of women, to the heart of these local and national debates. But this report helpfully reminds us that 'people power' petitioning can also have a dark side when used to ostracise, exclude or reject people. Now, in the 21st century, technology has reinvented the approach of both the public and parliaments to petitioning, presenting new challenges from 'clickocracy' to data ownership.

By providing historically-informed reflections on how petitioning has developed over the years, this report provides valuable food for thought as we contemplate how it might develop in the future.

Ruth Fox

Director, Hansard Society

What is the *aim* of this report?

Our historical research will enhance debates about the future of political participation and representation, especially within democratic institutions and campaign organisations.

What are the *main findings* of this report?

Petitioning has been one of the most popular and persistent forms of political participation used by British citizens in the modern democratic age.

Our research has uncovered the widespread role of petitioning to develop understanding of political culture, civil society and citizenship in Great Britain.

Contrary to received wisdom at the time or since, petitioning did not become irrelevant or old-fashioned in the era of universal suffrage.

Moreover, petitioners often held more subtle or sophisticated definitions of 'success' than those who condemned the practice as ineffective.

Research questions

Our project set out to answer three questions that are relevant to democracy in the UK today, using archival, oral, visual, and print evidence from the past century:

*What did **petitions** mean for the development of mass democracy?*

*Why do people start or sign **petitions**?*

*How did **petitioners** adapt to changes in technology, society, and culture?*

Acknowledgments:

The project team are grateful to our project partners at the History of Parliament Trust and the British Library (Oral History section) for supporting our research for the project, as well as our oral history interviewees. We are delighted to publish this report on our research in association with the Hansard Society. Report edited and designed by Research Retold.

Summary of the report

1. What *petitioning* revealed about mass democracy

- Petitioning shifted towards informal political participation
- Petitions were used for a diversity of causes, actions, and audiences

2. Why people started or signed *petitions*

- To facilitate further action or bring visibility to otherwise ignored concerns
- To form links between campaigning activities and between their campaigns and decision-makers
- To organise, recruit and fundraise in local and national campaigns

3. How *petitioners* adapted to cultural, social, and technological change

- By being accessible to different groups, citizens, and campaigns
- By offering a convenient way for campaigners to attract publicity

What *petitioning* revealed about mass democracy

Key message: Our research reveals the breadth of petitioning as a practice across all manner of causes and groups, addressing local, national, and international concerns. Studying who petitioned whom across a century enabled us to connect everyday political experiences of citizenship with changing understandings of where power lay and who claimed rights and obligations.

Petitioning shifted towards *informal* political participation

In the nineteenth century, Parliament was the main recipient of public petitions and the only one to count them. Petitions to Parliament declined throughout the twentieth century (Figure 1) so that in 1974 the House of Commons abolished its Select Committee on Public Petitions due to lack of business.

At the same time, citizens increasingly contacted their members of Parliament (MPs) to redress issues and a reinvigoration of the petitioning system might have enhanced this. Instead, those in power decided that petitioning had lost its value, thus devaluing the petitioning of Parliament further.

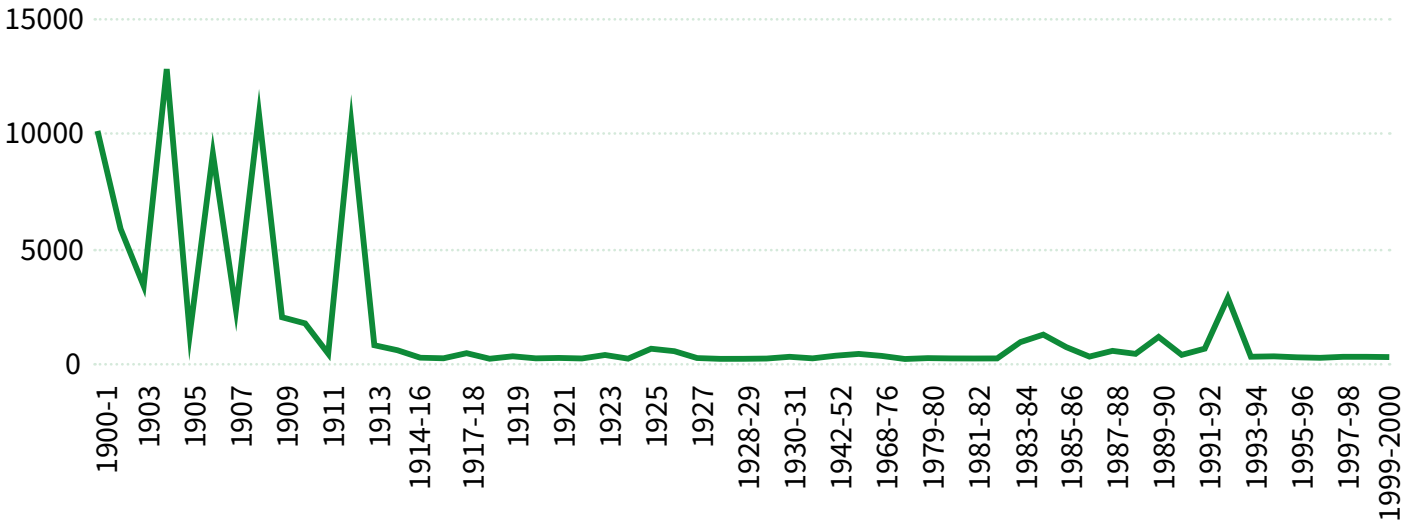


Figure 1: Petitions to the House of Commons declined between 1900-2000[1]

[1] **Sources:** 1900-31 period: Parliamentary Papers, Annual Returns of the Number of Public Petitions Presented to the House of Commons; 1932-2000 period: Philip Loft, *Petitions in the UK*, House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper, Number CBP 8620, 11 July 2019, p. 14.

Despite this decline, surveys of political participation repeatedly found that, apart from voting, petitioning was the only form of political activity that engaged a majority of British citizens in the later twentieth century (Figure 2).

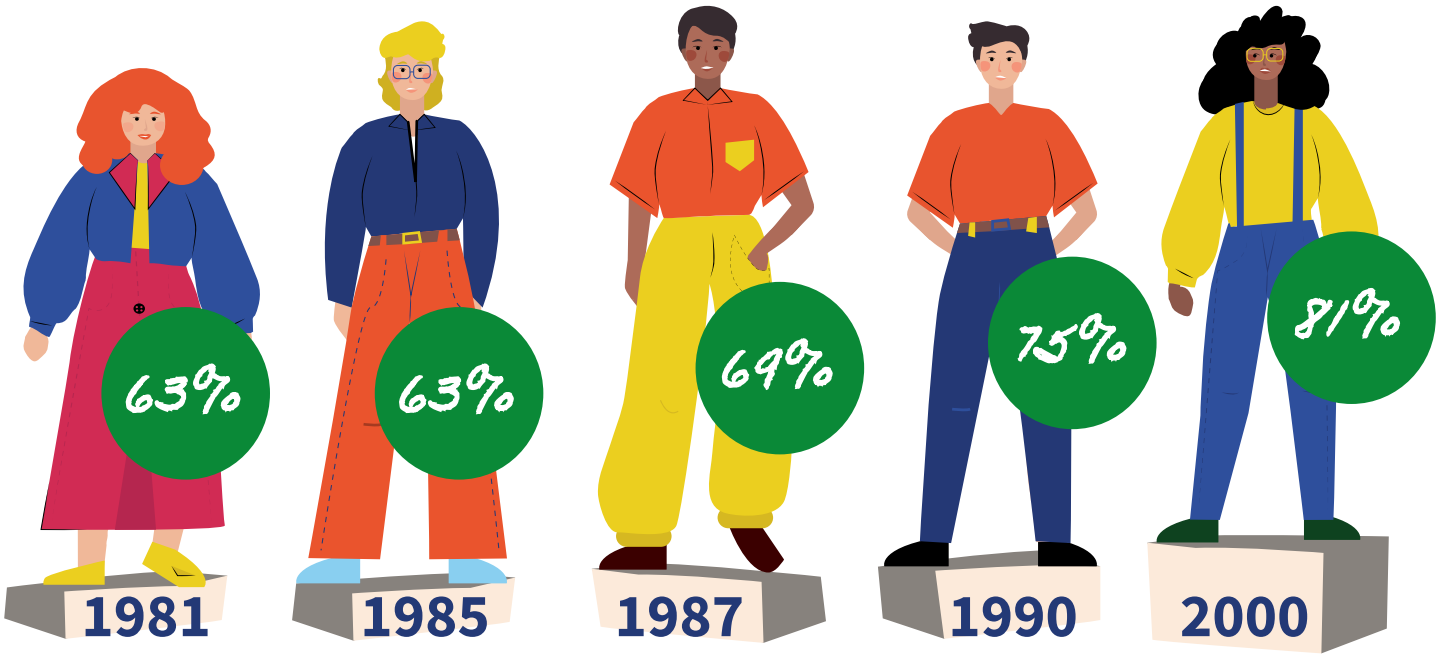


Figure 2: Percentage of British respondents who said they had signed a petition[2]

[2] **Sources:** R. Inglehart and G. Catterberg, 'Trends in Political Action: The Developmental Trend and the Post-Honeymoon Decline', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 43 (2002), 300-16, at 305; P. Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 201; G. Parry, G. Moyser, and N. Day, Political Participation and Democracy in Britain (Cambridge, 1992), p. 44; 1987, British Election Study 1987, Cross-section Survey, UK Data Service, SN2568

Our research reveals why people kept petitioning despite openly expressed doubts from decision-makers, commentators, and – often – campaigners themselves about petitions' likelihood of success.

- **Petitioning evolved alongside the early-twentieth-century democratisation of representative institutions.** As such, petitions often mediated between citizens and institutions. Petitioners often pre-empted official efforts to encourage participatory democratic practices towards the end of the century (and continuing in digital forms in the twenty-first century).

- **Citizens increasingly participated outside of formal political processes,** such as those associated with elections and political parties. Rather than waiting for invitations to express views in a vote, consultation, or opinion poll, petitions offered a way for citizens to press claims without prior permission.

- The apparent expansion of petitioning in the twentieth century reflected a shift away from being a practice directed to particular political institutions to it becoming **a mechanism for wider campaigns existing outside formalised processes or systems.**

- **Petitions enabled a dynamic process of different groups advancing their own representative claims.** Petitions formed an important part of a pluralist, contested democracy, where no particular institution or medium could claim exclusive authority to speak for all of the people, all of the time.

Petitions were used for a *diversity* of causes, actions, and audiences

Our research finds that petitioning diversified rather than diminished.

- Petitioners addressed a broader range of **local, national, and international authorities**, almost all of which did not formally record or count petitions.
- Some petitions now headed to **10 Downing Street**, continued to address the monarch, or lobbied local government.
- Petitioning remained a common tactic for **diverse** causes, social movements, political parties, civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) throughout the twentieth century.
- In other cases, people created freestanding petitions to represent their claims or opinions. We call these **petitions 'in the wild'**. They were organised with no intention to be sent to a formal 'petitions system' associated with a particular authority or institution. This new informality offered greater scope for the creativity of citizens and activists, reflecting a rich clash of different claims to represent 'people power'.

Recognising petitioning as a widespread, important, and popular practice explains why so many famous protest movements made petitions central to their activity.

1957 The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

1999 The Jubilee 2000 campaign for debt relief

1971 Anti-European opponents of Britain's entry to the Common Market

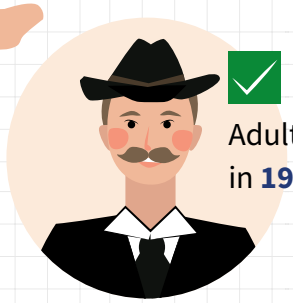
1936 The Jarrow marchers

1910 Women suffragists and suffragettes

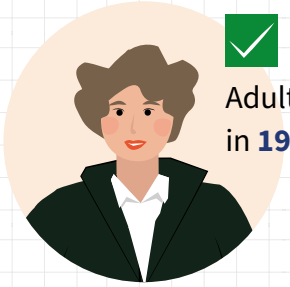
Petitions provided a tool for participation and representation in local, national, or international scales of collective action.

1950: A case study

Petitioning persisted despite the extension of the vote to all:



Adult *men* in **1918**



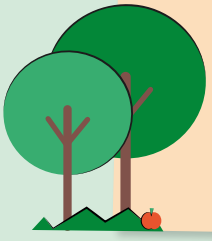
Adult *women* in **1928**

In **1950**, at the peak of a two-party electoral system when almost 90% of British electors voted for either Labour or the Conservatives, petitioning flourished alongside representative democracy:

Over 2 million Scottish citizens signed a Covenant in favour of a devolved parliament

1.3 million Britons subscribed to the Stockholm Appeal, an international (allegedly Communist-inspired) campaign for nuclear disarmament

Countless petitions were used by citizens within their neighbourhoods:



Stourport residents successfully *opposed* an attempt to convert an orchard into a car park.

Parents on one of the Orkney Islands *petitioned* the local director of education regarding 'the attitude and methods' of their children's teacher.

A Sunderland teenager organised a *petition* demanding better bus services.

2. Why people started or signed *petitions*

Key message: Many organisations and individuals kept petitioning, sometimes to the bafflement of politicians and insiders. Many people circulating or signing petitions did not hold a simple, instrumental expectation of 'success', but rather embraced sophisticated, strategic understandings of pressure, agency, and duty.

To facilitate further *action* or bring visibility to otherwise ignored concerns

Individuals and organisations using petitions have often had a broader or more sophisticated concept of 'success' than politicians, officials, or authorities. Many petitioners did not expect the person receiving a petition to agree to their demands immediately, but rather saw petitioning as enabling, honouring, or developing goals. Asking people to sign a petition could be a way to encourage them to change their future behaviour or to change their mind:

Mansfield Friends of the Earth's 1995 petition

opposed mahogany products and pledged not to buy them

Anti-German League's 1915 petition

demanding "all women who have signed it to register a resolve not to purchase German articles in the future".

The Equal Pay Campaign

1952 Committee petition:
[Petitions afford an] "opportunity for publicity for the campaign and for educating public opinion" by "bringing the question before large numbers of individual citizens" asked to sign.

For people signing petitions, they might do so because it offered a chance to express their view or honour a sense of duty, rather than because they expected theirs to be the one signature that tipped the balance for achieving change. Signing petitions could have a unifying effect, or be divisive within communities:

1993:
A petition for 'Justice for Joy Gardner', killed in a police raid, publicised the Black experience of the deportation system and London policing.

1968: Residents' decisions to sign or not to sign a petition against a new housing development resulted in permanent splits in men's Sunday drinking groups and women's coffee morning invitations.

1986: One woman recalled how there had been an anti-abortion "petition at my Church and I turned away from the Church over constant badgering over this issue" as "I dislike men telling me what I should do".

To *form links* between campaigning activities and between their campaigns and decision-makers

Petitioning formed part of a repertoire of campaigning tactics, and was often linked to demonstrations, protests, letter-writing, face-to-face lobbying, and other interactions with power.

At the time and since, petitioning has been dismissed as a low-risk, conventional form of participation compared to more direct and 'radical' forms of protest associated with the new social movements of the 1960s and afterwards.

Yet, the widespread use of petitioning within protest movements, including nuclear disarmament, women's liberation, gay rights, and animal rights, reveals a more complicated relationship between protest and petitioning, which were not mutually exclusive activities. Indeed, petitioning was often valued by activists as a prompt for demonstrations or as a way to connect directly with authority through the presentation of petitions.

To *organise, recruit* and *fundraise* in local and national campaigns

Increasingly from the 1970s, elected politicians organised their own petitions on local issues to show their leadership on constituency concerns or to boost turnout from their voters at elections.

Campaigners, whether local or national, found petitioning a valuable mechanism for organisation, recruitment, and fundraising. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament illustrates this.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (1950s-90s) advised branches to fill the donation column of the first line of signatures on each petition, to encourage others to chip in too.

"*In itself the petition is largely irrelevant, rather we use it as an enabling tool.*"

CND newspaper, 1983

"*Knocking on doors was very rewarding because it was surprising how many people were actually interested enough to listen and were sympathetic.*"

Interviewee who collected 1000 *signatures* in Surrey for the World Disarmament Petition, 1980s

"*Cynics assert that no petition ever influences the body to which it is addressed" but this "does not prevent the petition being valuable as a means of propaganda.*"

Anti-nuclear activist of the 1960s

3. How *petitioners* adapted to changes in technology, society, and culture

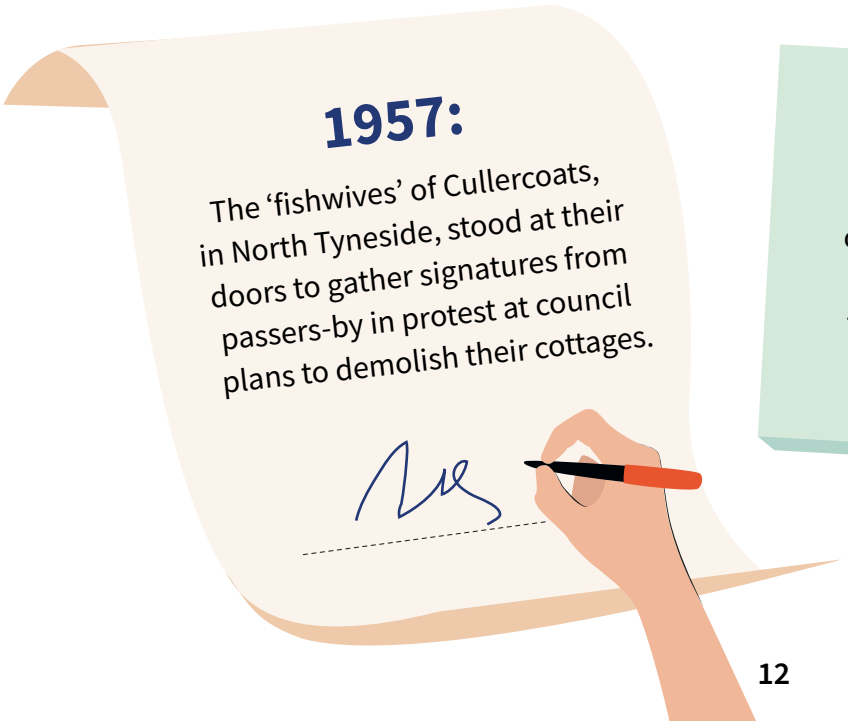
Key message: The growing 'mediatisation' of petitioning meant it was increasingly tailored and sometimes commissioned with an eye to newspaper or TV reporting, rather than the immediate authority to which a petition was addressed. In the 1990s, online pioneers experimented with e-mail and website petitions, adapting petitions to the early internet.

By being *accessible* to different groups, citizens, and campaigns

In many local contexts, petitions enabled residents, tenants, or service-users to offer their own democratic challenge to remote bureaucracies, arbitrary authority, or corporate power on any conceivable issue. Petitions focusing on local issues constituted a popular and ubiquitous form of everyday politics, which could extend beyond Westminster's priorities or party lines. Whether or not such petitions connected a particular, local issue to general, national, or international questions, they captured everyday political concerns about the power to shape communities.

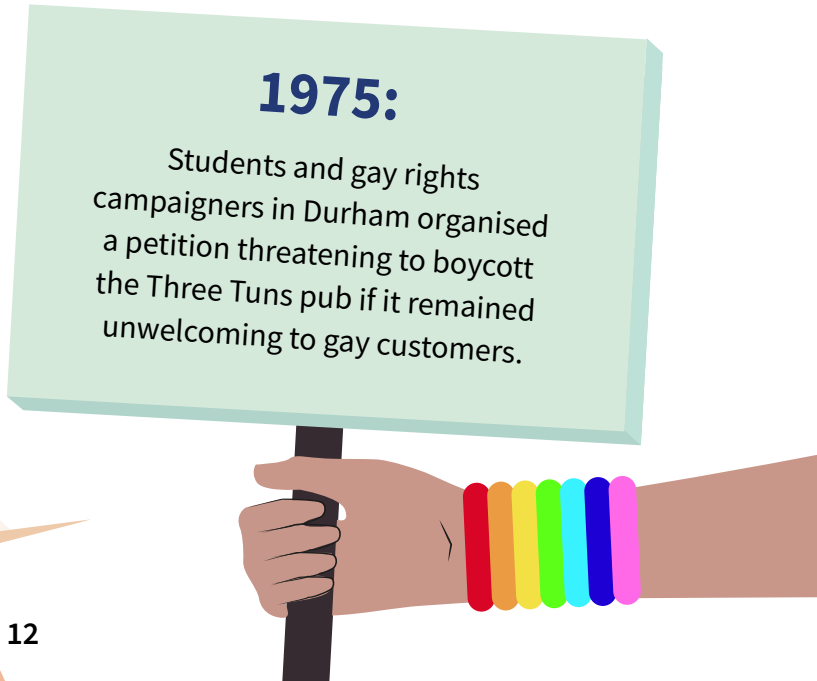
1957:

The 'fishwives' of Cullercoats, in North Tyneside, stood at their doors to gather signatures from passers-by in protest at council plans to demolish their cottages.



1975:

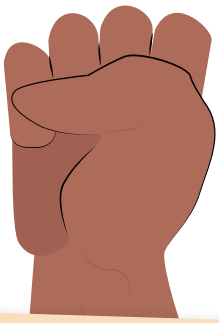
Students and gay rights campaigners in Durham organised a petition threatening to boycott the Three Tuns pub if it remained unwelcoming to gay customers.



While petitioning could be an inclusive, accessible tool enabling participation, it could also be used to exclude or reject people.

Our research reveals a persistent genre of 'ostracisation' petitions such as:

- petitions against Gypsy, Romany, and Traveller people
- objections to perceived 'problem' tenants or neighbours
- demands to 'keep the street white'



1985:

The Commission for Racial Equality won an injunction against 53 tenants of the Exmouth estate in Tower Hamlets for signing a petition opposing an Asian family moving into their block.

Women played a particularly important role in the labour of procuring signatures on petitions.

While expectations of women's political, economic, and social roles changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century, petitioning continued to be a popular way to claim gendered authority on particular issues.

1906:

Women temperance activists petitioned magistrates over the licensing of an inn in Trefeglwys.

1960s onwards

Campaigners opposed to the permissive society, such as Mary Whitehouse or Victoria Gillick, reinforced their message through a medium, the petition, that evoked 'ordinary' voices, such as those of provincial housewives, in defiance of establishment elites.

1996:

'Two Scottish mothers in a coffee shop' started the Snowdrop campaign for restrictions on handguns following the Dunblane massacre.

By offering a *convenient* way for campaigners to attract *publicity*

The growth of photographic reproduction, broadcast media, and mass readership newspapers gave petitioners an incentive to fashion increasingly striking or spectacular visual petition-presentations.

1931:

The Lord's Day Observance Society delivered to Downing Street a petition of nearly 1.5m *signatures* against cinemas opening on Sundays.

1954:

Women on the Equal Pay Campaign Committee and trades unions leaders presented petitions with 680,000 *signatures* for pay equality in public services.

1967:

Disabled people went on foot or in wheelchairs to Downing Street to raise the *concerns* of the Disablement Income Group campaigning for disability support.

1982:

500,000 Sikhs marched to deliver a petition protesting their *exclusion* from race relations laws.

Conclusions:

Twentieth-century petitioning and beyond

In the decades between the waning of mass petitions to Parliament in the Edwardian era and the early twenty-first century emergence of institutional e-petitions systems, petitioning was a widespread, but largely unrecorded, political activity directed to a range of authorities – or perhaps carried out without one specifically in mind.

In terms of our three research questions, we found that:

- during the development of mass democracy in the twentieth century, petitioning was used across all manner of causes, groups, and scales, from local to international;
- many people circulating or signing petitions did not hold a simple, instrumental expectation of 'success', but rather embraced sophisticated, strategic understandings of pressure, agency, and duty, and used petitioning as a key means of fundraising and recruitment;
- the 'mediatisation' of petitioning meant that it was increasingly tailored and sometimes commissioned with an eye to newspaper or TV reporting, rather than the immediate reception by the authority to which a petition had been addressed.

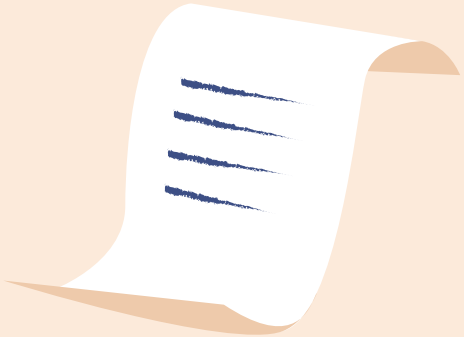
Despite the growth of government power during the twentieth century, Parliamentarians missed an opportunity to reinvent the petitioning process as a form of public engagement with legislators.

However, in 1999, the new Scottish Parliament was founded with a committee to consider and investigate citizens' petitions; from 2000, it invited online petitions too. The National Assembly for Wales (now Senedd Cymru), Northern Ireland Assembly, and UK Parliament subsequently followed this lead to reinvent petition systems, as have many local councils.

Brief experiments with Downing Street e-petitions ended with a parliamentary committee overseeing a system that incorporates government responses to petitioners. Petitioning to legislatures revived thanks not just to technology but also to an explicit strategy to engage voters and citizens in the work of their representative institutions during the period in between elections.

Since e-petitions rely on some sort of online platform for signature, they have changed the relationship between the organisation and the reception of petitions. Legislatures may now vet the content of e-petitions listed for signature, since their servers and reputation are at stake in inviting people to sign.

At the same time, a variety of proprietary or individual websites for petition-signing continue the tradition of petitioning 'in the wild', where the mechanism for transmitting a petition to the relevant authority is less important than amassing a show of support for the cause. Many campaigns and organisations remain keen to host their own petitions, for members and potential supporters, to sign online or on paper.



Ownership of petitions – whether paper or digital ones – has become increasingly important. While organisations always valued the recruitment and fundraising role of petitions, twenty-first-century data protection laws make the signatories' consent to further communications more valuable than ever. If the decline of local journalism provides fewer outlets soliciting or photographing petitions presented to a local council, then petitioning – whether online or not – remains a common means to represent a form of 'people power' to a wide range of authorities and audiences.

Understanding how political participation changed in the past can help us better understand and determine how we imagine its future.