

Submission to the Inquiry into the functions, processes and procedures of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, Parliament of Western Australia

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira (University of Leeds, UK)

I'm submitting this evidence on the basis of my comparative research into parliamentary petitions systems, which has recently focused in particular on the UK Parliament's e-petitions system. I am co-Director of the University of Leeds [Centre for Democratic Engagement](#) in the UK, Co-Editor of the journal [Parliamentary Affairs](#) and Chair of the UK [Study of Parliament Group](#).

My area of research is parliament and public engagement, and in particular petitions to parliament. My submission focuses on the role played by petitions in a modern parliament, and on the practices and procedures that can help to further improve a petitions system, as suggested in your correspondence to me (dated 25 October 2019).

Summary:

- Petitions to parliament can perform **four types of roles**: linkage, campaigning, scrutiny and policy.
 - These types of roles break down into **18 specific roles**, from legitimacy to policy change (listed in a Table below).
 - The extent to which these roles are performed depends on the **processes in place** to consider petitions and to relate to petitioners.
 - Key processes and practices that help further improve a petitioning system include: having a **set Committee for petitions**; having **the means to follow up issues**; ensuring the **government is bolted** into the process; **regular communication** with petitioners; **transparent and accessible** information about petitions; integration of **public engagement activities**.
 - Ensuring mechanisms through which **petitioners feel they are listened to, is paramount** for a petitioning systems to be perceived positively. This matters almost more than what petitions actually achieve in terms of policy output(s).
1. Petitions to parliament perform a wide range of roles. Most people think that petitions are simply a form of participation and/or a way to affect policy. However, petitions systems can have a much wider impact on the mediation between citizens and decision-making. My research has analysed these consequences and identified **four key types of roles** performed by petitions: **linkage, campaigning, scrutiny and policy**. Each of these types of roles encapsulates specific roles as listed in the following Table:

Table 1: Roles performed by parliamentary petitions systems

Areas	Roles
Linkage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimacy; • Safety-valve; • Grievance resolution; • Education; • Public engagement; • Political participation;
Campaigning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilisation; • Group identity strengthening; • Dissemination; • Recruitment;
Scrutiny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire-alarm; • Agenda-setting; • Evidence gathering; • Questioning;
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy review; • Policy improvement; • Policy influence; • Policy change.

2. **Linkage** type of roles - this refers to those consequences from petitioning which affect the relationship between the legislature and citizens and includes the following roles:
 - a. *legitimacy* of the political system and specifically of parliament, by recognising its authority to deal with issues raised by the public;
 - b. *safety-valve*, by facilitating an outlet to express dissatisfaction, very important for any political system;
 - c. *grievance resolution*, by providing a path to identify and address situations of injustice;
 - d. *education*, by initiating citizens into the functions of political institutions, potentially leading to a better understanding of politics. Some of the petitioners I have interviewed, knew very little (if anything – some had never voted) about parliament. It was their passion for an issue, which they petitioned on, which led them to parliament and to develop an understanding about the institution.
 - e. *public engagement*, by offering means and opportunities for people to engage with parliament, and
 - f. *political participation*, by the act in itself of petitioning.

3. **Campaigning** types of roles – this refers to those consequences from petitioning which have affected the development of campaigns and includes the following roles:
 - a. *mobilisation*, by providing a focus for citizens to unite around a specific cause;
 - b. *strengthening* of a campaign group’s identity, by supplying groups’ members the means to sustain a sense of shared identity;
 - c. *dissemination*, by facilitating a means to disseminate a specific campaign to the wider public and policy-makers;

- d. *recruitment* role, by facilitating the identification of specific people who can help to further the cause.
4. **Scrutiny** types of roles – this refers to those consequences from petitioning which lead to actions of scrutiny and includes the following roles:
- a. *fire-alarm*, by facilitating an outlet for citizens to raise issues bottom-up thereby identifying issues of concern which would otherwise not be known to parliament. This is a key role played by petitioning. By playing this role, petitioning facilitates the identification of occasions when policy/law is poorly implemented. This is one of the key roles performed within both the German and the UK petitioning systems.
 - b. *agenda-setting*, by publicising issues, it introduces new issues into policy discussions;
 - c. *evidence-gathering*, by providing an outlet on which to conduct enquiries and/or request information, petitioning also facilitates evidence gathering through an identification of people and organisations affected by the issue;
 - d. *questioning*, by enabling the collection of information on specific issues of public interest and providing a means through which government ministers have to respond to specific issues.
5. **Policy** types of roles – this refers to those consequences from petitioning which directly result in review and change of policy. I break this down into the following roles:
- a. *policy review*, by identifying black holes in policy or poor implementation;
 - b. *policy improvement*, by identifying ways to address poor policy and enabling the discussion of different alternatives;
 - c. *policy influence*, by supporting the building of pressure on specific policy change;
 - d. *policy change*, by eventually leading to change in policy.
6. Petitions are often seen simply as a way to change policy, but as the breakdown of roles above demonstrates, this is far from the only role played by petitioning systems. Changing policy is rarely a linear and quick process. It is most likely the result of a drip-drip process identifying problems to solve, campaigning about it and applying pressure at the right time. Petitions systems' roles in many ways illustrate this process, but also fall within broader areas relating to the legitimisation of a polity, such as education.
7. However, these roles do not happen in a vacuum and not all petitioning systems are able to perform all of these roles. My research shows that **the extent to which petitioning systems are able to perform the roles above depends on the processes used to consider petitions**. By this I do not mean merely the procedures used within parliament to process petitions, but also more basic elements such as how petitioners hear about the progress of this petition; and more structural elements such as whether there is a specific Committee in charge of considering petitions, or whether petitions are submitted through an MP or directly to the legislature.
8. All of these elements affect the extent to which the petitioning system is able to perform linkage roles, because they will determine for instance whether (and how) the petitioner gets in contact with the legislature, whether (and how) they receive information about the progress of their petition, whether (and how) they are involved in the consideration of the petition, or whether (and how) the petition leads to any further public engagement activities. The UK Parliament's e-petitioning system performs strongly in linkage roles because it includes a range of features which makes this a very transparent system, with regular email communication sent to petitioners, and a wide range of public engagement activities, which inform the processing of petitions (I'd be happy to provide more detail, if useful).

9. Likewise, all of the process elements of a petitioning system will also affect the other three types of roles (campaigning, scrutiny and policy), hindering or maximising the extent to which they perform these roles. Referring again to the UK system, one of the elements that makes it perform strongly in scrutiny is the fact that it bolts the government into the consideration process. It does this in a number of ways, such as establishing a threshold of signatures at which point government departments have to provide a reply to the petition (10.000 signatures). The government has 21 days to respond, and most departments do these within the timeframe. On the occasions when responses are not given within 21 days, the Committee has the ability to follow it up. My research shows that all petitions at the relevant threshold are responded by the government. Another way is by deciding to have debates on specific petitions. All debates finish with a response from the relevant government minister. Besides this, the Petitions Committee can also carry out inquiries on specific issues, in response to petitions.
10. In response to which processes and practices help to further improve the potential of a petitioning system, I'd highlight the following six elements in particular:
- 1) Having a **set Committee** that looks after petitions. This enables petitions to be followed up properly, contacts with petitioners to be made and a wide range of activities to be carried out, according to the specific needs of each petition;
 - 2) That the Committee (or whichever body with responsibility over petitioning) has the **means to follow up matters** raised by petitions, namely in terms of being able to develop inquiries, call witnesses to provide evidence, call for information from the government and/or relevant organisations, etc.;
 - 3) That the petitioning process includes **strong mechanisms which compel the government to respond** to petitions;
 - 4) That **regular communication** is kept with petitioners and signatories of petitions (where relevant). My research showed clearly that people perceive parliament as a very abstract entity, with which they find difficult to relate to. If, following the submission of their petition, there is no contact from the legislature / committee, then this sense of abstract and disconnect becomes all the more patent. Regular communication with petitioners enables the establishment of connections and a more individual voice to the Committee / Legislature, which helps citizens to feel listened to. **Being listened to matters more than actual outputs** from the petition. Research shows that petitioners are happy overall with the petitioning process, if they feel they have been listened to, regardless of whether they have achieved what they were after with their petition.
 - 5) That **information about petitions (and their processing) is transparent and accessible**, preferably online. This information should be communicated through plain language, avoiding parliamentary jargon;
 - 6) That the process to consider petitions includes **opportunities for public engagement**, such as: a web forum to collate citizens' experiences on a specific issue, deliberative workshops with citizens affected to understand better a specific issue, one to one discussions between MPs and petitioners etc. And that the evidence collated through public engagement activities informs the process considering petitions.
11. Finally, I'd like to address the issue of e-petitions. I know that this particular call does not focus or consider the possibility of e-petitions. But I'd like to make the point that if the Western Australia Parliament was to introduce e-petitions, I'd encourage it to consider carefully which processes would support the processing of e-petitions and to not simply adopt those processes used for paper petitions. I'd agree that there is great advantage to use the same processes to consider paper petitions and e-petitions. But the introduction of an e-petitions system should come with a review of the current processes. In order for an e-petitions system to work effectively, it should make the most of the possibilities offered by digital

means of communication. More importantly, just as with paper petitions, the process used to consider e-petitions is just as important.

This submission of evidence is based on the following outputs:

- Leston-Bandeira, C. (2019), 'Parliamentary petitions and public engagement: an empirical analysis of the role of e-petitions', *Policy and Politics*, 47 (3), pp.415-436.
- Leston-Bandeira, C. (2017) *An evaluation of the UK Parliament's e-Petitions System*, final report of Impact Acceleration Account Knowledge Exchange Fellowship, for the House of Commons Committee Service – Petitions Committee, July 2017.
- Leston-Bandeira, C. (2017), "What is the point of e-petitions in British politics", *LSE British politics and Policy Blog*, 7 February 2017, accessible at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/what-is-the-point-of-petitions/>.
- Leston-Bandeira, C. (2016), "A year on, the new Petitions Committee has much to celebrate", *Constitution Unit Blog*, 20 July 2016, accessible at: <https://constitution-unit.com/2016/07/20/a-year-on-the-new-petitions-committee-has-much-to-celebrate/>
- Leston-Bandeira, C. (2015), "The Petitions Committee's first six months – paving the way for a new style of public engagement" *Constitution Unit blog*, 10 December 2015, accessible at: <https://constitution-unit.com/2015/12/10/the-new-petitions-committees-first-six-months-paving-the-way-for-a-new-style-of-public-engagement/>

article

Parliamentary petitions and public engagement: an empirical analysis of the role of e-petitions

Cristina Leston-Bandeira, c.leston-bandeira@leeds.ac.uk
University of Leeds, UK

Legislatures around the world are experimenting with online petitions as a means of enabling the public to express policy preferences. In some countries they have attracted an extraordinarily large number of signatories, but it is often unclear what, if anything, they achieve. This article addresses this important question through an analysis of the UK parliament's e-petitions system. Drawing on a review of historical and comparative research, it develops a new analytical framework which identifies four potential types of roles – linkage, campaigning, scrutiny and policy. Our study shows that although a large proportion of e-petitions to the UK parliament are rejected and only a very small number lead to specific action, they nevertheless play important roles. Some have performed campaigning or scrutiny roles, but their primary effect has been to facilitate public engagement.

key words parliamentary petitions • e-petitions • political participation • parliament • public engagement • House of Commons • e-government • democracy

To cite this article: Leston-Bandeira, C. (2019) Parliamentary petitions and public engagement: an empirical analysis of the role of e-petitions, *Policy & Politics*, xx(xx): 1–22, DOI: 10.1332/030557319X15579230420117

Introduction

Petitions to the UK parliament have existed for centuries, but fell into disuse in the twentieth century as representative democracy expanded (Leys, 1955). However, faced with an expansion of participatory democracy tools, whereby e-petitions have become increasingly popular, the UK parliament upgraded its system by introducing an e-petitions alternative in 2015. This new system has seen extraordinary levels of usage, with over 30,000 e-petitions submitted and 14 million people signing at least one within its first parliament (Caygill and Griffiths, 2018), becoming the world's parliamentary e-petitions system with the highest usage; and yet we still know very little about it. The new system came on the back of government-led e-petitions systems, which were highly criticised for raising the public's expectations and achieving little (Hansard Society, 2012; Bochel, 2013; Wright, 2016). However, other than its very high levels of usage, does the new system achieve anything?

This is a perennial question associated with petitions: is there any point to them? As petitions moved to a digital format and became exponentially easier to create and disseminate, often labelled as 'slacktivism' (Beato, 2014), questions about their

purpose have become all the more pressing. This matters particularly in the context of the UK parliament's system because it was specifically introduced to enhance past systems in the mediation between citizens and policymaking. But is there any purpose to the UK parliament's e-petitions system, or is it merely an even bigger black hole than the paper petitions one (Hough, 2012)? What purpose does the UK parliament's e-petitions system fulfil, specifically, what role(s) does it play? In addressing this issue, we have a dual objective: to provide the first overview of the UK parliament's e-petitions system and to propose a framework to analyse the roles of parliamentary petitions systems.

We adopt a legislative functions perspective (Kornberg and Musolf, 1970; Pakenham, 1970), which assumes institutions have multiple consequences for social systems, beyond the strict remit for which they were developed; these consequences indicate the roles they play. Drawing from historical and comparative research, we identify a multiplicity of roles performed by petitions systems, which we group into four main types: linkage, campaigning, scrutiny and policy. We establish that petitions cannot be assessed as a unit by themselves, needing to be evaluated within the context of the processes used to consider them. Processes shape the roles performed by petitions systems, which is why we explain in detail the advent and respective processes of the UK parliament's e-petitions system, in order to understand the potential roles they may play in society. This provides our framework to develop the first overview of the UK parliament's e-petitions system and to specifically identify its roles during the 2015–2017 parliament. We show evidence of performance within all four main role types, but particularly in linkage and scrutiny. Our analysis is informed by a mixed methods approach, with a predominantly qualitative element.

The role(s) of petitioning across cultures

Although petitions have existed for centuries (Zaret, 2000; Ormrod et al, 2009), they have become particularly popular in the twenty-first century (Coleman and Blumler, 2009), partly thanks to its online enhanced capacity for dissemination. Reflecting its expanding usage, modern petitions systems have been the object of considerable study in recent decades, exploring particularly their potential as a participatory tool. Less explored has been, however, the role they play. There tends to be an assumption on their role, but this is seldom discussed.

Discussing the role of petitions systems matters, however, because it helps our understanding of their purpose. The lack of a broader discussion has led to a narrowing of assumptions about the role petitions systems play, which tend to revolve around two main axes: the ability to affect policy and/or the enabling of political participation. Hough's (2012) identification of effective petitions systems is a good example of a study focusing mainly on ability to affect policy, as is Leston-Bandeira and Tibúrcio (2012). Similarly Bochel examines petitions systems' effectiveness in expressing the public's voice into the policymaking process (2012; 2016). This focus is also expressed through the extent to which petitioners feel their original requests have been fulfilled. In his seminal study, Carman (2010) analyses attitudes on procedural fairness, exploring the extent to which achieving their petition's requests affected petitioners' level of trust in the Scottish parliament. Wright (2016) and Escher and Riehm (2017) follow a similar focus, exploring petitioners' perceptions towards, respectively, the Downing Street and German Bundestag petitions systems.

This is often intertwined with the political participation axis of analysis. Examples include [Bochel \(2013\)](#), [Carman \(2014\)](#) and [Wright \(2016\)](#), with [Miller \(2009\)](#) exploring the potential of e-petitioning to democratise participation into Westminster's policymaking. Many studies focus just on petitions' participatory potential, such as [Mosca and Santucci \(2009\)](#). Also, within this axis, [Wright \(2012\)](#) assesses Downing Street's potential as a democratic good, [Yasseri et al \(2017\)](#) explore the dynamics of online mobilisation of e-petitions, whereas [Jungheer and Jürgens \(2010\)](#), [Lindner and Riehm \(2011\)](#) and [Puschmann et al \(2017\)](#) are but three examples of studies analysing the characteristics of petitioners and signatories, investigating whether e-petitioning has led to different participation patterns.

Implicit in this plethora of studies is an assumption about the roles performed by petitioning, but no discussion of these. In their 1970 seminal analysis of legislatures, Kornberg and Musolf highlight that narrowing legislatures' role to the one of law-making led to a poor understanding of the multiple consequences of these institutions in our societies. Traditionally seen as law-making institutions, these authors demonstrate we need a more subtle evaluation of legislative functions in order to fully understand legislatures. By conceptualising legislative functions as consequences to our social systems, Packerham identifies in the same volume 12 different roles performed by legislatures, from latent legitimation to law-making (1970, 527–536). This requires an approach focusing on processes and consequences, rather than outputs. This approach is just as relevant today and applicable to parliamentary petitions systems, because petitions to parliament do not exist in a vacuum: they are part of a system that mediates between citizens and policymaking, with consequences beyond the act of participation and the possible amendment to policy.

Inspired by the Packerham approach, we examine petitioning across cultures, historical and modern, to identify the multiplicity of roles it can potentially play. Traditionally developed as a tool for the people to address grievances to the authority (for example, monarch, parliament), petitioning has become so pervasive that everyone knows about it, while caring less about what they entail beyond signing. But, as [Carman \(2010\)](#) and [Bochel \(2016\)](#) show, process matters. Understanding the processes supporting petitioning helps us understand the potential role it performs. We focus specifically on petitions to parliament because petitions' roles need to be evaluated within their respective processes; that is, petitions are not a stand-alone unit, they come with a process, which in itself determines in great part the range of consequences petitions may have. While parliamentary petitions encompass considerable diversity of systems, it offers a common context to establish the potential role they serve.

The right to petition has a long history, displaying a variety of roles across cultures. In France and the US, it is closely associated with their eighteenth-century revolutionary Constitutions ([Mark, 1998: 2195](#); [Costa et al, 2012: 304](#)). In Germany, petitioning has a strong tradition across all governance levels, being a constitutional right. In the UK and Portugal, petitioning goes as far as at least Medieval times ([Ormrod et al, 2009](#); [Tibúrcio, 2010: 39](#)). Magna Carta (1215) is commonly associated with the establishment of the right to petition, but petitioning long pre-dates it ([Connolly, 2009](#)). Connolly explains that in such early cultures as fifth century bc Persia, the power to accept or refuse petitions played an important role: '[a]nswering petitions helped ancient rulers appear caring and responsive. It also provided an effective and simple way for them to reinforce their authority and power' (2009, 63). Although today's parliamentary petitions are framed by different formats and processes, their

consequences have similarities: showing responsiveness to the public and legitimising parliament's power; this can therefore be identified as a potential role of petitioning.

Petitions to parliament in England developed over the centuries hand-in-hand with a strengthening of the institution's authority in mediating grievances raised by the public. Before parliament became the prime forum for citizens to present petitions, these were presented directly to the monarch. As parliament's powers strengthened, so did its ability to redress specific petitions. By the fifteenth century most petitions were directed to parliament, becoming particularly important for its survival: 'what consistently made parliament an indispensable part of the political and administrative structure...was the conviction that it provided a crucial outlet for the satisfaction and resolution of private interests and conflict' (Dodd, 2007: 325). Thus, petitioning performed already then roles of safety-valve and grievance resolution.

By the seventeenth century, petitions had adopted quite different characteristics to the ones from medieval times. While early petitions related mainly to personal grievances, issues became far more general, with petitions starting to be used for political pressure and to raise issues of public interest (Leys, 1955: 46). Petitioners were under little illusion that their petition would be addressed; its main purpose becoming instead to make a political point. Likewise, whereas the early petitions related mainly to legal-judicial matters, by the seventeenth century, petitions became more focused on policy, therefore acquiring a role of policy-setting.

However, petitions also performed important political participation roles. At a time of restricted access to the monarch, petitions provided a channel to contact the ultimate authority in power. What's more, petitions integrated the disenfranchised into the political system; citizens lacking the right to vote could present petitions. Petitioning was the most important channel to enfranchise those disenfranchised from the right to vote (Mark, 1998: 2169). For example, nineteenth century Chartist and anti-Corn Laws petitions were inclusive of disenfranchised citizens such as working-class men (Miller, 2012; Chase, 2018).

The history of petitioning also shows it performs an important role of mobilisation, as illustrated by the very large nineteenth century petitions, such as the Chartists petitions which gathered millions of signatures. The Chartists knew their petitions were unlikely to succeed, but these were a means towards an end (Chase, 2018). Petitioning was built around canvassing, through which people were mobilised to support the Chartist cause. Petitions also served a specific recruitment role, as demonstrated by Carpenter's far-reaching comparative analysis (2016). Finally, petitions contributed towards the development of a collective identity sustained by the sharing of a specific experience (Chase, 2018). They provided a focus for people to unite for a cause.

Petitioning has therefore performed a wide range of roles over the centuries, most of which are still visible today. While the format and processes of parliamentary petitions have changed and their relevance has varied considerably, their role has stood the test of time. Indeed, analysis of modern systems allude to wide-ranging roles: safety-valve (Carman, 2006; Hough, 2012), fire-alarm (Saalfeld and Dobmeier, 2012), communication of information (Lindner and Riehm, 2011), inform policy development (Hough, 2012), affect policy change (Carman, 2006; Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Hough, 2012; Escher and Riehm, 2017), link between parliament and citizens (Carman, 2006, 2010; Hough, 2012), provision of a voice for the public (Bochel, 2012), integration and legitimacy (Lindner and Riehm, 2011), scrutiny of the executive (Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Hough, 2012) and mobilisation (Escher

and Riehm, 2017). So there is clearly a recognition across cultures of a range of roles performed by petitions systems. What we lack is a systematisation within one contribution of this range of roles.

Taking stock of these accounts of petitioning across cultures, we identify four types of roles fulfilled by parliamentary petitions systems, in terms of their consequences to the mediation between citizens and policymaking: linkage, campaigning, scrutiny and policy. Linkage roles refer to consequences onto the direct relationship between citizens and parliament, such as information about the institution or the ability to express your views to parliament. Campaigning refers to how petitions systems contribute towards the processes of campaigning, by simply disseminating it or bringing people together. With scrutiny and policy roles, we move into the actual policymaking process. Scrutiny roles refer to when petitions systems enable the identification of issues meriting attention, for instance, with policy roles pinpointing occasions when petitions systems enable actual legislative impact. As illustrated in Figure 1, these four types of roles interlink, with scrutiny often contributing towards policy, for instance, just as linkage roles often are closely intertwined with scrutiny. As research shows, mediation between citizens and policymaking rarely happens through isolated instances expressed in specific moments (Thompson, 2015; Russell and Cowley, 2016), that is, far from a neat unidirectional process, mediation between citizens and policymaking encompasses formal and informal processes, whereby linkage, campaigning, scrutiny and policy, intertwine. Petitions systems have the potential to have an impact on all of these.

We subdivide these four types into the specific roles listed in Table 1. Within *linkage*, petitioning fulfils a wide range of roles, such as legitimacy of the political system and specifically of parliament, by recognising its authority to deal with issues raised by the public. It also performs a safety-valve role, facilitating an outlet to express dissatisfaction, and of grievance resolution, providing a path to identify and address situations of injustice. With a slightly different linkage purpose, petitioning can also perform an important educative role, initiating citizens into the functions of political institutions, potentially leading to a better understanding of politics. Finally, petitions systems can

Figure 1: Four types of roles performed by parliamentary petitions systems

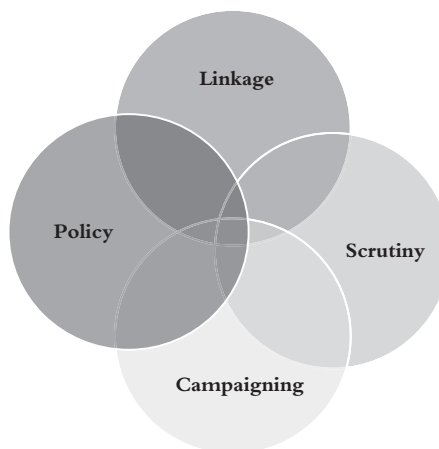


Table 1: Roles performed by parliamentary petitions systems

<i>Types</i>	<i>Roles</i>
Linkage	• Legitimacy
	• Safety-valve
	• Grievance resolution
	• Education
	• Public engagement
	• Political participation
Campaigning	• Mobilisation
	• Group identity strengthening
	• Dissemination
	• Recruitment
Scrutiny	• Fire-alarm
	• Agenda-setting
	• Evidence gathering
	• Questioning
Policy	• Policy review
	• Policy improvement
	• Policy influence
	• Policy change

perform an explicit public engagement role by offering means and opportunities for people to engage with parliament, and embed political participation acts in themselves.

Within *campaigning*, petitioning performs a mobilisation role, providing a focus for citizens to unite around a specific cause, and in doing so, playing a role in strengthening a group's identity, supplying groups' members the means to sustain a sense of shared identity. It also performs an important dissemination role, facilitating a means to disseminate a specific campaign to the wider public and policymakers. But it can also perform a more practical recruitment role, facilitating the identification of specific people who can help to further the cause.

Within *scrutiny*, petitioning plays a fire-alarm role by facilitating an outlet for citizens to raise issues bottom-up thereby identifying issues of concern which would otherwise not be known to parliament. By publicising issues, it also enables agenda-setting of possible policy discussions. At a more practical level, by providing an outlet on which to conduct enquiries and/or request information, petitioning also facilitates evidence gathering and questioning roles, enabling the collection of information on specific issues of public interest and providing a means through which government ministers have to respond to specific issues.

We break *policy* into: a policy review role, which identifies black holes in policy or poor implementation; policy improvement, identifying ways to address poor policy and enabling the discussion of different alternatives; policy influence, supporting the building of pressure on specific policy change; and finally, actual policy change, by eventually leading to change in policy. Changing policy is rarely a linear and quick process. It is most likely the result of a drip-drip process identifying problems to solve, campaigning about it and applying pressure at the right time. Petitions systems' roles

in many ways illustrate this process, but also fall within broader areas relating to the legitimisation of a polity, such as education.

This framework identifies therefore a range of different roles performed by parliamentary petitions systems, widening the discussion on the possible effects of petitions beyond participation rates or change to policy. Besides identifying different types of consequences for our systems, the framework also recalls the importance of not considering petitions in isolation, but instead considering the processes that support them; how a petition is considered matters to its potential effects. We now proceed by applying this framework to the UK parliament's e-petitions system, after outlining our methodology.

Methodology

We employ a predominantly qualitative methods approach, drawing from data on the 2015–2017 parliament collated during a Fellowship with the House of Commons Petitions Committee (October 2016 to April 2017). This encompasses three main qualitative methods: ethnographic observation, interviewing and document analysis, complemented by a quantitative analysis of data on e-petitions. The Fellowship gave us access to observe multiple types of meetings in parliament, from private staff and committee meetings, to parliamentary debates and oral evidence sessions. We undertook observations of 55 sessions, which were invaluable to understand processes in the consideration of petitions and respective consequences. We also undertook 17 semi-structured interviews with MPs (6), petitioners (6) and staff (5), selected through purposive and snowballing sample strategies, which gave another insight into processes and perceptions towards petitioning. This was complemented by document analysis of a very wide range of types of sources, such as Hansard verbatim record of debates, select committees' reports, e-petitions' websites and social media pages. Finally, we systematised data on e-petitions from official records for an overview of how many were submitted, debated and so on.

The UK parliament's e-petitions system

The analysis of petitioning requires an understanding of its processes, which is why we outline the development of the UK parliament's e-petitions system. This went live on 20 July 2015, the final step of a long process establishing a parliamentary e-petitioning system, following a couple of pilots led by the government and several parliamentary reports, from the Modernisation Committee's 2004 report, to the Procedure Committee's 2014 report establishing the key principles of the new system. In brief, the new system is a collaborative UK government and parliament venture, re-establishing a Petitions Committee, enabling the public to submit petitions directly to parliament, and sign, through a dedicated website, with e-petitions obtaining 10,000 signatures receiving a response from the government and those with 100,000 being considered for a debate in parliament.

The e-petitions system was an addition to parliament's long-established petitions system, thus existing in concomitance with House of Commons' (paper) public petitions, whereby petitions are presented through MPs. Petitions submitted to MPs can be formally presented in the main chamber, through a very brief statement. There is no debate. The government may make observations (that is, respond). But,

except on the rare occasions when a campaign orchestrates a concerted presentation of petitions, such as the WASPI (Women Against State Pension Inequality) campaign whereby 198 alike petitions were sequentially presented by MPs within the same sitting (HC Debates 11/10/2016,cc261-274), these public petitions ‘are not a particularly effective way of making a case’ (Rogers and Walters, 2015: 298–299). Other than the presentation, a government observation, and their printing on record, little else happens. As Judge stated in 1978, ‘petitions are at best an inefficient method of amplifying grievances, at worst ineffectual’ (p 404).

As e-petitions emerged, Downing Street introduced its own site in 2006. Although considered a step forward (Miller, 2009; Hale et al, 2013), this innovation has been criticised because it lacked integration into institutional processes (Bochel, 2012), had no policy impact and ignored the people (Wright, 2015: 418). The subsequent Coalition government substituted it in 2011 with a new e-petitions site, which bolted in parliament, but did not create parliamentary procedures for this purpose: the e-petitions site claimed petitions reaching 100,000 signatures would be debated in parliament, delegating this responsibility to parliament’s Backbench Business Committee.

Despite considered very successful quantitatively (Wright, 2015; Yasseri et al, 2017), the government-led e-petitions sites created significant challenges. A key challenge was the impression created that petitions would be debated in parliament, despite a lack of suitable processes for this. The government-led e-petitions site created unrealistic expectations and risked ‘an exacerbation of public disillusionment with the political system’ (Hansard Society, 2012: 5). Eventually, the government supported the creation of a parliament based e-petitions system (HC debates 8/05/2014,cc311-314). The ensuing 2014 Procedure Committee report established its key principles, setting the blueprint for the system inaugurated in 2015.

The new system re-introduced a Petitions Committee, giving it a core role in considering e-petitions – this was ‘the most significant recommendation’ in this system (Hague, HC Debates 24/02/2015:c.256). International comparisons show the existence of a committee enhances the consideration of petitions (Riehm et al, 2014; European Parliament, 2015). Contrary to its predecessors (Petitions Committees were in place between 1832 and 1974 (Judge, 1978)), the new committee would play a key role in addressing the public’s expectation gap. As the Procedure Committee Chair stated ‘The Petitions Committee will seek to improve engagement with petitioners. Often, those submitting and supporting a petition will not get the exact outcome they want, but they will hopefully feel...their concerns have been appreciated and heard through constructive engagement with the Committee’ (Walker, HC Debates 24/02/2015:c.249).

Another core feature of the UK system lies in the debate. This is not as important in other systems, though recently adopted in Wales for petitions obtaining 5,000 signatures (National Assembly for Wales, 2017), with the Portuguese parliament having petitions with 4,000 signatures considered in the chamber, but merely as a petition report presentation (Portuguese Parliament, 2007: Art 232^o). Whereas oral evidence sessions with petitioners are a key element of the German and particularly the Scottish systems, in the UK the parliamentary debate is the system’s pinnacle (Asher et al, 2019), in line with the predominance of debate in this parliament. Furthermore, as the government dominates the parliamentary timetable, a debate on a petition is a golden opportunity to publicise an issue outside of government control.

Finally, another key feature is the response from government departments to e-petitions reaching 10,000 signatures, within a deadline of 21 days ([Petitions Committee, 2015b](#)). As the UK petitioning system is collaborative between government and parliament, it integrates the executive in the process of considering petitions. Obtaining a response from the government is a perennial difficulty of petitions systems and ‘most of the systems do not provide any legal deadline for the government to respond’ ([European Parliament, 2015: 24](#)); systems such as the European, German and the Portuguese do foresee deadlines, though these are not always followed. This is therefore an important element of this system, as explored below.

Thus, the new system introduces several processes which make it potentially a strong petitioning tool able to perform various roles; namely its support by a Committee, its integration into parliamentary practice through the possibility of generating a parliamentary debate and its integration of the government into the consideration process. Additionally, the Petitions Committee can undertake any of the tasks attributed to Select Committees, such as developing an inquiry or holding oral evidence sessions. The next section evaluates the system’s usage during the 2015–2017 parliament, identifying the role(s) it fulfilled.

The e-petitions system in the 2015–2017 parliament

The new e-petitions system saw extraordinary levels of usage over its first parliament.¹ On its first day, nine e-petitions were submitted collecting 60,580 signatures ([Petitions Committee, 2015a](#)); twelve months on, a total of 18,767 e-petitions had been submitted. By the end of the parliament, over 14 million unique email addresses had been used to sign e-petitions ([Caygill and Griffiths, 2018: 325](#)) and 10,950 e-petitions had been accepted, as [Table 2](#) shows.

Table 2: Volume of e-petitions in the 2015–2017 parliament

	<i>Total</i>	<i>% from Submitted</i>	<i>% from Accepted</i>
Submitted	31,731		
Accepted	10,950	34.5	
Rejected	20,781	65.5	
Achieving 10,000 signatures	487	1.5	4.5
With government response	487	1.5	4.5
Achieving 100,000 signatures	66	0.21	0.60
Achieving 100,000 signatures, debated	50	0.16	0.46
Achieving 100,000 signatures, not debated	16	0.05	0.15
Debated, regardless of number of signatures	65	0.20	0.59
e-Petition debates*	46	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>
e-Petitions linked debates**	53	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>

Notes:

*E-petition debates sometimes include more than one e-petition, when several relate to the same topic;

**E-petitions can be tagged to scheduled debates taking place on related topics, which happened on seven occasions in this Parliament.

Sources: Author’s own research, data from <https://petition.parliament.uk/> and <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/petitions-committee/>

By any measure, the UK parliament's e-petitions system demonstrates very high levels of usage, even comparatively to the government-led systems, widely considered to have extraordinarily high numbers. Wright reports a total of 33,058 Downing Street e-petitions accepted over its four and half years (2012: 454), which corresponded to just over 5 million unique signatures (Yasseri et al, 2017: 2), with 99 per cent failing to achieve the 10,000 threshold for a government response in the Coalition system, and only 0.1 per cent achieving 100,000 signatures (Yasseri et al, 2017: 1) – all below the levels achieved in the UK parliament's system. Over 2015–2017, an average of 1,480 e-petitions were submitted per month.

Comparatively with other parliaments' petitions systems, this is a markedly high volume of usage. The German Bundestag, the most well-established system (Riehm et al, 2014) and relatively comparable to the UK parliament's in terms of powers and population size (Germany: 82 million, UK: 66 million (Eurostat, 2018)), received an average of 1,500 petitions per month in the 2000s (Saalfeld and Dobmeier, 2012: 326). This has dropped over the last few years to 1,186 in 2014–2015 (Bundestag Petitions Committee, 2016). The UK system's volume of petitions is therefore considerably high, particularly taking into account the differences in population size and that the German system includes ombudsman matters, with the volume of public petitions being therefore considerably lower.

As Table 2 shows, 66 e-petitions obtained over 100,000 signatures, with two achieving over a million; 487 achieved the 10,000 signatures threshold, all of which received a government written response. Out of those achieving the 100,000 threshold, 76 per cent were debated. Sixteen e-petitions were not debated mainly because the issue had been debated recently in parliament. For instance, the Committee decided not to debate e-petition asking for aid action in Syria, because an emergency debate had just taken place on this topic (Petition, 173574). The processes in place are therefore processing e-petitions according to the rules established. However, only 34.5 per cent of e-petitions submitted were accepted to be considered, and out of these only 4.4 per cent received a government response, with a very small proportion being debated (0.59%). Behind the numbers, we now turn to the roles performed by the system.

Linkage

We first address linkage roles. The main role played by the UK parliament's e-petitions system has undoubtedly been *public engagement*. This is hardly a surprise, being one of its main aims when first established, as seen above. The public engagement role works implicitly through the system's accessibility and transparency arrangements, and explicitly through the Committee's reach-out actions.

The e-petitions site is very accessible. As one of our interviewees said 'it is dangerously easy to submit a petition' (Interview Pet12, 15/02/2017), which can be done in a few minutes. Contrary to other systems, there is no need for registration and a handful of clicks accompanied by 380 characters are enough to submit an e-petition. This results from the Committee's staff working closely with the Government's Digital Service to develop as user friendly system as possible (Interview PC4, 08/11/2016). The downside of this accessibility is that 65.5 per cent are rejected, with many not being clear about the action intended, focusing on something outside government and parliament's responsibility or simply duplicating live e-petitions (Petitions Committee, 2016).

The system is also considerably transparent. Each e-petition has its own webpage clearly listing all of the relevant actions taken by government and parliament (as Figure 2 illustrates), including for those rejected (Figure 3). This is indicative of the system's level of transparency. While other parliaments' petitions systems, such as the European, Portuguese and Scottish systems, also list relevant actions on each petition's page, this tends to be in the form of reports, rather than direct links to proceedings, and written in parliamentary jargon rather than plain language. What makes the UK system particularly transparent however is the publication of all rejected petitions, with a specific explanation of why they were rejected, as Figure 3 illustrates. The European parliament gives access to lists of 'non-admissible' petitions, though with poor visibility.²

Figure 2: Webpage of an e-petition

Petitions
UK Government and Parliament

Closed petition

Make it a specific criminal offence to attack any member of NHS Medical Staff.

There are 193 attacks on NHS staff a day in England. LBC's Nick Ferrari thinks this is unacceptable. Support his 'Guard Our Emergency Medical Services' campaign to better protect our doctors and nurses by making it a specific legal offence to attack them.

► More details

This petition closed early because of a General Election
Find out more on the [Petitions Committee website](#)

118,056 signatures

100,000

Parliament debated this topic
This topic was debated on 27 February 2017

Watch the debate • Read the transcript

Government responded

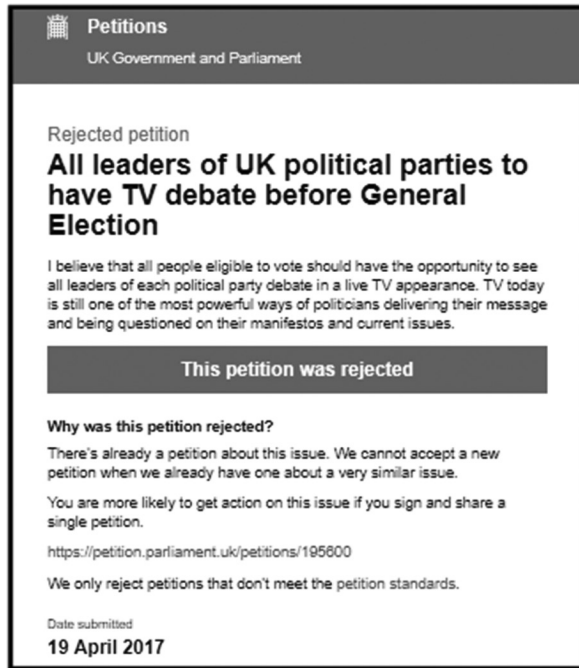
“ Assaults against NHS staff are unacceptable, and already criminalised. If the victim serves the public, an assault is treated more seriously. A new offence would not provide additional protection.

► Read the response in full

Date closed
3 May 2017

Source: Petition 176138 (2016) URL: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/176138>

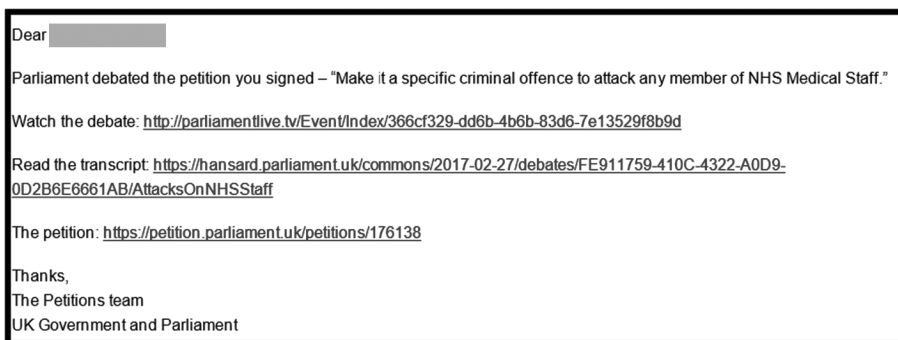
Figure 3: Webpage of a rejected e-petition



Source: Petition 195745 (2017) URL: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/195745>

This implicit element of its public engagement role is also embedded into the regular emails sent to signatories every time an action is taken in relation to their e-petition, which can happen well after the e-petition has closed; see, for instance, the Meningitis B e-petition, submitted in 2015, whose signatories received further updates in February 2018 (Petition 108072). As Figure 4 shows, each of these emails lists direct links to the relevant material, be it government responses or debates' video recordings. Thus, for each petition, thousands of people could be accessing parliamentary material, something not likely to happen otherwise. This has led to an

Figure 4: Email sent by the Petitions Committee to signatories



Source: Email sent by the Petitions Committee, 01/03/2017.

extraordinary increase by over 300 per cent of readership of Hansard and 900 per cent of viewing of Westminster Hall debates (Petitions Committee, 2016).

More explicitly, the public engagement role was pursued through a wide range of types of events; from initiatives collating views on specific petitions, to events disseminating the e-petitioning tool. On the former, see for example the web forum conducted in December 2016 for the petition requesting retailers to close on Boxing Day (Petition 168524). On the latter, see the Committee's event with local faith leaders in Birmingham (Observation Note, 28/02/2017).

This leads to another linkage role performed by the e-petitions system: *education*. This is discernible through the Committee's regular participation in initiatives aimed at schoolchildren (Observation Notes, October 2016–April 2017) and through its routine working practice. Through its regular communications in plain English which explain the ongoing processes, the Committee played an educative role. This came through in some of our interviews with petitioners, who prior to petitioning were not familiar with politics, but who through the process of petitioning had developed a better understanding of the role of parliament (Interview Pet14, 21/02/2017; Interview Pet16, 06/03/2017). As one official said, 'that lady that gave evidence for the...inquiry, she'd never ever interacted with Parliament before until she signed that petition, and then a few months later she was giving evidence' (Interview PC3, 31/10/2016).

All petitioners interviewed mentioned also their surprise at being contacted by the Committee; most did not expect to receive any response. By simply coming across as listening and responding to queries, it performed a *legitimacy* role, whereby people's trust in the overall system is reinforced. This is expressed by petitioner Maria Lester. She was bitterly disappointed with the (initial) government's response to her petition, 'but then something brilliant happened. I was contacted by the Petitions Committee. They were launching their own enquiry' (Lester, 2015). The Committee's contact restored her trust in the system. The value ascribed to the Committee's regular feedback to petitioners was palpable in even the most critical petitioners interviewed (Interview Pet13, 16/11/2016).

The system, however, also includes elements which may corrode this legitimacy role. This is noticeable when government responses come across as not addressing the petition's issue, but particularly for some of the debates. Achieving a parliamentary debate is the pinnacle of the process, for several reasons: being presented as the last step of the consideration process, being the main (if not only) element the press reports on, and through its visibility as it is webcast live, becoming petitioners' main aim (Interview PC2, 26/10/2016). It is also a way to give citizens the chance to determine the parliamentary agenda, as expressed by this MP: 'it gives people the opportunity to get a debate on things they are really passionate about' (Interview MP6 06/12/2016). However, the debates vary considerably, both in MP attendance and in their contents. One petitioner expressed their disappointment at the very poor turnout at their petition's debate and the lack of substantive discussion of their petition (Interview Pet13, 16/11/2016). Another petitioner expressed similar views: 'clearly the debate wasn't informed by evidence presented' and 'not worth it', adding '(s)urely the job of the Petitions Committee rep should be to offer a neutral introduction, not to undermine it from the start' (Interview Pet17 18/05/2017).

Finally, the system also performed an important *safety-valve* role, whereby the submission and signing of the e-petition helps to disperse tension. This manifests itself

particularly in protest petitions, such as the ones on the EU referendum, Trump's state visit or Jeremy Hunt's motion of no confidence. These petitions aimed mainly to show dissatisfaction towards a specific issue.

Campaigning

The e-petitions system also performed campaigning roles. This is apparent in the way it raised awareness of issues, therefore playing a *dissemination* role, visible within the April's Law petition ([Petition 166711](#)). Created by the family of April Jones, a seven-year-old girl who was abducted and murdered, the e-petition gave a focus to develop a campaign raising awareness of issues around sex-offenders' registers. In order to reach their 100,000 threshold, this otherwise not political family developed a Facebook page, which has since become a platform to disseminate similar cases ([April's Law, 2017](#)). As one of our interviewees said, an e-petition helps 'air some of the issues to new audiences' (Interview Pet17 18/05/2017).

The e-petitions system, however, also helped in some cases to *mobilise* support and to even help *strengthen a group's identity*. This is observable with the WASPI movement, which campaigns against pension cuts affecting women born in the 1950s. Its e-petition ([Petition 110776](#)) marked the foundation for what has since become a large and complex movement. As one of the movement's leaders put it, 'what this petition has achieved is that it has connected people', it 'was the catalyst that allowed us to find each other' ([WASPI representative, 2016](#)). However, when not duly considered, an e-petition can also play a counter-mobilisation role, as illustrated by a disappointed petitioner: 'I fear the resulting disappointment has led to a sort of defeatism creeping in to those engaged advocates who pushed the petition' (Interview Pet17 18/05/2017).

One role the e-petitions system does not seem to be as effective in is *recruitment*. Whereas petitioning traditionally involved meeting people face-to-face, collating signatures while perhaps recruiting them to support their cause, the UK parliament's e-petitions system does not list signatures and petitioners do not know who has supported their petition unless signatories disclose this.

Scrutiny

Together with linkage, scrutiny formed an important part of the roles performed by the e-petitions system. A key reason for this lies in this being a collaborative system between government and parliament, contrary to other systems. This means that the government is integrated in at least two key moments of the process: the written response at 10,000 signatures, and in the debates, which close with a ministerial statement. These are golden opportunities to place the government's position on the record.

The importance of government involvement becomes particularly clear when compared with (paper) public petitions. Prior to the 2015 system there was no obligation for government departments to respond. Although the government should respond to public petitions, [Table 3](#) shows the response rate is considerably lower to the 100 per cent obtained with e-petitions in the 2015–2017 parliament. The full compliance with responses resulted from the Committee following up delayed responses, with a member of staff responsible for tracking this (Interview

Table 3: Yearly average number of (paper) public petitions submitted and respective government observations (1987–2017)

Years*	Petitions	Government observations (%)
1987–1997**	281.22	42.8
1997–2007	130.40	62.6
2007–2017	212.44	86.7

Notes:

*Averages calculated from values per Session.

**1992–1993 values excluded, as it included an unusually high number of petitions (2,651); this does not affect the response rate.

Sources: Blackburn and Kennon (2003: 381); Rogers and Walters (2006: 341); Sessional Returns for 2000–2001 and between 2005–2006 and 2016–2017.

PC1, 16/10/2016); the fact that responses, or the lack thereof, are so visibly clear on the e-petitions site is also likely to act as a stimulus for responding. All government responses are considered by the Committee and when MPs feel the response is inadequate, the Chair writes to the respective minister, which happened regularly (Observation Notes, October 2016–April 2017).³ The Chair often wrote to ministers to follow up issues raised by petitioners or to request specific information. The e-petitions system played therefore a valuable *questioning* role.

This is also noticeable in the e-petitions debates, when ministers crucially respond to the issues raised by the petitions. In some instances, this is a mere (expanded) repeat of the written response. But they often give new information, on occasions giving a different response such as in the debate on the brain tumour petition; sometimes agreeing to specific actions requested by petitions, such as in the April Law e-petition debate, where two of the petition's three requests were accepted (Petition 166711, April's Law, 17/03/2017 post).

E-petitions often led also to a *gathering evidence* role, usually on matters on which MPs felt that they needed more information. As seen above, the Petitions Committee can lead inquiries. Within the 2015–2017 parliament, it developed two full inquiries, each producing a report: on the e-petition asking for more funding for brain tumour research (Petition 105560) and the e-petition on high heels and dress codes (Petition 129823). On the former, its petitioner found the inquiry to be a key stepping stone in their campaign (Lester, 2016). This inquiry would result in the government changing their original position.

The Committee's inquiry into high heels and dress codes revealed this issue affected disproportionately a specific workforce: women in vulnerable employment. This is a good example of a *fire-alarm* role, as it exposed two policy (implementation) flaws: first, that the Equality Act 2010 was 'not yet fully effective in protecting workers from discrimination' (Petition 129823); second, it identified the side effects of another policy, the introduction of employment tribunal fees, explaining partly why women affected by dress code discrimination did not follow it up. The e-petition's inquiry was key in revealing this and demonstrating how it affected specifically women in vulnerable employment, as recognised by the minister: '[T]his is not just about shoes. It is about...how women are treated in the workplace...the evidence sessions...were invaluable in setting out the extent of the problem' (Dinenage, HC Debates 06/03/2017:cc211WH–214WH). She would proceed outlining specific actions the government would be taking as a result. Regardless of whether it leads

to an inquiry, this *fire-alarm* role enables the raising of issues to policymakers from bottom-up. MPs routinely bring to parliament issues raised by their constituents. The e-petitions system complements this, highlighting issues dispersed across the country, of no particular significance within specific constituencies. The high heels petition is a good example of this: in the first instance seemingly trivial, its rapid collation of signatures highlighted it as a serious issue affecting many women across the country.

Besides inquiries, the *gathering evidence* role is also evident in oral evidence sessions held, such as the ones on the Meningitis B vaccination ([Petition 108072](#)), grouse shooting ([Petitions 125003](#) and [164851](#)) and a cap on young people's car insurance ([Petition 166847](#)). In all three, the evidence gathered would then inform the petitions' respective debates. As we see below, the Meningitis B e-petition's evidence sessions were key for the Committee to press on policy change.

The Committee also led countless other initiatives such as web forums to collate evidence on specific petitions; for example, the web forum for the Boxing Day e-petition received 8,010 comments ([Petition 168524](#)). The Committee also used a range of other methods such as small face-to-face meetings between MPs and members of the public (for example, [Petition 106133](#) – on holidays during term time), and online discussions such as the Facebook one about childcare ([Petition 132140](#)). The integration of this type of evidence in the debates was quite uneven though, sometimes due to the sheer volume of evidence submitted; the time required to review and systematise evidence was identified as a challenge by officials (Interview PC3, 31/10/2016; Interview PC4, 01/11/2016; Interview PC5, 08/11/2016).

Policy

We finish our analysis by addressing the system's policy roles. Despite playing mainly linkage and scrutiny roles, it also shaped policy. This assessment is often difficult to ascertain, as determining the actual triggers for policymaking decisions requires far more in-depth research and time. Policy seldom changes quickly. It typically results from the combination of factors and pressures applied over a period of time. In any case, both the April's Law and the high heels e-petitions demonstrate a *policy review* role, in forcing the government to reconsider specific policy areas, as recognised by ministers in their respective debates.

The *policy-influence* role is also discernible through the consideration process of the Meningitis B, brain tumour and sugar tax e-petitions. The so-called sugar tax petition ([Petition 106651](#)) illustrates the difficulties in identifying one specific cause triggering policy change. As the Petitions Committee stated, '(d)espite saying that it "had no plans" to introduce such a levy in its initial response to the petition...the Chancellor announced that the Government would be introducing a sugar levy on the soft drinks industry in 2018. Obviously, it wasn't the petition alone which led to this – but it was a significant part of the campaign which ultimately led to the change' (2016). This sugar tax has since been implemented, so it may in fact be evidence of a *policy-change* role.

The *policy-change* role is clearer with the brain tumour petition ([Petition 105560](#)), and a reflection of the relentless follow-up work done by the Petitions Committee; from its decision to hold an inquiry despite the e-petition then having just over 10,000 signatures, to its supplementary correspondence. The government's first written response (September 2015) was generic, technical and dismissive, disappointing petitioners greatly. But in the actual debate (April 2016), following the Committee's

inquiry, the Minister acknowledged extensively that more could be done to support funding of brain tumour research: 'I want to announce today that the Government accepts that we need to do more in this space, committing to a number of specific actions that reflect the concerns that have been raised' (Freeman, HC Debates, 18/04/2016:c258WH). He would proceed, announcing several actions, namely a working group, which worked on this issue with the government, campaign charities and a petitioner representative. This group reported in February 2018, acknowledging the contribution of the e-petition to its recommendations ([Task and Finish Working Group on Brain Tumour Research, 2018](#)), with the government announcing £45 million funding for the research of brain tumours ([Department of Health and Social Care, 2018](#)). A year later, the Health Secretary of State acknowledged the petition process had 'made a difference to the amount of attention [this issue] has in government' ([Petitions Committee, 2019: 18](#)).

The *policy-influence* role is also visible in the Meningitis B e-petition ([Petition 108072](#)). The Committee held evidence sessions with four panels, including affected families and experts on the topic. The evidence collated would be key for the debate, but also in bolstering the Committee's resolve to follow up this issue, from April 2016 to at least February 2018 with regular correspondence with the Department of Health.⁴ Despite not fully conceding to the petition's request, the minister agreed a national awareness campaign and a review of its cost-effectiveness methodology for immunisation. After considerable delay, the government finally published a report, the day before it was summoned to give new evidence to the Committee, in 2018. At this tense evidence session ([Petitions Committee, 2018](#)), the minister confirmed the Committee's pressure had led to the publication of the report.

While identifying evidence directly linking petitions to policy-change is difficult, it is even more so to find evidence to the contrary; for example, could some e-petitions actually damage an issue more than help it progress? One of our interviewees felt so. In the case of their petition, and specifically due to the disappointment felt in relation to its debate, they felt that it had set their cause back (Interview Pet17 18/05/2017), believing that it would have been better not to have had the e-petition in the first place.

Conclusion

The UK parliament's new e-petitions system has witnessed extraordinary levels of usage since its inauguration in 2015. However, it has not always been clear whether it achieves anything. Our article set out to explore whether there is any point to parliamentary e-petitions and, if so, in what way. It has done this by establishing a framework focusing on the roles played by petitions systems and thereafter implementing it to the analysis of the UK parliament's e-petitions system. Besides analysing this system's overall performance in 2015–2017, we explored the main types of roles it performed.

Our framework on petitions systems' roles encompasses two key principles: to consider petitions' consequences to the mediation between citizens and policymaking and to integrate in this evaluation the process through which petitions are considered; no petition should be assessed as a stand-alone unit, all petitions entail a process (even if minimal). The roles of a petitions system are shaped by their constitutive processes and the consequences arising from petitioning. Drawing from historical and comparative research on petitions, we identified four main types of potential

roles: those focusing on the linkage between parliament and public, those supporting campaigning, those that enable scrutiny and those directly affecting policy. Each of these encompasses specific roles such as education within linkage and fire-alarm within scrutiny (Table 1). The framework offers a broader perspective on petitions, inviting evaluations that look beyond direct outputs, the impact on legislation or rates of political participation.

Our analysis shows that the UK parliament's e-petitions system has performed mainly linkage roles, particularly in terms of public engagement, followed by scrutiny roles. But it has also performed campaigning roles, and at least three e-petitions indicate a case for policy roles. The system's key linkage roles derive from its strong focus on accessibility, transparency and public engagement initiatives, and reflect the blueprint established for the new system: it may not lead to actual changes in policy, but petitioners should feel listened to. Our interviews demonstrate this to be the case. The only instances when petitioners did not feel listened to, related to those cases of debates not reflecting appropriately their original petition. Although the processes incorporated in the UK system can enhance its linkage, campaigning, scrutiny and policy roles, the actual e-petition debates can also on occasion hinder these roles.

We should also reiterate that a high volume of petitions are rejected (65.5%) and that only a very small proportion leads to any action. What's more, the site favours the most popular petitions: the more signatures an e-petition gains, the more visible it becomes. Thus the vast majority of e-petitions submitted are not viewed by potential signatories, with most receiving few signatures. While our study has demonstrated a range of roles played by the e-petitions system, it focuses mainly on those petitions achieving 100,000 signatures. Future research should investigate all e-petitions and survey all petitioners for a more comprehensive analysis; while the system has capacity to perform specific roles, it may also have a countereffect on these, namely by causing disappointment to thousands of petitioners whose petition is in effect invisible due to very low numbers of signatures.

Still, by broadening the focus of analysis beyond policy and participation, our research showed that the UK parliament's e-petitions system performed important roles during the 2015–2017 parliament. It also provides a framework of analysis for the evaluation of other parliaments' petitions systems.

Funding

This work was supported by an Impact Acceleration Account grant (Economic and Social Research Council).

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

The author is very grateful to the House of Commons, its Petitions Committee and all interviewees. This study would not have been possible without the openness with which the House of Commons welcomed this research and without the time and insights given by interviewees. The author is also grateful to the participants of the *AHRC Research Network on Petitions and Petitioning from the Medieval Period to the Present*, particularly Richard Huzzey, Henry Miller and Joris Oddens, for their valuable comments on an early draft and to all four reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments.

Notes

¹ From 7 May 2015 to 3 May 2017.

² See: https://petiport.secure.europarl.europa.eu/petitions/en/show-petitions?keyWord s=&allYears=true&_allYears=on&_years=1&_anyTheme=on&_searchThemes=1&_anyStatus=on&statuses=NOT_ADMISSIBLE&_statuses=1&_anyEuCountry=on&_countries=1&searchRequest=true

³ See example at www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Letter-from-Chair-to-Secretary-of-State-for-Health-and-reply-October-2016.pdf

⁴ See samples at www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Correspondence-relating-to-petition-on-meningitis-b-vaccine.pdf

References

- April's Law (2017) *Our Little Welsh Princess April Jones* [Facebook] www.facebook.com/PrincessAprilJones/
- Asher, M., Leston-Bandeira, C. and Spaiser, V. (2019) Do parliamentary debates of e-petitions enhance public engagement with parliament?, *Policy & Internet*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.194>
- Beato, G. (2014) From petitions to decision, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 12(4): 20–7.
- Bochel, C. (2012) Different dimensions of voice and influence in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, *Social Policy and Administration*, 46(2): 142–60. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-9515.2011.00828.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2011.00828.x)
- Bochel, C. (2013) Petitions systems: contributing to representative democracy, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66(4): 798–815. doi: [10.1093/pa/gss005](https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss005)
- Bochel, C. (2016) Process matters: petitions systems in Britain's legislatures, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 22(3): 368–84. doi: [10.1080/13572334.2016.1202644](https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2016.1202644)
- Blackburn, R. and Kennon, A. (2003) *Parliament: Functions, practice and procedures*, London: Sweet & Maxwell.
- Bundestag Petitions Committee (2016) *Annual report 2015*, <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/083/1808370.pdf>
- Carman, C. (2006) *The assessment of the Scottish parliament's public petitions system 1999–2006*, Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament.
- Carman, C. (2010) The process is the reality: perceptions of procedural fairness and participatory democracy, *Political Studies*, 58(4): 731–51. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-9248.2010.00840.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2010.00840.x)
- Carman, C. (2014) Barriers are barriers: asymmetric participation in the Scottish public petitions system, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 67(1): 151–71. doi: [10.1093/pa/gss039](https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss039)
- Carpenter, D. (2016) Recruitment by petition: American antislavery, French protestantism, English suppression, *Perspectives on Politics*, 14(3): 700–23. doi: [10.1017/S1537592716001134](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592716001134)
- Caygill, T. and Griffiths, A.M. (2018) Parliament and petitions, In C. Leston-Bandeira and L. Thompson (eds) *Exploring parliament*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 322–32.
- Chase, M. (2018) What did Chartism petition for?, In H Miller (ed) *Social Science History: special issue*, ISSN 0145–5532 (In Press).
- Coleman, S. and Blumler, J. (2009) *The internet and democratic citizenship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Connolly, S. (2009) Petitioning in the ancient world, In M. Ormrod, G. Dodd and A. Musson (eds) *Medieval petitions*, York: York University Press, pp 47–63.
- Costa, O., Lefébure, P., Rozenberg, O., Schnatterer, T. and Kerrouche, E. (2012) Far away, so close: parliament and citizens in France, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 18(3/4): 294–313. doi: [10.1080/13572334.2012.706046](https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2012.706046)
- Department of Health and Social Care (2018) *Brain cancer research to receive £45 million funding*, www.gov.uk/government/news/brain-cancer-research-to-receive-45-million-funding
- Dodd, G. (2007) *Justice and grace: Private petitioning and the english parliament in the late middle ages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Escher, T. and Riehm, U. (2017) Petitioning the German Bundestag: political equality and the role of the internet, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 70(1): 132–54. doi: [10.1093/pa/gsw009](https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsw009)
- European Parliament (2015) *The Right to Petition*, Policy Department C: Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, PE.519.223.
- Eurostat (2018) *Population data*, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/population-data/main-tables>
- Hale, S., Margetts, H. and Yasseri, T. (2013) *Understanding the dynamics of internet-based collective action using big data: Analysing the growth rates of internet-based petitions*, Political Studies Association Annual Conference.
- Hansard Society (2012) *What next for e-petitions?*, London: Hansard Society, https://assets.ctfassets.net/u1rlvbs33ri/4cT21Ncc6kk8eWAASSA2eu/88137e59f4fa085075beefa6fe96b598/Publication___What-next-for-e-petitions-2012.pdf
- Hough, R. (2012) Do legislative petitions systems enhance the relationship between parliament and citizens?, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 18(3/4): 479–95. doi: [10.1080/13572334.2012.706057](https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2012.706057)
- Judge, D. (1978) Public petitions and the house of commons, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 31(4): 391–405. doi: [10.1093/oxfordjournals.pa.a054278](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.pa.a054278)
- Jungherr, A. and Jürgens, P. (2010) The political click: political participation through e-petitions in Germany, *Policy & Internet*, 2(4): 131–65.
- Kornberg, A. and Musolf, L. (1970) On legislatures in developmental perspective, In A. Kornberg and L. Musolf (eds) *Legislatures in developmental perspective*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp 3–32.
- Lester, M. (2015) The brain tumour e-petition, *Petitions launch event*, House of Commons, 02/12/2015.
- Lester, M. (2016) The brain tumour e-petition, *Petitions: A year of action event*, House of Commons, 16/11/2016.
- Leston-Bandeira, C. and Tibúrcio, T. (2012) Developing links despite the parties: parliaments and citizens in Portugal, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 18(3/4): 384–402. doi: [10.1080/13572334.2012.706052](https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2012.706052)
- Leys, C. (1955) Petitioning in the nineteen and twentieth centuries, *Political Studies*, 3(1): 45–64. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-9248.1955.tb01105.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1955.tb01105.x)
- Lindner, R. and Riehm, U. (2009) Electronic petitions and institutional modernization, *JeDem*, 1(1): 1–11. doi: [10.29379/jedem.v1i1.3](https://doi.org/10.29379/jedem.v1i1.3)
- Lindner, R. and Riehm, U. (2011) Broadening participation through e-petitions? An empirical study of petitions to the German parliament, *Policy & Internet*, 3(1): Art 4.
- Mark, G. (1998) Vestigial constitution: the history and significance of the right to petition, *Fordham Law Review*, 66: 2153–231.

- Miller, L. (2009) E-petitions in Westminster: the way forward for democracy?, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62(1): 162–77. doi: [10.1093/pa/gsn044](https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsn044)
- Miller, H. (2012) Popular petitioning and the corn laws, 1833–46, *English Historical Review*, 127(527): 882–919. doi: [10.1093/ehr/ces073](https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/ces073)
- Modernisation Committee (2004) *Connecting parliament with the public, first report of session 2003–04*, London: The Stationery Office, HC368.
- Mosca, L. and Santucci, D. (2009) Petitioning online: the role of e-petitions in web campaigning, In S. Baringhorst, V. Kneip and J. Niesyto, *Political campaigning on the web*, Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, pp 121–46.
- National Assembly for Wales (2017) *Petitions committee – news 8 March 2017*, www.assembly.wales/en/bus-home/committees/Pages/Committee-Profile.aspx?cid=430
- Ormrod, M. (2009) Introduction: medieval petitions in context, In M. Ormrod, G. Dodd and A. Musson (eds), *Medieval petitions*, York: York University Press, pp 1–11.
- Ormrod, M., Dodd, G. and Musson, A. (eds.) (2009) *Medieval petitions*, York: York University Press.
- Packenhams, R. (1970) Legislatures and political development, In A. Kornberg and L. Musolf (eds), *Legislatures in developmental perspective*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp 521–82.
- Petition 105560 (2015) Fund more research into brain tumours, the biggest cancer killer of under-40s, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/105560>
- Petition 106133 (2015) Make an allowance for up to 2 weeks term time leave from school for holiday, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/106133>
- Petition 106651 (2015) Introduce a tax on sugary drinks in the UK to improve our children’s health, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/106651>
- Petition 108072 (2015) Give the Meningitis B vaccine to ALL children, not just newborn babies, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/108072>
- Petition 110776 (2015) Make fair transitional state pension arrangements for 1950’s women, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/110776>
- Petition 125003 (2016) Ban driven grouse shooting, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/125003>
- Petition 129823 (2016) Make it illegal for a company to require women to wear high heels at work, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/129823>
- Petition 132140 (2016) Free childcare when both parents are working. Not just those who are on benefits, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/132140>
- Petition 164851 (2016) Protect grouse Moors and grouse shooting, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/164851>
- Petition 166711 (2016) April’s law, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/166711>
- Petition 166847 (2016) Put a max of £1200 on car insurance for 18–25 year olds, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/166847>
- Petition 168524 (2016) Close all retail on boxing day, retail isn’t needed on boxing day!, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/168524>
- Petition 173574 (2016) Air-drop life saving aid into the starving cities in Syria, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/173574>
- Petitions Committee (2015a) Email to Author, 6 October 2015
- Petitions Committee (2015b) *Guidance for government departments responding to e-petitions*, www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Petitions-Chair-leader-of-the-House-letter.pdf.

- Petitions Committee (2016) *Your petitions: one year of action*, www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Your-Petitions-A-Year-of-Action.pdf
- Petitions Committee (2018) *Oral evidence session: petition on meningitis B vaccine*, 27/02/2018, www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/1272d4d6-a219-4b60-8ad6-e2e8022d9111
- Petitions Committee (2019) *Oral evidence session: Funding for research into brain tumours*, HC1792, 15 January 2019, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/petitions-committee/funding-for-research-into-brain-tumours-followup/oral/95242.pdf>
- Portuguese Parliament (2007) *Regimento*, www.parlamento.pt/Legislacao/Documents/Legislacao_Anotada/RegimentoAR_Simples.pdf
- Procedure Committee (2014) *E-petitions: A collaborative system, third report of session 2014–15*, London: The Stationary Office, HC235.
- Puschmann, C., Bastos, M. and Schmidt, J.–H. (2017) Birds of a feather petition together? Characterizing e-petitioning through the lens of platform data, *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(2): 203–20. doi: [10.1080/1369118X.2016.1162828](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1162828)
- Riehm, U., Böhle, K. and Lindner, R. (2014) *Electronic petitioning and modernization of petitioning systems in Europe*, Berlin: Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag (TAB).
- Rogers, R. and Walters, R. (2006) *How parliament works*, Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Rogers, R. and Walters, R. (2015) *How parliament works*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Russell, R. and Cowley, P. (2016) The policy power of the Westminster parliament: the parliamentary state and the empirical evidence, *Governance*, 29(6): 121–37. doi: [10.1111/gove.12149](https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12149)
- Saalfeld, T. and Dobmeier, R. (2012) The Bundestag and German citizens: more communication, growing distance, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 18(3/4): 314–32. doi: [10.1080/13572334.2012.706047](https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2012.706047)
- Task and Finish Working Group on Brain Tumour Research (2018) *Report*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/683217/Brain_tumour_research_-_task_and_finish_working_group_report.pdf
- Tibúrcio, T. (2010) *O Direito de Petição perante a Assembleia da República*, Coimbra: Coimbra Editora.
- Thompson, L. (2015) *Making british law: Committees in action*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- WASPI representative (2016) The WASPI e-petition, *Petitions: A year of action event*, House of Commons, 16 November 2016.
- Wright, S. (2012) Assessing, e-democratic innovations: democratic goods and Downing Street e-petitions, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 9(4): 453–70.
- Wright, S. (2015) Populism and downing street petitions: connective action, hybridity, and the changing nature of organising, *Political Communication*, 32: 414–33. doi: [10.1080/10584609.2014.958256](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.958256)
- Wright, S. (2016) ‘Success’ and online participation: the case of downing street e-petitions, *Information, Communication and Society*, 19(6): 843–57. doi: [10.1080/1369118X.2015.1080285](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1080285)
- Yasseri, T., Hale, S. and Margetts, H. (2017) Rapid rise and decay in petition signing, *EPJ Data Science*, 6: 20. doi: [10.1140/epjds/s13688-017-0116-6](https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-017-0116-6)
- Zaret, D. (2000) *Origins of democratic culture: Printing, petitions and the public sphere in early-modern England*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.