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Article:

Leston Bandeira, C (2019) Parliamentary petitions and public engagement: an empirical analysis of the role of e-petitions. *Policy & Politics*, 47 (3). pp. 415-436. ISSN: 0305-5736

<https://doi.org/10.1332/030557319X15579230420117>

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

Cristina Leston-Bandeira

University of Leeds

Abstract:

Legislatures around the world are experimenting with online petitions as a means of enabling the public to express policy preferences. In many 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 action, they nevertheless play an important role. Some have performed campaigning or scrutiny roles, but their primary effect has been to facilitate public engagement.

Keywords: parliamentary petitions; e-petitions; political participation; parliament; public engagement; House of Commons; e-government; democracy.

Introduction

Petitions to the UK Parliament have existed for centuries, but fell into disuse in the 20th 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 policy-making. 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 parliamentary petitions systems' roles.

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 they were developed for; 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 2015-17 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 21st 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.

However discussing the role of petitions systems matters 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 policy-making 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 policy-making. 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 Jungherr 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, Pakenham identifies in the same volume twelve 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 policy-making, with consequences beyond the act of participation and the possible amendment to policy.

Inspired by the Pakenham 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 (e.g. Monarch, Parliament), petitioning has become so pervasive that everyone knows about it, whilst 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; e.g. 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. Whilst 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 18th century revolutionary Constitutions (Costa et.al. 2012,p.304; Mark 1998,p.2195). 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,p.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, p.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 15th 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, p.325). Thus, petitioning performed already then roles of safety-valve and grievance resolution.

By the 17th century, petitions had adopted quite different characteristics to the ones from medieval times. Whilst 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,p.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 17th century, petitions became more focused on policy, therefore acquiring a role of policy-setting.

But 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, p.2169). For example, 19th century Chartist and Anti-Corn Laws petitions were inclusive of disenfranchised citizens such as working class men (Miller 2012; Chase, 2017).

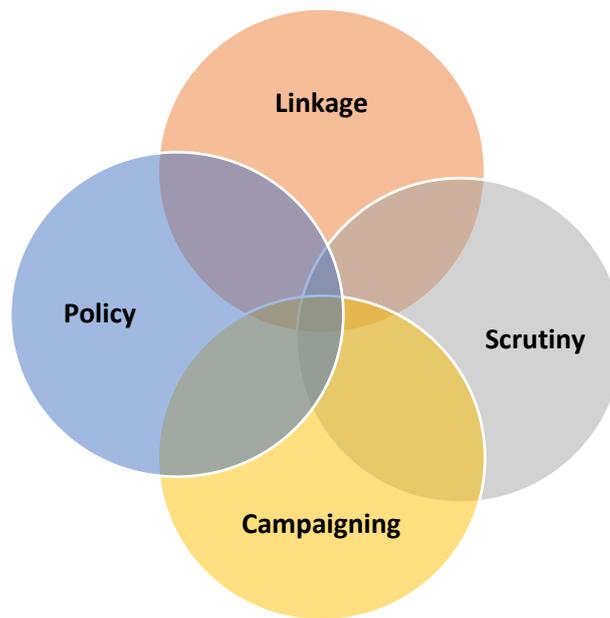
The history of petitioning also shows it performs an important role of mobilisation, as illustrated by the very large 19th century petitions, such as the Chartists petitions which gathered millions of signatures. The Chartists knew their petitions were unlikely to succeed, but these were a means towards an end (Chase 2017). 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 2017). 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. Whilst 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; Hough 2012; Lindner and Riehm 2011; 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 (Hough 2012; Lindner and Riehm 2011), 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 policy-making: 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 policy-making 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 policy-making rarely happens through isolated instances expressed in specific moments (Thompson 2015; Russell and Cowley 2016); i.e. far from a neat unidirectional process, mediation between citizens and policy-making encompasses formal and informal processes, whereby linkage, campaigning, scrutiny and policy, intertwine. Petitions systems have the potential to impact on all of these.

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



We sub-divide 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 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 policy-makers. But it can also perform a more practical recruitment role, facilitating the identification of specific people who can help to further the cause.

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. |

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 2015-17 Parliament collated during a Fellowship with the House of Commons Petitions Committee (October 2016-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 etc.

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 the 20th 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 (i.e. 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,p.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,p.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, p.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°). 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,p.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 2015-17 Parliament, identifying the role(s) it fulfilled.

The e-Petitions system in the 2015-17 Parliament

The new e-petitions system saw extraordinary levels of usage over its first parliament.ⁱ 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,p.325) and 10,950 e-petitions had been accepted, as Table 2 shows.

Table 2 – Volume of e-Petitions in the 2015-17 Parliament

| | Total | % from Submitted | % from Accepted |
|---|--------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 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 debated** | 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,p.454), which corresponded to just over 5 million unique signatures (Yasseri et al 2017,p.2), with 99% failing to achieve the 10,000 threshold for a government response in the Coalition system, and only 0.1% achieving 100,000 signatures (Yasseri et al 2017,p.1) – all below the levels achieved in the UK Parliament’s system. Over 2015-17, 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,p.326). This has dropped over the last few years to 1,186 in 2014-15 (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% 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% of e-petitions submitted were accepted to be considered, and out of these only 4.4% 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

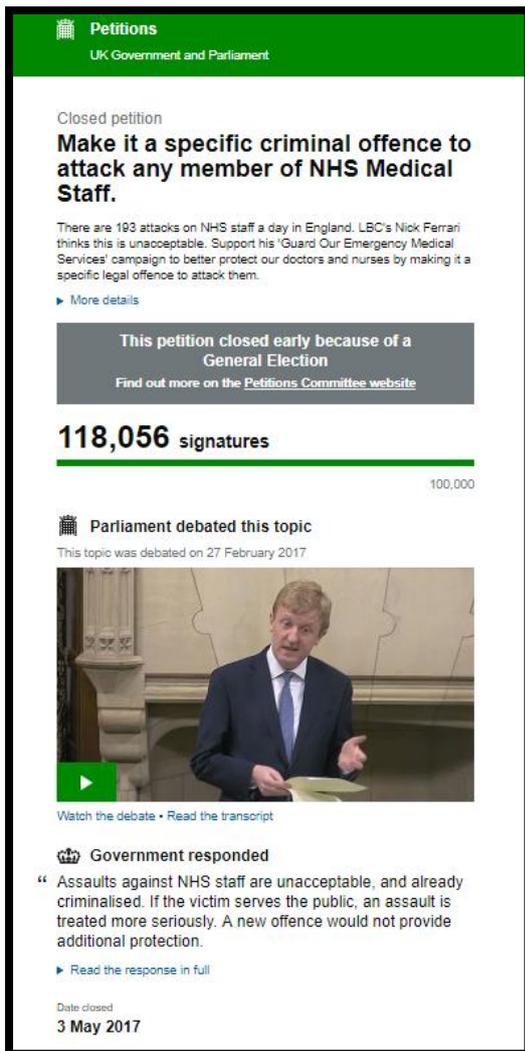
We first address linkage roles. The main role played by the UK Parliament's e-petitions system has undoubtedly been *public engagement*. This is hardly a surprise, being one of its main aims when first established, as seen above. The public engagement role works implicitly through the system's accessibility 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 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% 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. Whilst other parliaments' petitions systems, such as the European, Portuguese and Scottish, also list relevant actions on each

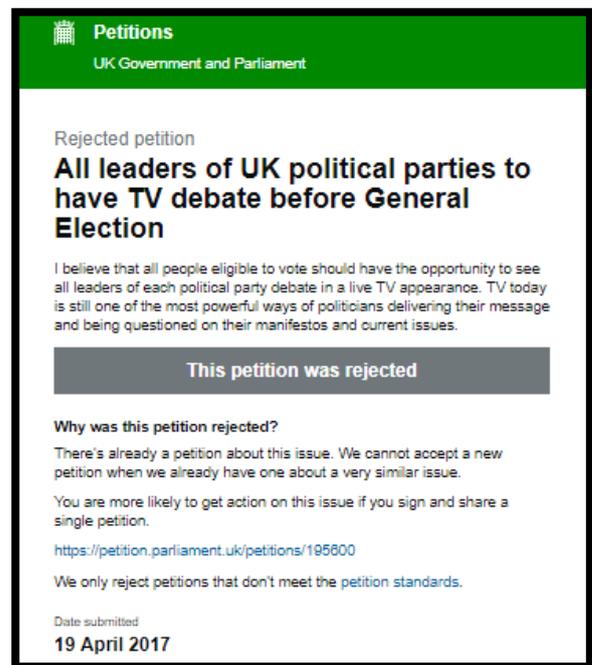
petition’s page, this tends to be in the form of reports, rather than direct links to proceedings, and written in parliamentary jargon rather than plain language. What makes the UK system particularly transparent however is the publication of all rejected petitions, with a specific explanation of why they were rejected, as Figure 3 illustrates. The European Parliament gives access to lists of “non-admissible” petitions, though with poor visibility.ⁱⁱ

Figure 2: Webpage of an e-petition



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

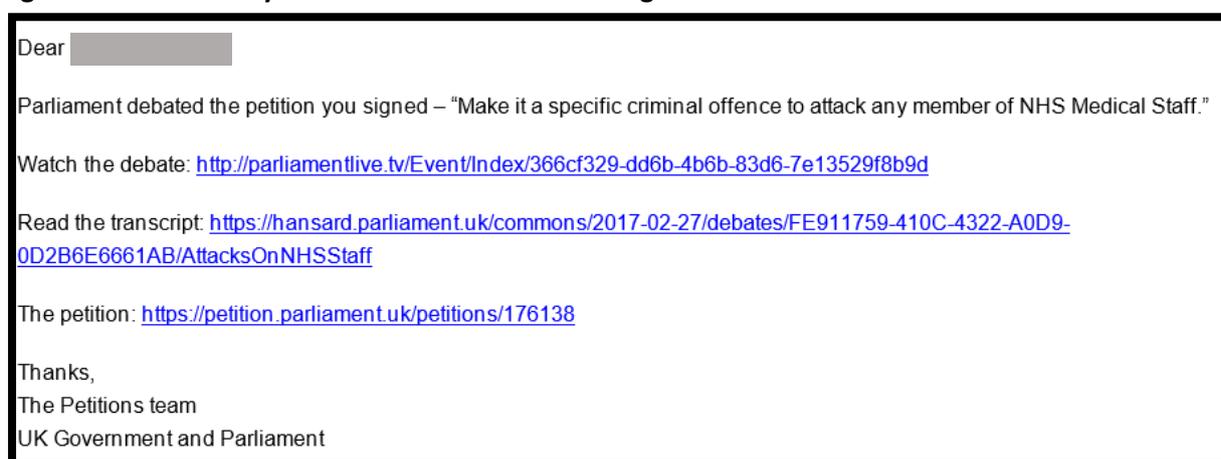
Figure 3: Webpage of a rejected e-petition



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

Figure 4: Email sent by the Petitions Committee to signatories



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

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 school children (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 02/12/2015). 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).

However, the system 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, seven-year-old girl 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 100k 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).

But the e-petitions system 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 16/11/2016). 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 whilst 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. This means 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% obtained with e-petitions in the 2015-17 Parliament.

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.

**1992-93 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,p.381; Rogers and Walters 2006,p.341; Sessional Returns for 2000-01 and between 2005-06 and 2016-17.

The full compliance with responses resulted from the Committee following up delayed responses, with a member of staff responsible for tracking this (Interview 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 responses. 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 MPs felt they needed more information. As seen above, the Petitions Committee can lead inquiries. Within the 2015-17 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, 16/11/2026). 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); secondly, 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 policy-makers 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 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 (e.g. 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 policy-making 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 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 changes." (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 tumour

(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,p.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.

Whilst identifying evidence directly linking petitions to policy-change is difficult, it is even more so to find evidence to the contrary; e.g. 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 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 2015-17, 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 policy-making 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. Whilst 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; whilst the system has capacity to perform specific roles, it may also have a counter-effect 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 2015-17 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 to an early draft and to all four reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments.

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ⁱⁱ See: https://petiport.secure.europarl.europa.eu/petitions/en/show-petitions?keyWords=&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 here: <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Letter-from-Chair-to-Secretary-of-State-for-Health-and-reply-October-2016.pdf>

⁴ See samples here: <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/petitions/Correspondence-relating-to-petition-on-meningitis-b-vaccine.pdf>