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E-petitioning Parliament: Understanding the connections between citizens and the UK Parliament

Lauren Martin*

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, Elmfield Building, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TU, UK

Correspondence: lmartin2@sheffield.ac.uk

2025 marks ten years since the UK Government and Parliament e-petitions system was established in a context of political dissatisfaction and disengagement with representative democracy. This article responds to calls for empirically grounded research about the mechanisms that connect citizens to their representative institutions by focussing on parliamentary e-petitions as a popular tool for citizen engagement with political processes. It presents findings from qualitative research with animal welfare e-petition creators, campaigners, and the MPs who supported them to highlight the role played by petitioners themselves in ensuring that their voices are heard. It also considers the 'added value' of e-petitions as a political campaigning tool from the perspective of petitioners by highlighting the spillover effects that arise from using an e-petition system that has formal ties to parliament. In doing so this article makes novel contributions to understandings of political participation via institutionally facilitated democratic innovations.

Keywords: connective mechanisms; democratic innovations; everyday politics; parliamentary e-petitions; political participation; public engagement.

In response to political apathy and disillusionment political scholars and practitioners have sought new mechanisms that enable the public to engage with their representative bodies. The UK Government and Parliament e-petition system is

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just one of many systems around the world, each established alongside several democratic innovations intending to restore engagement with and trust in politics. Parliamentary e-petitions systems are different from commercial platforms such as Change.org because they are tied to the institution. In the UK, this is through formal signature thresholds which necessitate either a written response from the Government or a debate in Parliament, mediated by a Petitions Committee. While these systems are the source of much academic interest, little empirical research has examined the following aspects of the UK e-petitions process. First, the connective mechanisms between citizens and parliament through which the voices of the public are brought to parliamentarians, with the notable exception of Matthews (2023). Second, where empirical research has sought to understand the connections between the public and parliament it has rarely been undertaken with petitioners who have used the Westminster system and, as such, is limited in the ability to understand how petitioners seek to engage with the UK Parliament, and why. Finally, little is known in terms of the 'added value' of using an institutionally linked e-petitions system to campaigners vis-a-vis other campaign tools. These gaps matter because the dynamics through which the public engages with parliament matters for their perception; the success of parliamentary e-petitions systems rests on users viewing them as efficacious tools through which their voices can be heard and desired outcomes can be reached (Carman 2010; Wright 2016). Furthermore, empirically grounded knowledge about how connections are brought between the different spheres—the informal spheres of civil society and formal spheres of representative institutions (Habermas 2009)—of democratic systems is necessary if we are to appraise attempts to overcome widespread public apathy.

In this article, I address these gaps by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the connective mechanisms through which citizen voices are brought to parliament?

RQ2: What benefits do these connections bring to the citizens who utilize the e-petition system as a tool for democratic engagement?

I do so based on fieldwork undertaken in July 2023 to March 2024 which focussed on five case studies of animal welfare e-petitions submitted to the 2019–2024 Parliament. I draw on 16 semi-structured qualitative interviews with e-petition creators and campaigners and seven interviews with MPs who were not members of the Petitions Committee. I also draw on document analysis of 45 relevant documents and petitioners' social media posts. The findings of this research show that petitioners prioritize relationship building with and the support of individual MPs as a key conduit for e-petition success, as opposed to the formal e-petition thresholds and engagement with the Petitions Committee. It also shows how petitioners view their e-petition in relation to wider political campaigning

objectives, with particular focus on how relationships built with parliamentarians during the e-petition campaign benefit them beyond just reaching formal e-petition milestones.

Through this analysis, I make the following contributions. Firstly, by providing empirical evidence based on qualitative research with e-petition creators and campaigners I advance understandings of how petitioners seek to engage with parliament both through and beyond e-petitions systems, and why. I apply an 'everyday politics' lens to e-petition campaigns which further underscores the importance of understanding contemporary political engagement as embedded within these online everyday spaces. In bringing these two together, this article makes a novel contribution about the 'added value' of e-petitions vis-a-vis other political campaigning tools and democratic innovations from the perspective of petitioners who utilize the system. Furthermore, I respond to a wider call in the literature for knowledge about how connections are brought between the different spheres of democratic systems and the democratic innovations within them which is necessary for the appraisal of tools which seek to address public apathy with political institutions.

The remainder of the article is structured into four sections. In the first section I provide an overview of what I mean by 'everyday politics' and its relevance to contemporary political engagement. I then provide an overview of the literature on parliamentary e-petitions and connective mechanisms. In the second section I outline the case study selection process and methods used for data collection. In the third section I present the findings to the research questions outlined above. In the fourth section I discuss the implications of these findings. I conclude with a discussion of potential limitations and points for further research.

1. Everyday political engagement and the connections between citizens and democratic institutions

In recent decades there has been a marked decline in public faith in democracy—a so-called democratic 'crisis' (Papadopoulos 2013)—in which public satisfaction with formal representative institutions and political processes is decreasing and in which disaffection is on the rise (Stoker 2006; Hay 2007; Norris 2011). 'The challenge', Dalton suggests, 'comes from democracy's own citizens, who have grown distrustful of politicians, sceptical about democra[tic] institutions and disillusioned about how democratic processes function' (Dalton 2004: 1). In the UK, research has, for example, highlighted low levels of trust in democratic institutions comparable to other countries (Duffy et al., 2023) and the Hansard Society's series of audits of political engagement present a similar story (see Hansard Society 2018, 2019 for recent examples). It is against this backdrop that formal representative institutions have mounted a 'fight-back' to the decline of formal political

participation via the introduction of democratic innovations, of which parliamentary e-petitions are just one type. Democratic innovations are "institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in political decision making" (Smith 2009: 1) and are 'developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence.' (Elstub and Escobar 2019:14).

At the same time, patterns of political engagement have changed; grassroots participation is increasingly prevalent vis-a-vis traditional forms of participation like voting (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011). Many scholars have noted, for example, the increase of political actions such as boycotting, hacking, and social media mobilization (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005; Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010; Flinders and Wood 2018). 'Everyday' political action has become increasingly more prevalent, understood to be political action that occurs at levels *beyond* elections and formal processes and 'involves people reclaiming politics as actively owned and engaged in by citizens, in environments that reach far beyond the formal politics system' (Boyte 2005: 36). Today, this is increasingly happening in online spaces such as social media because it affords opportunities for the public to engage with politics in a 'public, shared context' (Highfield 2016: 8). Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and YouTube and their facilities for sharing, liking and commenting opinions to users' immediate circles and to larger audiences now play a crucial role in both the expression of preferences and ideas and in formulating political communities and identities (Dean 2019). By applying an 'everyday' lens to political behaviour, what appears to be mundane activity becomes clearly political, motivated and enacted according to the concerns and identities of citizens. An 'everyday lens' is applied because it encourages focus not just on the role that representative institutions play in enacting participation via democratic innovations like e-petitions, but also the spaces in which citizens might discuss and share e-petitions, their topic and political relevance. This is increasingly important as a site for scholarly research because everyday forms of political engagement as 'vehicles for marshalling public opinion to political force' (Fraser 2007: 7) offer avenues to express concerns in autonomous ways, on citizens' own terms.

1.1 Parliamentary e-petitions

E-petitions are unique as they represent a formal institutional response to the issues of disaffection outlined above, but they equally represent a move towards citizen initiated, online political engagement because much engagement with them happens in online everyday spaces such as social media. Petitioning itself is not new, however. At its heyday in the eighteenth century over a million public petitions were sent to the UK House of Commons, representing a growth of a

vibrant political culture in which concerns were presented to political institutions (Miller 2023). Today, parliamentary e-petitions are a direct channel to Parliament outside of formal elections and they have few constraints on participation, for example, in the UK system MPs do not need to 'sponsor'. Their relevance to political life today is reflected in their large uptake internationally such as in Scotland (Carman 2006), Germany (Lindner and Riehm 2011), and Taiwan (Lee, Chen and Huang 2014), to name a few.

The expansion of opportunities for citizens to have their voices heard has been the subject of much academic interest. Extant literature on parliamentary e-petitions largely focuses on the functions of e-petitions systems, the outcomes of e-petitions systems and the demographic characteristics of users (e.g. Wright 2012, 2016; Bochel 2013, 2016; Riehm, Böhle and Lindner 2014; Rosenberger et al., 2022). One function identified by Leston-Bandeira (2019) is that of the 'campaigning function' in which petitioning performs a mobilizing role that enables citizens to unite around a specific cause. And yet this function has not been explored in depth in the literature; there has been no empirical research presented that considers how parliamentary e-petitions might be used in wider campaign repertoires and their 'added value' to campaign objectives vis-a-vis other tools. Despite calls for thinking about democratic innovations not in isolation but as interacting as part of dynamic democratic systems (see Parkinson 2006; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Ercan et al., 2019) much of the focus on parliamentary e-petitions systems, particularly the UK system, has not looked outside of the system itself: the formal procedures and milestones. But, looking outside to how parliamentary e-petitions function within a wider political campaigning repertoire is fundamental if we are to appraise the potential for addressing political apathy and disillusionment. This article addresses this gap by presenting how petitioners view their e-petition in relation to wider campaigning objectives, with particular focus on the benefits brought by forming relationships with MPs.

Furthermore, recent focus has also been placed on the importance of the mechanisms through which parliamentary e-petitions bring the 'voices' of citizens to the 'ears' of policymakers (Matthews, 2023). This matters for understanding the interplay of citizen voices and formal representative institutions; the effective transmission of voices expressed in the sphere of civil society so that they are acknowledged and considered in formal spaces is fundamental to the success of any democratic innovation (Boswell, Hendriks, and Ercan 2016). So how do parliamentary e-petitions systems do this effectively? The UK system has 'designed coupling', that is, inbuilt mechanisms that guarantee the views of citizens will be transmitted to formal spheres of influence (Hendriks 2016). This is represented by the Petitions Committee, whose function is to connect petitioners to Parliament by facilitating government responses or petition debates. This is an 'institutional connection' because it is tied to and enacted by Parliament. But connective

mechanisms are not always formalized in such a way and there has been recognition that reliance on institutional design might not always be sufficient for our understanding about connections between constituent aspects of the democratic system (Boswell, Hendriks, and Ercan 2016). Whilst empirical research on the role of non-institutional actors is limited, Mendonça (2016) highlights 'inducers of connectivity' such as the media and activists as important systematic connections because they 'promote not only awareness of what has been said in other arenas but the consideration of discourses throughout the system' (p. 178) which draws our attention to how 'like-minded conversations, intra public discussions and everyday talk are important for democracy' (p. 173). Indeed, he calls for further urgent research into the role of extra-parliamentary and non-institutional actors in connecting spheres. By non-institutional, I mean those actors who are primarily situated in the public sphere of civil society (Habermas, 2009) such as petitioners.

This article responds to this call. It provides analysis on the institutional and non-institutional connections between citizens and their representative institutions (e.g. Mendonça 2016; Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019) by presenting empirical findings on the role that petitioners themselves play in ensuring that their voices are heard by policymakers. Where other research states the importance of formal intermediaries such as that of the Petitions Committee, the findings of this research highlight the primacy of petitioners as facilitators of the connections between the informal sphere of civil society and the formal sphere of parliament.

2. Research methods

This research was conducted between July 2023 and March 2024. The five case study e-petitions were selected according to the following three-step strategy. I downloaded the Json data for e-petitions that had received 10,000 signatures (the first formal signature threshold) (n = 786) in March 2023. I then coded these petitions according to the topic of the e-petition, for example, 'health' or 'education' and selected the most popular topics to move to the next stage. The most petitioned area, excluding those relating solely to the Covid-19 pandemic, was animal rights (n = 83). The most populous subtopics within this parent category were pets and kept animals (n = 19) and wildlife conservation (n = 19). By choosing the most popular topic areas from which to move to the next stage, this strategy ensured that at each stage of narrowing down I would retain the greatest possible breadth of petitions to select from in the final stage which, as explained below, prioritizes capturing a breadth of actions and creator types.

In this final stage, I placed focus on selecting e-petitions that reflected the range of possible parliamentary and non-parliamentary actions that took place during the petition campaign so that points of difference could be interrogated,

particularly in terms of Petitions Committee and constituency MP involvement. Emphasis was also placed on selecting e-petitions that received added impetus through traditional and social media coverage and a range of e-petitions that either had the support of campaign groups or charities, or not. Some examples of the types of actions considered are as follows. Within Parliament, I considered whether there had been any parliamentary debates that mentioned the e-petition or its topic area, for example, an Opposition Day debate. I also considered whether the e-petition was mentioned in a Private Members' Bill or if the Petitions Committee had contacted the relevant Government department or undertaken any outreach work. Outside of Parliament, I explored whether a petition was the subject of a social media campaign or had been picked up by well-known voices such as celebrities or large organisations. With e-petition creators I prioritized choosing a range of creator 'types' to reflect the potential differences in resources—such as money or databases of subscribers—so that I would be able to evaluate the differences in campaign strategies across creator 'types'. Table 1 gives a snapshot of these considerations, but it is not an exhaustive list for brevity and to protect anonymity.

These considerations were made because the literature cited above underscores the importance of institutional (and non-institutional) ties to parliament, and the role of media in contemporary political life. By selecting cases that reflected a wide range of actions and creators this research reflects the fluid nature of petitioning and the range of parliamentary and non-parliamentary influences. I acknowledge that animal welfare e-petitions may be different to other types of petitions, so I address the potential limitations of this strategy in the concluding remarks. With that said, however, the aim of this strategy was not generalisability but rather to select a range of e-petitions that shed light on the varied experiences of petitioners and the various campaign strategies that might be employed.

A total of 16 interviews were undertaken with petition creators or campaigners, hereafter referred to collectively as petitioners. Whilst only one person can propose a petition via the online portal and be named on the e-petition website, in many cases the petition campaign was undertaken by more than one person and so they are referred to together. Six interviews were undertaken with MPs who supported the petition in some way. One Peer who was supporting a petition was also interviewed. Table 2 shows the breakdown of interviewees. To protect the anonymity of those who took part in the research all interviewee's names and associated e-petition are not referred to. Petitioners are instead referred to by number (e.g. 1) and MPs and Peers by letter (e.g. A).

I also undertook qualitative document analysis which consisted primarily of Westminster Hall debate transcripts, official Government responses, Petitions Committee correspondence, campaign websites or blogs and media articles. All documents are publicly available and were sourced primarily while doing

Table 1. Example case study decisions

Petition	Example actions				Creator 'types'		
	Parliamentary debate (of any kind)	Other parliamentary action (e.g. Private Members Bills)	Petitions Committee action	Social media campaign	Large charity	Small organization	Individual
1	X	X					X
2	X			X			
3	X		X		X		
4	X		X	X		X	
5	X	X					X

Table 2. Breakdown of interviewees

Interviewee	Frequency
Petitioner	16
Member of Parliament	6
Lord	1

background research into petition campaigns, to complement the interviews. Finally, the social media posts of petitioners were examined during the period of fieldwork, and once in July 2024 to check for updates. Whilst social media posting (and indeed, e-petitions) have been criticized as a form of 'slacktivism' (see Christensen 2011), the benefit of analysing social media posts is demonstrated generally by Highfield (2016:8) as venues in which citizens are able to 'discuss, challenge and participate in diverse aspects of politics', and specifically by Asher, Leston-Bandeira, and Spaiser (2019) as useful thermometers for people's responses to petitions. In line with an interpretivist epistemology, the analysis process was taken inductively—first with documents, followed by interviews and social media posts—with a view to forefronting the experiences of petitioners and the MPs who supported them (Bowen 2009). In this way I identified themes from the data; they were not predetermined by a coding scheme. I also conducted analysis iteratively, with multiple rounds of coding after which final themes were settled on so that, as much as possible, the experiences of those involved are accurately reflected. Example themes include *relationship building, social media mobilisation and networks of support.* All aspects of this research design received ethical approval.

3. Findings

This article presents findings to answer the two research questions stated above:

> RQ1: What are the connective mechanisms through which citizen voices are brought to Parliament?
> RQ2: What benefits do these connections bring to the citizens who utilize the e-petition system as a tool for democratic engagement?

They are answered in sequence. To do so, this section outlines the typical e-petition campaign, focussing on the use of social media as a site for everyday political engagement, and the relationship building aspect that petitioners sought to further their campaign. But first, it is necessary to understand the formalized thresholds of the UK House of Commons e-petitions system, as they provide important context to some of the strategies employed by petitioners. At 10,000

signatures e-petitions will receive a government response from the relevant department. For the petitions in this research this was usually the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). After reaching 100,000 signatures petitions will be considered for a debate in Westminster Hall. These debates are 'general' debates and do not end with a vote. The system is overseen by the Petitions Committee which is a cross-party select committee that was set up to support the new e-petitions system. The Committee oversees all stages of the petition process, most notably the submission and moderation of petitions, the Government responses, and the petition debates.[1] It also shares the powers of other select committees, being able to take evidence on and undertake inquiries related to petitions but these powers were not used in the case studies featured in this research, nor were they used particularly often in the 2019–24 Parliament.

3.1 E-petition campaigns

All interviews with petitioners focussed on the characteristics of their petition campaign. Focus was not on 'success', rather it was on the processes and strategies by which petitioners used the system. This is because, as this article will demonstrate, 'success' is complicated and contested; there are multiple interpretations of what success might look like, policymaking is not linear and perceptions of success are likely to differ according to interpretation (Marsh and McConnell 2010; McConnell 2010).

Petitioners employed a range of campaign methods, each which revolved around the two following core strategies:

1. The use of social media
2. Building relationships with parliamentarians

These are two distinct but linked campaign strategies that demonstrate the various touch points petitioners have with parliament. They are the focus because all the methods used by petitioners either relied on the use of social media or were centred around building relationships with parliamentarians, or both. But, it is worth noting that the campaign process was not linear, with petition strategies varying at different times; sometimes petitioners went back to using strategies already employed earlier on in the process, and not every campaign sought out the same strategies or outcomes. Indeed, the e-petitions themselves were rarely the start of a petitioner's wider campaign. Most petitioners interviewed had been campaigning on the issue prior to the submission of their e-petition online, for

[1]A Member of the Petitions Committee will open the petition debate. Which Member will do so is decided in private sittings.

example, by speaking to their constituency MPs or relevant campaign groups and charities. Overwhelmingly, petitioners suggested that the reason for creating their e-petition was that other channels had been exhausted, and that they needed a different approach to getting to the 'ears' of policymakers.

As mentioned previously, the Petitions Committee is the body through which citizens are formally linked to Parliament. All petitioners, regardless of campaign strategy, will encounter the Petitions Committee at the milestones outlined above. Generally, however, the petitioners I interviewed had limited contact with the Committee. Two petitioners liaised with the Committee to request amendments to the Government response when it was not deemed to be adequately engaging with the petition, but this was not necessary for all petitioners, and most did not request revisions to the response. In comparison, all the petitioners who had a debate (one did not) had spoken with the MP leading their petition debate prior to it to ensure that the core points were presented in the debate, which interviewees referred to as an important part of the process.

> I had Zoom calls with [the MP] who led the debate, and he was asking what questions I want them to ask and what I want out of it. To be honest the petitions people have all been really good. Really helpful. Really supportive with the debate. It was great. (Interview, Petitioner 14)

However, these moments were generally the extent of engagement with the Committee that petitioners had. Only one petitioner spoke of their—positive—engagement with Committee staff who explained some of the procedural aspects of the process. That is not to say that this is all that the Petitions Committee does. It has the power to run inquiries and has done so in the past (see Matthews 2023, for an example), but none of the e-petitions featured in this research were taken forward as inquiries. The Committee is also able to undertake a range of engagement events with petitioners, but these were not undertaken for the case study e-petitions.

'Everyday politics' and social media

As such, the bulk of petitioners' campaigns happened outside of the formal procedural aspects of the petitions process. Instead, 'everyday' politics was an important feature. All petitioners interviewed sought to build up support for their e-petitions and reach the formal signature thresholds by utilizing both social and traditional media (TV, newspapers, radio) sites which has been shown to influence petition success (Wright 2016; Asher, Leston-Bandeira, and Spaiser 2019). Often, the use of social media and the traditional media went hand in hand: virality on social media helped to get the attention of news outlets, and clips from news outlets could be used to support posts on social media, for example:

> I would go in the comments of the press coverage on social media and then start talking about the petition and sharing those petitions and driving people that way. I find that really helpful because obviously the press already has a following (Interview, Petitioner 10)
>
> Huge thank you to [BBC programme] for inviting me on the show to chat with [MP] and [Local Councillor] about my petition. It was a real honour to share the sofa #AnimalWelfare (Paraphrased Tweet from Petitioner 9 following an appearance on a BBC current affairs programme in which they spoke about their e-petition. It was viewed 1631 times.)
>
> I am looking forward to joining [Petitioner 10] and [Petitioner 12] for radio interviews. We will be discussing the delay to [petition]. Please sign and share (Paraphrased Tweet from Petitioner 9, who supported the campaign of Petitioner 10 with Petitioner 12. It was Retweeted 93 times, and liked 99 times)

All petitioners articulated the need for, and placed high importance on, having a sustained social media campaign for several reasons (RQ1). Firstly, social media was the main way in which petitioners were able to reach signature thresholds because it provided a relatively easy way for petitioners to share their e-petition with thousands of people. By posting on social media petitioners could develop strategies that resulted in more targeted posting and in some cases, adverts, driving their petition signatures almost entirely online.

> We thought '100,000 signatures, how on Earth are we going to do that?' and the only way we did it was by boosting posts. [We] shared it with everybody and their friends and everyone online. Their brothers and sisters, anyone. [Campaigner] used to talk about it on [podcast]. [Campaigner] tweeted all of Wales. That is how we managed to do it. (Interview, Petitioner 5)
>
> Interviewer: Were those [Facebook] ads helpful, do you think?
>
> Petitioner 16: Yes, definitely. Absolutely, definitely. They were cheap [...] and we know they were effective, at least cost effective. We could see the surge in signatures, and you never quite know what caused the surge in signatures, but if it coincides with us spending money on Facebook ads and as soon as the money is spent the signatures go up then it is noticeable. And Facebook metrics can tell us. You get a feel (Interview, Petitioner 16)

As well as purely reaching signature thresholds, sophisticated social media strategies allowed petitioners to build a following or support base that they were able to later utilize to further push their petition out to relevant audiences who might

be able to support the e-petition in other ways beyond just signing it. Relevant audiences included members of the public who would sign and/or share the e-petition, other campaigners who could further support the petition campaign by, for example, providing access to monetary resources or including e-petitions in newsletters, and MPs. Whilst petitioners expressed that the network building with all audiences was useful, the ability to connect with MPs online was key. X (formerly Twitter) was a platform that a significant number of MPs who supported the case study e-petitions utilized to share their work with constituents and as such had an active presence online. This enabled petitioners to contact and engage with MPs who they otherwise could not reach (most MPs will respond only to constituent enquiries that enter their post bags) (RQ1; RQ2):

> The reason why [former MP] is now coming to play is because of Twitter. It is all Twitter, politics is driven on Twitter because all these people have it and that is their most professional or most formal way to say how good they're doing or whatever it, or complain about stuff or to circulate newspaper articles or things like that (Interview, Petitioner 1)

3.2 Relationship building

In this way, sophisticated social media strategies were beneficial to petition campaigns not only because it helped petitioners to reach the formal signature milestones, but also because social media helped them to access other important 'touch points' with parliament. To build support, petitioners would typically reach out to their constituency MPs in the first instance, followed by MPs who they knew had worked on animal welfare issues previously and who might be described as a 'warm audience' for the petition ask. This is something that all petitioners did, and most often this would be done by emailing MPs (one petitioner emailed all 650!) or by reaching out to them on social media, as above (RQ1). In doing so, petitioners were seeking out one or two MPs who would support them by attending debates, speaking to colleagues or pursuing other parliamentary mechanisms, for example. Where petitioners were successful in establishing a close working relationship with MPs it was suggested by both petitioners and the MPs who supported them that this was a core moment in the campaign because of the 'spillover' benefits—benefits not solely related to the procedural aspects of petitioning—that arose (RQ2):

> [Petitioner] was the lead on all of it. He got on really well with all the MPs. He had a really good relationship with the MPs, so he was the driving force behind meeting them, getting them to support it. He was the name and face of [campaign group] because he went to all the meetings, he went on radio, he went on TV [...] I think

> what happened is that [petitioner] cultivated all those relationships with MPs. He went and found them all, talked about [dog]. So, when we got to the date when we were going to go to ten Downing Street they (MPs) came. Then the debate at Westminster Hall they chose to speak on it. They chose to come and speak on it because of [petitioner] He still got to talk to DEFRA after. They invited him to their meetings. (Interview, Petitioner 6, who campaigned alongside Petitioner 5)
>
> The benefit comes from the hard graft of the lobbying process. It is the persuading the member to attend, or for members to introduce a private member's bill or a Ten-Minute Rule Bill or whatever it is. That is the stuff of the parliamentary process that might then change legislation (Interview, MP A)

Because of the spillover benefits that arise from relationships with MPs, many petitioners articulated that building up these connections was the most vital part of their campaign; their 'next steps' were contingent on an MP who can support them (RQ2). As such, it was also the most difficult part. MPs are busy; attending a petition debate is not at the top of their list of priorities or responsibilities. So, convincing them to attend the debate and support the petition was generally an uphill battle for petitioners but one that they knew was fundamental to their wider political campaign. One petitioner would spend days at a time in Portcullis House to engage with MPs face-to-face to build up relationships and keep the petition in the spotlight. Others would ask their supporters to contact their own MPs—and often spend many hours writing the material for them to avoid generic campaign emails—to encourage more MPs to support their campaign. In this sense relationship building was a paramount aspect of the campaign not only because MPs could show support in the debate itself, but because the relationship fostered brings other benefits that would help the wider campaign after the petition process itself was over. Furthermore, that it is a strategy that all petitioners employed, despite not all having the same level of campaigning experience, suggests a recognition that campaign benefits would arise because of the e-petition (RQ2).

> When you've got a petition, it is like a bit of campaigning gold, isn't it? [...] When that debate happens and you have good relationships with MPs and they then share with you the briefings from organisations, campaigns, individuals that's where your campaign starts because you have that next wave of right, this is what I am fighting, and the debate provides a platform for that. (Interview, Petitioner 9)

3.3 Beyond the e-petition (RQ2)

The relationships built with MPs were a fundamental next step in the campaign once the petition had reached its procedural endpoint at 100,000 signatures. Petitioners did not stop campaigning after their e-petition was debated. Rather, they built on the relationships forged earlier in the campaign to pursue other parliamentary (and non-parliamentary) mechanisms. Three petitioners went on to work with an MP to introduce a private member's bill on the petition topic. Unfortunately, at the time of interviewing, none of these had progressed, but those petitioners expressed that they were exploring other avenues with MPs, thinking ahead to the, at the time, imminent general election. One petitioner went on to work with a Peer in the House of Lords to lobby DEFRA, and at the time of writing they continue to work together to lobby the new Labour government. Another two petitioners were able to meet frequently with DEFRA ministers and civil servants to discuss next steps, and another petition was featured in a government policy paper following discussions with other campaign groups and the Secretary of State.

> We are reviewing the operation of current microchip databases, with a view to introducing improvements. We are considering reforms to provide assurance that microchip databases are checked and kept up to date. This is following the campaign of [petitioners] (Paraphrased excerpt from a government policy paper in which one of the case study petitioners is mentioned)

Despite having reached the procedural end point of their e-petition campaign, the wider campaign was in all cases at the time of interviewing ongoing, and the e-petition was often used to show the support that they had received not just from large numbers of the public but from parliamentarians too. It also provided MPs and others something tangible to understand; the petition acted as a material thing that centred their campaigning objectives, and which provided a clear and targeted ask of the Government or Parliament. For all petitioners who did have a website, for example, the e-petition was front and centre and was referred to on social media even after time had passed since the debate. Indeed, petitioners sometimes used clips from the debates as a reflection of the support they did (or did not receive) from MPs months after the debate itself showing how different aspects of the petitioning process come into play at different times, and the strategic nature of social media posting.

> [Peer] publicly supported it and basically said after [the debate], what he said is [...] "I urge [minister] to take this forward" on Twitter as well as kept sharing all my tweets. And that was a really big boost [...] and [MP]

> did tweet immediately after the debate, outside Parliament did a speech and tweeted it (Interview, Petitioner 1)
>
> On Tuesday we launched our newest petition. We have surpassed the 10,000 signatures needed for a government response. We're keen to see what the Government says about our cheap, evidence led proposal. They have been dragging their heels since we wrote to them, so this petition is a nudge to make them address the need (Paraphrased post from Petitioner 16's campaign website outlining the progress and rationale behind their e-petition)

The MPs interviewed spoke more often about the ways in which they could support petitioners *beyond* the petition itself. They would utilize their parliamentary networks to find colleagues who may be able to further support the petition after the Westminster Hall debates, for example. Sometimes this would mean talking to ministers, but often it would be other backbenchers who had worked in similar policy areas, who sat on certain Select Committees or who knew people in major charities that would be the avenues MPs sought to explore. Other times, MPs would give advice on where to turn outside of Parliament:

> I would normally give them advice on what I thought would be the best way to carry on. Maybe the people to contact next, maybe organisations but not necessarily Parliament to find out what the bigger issue is. For some issues, I would say they've got to try and engage with civil servants (Interview, MP C)

In this respect, it was not necessarily the fact that the parliamentary petition system has formalized parliamentary actions inbuilt in the process that is the benefit to petitioners. Petitioners rarely referenced the Petitions Committee when talking about the key milestones of their campaign, or the focus of their campaign going forward. Rather, their focus was almost always on the relationships with MPs, and how they can use MPs to their (campaign's) advantage.

In this way, the e-petition acted as a vehicle through which relationships were built between parliamentarians and campaigners which opened opportunities for other parliamentary (or, in some cases, non-parliamentary) mechanisms to be used. Even where a petition may look on the surface to have been unsuccessful—i.e. that the specific ask of the petition has not been met by the Government in the immediate term—the extensive nature of the petition campaign and the spillover benefits that arise from it suggests that 'success' is dynamic and does not come to an end when a petition reaches 100,000 signatures. Instead, petitioners placed most emphasis on the mechanisms that are not the direct result of the core formal elements of e-petitions process but that are the result of the extensive,

driven campaigning that petitioners have undertaken before, during and since the creation of their e-petition.

Interestingly, MPs also tended to take the view that the benefits of petitioning came from the relationships built with petitioners, and not from petition procedures. MPs were generally quite cynical—though some more than others—about e-petitions, suggesting that because it is the building of relationships that matter the most, the e-petition itself is redundant as a tool; it is the relationship with an MP that exerts parliamentary influence, and these can be forged in other ways:

> So the driving force behind [petition campaign] got in touch with me as a Member of Parliament and he individually lobbied me. Now, for my money, that is a much better, more effective way of exerting parliamentary influence than getting a petition. I don't want, as I said, I don't want to disparage the effort that went into the petition because the organiser of that and, in that case, probably quite a lot of people, because they took an interest in animal welfare, did read that and support the cause. But I don't think the petition changed much, if anything. It was [petitioner] (Interview, MP A)

In sum, both petitioners and MPs recognized the benefits that come from petitioning beyond the e-petition itself in terms of the wider parliamentary connections forged. Naturally, one may ask what this means for e-petition 'success' and outcomes. Whilst only one of the case study e-petitions has led to an amendment to existing legislation, focussing just on legislative change and not the other benefits addressed above unduly narrows our understanding of what petitioners perceive as a successful campaign and, indeed, the benefits to tools that enable connections between citizens and their representatives. These connections with Parliament are a core benefit to a system that has institutional ties because it enables multiple 'touch points' with Parliament that can be called upon later.

4. Discussion: Understanding the connections between citizens and Parliament

In this article, I have presented findings from five case study e-petitions about two core, related, components of e-petition campaigns—the use of social media and relationship building with MPs—to understand the connective mechanisms through which citizen voices are brought to Parliament and the subsequent benefits of utilizing parliamentary e-petitions systems. I have outlined how petitioners employ sophisticated social media strategies to firstly bolster petition support and drive signatures but also to gain the support of MPs and other civil society actors who are able to support their wider political campaign. I now address each

of the contributions made, which have implications for both academics and for practitioners.

Firstly, by focussing on the perspectives of petitioners and the MPs who supported them, this article has presented novel contributions which depart from extant academic literature. Where previous research has recognized the necessity of formal linkages between citizens and Parliament as conducted by the Petitions Committee it has rarely been grounded in the experiences articulated by petitioners. By providing empirical evidence from petitioners about the parts of the process that are the most important and valuable to them, this article draws attention to the skewed perspective within the literature, which over-inflates the role of the Petitions Committee as the core connective mechanism between citizens and parliament.

As such, the findings of this research establish the primacy of petitioners as 'inducers of connectivity' (Mendonça 2016). I put forward that petitioners bypass the formal role of the Committee by seeking out relationships with MPs that are likely to benefit them beyond the e-petition itself. This is because petitioners placed higher value on these relationships than the procedural aspects of the petitioning process—the Government responses and petition debates—because of the other avenues towards the e-petition goal that could be explored as a result. In seeking out these relationships petitioners were in the first instance looking for support at petition debates, and secondly other mechanisms through which their wider petition campaign could be taken forward. Whilst MPs are institutional actors, the impetus comes from petitioners, who are non-institutional actors. As such, the findings of this research demonstrate that the connective mechanisms through which the voices of petitioners in the sphere of civil society are brought to the attention and consideration of parliamentarians within the formal sphere are largely driven by petitioners and via 'everyday' means, as demonstrated through petitioners' extensive campaign strategies that revolve around the use of social media.

Although the 'designed coupling' function (Hendriks 2016) of the Petitions Committee is important for the facilitation of the Government responses and e-petition debate it is not these designed-in powers that petitioners articulated as the most beneficial aspect to their wider petition campaign. Instead, it was the benefits forged through the relationships that had been built with MPs that enabled petitioners to seek out other parliamentary or non-parliamentary mechanisms that act as the next step in their wider political campaign. In making this distinction, this article responds to calls within the literature for further research into the role played by non-institutional actors as 'inducers of connectivity' (Mendonça 2016; see Boswell, Hendriks, and Ercan 2016; Matthews 2023) and suggests that empirical research with petitioners themselves is fundamental to understandings of parliamentary e-petitions are utilized and understood by citizens.

Furthermore, by demonstrating that the democratic goods resulting from parliamentary e-petitions exist beyond the e-petition itself, this article also demonstrates the presence of 'spillover effects' (see Matthews 2023) that petitioners articulated as core milestones in their campaign. Thinking beyond the petition process in isolation to wider political campaigning objectives, the e-petition acts as a useful vehicle through which future campaigns can be driven; for petitioners the e-petition was a door into Parliament that provided access to individuals who continued to be a significant source of support and resource even once signatures thresholds were met and formal petition mechanisms had been exhausted. These are so-called spillover effects because they exist beyond the procedural, designed in functions of the e-petitions system. In this respect, e-petitions add value to petitioners' wider campaigns because they enable the creation of a support network of MPs that may continue to exist after the petition campaign is over. This suggests the existence of intrinsic benefits to petitioning that exist beyond the procedural aspects of the system and has wider implications for our understanding of contemporary political campaigning in the UK.

Finally, these case studies show that 'everyday' political practices online are a core aspect of contemporary political campaigning; social media sites, in particular X, were the sites in which connections between civil society and formal representative institutions could be established, and from which individual relationships could develop. In doing so, 'everyday' political practices are important steps in a wider political campaign and enable the range of spillover effects outlined above. That is, e-petition campaigns further show that everyday political actions are part of an 'extended hybrid media system' (Highfield 2016: 15).

These contributions also have practical implications for MPs and practitioners who engage with the public. Previous research has underscored how MPs assume different dispositions depending on different circumstances (Crewe 2015; Geddes 2019, 2020). Attempts from the public to connect with MPs combined with a flexibility in MPs' roles means that e-petitions provide ample opportunities for connections between the public and their representatives. Going forward, practitioners might consider how e-petitions provide different avenues to connect with the public, and different avenues to explore (sometimes niche) topic areas that do not fall within normal day-to-day duties. The Petitions Committee and other practitioners may seek to explore how they can support petitioners further in their attempts to connect with other parliamentarians.

5. Concluding remarks

This article has made contributions to wider debates about the connective mechanisms between citizens and their representative institutions and demonstrates the potential for parliamentary e-petitions as a tool for democratic engagement

to 'add value' vis-a-vis other campaign mechanisms. It has shown how petitioners prioritize relationship building with individual MPs over the use of the Petitions Committee because it can open avenues for engagement that extend beyond the e-petition itself. It also puts forward that e-petitions add value to campaigns as a result, demonstrating that the 'success' of e-petitions is not limited to just policy change and that 'spillover effects' are also important outcomes to the process. In doing so the findings not only respond to calls for understanding non-institutional connective mechanisms, but also demonstrate the value of understanding the multiple means by which citizens are connected to their representatives.

I acknowledge that this research is somewhat limited by its focus on animal welfare e-petitions. The extent to which the experiences of these petitioners is reflective of other petitioners' experiences, such as those campaigning on healthcare, is beyond the scope of what I can reasonably conclude. For example, the extent to which the campaign strategies employed by animal welfare campaigners and the support they received is the case for all petitioners cannot be determined, and one may suspect that the nature of animal welfare campaigns is different to human focussed campaigns. With that said, however, the aim of the research was not to produce generalizable results but to understand the experiences of petitioners. Additionally, the focus on animal welfare e-petitions is warranted because there has been an increased parliamentary focus on animal welfare in recent Parliaments (see Chaney, Jones and Fevre 2022) and many of the MPs interviewed highlighted that concerns around animal welfare fill up their post bags. Despite this, animal welfare issues rarely feature in the Order Papers and so e-petitions provide a platform for these issues to be raised in Parliament. To capture a wider understanding of petitioners' experiences across topics, future research might evaluate the extent to which these findings are similar across a range of e-petition topics.

Nonetheless, the contributions of this article have important implications for understanding petitioning from the perspective of petitioners and those MPs who support them and provide a novel contribution to understanding how e-petition systems can connect citizens to their representatives through everyday political means. In doing so, however, this paper does also raise some questions about whose voice is heard. For example, are those more able to see the 'hidden value' of e-petitions, likely those already familiar with how parliament and policy works, more likely to derive the potential spillover benefits of using e-petitions as a tool? Therefore, are those most alienated by the political system also the most likely to be left disappointed? Finally, how sustainable is this approach to public engagement if 'success', however defined, is reliant on the will of elite gatekeepers, in this case, MPs? These questions are explorable from the wider data set from which this paper is drawn.

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