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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Understanding Petitioner Motivations, Campaign Activities and Perceptions of Success

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ABSTRACT

Petitioning parliament has seen a revival in popularity thanks to modern-day technology and social media. Over 10 years on from its inception in 2015, the UK Government and Parliament system in the United Kingdom has received tens of thousands of petitions signed by millions of people. Despite the popularity of e-petitions, little is understood about both the qualitative motivations of petitioners and the wider campaigning benefits that arise from using them in terms of wider democratic “goods” and policy outcomes. This article addresses this gap by asking why petitioners began their campaign in the first place, how they campaigned and what outcomes they achieved based upon nine case study e-petitions submitted in the 2019–2024 Parliament. In doing so it provides empirical knowledge about the strategies petitioners employ to influence policy making processes and where democratic value is “added” by using a system that has formal ties to the representative institution.

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摘要

由于现代科技和社交媒体的兴起，“向议会请愿”再次流行起来。自2015年推出以来，英国政府和议会系统在十多年间已收到数万份请愿书，这些请愿书由数百万人签署。尽管电子请愿广受欢迎，但人们对请愿者的动机以及使用电子请愿在更广泛的民主“产品”和政策结果方面所带来的益处知之甚少。本文旨在填补这一空白，通过分析2019–2024年议会期间提交的九份电子请愿案例，探讨请愿者最初发起请愿的原因、请愿方式以及最终取得的成果。本文旨在提供关于请愿者影响政策制定过程的策略以及通过与代表机构正式联系的系统如何“增加”民主价值的实证知识。

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RESUMEN

La presentación de peticiones al parlamento ha experimentado un resurgimiento gracias a la tecnología moderna y las redes sociales. Más de diez años después de su creación en 2015, el sistema parlamentario y gubernamental del Reino Unido ha recibido decenas de miles de peticiones firmadas por millones de personas. A pesar de la popularidad de las peticiones electrónicas, se sabe poco sobre las motivaciones cualitativas de quienes las presentan y los beneficios más amplios que se derivan de su uso en términos de bienestar democrático y resultados políticos. Este artículo aborda esta laguna analizando por qué los peticionarios iniciaron su campaña, cómo la llevaron a cabo y qué resultados obtuvieron, basándose en nueve casos de peticiones electrónicas presentadas en el Parlamento 2019–2024. De este modo, se aporta conocimiento empírico sobre las estrategias que emplean los peticionarios para influir en los procesos de formulación de políticas y sobre el valor democrático que se genera al utilizar un sistema con vínculos formales con la institución representativa.

1 | Introduction

Over the past few decades, scholars, politicians and practitioners have lamented a crisis of democracy in which citizens are apathetic, distrustful and disengaged from our democratic processes and institutions (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011; Papadopoulos 2013). Whilst public attitudes today certainly give credence to such concerns (see Duffy et al. 2023; Electoral Commission 2025), we have seen political institutions such as parliaments respond in numerous ways. From citizens' assemblies to referenda to e-petition platforms, there are now more mechanisms that might deepen popular participation, confidence in and satisfaction with our democratic institutions today than ever before (Smith 2009; Elstub and Escobar 2019). Distinct from non-institutionalized platforms such as Change.org or 38 Degrees, parliamentary e-petitions are formally embedded within a representative institution, provide signatories with a direct tie to the institution, and are typically designed to require formal action from the institution once certain conditions, such as signature thresholds, are met (Lindner and Riehm 2011; see also Matthews 2021).

So as opportunities for political participation have increased, so too has the community of scholars seeking to understand them. Literature on parliamentary e-petitions suggests that they are popular, with the UK system seeing vast engagement: as of the 2019 general election there had been 23 million unique signatures on the petition website (House of Commons Library 2020), and at the end of the 2019–2024 Parliament, 52,033 e-petitions had been submitted in that period (Petitions, UK Parliament and Government, n.d.). Previous studies have, therefore, sought to understand what role they play in democracy today (Leston-Bandeira 2019), how processes might impact outcomes (Bochel 2013, 2016; Carman 2010), who uses e-petitions systems in terms of demographics (Lee et al. 2014; Lindner and Riehm 2011), and how we might go about analyzing e-petition “success” (Wright 2016; Bochel 2020).

Indeed, parliamentary e-petitions are also a particularly interesting case of democratic participation to analyze because they are not altogether new. In the United Kingdom in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, petitioning was in its heyday; between 1780 and 1918, over one million petitions were sent to the House of Commons (Miller 2023), and petitioning was as much about the expression of participatory preferences as it was about procedure, amounting to a central pillar within a broader repertoire of collective action (Miller 2023; Tilly 1984). Today, e-petitions

represent the revitalization of this historic practice made possible by online technologies, and they play important democratic roles by providing opportunities for contemporary political participation. They are particularly interesting because they sit at the juncture of institutional responses to challenges of disengagement and trends for increasingly online, ad hoc political engagement, reflecting a new era for political engagement that takes place in an extended “hybrid media system” (Chadwick 2017; Highfield 2016).

This article is, therefore, concerned with the role played by e-petitions and the associated outcomes for petitioners in order to appraise the democratic “goods” that might be achieved, recognizing that e-petitions are just one example of new participatory mechanisms designed to bring the public back “in” to their representative institutions. Given their popularity, e-petitions have been identified as performing numerous functions. They link the public and parliament (Leston-Bandeira 2019; Rosenberger et al. 2022), perform executive scrutiny by enabling the expression and collection of the public's views and identify problems that might be otherwise unknown to policy makers (Hough 2012), act as a safety valve in which public dissatisfaction with policy decisions have an outlet in parliament (Leston-Bandeira 2019), and may democratize parliamentary processes (e.g., Bochel 2013; Carman 2014). The most comprehensive framework for analyzing these roles comes from Leston-Bandeira's (2019) analysis of the roles of e-petitions in the United Kingdom after the introduction of the joint Parliament and Government system in 2015. They identify a potential campaigning function of e-petitions: that they perform a mobilizing role around a specific cause for citizens to unite around, which may develop a shared sense of identity. However, empirical analysis of this function has been neglected in the literature in the years since, having not been systematically applied to studies of e-petitions since it was first introduced. Beyond their ability to mobilize, we, therefore, know very little about what benefits petitioners may glean from using e-petitions as part of a wider campaigning repertoire, which is compounded by a tendency within the literature to neglect e-petition outcomes outside of the formal system milestones: the government response and Westminster Hall debate.

The second but related focus of this article is on e-petition outcomes, because the functions performed by the system affect petitioner experiences and likely democratic outcomes. Some studies on parliamentary e-petitions implicitly consider petition “success”, for example, based upon quantitative measures

of success such as the number of signatures, but very few focus explicitly on outcomes and how they come about. Bochel (2020), for example, most recently focuses on outcomes based upon the “perspective of the system” (p. 237), underscoring the importance of the actions taken by petition committees in judging e-petition outcomes. Outside of Bochel’s study, the main analysis of e-petition success and outcomes in the United Kingdom comes from Wright’s (2016) analysis of the former Downing Street e-petition system, explained in the succeeding section. Outside of Wright’s analysis, however, the qualitative aspects of petitioner motivations and actions—that is, their campaigning strategies—and the associated outcomes or successes as perceived by petitioners are still a largely underdeveloped element of our understanding. As such, this article seeks to bring our understanding of the campaigning function of e-petitions up to date by focusing on the perceptions and experiences of petitioners who used the UK Government and Parliament joint system in the 2019–2024 Parliament in order to nuance future conversations about how we discuss and analyze e-petition outcomes and success, including how they may feed into wider policy making processes.

Drawing on 16 semi-structured interviews undertaken with e-petition creators and their wider campaigning teams, the analysis presented in this article finds that whilst petitioner motivations were initially targeted towards legislative change or capturing the attention of the Government through the e-petition milestones, their activities later amounted to a much broader campaign that encompassed various forms of policy-making influence from engaging with pressure groups or civil servants to celebrity advocacy. In this way, once the formal e-petition milestones were achieved—and often followed by disappointment—petitioners’ attention turned to what other outcomes their e-petition campaign might achieve, both in and outside of parliament. As such, the vast e-petition campaigning undertaken by petitioners amounts to much more than just mobilizing or reaching signature thresholds, instead contributing to a much wider repertoire of political participation, and with it, a range of possible outcomes.

By establishing the eminence of wider campaign outcomes that exist as a result of the initial e-petition campaign, this article makes a novel contribution about the ability of e-petition campaigns to affect change elsewhere, adding nuance to debates about what e-petitions are good for in terms of what they achieve and what likely democratic outcomes are. It underscores, like Leston-Bandeira (2019), that focusing purely on legislative outcomes fails to take into account the wider range of additional benefits that might arise from petitioning in terms of wider engagement with politics and policy making processes. By focusing on petitioners’ perceptions and subjective evaluations of their motivations and actions instead of quantitative measures like how many signatures they achieved, this article therefore adds nuance to analyses of what petitioners set out to achieve, the campaigning function of e-petitions identified by Leston-Bandeira (2019) in terms of wider political participation, and what likely outcomes are beyond the e-petition system in isolation. This is an important contribution because it highlights how e-petitions should not be seen as isolated, discrete activities, but rather as enabling broader democratic participation through which a range of touch points with wider policy making

processes can be achieved, in line with broader approaches that recognize the various routes towards parliamentary and policy influence (e.g., Richardson and Jordan 1979; Matthews and Thomas 2025; Russell and Gover 2017). Indeed, such an approach pushes back against claims that petitions are a form of “slacktivism”, suggesting instead that they can contribute to broader democratic outcomes.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section explores current understandings of e-petitions and outlines Leston-Bandeira’s (2019) analysis of the roles of e-petitions with particular focus on the campaigning function they identify. Particular focus is also placed upon Wright (2016) and Bochel’s (2020) analysis of e-petition outcomes and success, which to date are the most comprehensive analyses of e-petition outcomes in the United Kingdom. The article then outlines in brief the research methods taken before turning to the main body, which presents the research findings about the campaign motivations, strategies and outcomes of e-petition campaigns. Finally, this article concludes with a discussion about how these findings nuance our understanding of how parliamentary e-petitions might address perennial challenges of democratic decline, and how grounding analysis in the experiences, motivations and actions of petitioners is a necessary prerequisite for a nuanced understanding of the role of parliamentary e-petitions as a tool for contemporary political participation.

2 | The Campaigning Function and Understandings of e-Petition Outcomes and “Success”

The literature on parliamentary e-petition systems across the world tends to focus on the institutional design and processes of e-petition systems, considering, for example, the role of the legislative committees that are tasked with oversight of the system (Lindner and Riehm 2011; Bochel 2013, 2016). Institutional design and the processes that petitioners experience are shown to matter because they impact the extent to which the systems can influence policy making (Hough 2012), express the public’s voice (Bochel 2012), or show petitioners that their requests have been considered in ways that are procedurally fair (Carman 2010). Additionally, research has focused on the participatory potentials for e-petitions, for example, the extent to which e-petition systems can democratize participation, for example, at Westminster by feeding into parliamentary processes (Bochel 2013; Wright 2016).

In the UK Government and Parliament system, e-petitions work, in brief, as follows. When a member of the public submits an e-petition, it is moderated by the Petitions Committee, which checks if the e-petition meets the requirements: that it calls for a different action from another e-petition and that the action it calls for is the responsibility of the UK Government or the House of Commons. Once published, the e-petition is live on the website for 6 months, which means it is open to new signatures. During this time, an e-petition that reaches 10,000 signatures will receive a written response from the government. Once it reaches 100,000 signatures, the Petitions Committee will consider the e-petition for a debate in Westminster Hall. Westminster Hall debates are “general debates”—they do not feature divisions

(votes)—which allow MPs to raise local or national issues and receive a response from a government minister. Described by Sir George Young, Westminster Hall debates were intended to “give the House a greater ability to hold the Executive to account, rather than to push through more inadequately considered legislation” (Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons 1999, col. 87).

With the range of institutional designs in mind, numerous studies have sought to understand what role parliamentary e-petitions play in our democratic processes today as a democratic innovation which may achieve a range of democratic “goods”. By “goods”, I refer to outcomes which increase and deepen citizen participation in political decision making (Smith 2009), and which may, therefore, exist outside of the responses and debates that make up the formal e-petitions processes in the UK.

The role highlighted most often is e-petitions’ ability to influence policy-making decisions at various stages of the policy life-cycle, a function that is often implicit in studies if not directly analyzed (examples include Leston-Bandeira and Tibúrcio 2012; Hough 2012; Escher and Riehm 2017). Leston-Bandeira’s (2019) research is the first, and still the only, study which explicitly seeks to identify the role played by the House of Commons e-petition system in the United Kingdom. Whilst other scholars acknowledge the role e-petitions play, Leston-Bandeira’s (2019) study provides a comprehensive analysis of the following four roles of e-petitions:

- Linkage between the concerns of the public and the work of parliament.
- Policy, for example, review of policy implementation or leading to policy change.
- Scrutiny by providing outlets for citizens to raise issues from the bottom up.
- Campaigning in terms of mobilization around an issue.

Linkage, scrutiny and policy are functions of petitions that have been empirically studied elsewhere in the United Kingdom and in European countries. In terms of linkage, Blumenau’s (2021) study of online activism and dyadic representation finds that e-democracy initiatives like e-petitions can significantly enhance the representational ties between the public and policymakers, and Bochel (2013) suggests that e-petitions provide a mechanism for the public to express their views to their elected representatives. In the German Bundestag, Hough (2012) identifies e-petitions as acting as a parliamentary “seismograph” which enables the public to have some hand in influencing the parliamentary agenda and affecting policy change. Finally, drawing on e-petitions in local government, Bochel and Bochel (2017) identify legislative committees like the Petitions Committee as potentially performing a scrutiny role in their interactions with the Government.

Where we still lack empirical knowledge of the role played by parliamentary e-petitions is largely in terms of the campaigning function identified by Leston-Bandeira (2019). Leston-Bandeira focuses primarily on campaigning in terms of mobilization: how citizens might unite around a specific cause and how a group’s

identity might be strengthened as a result. Additionally, they show how e-petitions enable the dissemination of a specific campaign to the wider public or policy makers, as shown through the campaigning activities of April Jones’s family, who used an e-petition to campaign for sex offenders to remain on the sex offender register for life following April’s murder. However, the campaigning function is arguably the least developed aspect of Leston-Bandeira’s framework and has been the focus of only a few studies. For example, the mobilizing role of petitioning is supported by Rosenberger et al.’s (2022) analysis of a range of formalized and non-formalized e-petition systems in Austria. They find that e-petitions fuel public debate, disseminate claims and both build alliances and polarize the public. In the context of EU member states’ e-petition systems, Böhle and Riehm (2013) identify mobilization as a potential role by generating greater public attention on the issue. In this way, much of the focus of the campaigning role of parliamentary e-petition systems is placed on how they may provide citizens with opportunities to coalesce around an issue and garner public support through, for example, large numbers of signatures. Whilst undoubtedly useful and largely echoing the literature on petitioning via non-institutional platforms as providing opportunities for groups to draw attention to specific issues or grievances (Harris 2005) and helping social movements to indicate the breadth and strength of their cause (della Porta and Diani 2009), this narrow focus on the campaigning function in terms of mobilization means that our understanding of more tangible campaign outcomes, such as how parliamentary e-petitions fit within wider campaign repertoires (Tilly 1984; McAdam et al. 2004) is underdeveloped.

Indeed, in the United Kingdom context, such an emphasis on mobilizing is particularly puzzling because the House of Commons system does not enable petitioners to access signatories’ data or contact details, which means that mobilizing is, in fact, largely very difficult to achieve solely through the e-petition platform. To mobilize, petitioners must build their networks by using social media platforms, which do enable supporters to identify themselves, as highlighted in the campaign social media strategies of contemporary animal welfare petitioners (Martin 2026). Additionally, much of the literature identified above analyzes e-petitions as discrete units of analysis, largely neglecting to consider the democratic potential of the systems outside of the parliamentary systems in which they sit, shown for example by the overwhelming focus on the outcomes of the government responses and Westminster Hall debates. In this way, we lack empirical knowledge about how petitioners in the United Kingdom might use parliamentary e-petitions as part of a wider repertoire of action that extends beyond just parliamentary influence, particularly in the context of increased political participation through social media or broader policy influence. Resultantly, we also therefore lack knowledge about broader democratic outcomes that may arise from petitioning.

An additional, related element of the e-petitioning literature that is largely underdeveloped is the outcomes of petitioning, particularly in terms of petitioners’ definitions of “success”. And yet, questions about whether petition systems achieve anything are often asked within the literature (see, e.g., Leston-Bandeira 2019). Whilst some of the above studies arguably focus on outcomes when analyzing the policy-making potential of e-petitions, or the number of users, this narrow

focus means that we understand very little about how successful petitions are, thereby further contributing to our lack of understanding about what petitions might achieve outside of parliament. Bochel's (2020) analysis of petition outcomes from the "perspective of the system" (p. 237) marks an important deviation from this trend by underscoring the importance of the actions taken by petition committees in judging e-petition success. Their approach enables e-petitions to be judged based upon what they achieve as they progress through various formal milestones rather than based upon petitioners' judgments.

Whilst useful in demonstrating that success is a continuum in which actions by the committee can lead to a variety of outcomes for petitioners, the approach of Wright (2016) in their study of the prior Downing Street petitions system underscores that whilst externally defined measures of success do matter (particularly for the internal running of the system) it is ultimately individual perceptions of success that matter to those using the system. The Downing Street system, first set up in 2006 and then redesigned under the Coalition government in 2011, was similar to the current UK Government and Parliament system but was marred by confusion around ownership and responsibility, a "constitutional no-man's land" in which it was "neither a fully parliamentary nor a government system" (Fox 2012, 6), and where there were no standardized processes for e-petitions which reached the debate threshold or which received official responses. Wright finds that success is broadly conceived and that people cited a wide range of benefits to petitioning that were beyond just traditional measures such as number of signatures, but that outcomes may have been undermined by the issues with official replies. Some examples include increasing campaign credibility, fulfilling a sense of civic duty and helping to gain supporters. Indeed, to date, Wright's study is the only study on outcomes which acknowledges petition outcomes beyond procedural outcomes, noting how respondents also defined success in terms of wider campaign impact. With this in mind, this article seeks to build upon the foundations set out by Wright's (2016) focus on perceptions, Leston-Bandeira's (2019) campaigning function and Bochel's (2020) focus on outcomes by answering the following question about the current UK Government and Parliament system, in order to appraise petitioning as a tool for contemporary democratic participation and its potential to realize a range of democratic "goods".

What else does the campaigning function entail, and do outcomes extend beyond the e-petition system?

This article addresses this question by grounding the analysis in the experiences of petitioners to bring together a focus on the campaigning function of e-petitioning with a discussion of what "success" might look like beyond the formal procedures of the e-petition system. It seeks to establish what benefits petitioners may glean from campaigning through parliamentary e-petitions in the hopes that it widens future discussions of success to consider the experiences and reflections of petitioners themselves. In this way, this article builds upon the findings of Leston-Bandeira (2019), Wright (2016) and the more recent findings of Martin (2026), which highlight how a range of "spillover effects"—outcomes beyond the formal e-petition milestones—may arise in the duration of an e-petition campaign.

3 | Methodology

This research was conducted over 9 months, beginning in the summer of 2023 and concluding in early 2024. Some of the broader research findings and the methodological approach taken, as outlined below, have been published elsewhere (see Martin 2026). This paper draws upon the analysis of nine e-petitions submitted in the 2019–2024 Parliament and is based upon 16 semi-structured interviews with e-petition creators and the campaigners who supported them. Campaigners who supported petitioners were included in interviews because, whilst only one person can submit an e-petition through the website, e-petition campaigns are rarely undertaken alone, and it was important to include petitioners' wider network of support in order to understand the wider campaigning potential of e-petitioning. Qualitative documentary analysis of petitioners' campaign material, social media posts and parliamentary documents pertaining to individual e-petitions was also analyzed in order to supplement interview data.

Petitioners were chosen for inclusion in this research based upon the following selection criteria. Firstly, that their e-petition had reached 10,000 signatures and were submitted in the 2019–2024 parliament, and that creators were publicly identified, most often through their social media presence, in order to contact them. The threshold of 10,000 signatures was taken because multiple studies indicate that signatories are an important indicator of salience (Jungherr and Jürgens 2010; Lindner and Riehm 2011) and it is at this number of signatures where the government will respond to the e-petition. It is, therefore, the point at which there are formal guarantees that an e-petition will receive the attention of policy makers and its ability to reach 10,000 signatures suggests that there has been some degree of successful campaigning by the creator. So, whilst it does mean that e-petitions that failed to reach this threshold were not included in this research, this research's focus on deepening our understanding of the campaigning function of e-petitions necessitates a cut off where such activities have been likely. Future research may wish to explore what makes an e-petition "take off" to reach this threshold in the first place.

786 e-petitions had reached this threshold. To further narrow down, these e-petitions were categorized into topic areas; for example, "health", "education" or "transport", and the most popular topic was considered for the next stage. This was "animal welfare" ($n=86$). Within the animal welfare subcategory, the most popular subtopics were "pets and kept animals" ($n=19$) and "wildlife conservation" ($n=19$). Narrowing down based upon topic frequency ensured that a meaningful comparison could be made across the case studies; at each stage of the process, I retained the greatest possible breadth of e-petition activities to select from, in line with the aims of this research.

The final state of the process was as follows. From the 38 e-petitions remaining, priority was given to petitions where a range of actions had or had not been taken by the Petitions Committee, in line with Bochel's (2020) framework of outcomes, and where petitioners engaged in a wide range of campaign practices online. This was, like the minimum requirement of 10,000 signatures, to ensure that there was sufficient material

to analyze the campaign process and outcomes of e-petitions in line with the literature that underscores the importance of a range of parliamentary and non-parliamentary action in policy influence (e.g., Matthews and Thomas 2025). This resulted in a final number of nine case studies reflecting a range of activities within and outside of parliament and the prior experience and knowledge of petitioning or of engaging with parliament varied amongst the 16 interviewees.

A qualitative approach allowed the research to analyze the motivations and perceptions of petitioners in their own words and based upon their own reflections (Rubin and Rubin 2004; Furlong and Marsh 2010), which, as above, is an empirical analysis hitherto underdeveloped within the literature on UK Government and Parliament e-petition outcomes which has tended to focus on quantitative measures of the system. Interview questions sought to uncover the reasons why petitioners chose to use the UK Parliament's e-petition system, the activities they undertook and the various outcomes they achieved throughout their e-petition (and wider) campaign to capture a wide understanding of what the petitioning process looked like for petitioners, and how they felt about it. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed in NVivo using an open coding process (Charmaz 2014) in which codes were added, taken away, and refined into themes over three stages of analysis. The themes identified across the case study e-petitions include motivations for involvement, petitioner experience of parliament and petitioning, online and offline campaign strategies and attitudes towards their experience, which map broadly onto the structure of this article. All interviewees were granted anonymity, which means that e-petition titles, content, or specific details about their campaign are necessarily omitted from analysis.

4 | What Motivates Petitioners?

Despite diverse campaigning backgrounds, differing levels of experience and imbalances in access to resources, petitioners were largely analogous in their motivations for petitioning. Across the campaigns studied, there were two main motivations for creating e-petitions, which are related: bringing an issue to the attention of the Government and seeing a change in legislation.

All petitioners expressed an understanding of the benefit of using the parliamentary petition platform over a non-institutional one such as Change.org. They noted how the parliamentary system enabled a direct tie to the Government in the form of the government's response to their petition once they achieved 10,000 signatures. This enabled petitioners to keep the government abreast of their issue, suggesting, for example, that "pestering them all the time" (Interview, Petitioner 2) would mean the government has to go away and think about the issue, even if it chooses not to act. Others expressed a desire to be heard, noting that a wide public display of support for an issue would mean the Government could not simply ignore them, believing that tens or hundreds of thousands of signatures would highlight the extent of public support or outcry for an issue. This motivation is largely in keeping with Leston-Bandeira's (2019) policy function, in which there is a "drip drip process identifying problems to solve" (p. 8) and from which the Government may choose to act. Interestingly, spotlighting issues and influencing policy debate

is an element of wider parliamentary influence on Government, for example from select committees, that has been highlighted elsewhere (see Benton and Russell 2013), suggesting that the agenda setting ability of e-petitions may mean that they are also positioned to feed into wider policymaking influence.

Ultimately, though, the motivation to keep the issue on the Government's agenda was tied to a much broader, much more ambitious motivation: legislative change. When petitioners expressed agenda-setting as a motivation, it was usually enmeshed in a wider hope that the government noticing the e-petition would result in them taking action on the issue. One petition, for example was calling for the "Government to introduce regulation of all websites where [pets] are sold" (Petitioner 5's e-petition page), and another petitioner described how "this petition is a nudge in the side [of the Government] to make them address our proposal" (Petitioner 16's campaign website). The majority of petitioners hoped that action would be taken on their e-petition in the immediate term and were often disappointed when they did not achieve this goal. This was because the government response is intended to be just that: a response to the petition's request, and the Westminster Hall debate is intended as a venue for the issue to be debated in Parliament and as a result does not end in a division. Two petitioners working together, upset that their Westminster Hall debate had not changed the minister's position, described the process as "fake democracy [...] incredibly disrespectful" (Interview, Petitioner 1) and "deplorable [...], a slap in the face of democracy and to the people who make petitions" (Interview, Petitioner 2). Petitioners who had previous experience of petitioning or experience of engaging with Parliament more generally were more pragmatic, noting, for example, that their e-petition was intended to get them on the "radar", and not necessarily achieve legislative change because they already had relationships in government that they would utilize to achieve their goals instead of the e-petition (Interview, Petitioner 11). In this way, it was not always the case that petitioners expected the government to change position or pursue the change that petitioners wanted, but Petitioner 11 was an exception to this general expectation. Much more frequently, petitioners wanted to see their end goal achieved:

My hope is that the law would change, and I was hoping that it would change a lot quicker than it has. It hasn't yet.

(Interview, Petitioner 10)

However, as noted by Bochel (2020), success is a continuum, and the experiences of these case study petitioners suggest that this is true also of their motivations and expectations. When asked in interviews if their motivations changed over the course of their campaign or over the course of numerous e-petitions, petitioners explained how they had undergone a "learning curve" in which priorities shifted away from just legislative outcomes to capture a much broader range of possibilities. So, whilst initial reactions to the outcomes of the formal e-petition milestones may have been negative, general reflections of the experience as a whole were less so. Some expressed that they had been naive at the beginning of their e-petition campaign, and it was only through this initial disappointment that they learnt an e-petition

campaign encompasses much more, including, for example, the agenda-setting abilities of e-petitions identified above.

I was so naive at the beginning. I thought just because you have 100,000 [signatures], it has to go, it has to win. And we presented it to Number Ten in the morning, and then we took all the photos. And I remember walking to the [House of] Commons thinking, we've got this because it's so obvious. And we lost. And it was a real kick in the teeth [...] then I learnt that when you get to 100,000, it is just the beginning of a much larger campaign.

(Interview, Petitioner 9)

The learning curve was explained as influencing petitioners' perceptions and expectations of what the e-petition system could achieve. As a result, when reflecting on their experiences retrospectively in interviews, petitioners were keen to emphasize that they had learnt by doing, and that additional benefits weren't necessarily something they were attuned to at the beginning.

But knowing from experience that they were unlikely to achieve legislative change through the petition, then meant that their efforts went into other avenues as their campaign progressed. So, what were these broader avenues, and what is the "larger campaign" identified by Petitioner 9 that guided their subsequent activities?

5 | A Broader View: Campaigning, Networks and Outcomes

Because of the initial goal to achieve legislative change through the process, petitioners' first campaign strategy was usually to reach these signature thresholds so that the government response could be received (at 10,000 signatures) and a parliamentary debate at Westminster Hall would take place (at 100,000 signatures). Whilst, as above, most petitioners were disparaging that the government responses were unhelpful or "fobbed them off" (Interview, Petitioner 7), the government response was nonetheless also indicated by petitioners to be useful in other ways. For example, the response acted as a gauge of the government's current position, which was particularly useful in the context of the 2019–2024 Parliament which saw three prime ministers, each with varying priorities on the case study policy areas. For petitioners with a history of campaigning on the petition topic, the government response also allowed them to determine government priorities over time, explain this to supporters, establish if their "agenda setting" goals had been successful and plan next steps (Interview, Petitioner 11). In terms of the second milestone, the debate, across the case studies, petitioners were hopeful that the Westminster Hall debate would encourage both government and opposition to think meaningfully about their e-petition. But, because Westminster Hall debates do not include votable motions, petitioners were often disappointed by a lack of commitment to action and by also poor attendance. Petitioners lamented that the minister's contribution to the debate was to do little more than read out the government response already

received or that not enough MPs attended for a "proper debate" to take place (Interview, Petitioner 1).

How can you have a debate when the minister has already decided beforehand which way they are going? That is like having the judge turn up to a hearing saying Oh yeah, this person's definitely innocent or this person is definitely guilty without reviewing any evidence. It's not good because if nothing else, you've wasted all that taxpayers' money to get all these different MPs to come to a debate, and they're not even listening to them. What sort of process is that?

(Interview, Petitioner 2).

Whilst petitioners' attempts to achieve these thresholds are interesting, in recognizing that petitioners are unlikely to achieve their e-petition aims through these thresholds alone (see Wright 2016) and that petitioners find the outcomes disappointing, the additional campaigning activities that petitioners undertook in relation to their campaign are altogether more interesting. Indeed, the major finding of this research is that e-petition campaigns amounted to much more than just trying to achieve signature milestones, and we will come to see how the "successes" that petitioners achieved were largely in terms of other parliamentary or extra-parliamentary outcomes. This finding echoes that of Karpf (2010) in recognizing that the e-petition "is one piece of a broader campaign to leverage organizational resources into power to affect [decision makers]" (p. 32) and by bringing in this wider focus, we are able to see how success is much more broadly conceived than petitioners' reflections on the formal milestones suggest.

Petitioners often spoke gratefully about the *wider* benefits that arose from their attempts to reach signature thresholds. These are so-called "spillover effects" (Matthews 2023; see also Martin 2026) which are outcomes that arose because of petitioners' attempts to collect signatures that were not direct consequences of reaching the signature thresholds. Examples are listed below and discussed in more depth, but they were achieved because the work put into getting the campaign "out there" meant that as signature numbers ticked upwards, petitioners were meanwhile capturing the attention of a range of people who could help them in other ways. These were usually other campaigners in that area, organizations or charities with shared interests, but also sometimes celebrity voices or politicians with whom petitioners could enter "strategic collaborations" that would give "as much weight behind [petitioners] as possible to succeed" (Interview, Petitioner 1). These connections were usually brought about via extensive social media campaigns on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook in which petitioners built up vast communities of support, an element of contemporary e-petition campaigning that has been explored elsewhere (see Martin 2026; Matthews 2023; Asher et al. 2019). Many of the social media posts featured in the documentary analysis, for example, received thousands of "impressions" and were "retweeted" or shared by supporters. One post shared by a celebrity received 3.8k reposts and 12k likes on X.

The inclusion of these additional voices meant that the priorities of petitioners' campaigns shifted to encompass a much wider set of objectives beyond just achieving the petition signature thresholds; focus was no longer just about getting a debate at Westminster but it was also about drawing upon these networks to achieve other outcomes or forms of policy influence, which one petitioner described as "endless possibilities" (Interview, Petitioner 6). Before discussing some of these in greater detail below, a list of commonly achieved wider campaign outcomes includes:

- The exploration of other parliamentary avenues such as Private Members Bills.
- Conversations with civil servants or lobbyists who were already connected to the government.
- Additional public awareness campaigns with national charities.
- Changes to professional practice (e.g., amendments to professional Codes of Conduct).
- Media publicity.

Above all else, wider petition networks opened petitioners up to a range of additional tangible benefits. As a non-exhaustive list, examples include access to wider social media networks (Interviews, Petitioners 9 and 10), access to more experienced campaigners' knowledge and networks (Interviews, Petitioners 1, 3, 4 and 14), the skills of a range of professionals including content creators (Interview, Petitioner 2), lawyers and policy advisers (Interviews, Petitioner 9 and 16), monetary funds (Interview, Petitioner 1), and email databases (Interview, Petitioner 10). For example, two petitioners had begun their campaign alone, having had no prior experience of petitioning or of engaging with Parliament, but through social media had built up a coalition of support which came to include other, more experienced campaigners and organizations. Having done so, one petitioner relied on the status of a large charity that had agreed to support them to provide legitimacy to the petition's ask of the Government. Another used a small amount of money given by the charity to fund some social media adverts to boost their e-petition's publicity and sought the charity's advice about which next steps to pursue. In this way, wider campaign benefits arose for all petitioners from having a wider network they could tap into for support, largely in terms of the following activities.

The additional campaign activities that had the greatest impact for petitioners were the pursuit of other parliamentary mechanisms beyond just e-petition milestones, for example, Private Members' Bills, oral or written questions, Early Day Motions, Opposition Day debates or advocacy in All-Party Parliamentary Groups. Whilst using social media to build their number of signatures, petitioners were simultaneously creating a vast, public campaign that could capture the attention of a range of stakeholders. The visible success of a campaign that had, for example, been featured on daytime television or had been shared by a high-profile celebrity was one that created "a fear of missing out" in which people like politicians are "sucked in" (Interview, Petitioner 9). With one or two willing MPs on board with their e-petition campaigns, this additional

range of avenues within parliament opened up. Three petitions were later put forward as Private Member's Bills, one was developed into an amendment for a Bill before parliament, and the policy change put forward by one e-petition was featured in a government policy paper. The benefits of tapping into a wider parliamentary ecosystem are established elsewhere as important (e.g., Martin 2026) and whilst much of the literature on e-petitioning has already established its potential to influence the policy-making process in a range of ways (e.g., Hough 2012), this finding is nonetheless interesting because it demonstrates how wider e-petition campaigns continued on long after the formal e-petition process was over. However, this wasn't the only additional campaign strategy employed by petitioners, who also recognized that benefits arise from exploring other, non-parliamentary avenues towards their e-petition goals.

Whilst petitioners prioritized other parliamentary avenues towards legislative change in their wider campaign, they nonetheless also recognized the value of tapping into wider political processes beyond just parliamentary processes. Petitioners were grateful for opportunities to engage with civil servants in relevant departments because it meant they could explore other ways for their e-petition goal to work its way into government policy. Petitioners 5 and 8, for example, expended much of their campaign's energy on hosting meetings with various parts of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Additionally, petitioners sought out opportunities to meet "someone who knows someone" (Interview, Petitioner 6) because it meant that they could tap into wider systems of influence, for example, through wider pressure group activity. This finding is largely in keeping with the well-established literature on policy communities, which draws our attention to how individuals or groups may come together to influence policy decisions outside of typical parliamentary channels (Richardson and Jordan 1979), for example through campaigners' mobilization of NGOs and businesses (Nisbett et al. 2025) or All Party Parliamentary Groups which are often funded by pressure groups (Matthews and Thomas 2025). For this reason, petitioners were also grateful for opportunities to work with larger charities or organizations who not only had larger supporter bases—"I had to use [charity's] email list because I didn't know anyone" (Interview, Petitioner 10)—but who also had connections in the Westminster bubble and could facilitate petitioners' meeting with relevant people or bodies. For example, one petition campaign, as a result of the connections brought through the support of a charity, was able to work with a professional body to change the sectors' code of conduct, an outcome "as good as" (Interview, Petitioners 3 and 4) the legislative change they had sought at the very beginning of their e-petition campaign.

Petitioners also placed value in their petitions as raising public awareness for an issue, a function of petitioning that is widely established in the literature (e.g., Böhle and Riehm 2013) and which relates to the mobilizing abilities of e-petitions identified by Leston-Bandeira (2019). Petitioners articulated that public awareness is largely what enabled them to make the connections and pursue the additional outcomes identified above, but also because a large scale of support enables long-term pressure on policymakers. They noted how, by having a vast supporter base

that includes ordinary members of the public, charities, celebrities and politicians, the petition has a level of credibility that is hard to ignore entirely, especially if they can demonstrate that they have taken action in other ways beyond the e-petition. The challenge for petitioners in this case is maintaining this credibility over time, and many petitioners mentioned in interviews that they were serial petitioners¹ because it shows that the campaign was not a whim, that their level of support is not a fluke, and that the issue is in the public's interest. In this way, the e-petition campaigns featured in this research acted as a centralizing force from which a range of activities could occur.

I was like the one woman show, but like the whole point is that I managed to use resources, willing resources. I was like the sun and they kind of orbited around me.

(Interview, Petitioner 1)

6 | Definitions of Success

Considering the *wider* e-petition campaigns, we see how petitioners were able to achieve a range of outcomes beyond those of the formal e-petition milestones. Success is, therefore, nuanced and defined by petitioners in multiple ways that cut across the petitioning process into various forms of policy making influence. Whilst petitioners were disparaging about the outcomes of the formal processes, they identified additional benefits—small, incremental successes—that progressed their overarching campaign through the additional participation methods outlined above. It may seem contradictory to desire legislative change and be satisfied with a sector-level change or a meeting with civil servants, but petitioners were pragmatic in their reflections and noted how one step forward, even if not the ultimate outcome, was a good outcome, nonetheless, suggesting that the democratic goods that can be achieved from petitioning are broad. Whilst recognizing that these outcomes furthered their larger campaign, we have seen how petitioners were also scathing about their experiences with the government response and Westminster Hall debate. As a result, petitioners held contradictory feelings towards the petitioning process simultaneously, highlighted for example by one petitioner who stated “if you were to ask me how I feel about e-petitions, I hate them. I think they take over your life, basically. And for what? For what?” (Interview, Petitioner 15), but who has gone on to create other e-petitions and campaign extensively with the support of their wider (celebrity) network since this research concluded. For this reason, success should be considered as complex and largely dependent on the range of outcomes experienced by the petitioner.

In this way, the findings of this research underscore that the campaigning function is broader than that of just mobilization, and further underscores that the role of petitioning should not be seen narrowly in terms of procedural outcomes or (lack of) policy change. Instead, the findings highlight how the campaigning function of e-petitions includes the creation and utilization of a support network of bilateral relationships that continue to exist far beyond the e-petition milestones; the relationships built as a result of e-petition processes have tangible benefits to petitioners

even after the formal processes and procedures of the e-petition system have been exhausted. In this way, by taking a wider definition of success that extends beyond just the actions of the Petitions Committee or the procedural processes of the petitions system and considers wider democratic outcomes, we see how the campaigns of petitioners are far from isolated activities targeting only e-petition signature thresholds, and that e-petitions enable vast political participation beyond just parliament. This matters because it highlights how petitioning is not necessarily an isolated activity removed from wider participation, but that it is an avenue from which campaigners can tap into a wide range of democratic outcomes.

It is, nonetheless, important to acknowledge that whilst petitioners did reflect upon success in this broad way as encompassing all of these other achievements, their reflections were often entwined with disappointment that their Westminster Hall debate had not achieved anything because this is what had motivated them at the outset. Such reflections were also complicated by a feeling that the workload to achieve these outcomes was intense; petitioners highlighted how “it got so overwhelming and detrimental [to my health]” (Petitioner 4) and how petitioning was “taxing” (Interview, Petitioner 7), something that “you lose a lot of your life to” (Interview, Petitioner 10) and that “took over everything” (Petitioner 3). Success is therefore complex, and petitioners' views towards petitioning are also likely to encompass positive and negative emotions, often at the same time. Indeed, this complicated issue of expectations is a perennial issue for the Petitions Committee, who must deal with challenges about setting realistic expectations whilst not dissuading potential petitioners from engaging, an issue which has been a recurring theme within the e-petitions literature (see, for example, Matthews 2021; Leston-Bandeira 2019; Wright 2016; Carman 2010).

This leaves us with a particular challenge about how we discuss e-petition success as scholars, particularly in terms of the broader democratic “goods” that may be achieved. I have argued that it is necessary to focus on success beyond just procedural outcomes because doing so illuminates additional elements of petitioning that are hidden by a focus on just what the milestones might achieve for petitioners. On the one hand, this is important because it foregrounds the additional roles of petitioning and spotlights the additional contours of the campaigning function as contributing to a much wider repertoire of democratic participation. But on the other hand, we equally need to acknowledge that the system may be doing more harm than good when it comes to what the formal milestones can achieve in reality. There is a risk that a system set up to ameliorate challenges of apathy and disillusionment may actively contribute to it if the spillover benefits from petitioning are not clear to petitioners from the outset, and if this is not something that motivates petitioners in the first place, particularly given the additional workload that is necessary for campaigning beyond the initial e-petition milestones. As researchers, we, together with the practitioners who deal with the day-to-day interactions of users, ought to highlight what additional benefits can arise from the system—that the campaigning abilities of e-petitions are vast and extend far beyond just signature thresholds—so that petitioners take this wider perspective from the outset.

7 | Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of the article, I posed the following question: What else does the campaigning function entail, and do outcomes extend beyond the e-petition system? This was in order to understand broader policy outcomes of petitioning as a popular tool for democratic participation, building on the previous work of Wright (2016), Leston-Bandeira (2019) and Bochel (2020).

From the findings presented, we see how the campaigning function extends beyond the ability of petitions to mobilize the public around a cause. Because the process of reaching the two signature thresholds has spillover benefits in terms of wider connections brought, petitioners are imbued with access to a much wider ecosystem of political participation that can, in small and slow ways, influence wider parliamentary and policy-making processes and agendas. Whilst these activities exist beyond the formal aspects and milestones of the petition system, they exist because of it, which is an intrinsic benefit of utilizing a petition system tied to Parliament rather than a non-institutionalized one. In this way, this article underscores that petitioning is not a discrete or isolated activity and that e-petitions can be said to “add value” to campaigners because they open up doors for other parliamentary or non-parliamentary forms of action. For future research, this additional element of the campaigning function could be referred to as “e-petition spillover effects”, in keeping with previous use of this term (see Matthews 2023; Martin 2026).

In answering this question, this article builds upon the analysis of Leston-Bandeira (2019) by developing a more comprehensive understanding of the campaigning role of e-petitions outside of their ability to mobilize the public around an issue, recognizing the broader democratic benefits that arise from using e-petitions as a tool for participation. It took the approach of Wright (2016) by focusing on e-petition outcomes beyond traditional measures, recognizing that petitioners have a nuanced approach to success by analyzing outcomes in terms of petitioner experiences and motivations. In doing so, it updates our empirical understanding by focusing on the Downing Street system's successor, the UK Government and Parliament system introduced in 2015.

In terms of “success”, by establishing petitioner's perceptions and their activities in the context of their initial motivations when using the UK Government and Parliament system, this article adds to our understanding that campaign activities are vast, amounting to a wider repertoire of political participation, and that success is, therefore, not a stagnant measure confined solely to e-petition processes. Whilst by typical measures that focus on whether petitioners have reached signature thresholds all of the case study petitioners were successful, once we broaden our analysis of outcomes to include petitioners' subjective motivations and analysis of the process, we see that success is much less clear-cut. Rather, we see how “success” for petitioners encompasses a much broader set of actions that are guided by an ultimate goal of legislative change, but we also see—in somewhat contradiction— that petitioners were also happy to pursue a range of other parliamentary and non-parliamentary mechanisms with broader policy influence in mind. Broadening our analysis to include the judgment of petitioners illuminates *why* people may not feel satisfied with the formal e-petitions process and gives additional context into why they continue to campaign

in other ways after the signature milestones are achieved. By drawing our attention to the nuance of campaign activities, this article responds directly to Wright's (2016) call for future research to “take account of the more nuanced understanding of the impact of [e-petition] participation” (p. 855). Importantly, this research grounds the voices of petitioners and campaigners themselves to define success, rather than imposing a vision of success upon the creators based on external measures.

In summary, by considering the wider context of political apathy and disengagement, this research adds necessary nuance to understandings of contemporary democratic participation, adding also to established findings about the role of parliamentary e-petitions as an ongoing opportunity for political participation. On a larger scale, it shows how e-petitions enable and feature in modern repertoires of political action, which are vast and tap into a range of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary processes. This is an important element of petitioning that could become part of petitioners' motivations, which may, in turn, combat ongoing issues of disappointment with the system. Future research that recognizes the existence of these broader outcomes would contribute to this shift in narrative about what e-petitions can achieve; in moving away from an approach which views parliamentary e-petitions in narrow or limited terms, the participatory potentials of petitioning and the democratic outcomes that can be achieved are evident, but this requires a reframing on the part of scholars and practitioners alike.

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Ethics Statement

The research received ethical approval from the Department of Politics and International Relations on 19/01/2023 (Reference number: 050771).

Consent

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The participants of this research gave consent for their data to be included in publications anonymously which means that the full interview transcripts cannot be shared as they contain identifying information. All quotations included within the manuscript are anonymised.

Endnotes

¹ Participants were selected to take part in this research based upon one e-petition identified in the case selection process. However, a

number of petitioners had created several e-petitions, some over different Parliaments, and these were often mentioned in interviews providing interesting additional insights into the nature of e-petition campaigns. So, whilst additional e-petitions were not the topic of analysis, when they were mentioned I did not dissuade participants from discussing them.

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