



**Who speaks and who listens? Parliamentary e-petitions
and the connections between campaigners and the UK
Parliament**

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Abstract

In the context of declining public faith in democracy and rising democratic disengagement, this thesis explores how the UK Government and Parliament e-petition system is being used by members of the public to engage with parliament and how those in parliament come to listen back. Whilst the literature on parliamentary e-petition systems across the world is extensive, it has been largely concerned with the design and procedures of the systems, neglecting to consider how citizens engage with, discuss and disseminate their e-petitions, how they come to be used in wider campaigning objectives and how a range of intermediaries may bring the voices of the public to the ears of policy makers. Through qualitative document analysis and semi-structured interviews with petitioners and parliamentary actors, this thesis explores the campaign processes, strategies and experiences of petitioners and the parliamentary actors who supported them across a total of nine different animal welfare e-petitions submitted in the 2019-2024 Parliament. It underscores the everyday online practices undertaken by petitioners as central to the process, explores the role of well-known voices such as celebrities, and emphasises that the benefits that arise from the use of parliamentary e-petitions should be viewed widely in terms of the doors that are opened into wider parliamentary networks and processes. In doing so, this thesis makes important original contributions to the academic community, but also to petitioners and practitioners about how new participatory tools like e-petitions can amount to a much wider repertoire of democratic action.

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Declaration

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Context

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 in liberal democracies is decreasing and in which disengagement 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[ti]c institutions and disillusioned about how democratic processes function” (Dalton, 2004: 1). Comparative research suggests that democratic dissatisfaction is at an all-time high (Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020) and recent analysis suggests that across 12 advanced liberal democracies 64% of respondents are dissatisfied with democracy, and 74% think that elected officials do not care about what ‘people like them’ think (Pew Research Centre, 2024). These trends are manifesting in several ways, such as through declines in electoral turnout (Stoker, 2017), declines in the number of political party members in almost all European democracies (Van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012), and the rise of populism and popular unrest (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Vormann and Lammert, 2019).

But at the same time, trends in political participation have changed. Whilst there is evidence of distrust in formal institutions and processes, to suggest that dissatisfaction has led to a decline in political participation would be erroneous. Citizens remain politically aware and active, if only in different ways from voting in general elections. Informal, grassroots participation is increasingly prevalent vis-à-vis traditional forms of participation like voting (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011), and participation has become more citizen-initiated and policy-oriented (Dalton, 2008). Norris’s (2002) *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* heralded a change in the nature of participation, recognising a move towards issue-driven politics that is more ad-hoc than traditional methods of participation such as voting, for example, boycotting, hacking or posting about political topics online. Studies on ‘everyday politics’ draw our attention to how the mundane, seemingly unextraordinary actions of citizens can be political in nature and target politics beyond election periods. It underscores how everyday spaces online and in person can act as incubators for political action whereby communication induces reflection on preferences, values and interests in a non-coercive fashion (Dryzek, 2000; see also Mansbridge et al 2010), encouraging political participation in a “public, shared context” (Highfield, 2016) through the

telling and retelling of stories, ideas and perspectives through text, image, videos and ‘emojis’ (Dean, 2019).

Indeed, emerging trends suggest that social media today has extended repertoires of political action, exemplified by the social media organising and international networks of movements like Black Lives Matter or Just Stop Oil. Social media enables the public to find and share political content with ease, acting as a “crucible of negotiation between the public and private, the political and personal” (Graham, Jackson and Wright, 2016: 1384). In this way, despite trends which suggest people are disengaged from politics, contemporary engagement with politics largely occurs outside of voting and citizens’ repertoire of action is large with a variety of ways for citizens to communicate their preferences, values and opinions beyond the ballot box and ‘between elections’ (Narud and Esaiasson, 2013).

Against this backdrop, formal political institutions have sought to respond to challenges of democratic dissatisfaction by designing new channels for citizen voices to be heard and influence policy making in ways that recognise changing appetites for political participation. New mechanisms that seek to promote greater engagement with and connections to institutions and policy making processes include citizens’ assemblies, direct democracy initiatives, and parliamentary e-petitions, each of which may achieve a range of democratic ‘goods’ from enhanced deliberation to increased transparency. Parliamentary e-petitions are particularly interesting as a site of study because they are emblematic of institutional attempts to bring the public ‘in’ to parliamentary and policy-making processes, but engagement with them happens primarily outside of parliament in the various informal communicative spaces mentioned above. In this respect, parliamentary e-petitions mark an interesting territory that sits at the juncture of the informal sphere of public society - where citizens sign, share and promote campaigns - and the formal sphere (Habermas, 2009) of parliament, where actions are taken against the e-petition. This thesis is concerned with how parliamentary e-petitions might bridge the gap between institutional drives to bring the public back ‘in’ and contemporary preferences for online, ad hoc, and personally driven engagement within the wider context of democratic dissatisfaction by considering how e-petition campaign actions in the informal sphere come to bear on the formal sphere of parliament.

1.2 Parliamentary e-petitions: current understandings

Parliamentary e-petitions have captured the public imagination and have been set up around the world, for example, in Scotland (Carman, 2006), Germany (Lindner and Riehm, 2011), Taiwan (Lee, Chen and Huang, 2014) and Austria (Rosenberger et al, 2022), to name a few. They have also been adopted at supranational (Böhle and Riehm, 2013) regional (Escher and Riehm, 2017; Bochel, 2012) and local (Åström, Jonsson and Karlsson, 2017) levels. The UK Government and Parliament e-petitions system was established in 2015. It was designed with the potential for bringing about a “significant enhancing of the relationship between the petitioning public and their elected representatives” in mind (HC 235, 2014-15: para 81). It has proved to be incredibly popular with the British public. 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 Website, no date).

Reflecting this widespread adoption in countries worldwide, academic interest in parliamentary e-petitions has similarly flourished. The body of literature on parliamentary e-petition systems has focused on the design, implementation and institutional characteristics of e-petition systems. It has considered what e-petitions may achieve, for example, in terms of how their design might enable them to influence the policy lifecycle (Leston-Bandeira and Tiburcio, 2012; Hough 2012), how they act as a link between the public and parliament and enhance representational ties (Leston-Bandeira, 2019; Blumenau, 2021), how they might influence the parliamentary agenda (Hough, 2012) and how they might perform a scrutiny role (Bochel and Bochel, 2017).

Considering the institutional design of e-petition systems, the extant literature underscores the importance of the procedures of the systems, for example, in terms of who oversees them (Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Bochel, 2013), the role of petitioners’ hearings, debates and legislative committees (Lindner and Riehm, 2009). This is because perceptions that the processes have been ‘fair’ are key to the successful implementation of e-petitions systems; users need to view the system as being fair and politically neutral to engage (Carman, 2010).

Nonetheless, a tendency to focus on the institutional processes, rules, actors and outcomes of various systems means that gaps in our knowledge exist about how citizens actually engage with parliamentary e-petitions in this wider context of everyday political behaviour; compared to the formal processes and designs of the system, we firstly know very little about citizens’ e-petition

campaign practices, particularly their online activities. With the notable exceptions of Asher, Leston-Bandeira and Spaiser (2019) and Matthews (2023), there has been little consideration of how parliamentary e-petitions intersect with actions in civil society, despite increasing recognition of everyday online practices as important modes of political participation, which means that we have a gap in our understanding about how citizens advocate, share and promote their e-petition campaigns in informal communicative spaces such as social media.

By neglecting the dynamics through which the public engages with e-petitions both offline and online, there is a second gap in our understanding about how public input in the various informal spaces is fed into parliament - about how the voices of petitioners are fed into the ears of policymakers. This is because where consideration is placed on the linkage function between the public and parliament (Leston-Bandeira, 2019), it is largely about the role of legislative petition committees in connecting the public to the wider parliamentary system. Whilst it is recognised that “petitions cannot be assessed as a unit by themselves, needing to be evaluated within the context of the processes used to consider them” (Leston-Bandeira, 2019: 2), a sole focus on institutional connective mechanisms like the Petitions Committee neglects acknowledgement of other ways in which citizen input can be fed in, for example, by informal intermediaries, despite recognition in wider literature on democratic systems that non-institutional actors such as the media and activists “may work as potential inducers of connectivity” between civil society and representative institutions (Mendonça, 2016: 171; see also Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2019). As a notable exception to this tendency, Matthews’ (2023) study recognises, additionally, for example, the role of celebrities and the media as intermediaries between the public and parliament but is unique insofar as it is the only study on parliamentary e-petitions to consider the role of informal intermediaries in the petitioning system.

Relatedly, the tendency within the literature to focus on institutional processes extends to our understanding of e-petition outcomes. A relatively understudied area of the literature on e-petition systems, outcomes may refer to the number of e-petitions submitted, the number of signatures or the extent to which the procedures of the system achieve procedural fairness (see Carman, 2010). In a recent study, Bochel (2020) provides a framework of outcomes which maps outcomes onto the processes undertaken by the Petitions Committee, and Wright’s (2016) earlier study highlights how the poor government responses of the Downing Street e-petition system may have undermined the outcomes of the system. Nonetheless, outside of these studies,

empirical focus on e-petition outcomes is lacking within the wider e-petitions literature and whilst Wright's (2016) study alludes to the existence of outcomes outside of the e-petition system, it is based upon the Downing Street e-petition system (the predecessor to the current system) which means we need up-to-date empirical knowledge about these potential outcomes and the value of petitioning to petitioners.

Finally, whilst parliamentary e-petitions have been recognised to play an important campaigning function (Leston-Bandeira, 2019; see also Hough, 2012; Rosenberger et al, 2022), and literature on non-institutionalised e-petition platforms like Change.org has recognised the "different influencing approach [of petitions] based on mobilising mass membership [that] amplify and complement existing advocacy strategies" (Halpin et al, 2022), research into the campaigning role of parliamentary e-petitions has been largely focused on how users might mobilise (Rosenberger et al, 2022) rather than how parliamentary e-petitions relate to or feed into wider campaign repertoires. This, coupled with a wider neglect of how informal methods for participation relate to engagement with e-petition systems and a neglect of petitioning outcomes, means that how e-petitions relate to or advance wider political campaigning objectives external to the e-petition system is underdeveloped at present.

Because existing literature has an underdeveloped focus on the wider context in which parliamentary e-petition systems sit, a reframing of the approach we take to the study of parliamentary e-petitions, and indeed, other democratic innovations, is necessary. This is to ensure that the informal actions of petitioners or the connections forged to parliament from these actions are not overlooked and the gaps listed above are addressed. This thesis is guided by the insights of 'systems thinking', a recent turn within the deliberative democracy field that encourages consideration of democratic systems as a whole, rather than in terms of constituent parts. A systems-level approach instead encourages focus on the complexity and linkages between parts of the system (Dryzek, 2016) and recognises that various sites might accomplish political goals from formal political institutions like parliament, to advocacy networks and everyday spaces (Mansbridge et al, 2012). This approach, therefore, alerts scholars to the presence of multiple sites of democratic action and the connections between them - the connective mechanisms through which claims made in public settings are considered within empowered places such as parliament. When taking this framing to the study of parliamentary e-petitions, focus is therefore placed on the following: where citizens are engaging with e-petitions, - where they are 'speaking' - where parliamentary actors are engaging back with them - where and

how they are ‘listening’ - how these elements are connected, and what the subsequent value of such connections are.

Bringing together the ‘gaps’ in the literature above with the holistic approach encouraged by systems thinking, this thesis explores where the public speaks to parliament through e-petitions but also how - and to what extent - parliament listens and speaks back, analysing the outcomes and value of e-petitioning as a tool for political engagement. In doing so, it ultimately contributes to a more nuanced understanding of parliamentary e-petitions and how citizen input may come to bear on parliament, in turn contributing to debates about wider democratic dissatisfaction and its solutions because consideration is placed on both how parliamentary e-petitions are situated within a much broader repertoire of political action, and how this may create a range of outcomes in and outside of parliament.

1.3 Research questions

Subsequently, there are three aims guiding this thesis. The first is to establish how parliamentary e-petitions are disseminated and discussed by citizens and organisations in the informal sphere of civil society, recognising that the campaigning activities of petitioners are likely to take place in everyday spaces and on social media. The second, related aim is to identify the formal and informal coupling mechanisms (Hendriks, 2016) that bring these actions in the informal sphere of civil society to bear on the formal sphere of parliament, acknowledging the role of intermediaries beyond just that of the Petitions Committee and responding to calls within the literature about the “urgent need” for further research into the role of non-institutional actors that promote connectivity between the public and representative institutions (Mendonça, 2016: 186).

Having achieved these first two aims, the final aim of this research is to establish a deeper understanding of e-petition outcomes in terms of the value that petitioning brings to users in order to evaluate e-petitions as a tool for addressing democratic dissatisfaction and disengagement. Together, these three aims will advance academic knowledge of how parliamentary e-petitions are used by citizens in informal communicative spaces, the various connective mechanisms from this civil sphere to parliament, and what value these activities bring to petitioners, contributing to an overarching understanding of the mechanisms by which citizens are remaining engaged with politics. This is because focus is placed on where citizens are

engaging with e-petitions - where they are 'speaking' - where parliamentary actors are engaging back with them - where they are 'listening' - and how these elements are connected. They are mapped onto the following three research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the informal public sites in which everyday engagement with parliamentary e-petitions occurs, and what are the characteristics of the activities that occur within these sites?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are the formal and informal connective mechanisms that exist between sites of discussion in the informal sphere of citizen participation and the formal sphere of parliament?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What are the outcomes of petitioners' campaign activities, and what subsequent value do these activities bring to petitioners' objectives?

1.4 How I address the research questions

This thesis interrogates the efficacy of e-petitions as a solution to challenges of democratic dissatisfaction by exploring the motivations, campaign activities, outcomes, expectations and reflections of petitioners and parliamentary actors to understand, in their own words and actions, how they use and perceive the UK e-petitions system. I analyse a total of nine case study e-petitions submitted in the 2019-2024 Parliament. Cases were selected on the basis that they had reached 10,000 signatures, were under the topic area of 'animal welfare', and among those selected reflected a range of actions within and outside of parliament and reflected a range of creator types. The full details of why each of these elements was chosen are in Chapter 3.

I use the qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis of various parliamentary and campaign material and social media posts. Between the summer of 2023 and the spring of 2024, I undertook a two-step research process beginning with documentary analysis of 68 documents, followed by a total of 36 semi-structured interviews: 16 with petitioners, 12 with MPs, seven with parliamentary officials and one with a media professional who supported a petition campaign. All elements of this research received full ethical approval from the Department of Politics and International Relations' ethics committee.

1.5 Core findings

The analysis laid out in the chapters of this thesis will reveal that, through a range of activities in both informal communicative spaces like social media and in formal spheres of parliament, petitioners' e-petition campaigns were vast and opened doors to a range of additional avenues to affect change. Petitioners' campaigns are characterised by a range of activities which build support for signature thresholds, identify and utilise other campaigners with the ability to support either monetarily, by sharing data, or promoting the campaign on social media, and petitioners leverage connections with charities, well-known voices like celebrities or parliamentarians to advance their campaigns towards their goals. Through this range of activities, connections are forged with parliamentarians who support petitioners in a range of ways, for example, by pursuing parliamentary mechanisms additional to the e-petition processes. Examples included submitting Private Members' Bills, tabling amendments, asking questions or building consensus with other parliamentarians. In this way, the extensive campaigning activities of petitioners are not just confined to the e-petition itself – the government responses and Westminster Hall debate - and outcomes from e-petition campaigns extended in and outside of parliament, amounting a wider repertoire of action in civil society and in parliament. The reflections of those actors involved in the e-petition campaigns suggests that the points at which petitioners felt they had made the most progress towards their goals were when they were able to pursue this range of other parliamentary mechanisms because a range of 'touch points' were opened up within parliament through which they could continue to campaign as a result. Importantly, these activities hinged on the effective use of social media, and we will come to see how social media may have helped less resourced petitioners to achieve similar outcomes than better resourced or more experienced petitioners.

As a point of departure from extant literature on parliamentary e-petitions which tends to focus on institutional designs, rules, procedures, and the connective role of the Petitions Committee, this thesis underscores that other informal intermediaries, namely petitioners themselves, other parliamentarians and well-known voices such as celebrities, merit serious consideration when analysing the connections between citizens and parliament. This is because whilst the Petitions Committee is fundamental to the running of the system, petitioners did not tend to place value on these processes in terms of achieving the wider campaign objectives highlighted above. Instead, petitioners valued the relationships built with other parliamentarians and policy makers, which they themselves established through the campaigning activities highlighted above and

which were amplified or incentivised by the involvement of well-known voices like celebrities. In this way, petitioners were core actors - ‘inducers of connectivity’ (Mendonça, 2016) - who ensured wider integration with the parliamentary system and processes, but who were supported by a range of informal actors outside of the formal auspices of the Petitions Committee.

Considering these points together, one of the key findings of this thesis is that the e-petitions process should not be seen narrowly in terms of its two formal milestones (the government response and Westminster Hall debate) but widely in terms of the network of opportunities that are amplified inside and outside of parliament through using the institutionally tied system. We see that far from discrete or isolated activities, parliamentary e-petitions open the door to a range of other parliamentary tools that can be utilised even when the formal e-petitions process is over. These findings are particularly important because they alert us to the presence of multiple sites of democratic action and how various activities forge connections between the public and representative institutions. Our attention is therefore placed on where and how the public may seek to engage with their representatives, but also where and how parliamentarians may come to listen to them.

1.6 Contributions to knowledge

Based on these findings, this thesis makes contributions to three audiences: the academic community, petitioners and practitioners of new participatory tools like e-petitions.

Contributions to the literature

Firstly, this thesis bridges the gap between understandings of the growth in informal and online political participation and attempts by representative institutions to address political apathy. It does so by considering how e-petitions are emblematic of institutional attempts to bring the public ‘in’ to parliamentary and policymaking processes whilst recognising that engagement with them is likely to happen primarily outside of parliament in various informal communicative spaces. It moves away from approaches to parliamentary e-petitions which are overwhelmingly from an institutional perspective by centring the online everyday experiences of petitioners into the design and methods of this research. Additionally, by highlighting the various activities undertaken by petitioners and how much of the e-petition campaign is contingent on the establishment of wide networks of support online and offline, I also draw attention to the range of informal intermediaries who may connect the public to parliament, a somewhat nascent

development in the literature (see Matthews, 2023) but one which has been called for as a part of an “urgent need” to understand the operation of such actors (Mendonça, 2016: 186). In this way, by presenting the range of activities undertaken by petitioners in informal communicative spaces and exploring how these come to bear on parliament, I demonstrate how a more holistic view of the petitioning process can be achieved by tying together the everyday practices of petitioners to the study of parliamentary engagement and public influence. This more holistic approach is necessary because it prevents overlooking the role of informal actions, instead underscoring the various means by which links between the public and parliament can be forged.

Secondly, because the campaign activities undertaken by petitioners themselves are fore fronted, I make contributions to the literature about the campaigning function of e-petitions, showing that it is wider than just that of giving members of the public an issue to mobilise around (Leston-Bandeira, 2019) and that it encompasses an ‘extended, hybrid media system’ (Highfield, 2016:15) that brings with it a range of ‘spillover effects’ (Matthews, 2023) for petitioners. I demonstrate how parliamentary e-petitions are a valuable tool for campaigners because they are a useful vehicle through which wider connections can be made and additional parliamentary (or non-parliamentary) mechanisms can be pursued. In this respect, these findings add to the literature about the outcomes of parliamentary e-petitions: they enable the creation of a support network of MPs that may continue to exist after the petition campaign is over, which also has important implications for wider understandings of contemporary attempts to bring the public back ‘in’ to parliamentary and policy making processes.

Thirdly, I will come to highlight the importance of various informal intermediaries which connect the public to parliament. Firstly, through petitioners' informal relationships with various parliamentarians who tap into a range of touch points in parliament. Second, in terms of well-known voices who both amplify e-petition campaigns and incentivise involvement from actors in both the formal and informal sphere. Finally, I highlight the ability of petitioners themselves to act as ‘inducers of connectivity’ (Mendonça, 2016) between the public and parliament through petitioners’ extensive campaign strategies that revolve around the use of social media and forging connections with a range of institutional and non-institutional intermediaries. These findings about the various connections forged between petitioners and parliament address a gap in knowledge about the dynamics between the citizen participation and formal channels of influence, enabling us to better understand how connections are drawn between the public and their representative institutions and the capacity of citizens to affect policy making processes

through ‘beyond election’ tools like e-petitions, adding necessary empirical nuance to debates about the solutions to democratic dissatisfaction.

Finally, the findings of this research underscore the usefulness of ‘systems thinking’ (Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2019) to the study of parliamentary e-petition systems. This approach draws our attention to how democratic engagement happens across the spectrum of political action, from towns and villages to nation states and international bodies in ways that are both “ad hoc and long-standing” (Mansbridge et al, 2012:10). Applied to the study of parliamentary e-petitions systems, this thesis underscores how e-petitions sit within, interact with and affect a wider parliamentary ecosystem and may influence policy making processes in a range of ways. This is because by focusing on various sites of engagement, the subsequent spillover effects of parliamentary e-petitions, and the range of different connective mechanisms between the public and parliament are illuminated. Against a backdrop of widespread disengagement with political processes, this approach is useful because it demonstrates how parliamentary e-petitions and the associated campaigns are an important tool for contemporary engagement that taps into a range of other activities both inside (in terms of other parliamentary mechanisms) and outside (in terms of other campaigning tools) of parliament, enabling various ways to ‘speak’ to parliament, and various ways for parliament to ‘listen’ back. That is, by demonstrating how the e-petition system brings about multiple other opportunities for the public to engage with parliament in a range of ways, this thesis adds important nuance to discussions about contemporary political participation and the public’s relationship with representative institutions like parliaments.

Contributions to practitioners and to petitioners

The contributions to scholarship also contribute to applied knowledge. The findings about how actions in informal communicative spaces like social media can come to bear on parliament and influence parliamentary outcomes outside of just the e-petition system are useful to petitioners and practitioners, too. They are useful to petitioners because the findings presented in this thesis flag a range of activities that petitioners may choose to implement in their campaigns going forward and which may have a range of outcomes. For practitioners, the findings of this thesis highlight that reframing parliamentary e-petitions as embedded within a wider parliamentary ecosystem that imbues a range of different outcomes in and outside of parliament is necessary for a more holistic understanding of petitioning. We will come to see throughout the empirical

chapters in this thesis that this contribution is particularly necessary in light of ongoing challenges about petitioners' expectations of the formal e-petition processes.

The recommendations presented in Chapter 7 were designed with these points in mind. For petitioners, this is about how to approach the campaign process with the wider view of e-petition campaigns and outcomes in mind. They are designed to manage expectations about likely outcomes and opportunities and revolve around petitioners finding supportive audiences, both in and outside of parliament, and planning their campaign with the pursuit of other parliamentary mechanisms in mind. For practitioners, the recommendations are based on the learnings from the UK system but are relevant to wider practitioners of new participatory tools. They are focused on systems' abilities to manage expectations and are intended to create mechanisms which provide support to users, for example, greater signposting about how they can explore the range of other parliamentary activities that can be tapped into. In this way, all of the recommendations are intended to tie the e-petitions system more closely into wider parliamentary ecosystems, furthering opportunities for connections between citizens and parliament to be developed.

1.7 Thesis structure

Chapter 2 establishes the context in which parliamentary e-petitions have emerged, setting out key trends in political participation about disillusionment and changing repertoires of political action. It outlines the areas where current literature on e-petitions has focused thus far, explores the usefulness of a 'systems level' approach and provides an overview of the UK Government and Parliament system. It then delineates three core gaps in our understanding which are mapped on the research questions presented in this chapter.

Chapter 3 begins with an introduction to the philosophical foundations of this research. It then outlines in depth the approach taken to case study selection, the methods chosen for this research and the approach I took to data analysis. Throughout the chapter, I reflect on the value of the methods chosen and end the chapter by highlighting some potential limitations to the approach taken.

Chapter 4 is the first of two empirical chapters in which I present the findings to the three research questions. It presents findings on who is 'speaking' to parliament and how, by focusing

on petitioner profiles and motivations, campaign journeys including core milestones, and the reflections of petitioners based on their experiences. It offers findings on all three research questions, though it is primarily focused on RQ1 and RQ3.

Chapter 5 is the second of two empirical chapters. It focuses on who is ‘listening’ to petitioners within parliament, distinguishing between Petitions Committee MPs and officials from MPs who do not sit on the Committee to explore the various contours about how, in terms of actions taken, and why, in terms of motivations, the various parliamentary actors came to be involved in the case study e-petitions. It is focused primarily on presenting findings to RQ2. Like Chapter 4, this chapter concludes by outlining the reflections of parliamentary actors, thereby setting the scene for Chapter 6 to address the implications of these findings.

In **Chapter 6**, I draw on the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5 to consider the implications of this research. I do so by bringing the two ‘halves’ together to reflect on points of convergence and disconnect between the experiences and perceptions of petitioners and parliamentary actors, split into three main sections: campaign and petitioner characteristics, social media and connections between the public and parliament. Throughout the chapter, I link the findings to the wider trends and challenges highlighted in Chapter 2 and reflect upon the efficacy of the e-petitions system as a process through which the public is able to engage with parliament.

Chapter 7 concludes this thesis. By reflecting on the findings and discussion presented it conclusively answers the three research questions presented in this chapter, explores avenues for further research and considers the contributions made along three lines. First, the contributions to the literature and to scholars seeking to understand the role of parliamentary e-petitions in contemporary democratic participation. Second, the practical implications for petitioners, offering four recommendations for prospective petitioners about how to best pull value from the system. Relatedly, the final contribution is to practitioners, offering four recommendations about how to best support petitioners going forward, whilst recognising the constraints within which practitioners must operate. The final part of this chapter reflects on the thesis as a whole.

Chapter 2: Everyday political participation and parliamentary e-petitions

Introduction

Against a backdrop of declining public faith in democracy and rising democratic disaffection, formal political institutions have sought to ‘fight back’ by providing new channels for citizen voices to be heard and influence policy making. Combined with trends towards informal everyday political engagement, there are now more formal and informal opportunities to express opinions, identities and grievances than at any time in history. In this chapter, I explore the wider body of literature on contemporary democratic engagement, establish our current understanding of parliamentary e-petitions, and situate the three research questions outlined in Chapter 1 against three core ‘gaps’ in knowledge.

It is structured into five broad sections. In section 2.1, I begin with a brief overview of recent trends in political participation and the widely documented rise in democratic disaffection. In section 2.2, I explore what these trends mean for non-traditional and informal political engagement and provide an in-depth look at the literature around ‘everyday’ political participation - including the affordances provided by online technologies - in order to establish the contemporary participatory landscape in which parliamentary e-petitions have emerged. In section 2.3, I denote the responses of formal representative institutions to the trends outlined in sections 2.1 and 2.2. In section 2.4, I provide an in-depth overview of the UK e-petition system, review the literature around parliamentary e-petitions and highlight the value of drawing on ‘systems thinking’ to understand the formal and informal intersections of parliamentary e-petitions. In section 2.5 I bring the preceding sections together by identifying the gaps in our understanding, thereby situating this thesis’s original contribution to the field.

2.1 Research context: Democratic disaffection

Over the past few decades, scholars, politicians and practitioners have lamented a crisis of democracy in which citizens in advanced liberal democracies are apathetic, distrustful and disengaged from our democratic processes and institutions (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2013). Public attitudes today certainly give credence to such concerns. A recent study from the Pew Research Center finds that across 12 economically advanced countries, in

2024, 64% of respondents are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working, a percentage that has risen from 49% in 2017 (Pew Research Center, 2024). In Australia, one in four Australians do not believe the government can be trusted (Cameron and McAllister, 2019; Cameron, 2020). In Italy and other European Union countries, disaffection has increased since the 2008 global financial crisis (Quaranta and Martini, 2016; Schmitt *et al.*, 2016). In 2025, Freedom House's 'democracy status' map which measures democratic governance, electoral processes, the organisational capacity and financial stability of civil society amongst other variables, suggested that, globally, democracy in liberal established democracies was in 'decline' for the 19th consecutive year (Freedom House, 2025). Relatedly, the Edelman Trust barometer in 2025 suggests that, globally, widespread grievance is eroding trust across four dimensions: business, government, media and NGOs (Edelman Trust Institute, 2025).

Across liberal democracies there is an abundance of literature which suggests that these trends have manifested in a mistrust of politicians and political processes, anti-political beliefs and a lack of perceived relevance of political institutions (Crow, 2010; Flinders, 2014; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Jennings and Stoker, 2015; Maciel and de Sousa, 2018). Symptoms of dissatisfaction are shown by declines in electoral turnout in national elections (see Flickinger and Studlar, 1992; Blais, Gidengil and Nevitte, 2004; Pattie, Hartman and Johnston, 2019; Stoker, 2017) and numbers of political party members are falling in virtually all European democracies (Van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012; Van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014). There has meanwhile been the rise of anti-political sentiment and distrust (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Jennings and Stoker, 2015; Flinders, Wood and Cunningham, 2016; Wood, 2022), which has led to the well-documented populist turn, demonstrated by the 2016 Brexit and Donald Trump votes, the rise of populist parties like the National Front in France and Alternative for Germany in Germany, and recently the second success of Donald Trump in 2024 (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; see also Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

These trends are also present in the United Kingdom. In 2025 the Electoral Commission found that 28% of respondents are dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in the UK (Electoral Commission, 2025). In previous years, dissatisfaction has been documented in the Hansard Society's Audits of Political Engagement, a time-series study which provides an annual benchmark to measure political engagement in the UK. In its final audit in 2019, the Hansard Society highlights that levels of dissatisfaction are rife among the population, with 56% of respondents thinking that "Britain is in decline", and 63% thinking that "Britain's system of

government is rigged to advantage the rich and powerful” (Hansard Society, 2019). This echoes previous audits which highlight that satisfaction with the system of governing Britain is at 29%, and only 34% of people believe that they are able to bring about political change (Hansard Society, 2018). Public dissatisfaction in the UK has similarly manifested in a range of ways. Turnout at the 2024 general election was 59.7%, the lowest since 2001, and 7.6 percentage points lower than 2019. The Conservative Party’s electoral defeat in 2024 has been attributed in part to populist party Reform UK’s success amongst Conservative voters, with Reform UK securing 14.3% of votes (Heath et al, 2025). Indeed, Reform UK also achieved 32% of the votes in the 2025 local elections (Rallings and Thrasher, 2025).

2.2 New trends? Informal and everyday political participation

These trends suggest that the picture in advanced liberal democracies is bleak. But whilst there is evidence of dissatisfaction with and disengagement from formal institutions and processes, to suggest that there has been a complete decline in public engagement with politics would be erroneous. Even with disaffection and distrust increasingly prevalent, a more accurate description would be that the nature of political participation in contemporary democracies is changing; informal, grassroots participation is increasingly prevalent vis-à-vis traditional forms of participation like voting (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011) and participation has become more citizen-initiated and policy-orientated (Dalton, 2008). Many scholars note that citizens remain committed to democratic values and principles but are disillusioned with traditional means of participation, leading to a rise of non-institutionalised engagement in the form of protests, demonstrations and other forms of direct, individualised forms of democratic engagement beginning in the 1970s (Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Jennings and Deth, 1990) and continuing in the present day both offline and online (Vromen, 2016; Freelon, Marwick and Kreiss, 2020; Slavina, 2021). With technological advancement, contemporary political engagement includes actions such as boycotting, hacking, and social media mobilisation (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005; Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010; Flinders and Wood, 2018) and we have seen the rise of movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter that were largely driven online. Sloam (2013: 850) finds that “young Europeans have become increasingly alienated from parties and politicians but are active in ‘politics’ in a broader sense” and Vromen, Xenos and Loader (2015) find that young people in particular incorporate social media into group based politics as an important tool for maintaining political engagement across the USA, UK and Australia. On platforms like Instagram, political acts are increasingly popular, for example, through ‘digital

politics infographics' (Amit-Danhi and Shifman, 2018) or 'activist slideshows' (Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, 2023) whereby complex politics issues are formulated into short, snappy and easily shareable posts.

Particularly useful to understanding these developments is the literature on 'everyday politics'. Everyday politics is a concept which shifts analytical focus away from formal institutions, elections and the actions of politicians, instead encouraging analytical focus on the mundane, seemingly unextraordinary actions which are politically relevant, even if they do not appear so at first glance. Most notably defined by Boyte (2005: 36), everyday politics occurs at numerous levels *beyond* elections and "involves people reclaiming politics as actively owned and engaged in by citizens, in environments that reach far beyond the formal politics system". It is civic action which includes a range of participation methods that are politically relevant and is highly informal. For example, Bang's (2005) concept of 'everyday makers' draws our attention to project oriented citizens who are more concerned with their 'small politics' (local or personal political issues) than they are the big political issues of the day. While this is not true of all 'everyday' forms of engagement - many citizens are still concerned with and politically active in relation to the 'big' issues, exemplified by anti-war marches and social movement Black Lives Matter - the concept is valuable in understanding the scale of the everyday because everyday makers, broadly conceived, "do not feel defined by the state; nor do they see themselves as apathetic or opposed to it" (p.6). Everyday makers and everyday politics are both inherently informal, but not unimportant because they are actively engaged and redesigning political participation. Following Mansbridge (1999), Dryzek (2000) and Mansbridge et al (2012), the seemingly banal actions of everyday makers and everyday politics ought to be considered communication that induces reflection on preferences, values and interests outside of traditional democratic methods like voting and instead through aforementioned activities like boycotting or social media activism.

Everyday 'third' spaces (i.e. spaces where people meet outside of work and the home, both online and offline) can act as incubators for this action; they act as a "crucible of negotiation between the public and private, the political and personal" (Graham, Jackson and Wright, 2016: 1384; see also Graham, Jackson and Wright, 2015). Within such spaces the mundane - personal stories, preferences, complaints and concerns - can open up spaces for more explicitly political talk and the co-creation of preferences to occur. The Knitting Nannas Against Gas (KNAG) groups in Australia - groups of women who meet to knit to express their opposition to coal seam

gas mining - demonstrate the use of everyday talk in person. Whilst a seemingly innocuous form of engagement, the KNAG groups both protest against gas mining and provide space for citizens to get involved in the issues affecting their local communities through knitting groups. Knitting “assumes a critical voice function, offering a passageway to voice those concerns that women have about the future for their children or their grandchildren” (Hendriks, Ercan and Boswell, 2020: 75). By engaging with local political issues “through a variety of creative, performative activities that are both provocative and playful” (p.15) the KNAG groups reflect the growing literature which suggests that citizens are remaining engaged in politics, especially on issues that affect or resonate with them personally and which are articulated in day-to-day practices beyond the ballot box.

Today, much of this everyday type of engagement occurs online. Given that the 21st century has been defined by rapid technological change (so far), this is no shock. There is a wealth of literature on digital campaigning particularly with regard to elections. For example, research into online political advertising highlights the extent to which social media and data driven practices are used in relation to formal electoral processes (Dommett et al, 2025; Dommett and Power, 2024). But, outside of electoral campaigning, consideration of online spaces where political talk emerges is also an important site for consideration to understand how citizens remain politically engaged today (Wright, 2012) and there has been extensive consideration of the capacity of online spaces to extend repertoires of political action (see Vaccari, 2013; Vromen, 2016). Particular focus has been placed on social media platforms as sites for citizens to share political information and there has been increasing provocation for research into social media as a tool for everyday political engagement. For example, Brabham’s (2015) call for research into how individuals use social media platforms to communicate and contribute to political discussions beyond ‘extraordinary’ political events - “very few social media users use social media tools to coordinate revolutions” - underscores that it necessary to understand how politics is discussed online outside of the heightened interest surrounding elections or major events (Highfield, 2016).

As it has become more embedded in the everyday lives of citizens, social media affords opportunities to engage with politics in a “public, shared context” (Highfield, 2016: 8) as opposed to the largely individual and private actions such as voting at the ballot box. 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) which is important because these tools exist on a continual basis and are not contingent on major political events. For example, the work of Highfield (2016) highlights how the political exists in far more contexts than just formal politics and that communication in the form of text, image, videos or 'emojis' on social media enable the continued and instant sharing of everyday experiences, political perspectives, ideas and preferences. Indeed, because of its separation from formal politics, social media also has a politically mobilising effect which is illustrated famously in many social movements' online activities including the Arab Spring uprisings, the Occupy movement (Gerbaudo, 2012) and more recently, Black Lives Matter, Just Stop Oil and #Free Palestine (Carney, 2016; Mundt, Ross and Burnett, 2018). With social media's rise and ongoing capacity for engagement, we therefore now see multiple tools of activism utilised by individuals and campaigning groups, suggesting that repertoires of collective action today are large (Tilly, 1984; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2004) and are no longer contingent on the opportunities provided by formal politics. della Porta et al. (2006) for example, find that, even before social media and online campaigning really 'took off', digital signature campaigns (a form of non-institutionalised e-petition) were global justice activists' most widely used campaigning tool because of the wide reach possible. More recently, Trappenberg-Frick (2016), in their study of how citizens use technology outside of formal channels of participation, finds that "activists use new media in combination with traditional strategies to communicate, organise, market their cause and refine tactics" (p.93). Similarly, Tsatsou's (2018) study of the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan further highlights the mobilising and facilitative role of social media because activists primarily used Facebook's information sharing functions to enhance public engagement with the movement, recruit participants and coordinate offline actions.

Taken together, it is clear that online technologies and social media platforms play an important role in contemporary everyday political participation, but it should be noted that they are not a panacea to the issues outlined in the previous section. When considering the extent to which social media influences democracies and the ability for citizens to engage in beyond-election (Narud and Esaiasson, 2013) everyday politics, it is critical to recognise that digital exclusion is prevalent in relation to socio-demographics and geographic or global divides. Just because engagement via social media is increasingly normalised, it does not mean that everyone is able to participate online (see Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2019) and a degree of social media literacy is required to reap the benefits outlined above (Valle et al, 2024). Where online activism is common, it has been widely criticised for proliferating 'echo-chambers' of like-minded people in

which deliberation on contested and complex issues is restricted (Spohr, 2017; Pfetsch, 2018; Sunstein, 2018).

Further criticism of everyday politics comes from the somewhat superficial nature of online political participation, described as ‘slacktivism’ in which engagement is thin and easily performed in order to make the participants feel good about their actions rather than to advance political goals (see Christensen, 2011, 2012, for a more detailed discussion of slacktivism). Gladwell (2010), goes so far as to say that online activism is not a ‘real’ form of activism because it does not involve the trust nor the risks associated with face-to-face activism. Whilst important, these criticisms fail to recognise or celebrate how online spaces centralise engagement, increase avenues for engagement and provide opportunities for groups to “discuss, challenge and participate in diverse aspects of politics” (Highfield, 2016: 8). As the personal and political become increasingly linked, it is important to treat “the online not as a separate and isolated setting, but as part of an extended, hybrid media and political system” (Highfield, 2016: 15) in which different types and depths of engagement are apparent, whilst recognising that social media is not a panacea to the challenges highlighted in the preceding section.

Considering sections 2.1 and 2.2 together, the picture of contemporary political engagement is nuanced. Whilst many scholars and practitioners have (rightly) expressed concern about disaffection, distrust and the turn away from participation via traditional means, there has been an increase in informal, ‘everyday’ participation facilitated by the advent of online technologies and social media. The literature highlights that contemporary engagement is marked by a large repertoire of collective action, with a variety of ways for citizens to communicate their preferences, values and opinions beyond the ballot box and ‘between elections’ (Narud and Esaiasson, 2013). As traditional forms of participation have fallen closer into abeyance, an everyday scale of analysis becomes more useful for our understanding of political action because these everyday political activities indicate the presence of alert and informed citizens who remain politically engaged outside of traditional participation methods.

2.3 Institutional responses to the changing nature of political participation

Across various democracies, political institutions have recognised this changing appetite for engagement, demonstrated in the creation and implementations of various ‘democratic innovations’ that have been designed with the trends towards informal political participation in

mind. Whilst democratic innovations are top-down, instituted by and tied to political institutions, they are often designed in a way that recognises that citizens want to do more than just vote in formal elections. Perhaps the most influential conceptualisation of democratic innovations comes from Smith's (2009) seminal *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation* in which he defines them as "institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in political decision making" (Smith, 2009: 1). Further definitions add that democratic innovations are "processes or institutions, that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and 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). Examples of democratic innovations include citizens assemblies, youth councils, citizens initiatives, participatory budgeting and parliamentary e-petitions (see Smith, 2005; Smith 2009).

Whilst overarching goals might be to increase and deepen participation, democratic innovations are designed to achieve different outcomes. They may be innovations which seek to increase electoral turnout or broaden public participation in political processes, aim to inform decision makers of citizens' views or attempt to bring citizens together to deliberate on policy issues (Smith, 2005). These aims are not necessarily mutually exclusive; citizen initiatives both broaden participation in the policy making process and inform decision makers of the public's views, for example. But, because of differences in design and purpose, different innovations are likely to achieve a range of different democratic outcomes or 'goods' and no one innovation is likely to achieve all the possible benefits. These democratic 'goods' may include (but are not limited to) enhanced public participation, considered judgement of issues, transparency and inclusiveness (Smith, 2009; see also Nabatchi, 2010; Poplin, Pereira and Rocha, 2013; Bobbio, 2019). For example, for European Union members, 'Citizens Initiatives' bring about changes that are "initially incremental but [accumulate] to transformative change" (Tosun, Béland and Papadopoulos, 2022: 2).

Because many democratic innovations are deliberative in nature, other considerations about the possible 'goods' that can be achieved include the level of deliberation and communication so that issues are well-understood, and the capacity to feed deliberation through into actionable decision making (Warren, 2017). Even for non-deliberative innovations, these considerations are useful for our understanding because they draw our attention to how different types of 'goods' may coexist, or not. For example large scale participation initiatives (such as e-petitions) will be

unable to facilitate intense deliberation but can facilitate enhanced public participation on large scales, and deliberative tools such as citizen's assemblies will necessarily restrict participation to small numbers but can feed directly into actionable decision making shown, for example by the successes of the Irish citizens' assemblies which "produced major political outcomes through three successful referendums" (Courant, 2021: 1). These trade-offs are important to note at the outset because they mean that no single democratic innovation will be able to address the challenges outlined in section 2.1 or fulfil the wide range of democratic goods possible.

2.4 Understanding parliamentary e-petitions

Parliamentary e-petitions are a type of democratic innovation which are designed to enhance public participation, a type of 'advocacy democracy' that enables members of the public to "raise issues or propose policies to parliament" (Carman, 2010: 735), providing opportunities for the public to make their voice heard in what is a "relatively easy and cost-effective manner" (Bochel and Bochel 2017: 686). Parliamentary e-petitions are distinct from non-institutionalised platforms like Change.org because they are formally embedded within a representative institution: they are 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). They are one of the only democratic innovations which provide citizens with *ongoing* opportunities to engage with parliament directly (Matthews, 2021) and often have few constraints on who can participate. They are inherently online tools for participation, and many systems have large signature thresholds which necessitate petitioners' engagement with them in online communicative spaces in order to achieve enough signatures. In terms of the democratic 'goods' that parliamentary e-petitions may achieve, they enhance public engagement by offering the means for people to engage with parliament, and they enable citizens to raise issues bottom-up which may otherwise be unknown to policy makers (Leston-Bandeira, 2019).

There has been widespread uptake of parliamentary e-petitions, demonstrated by the establishment of e-petition systems globally such as in Scotland (Carman, 2006), Germany (Lindner and Riehm, 2011), Taiwan (Lee, Chen and Huang, 2014) and Austria (Rosenberger et al, 2022), to name a few. They have also been adopted at supranational (Böhle and Riehm, 2013) regional (Escher and Riehm, 2017; Bochel, 2012) and local (Åström, Jonsson and Karlsson, 2017) levels. As a result of wide uptake, the literature on parliamentary e-petitions around the world is well-established. It can be broadly divided into the following focuses: the functions or

roles of parliamentary e-petition systems, the institutional design of parliamentary e-petitions systems, the outcomes of parliamentary e-petitions systems and the demographic characteristics of users.

Parliamentary e-petition functions

As with all democratic innovations, there are multiple functions that parliamentary e-petitions might fulfil. Whilst the design of different systems varies, each system shares the desire to enhance public engagement with legislative bodies, a democratic ‘good’ relating to increasing public participation with formal institutions and processes. Potential core functions established in the literature can be summarised as follows: a link between parliament and citizens, informing policy development and enabling policy change, and executive scrutiny by enabling the expression and collection of the public’s views (Hough, 2012). Leston-Bandeira (2019) identifies similar functions: linkage, policy, scrutiny and campaigning, and highlights how, through linking the public to parliament, e-petitions systems can perform a safety valve role by providing citizens with an outlet to express dissatisfaction and identify solutions which may feed into policy and scrutiny processes with parliament. In terms of linkages between the public and parliament, Blumenau’s (2021), study of online activism and dyadic representation suggests that e-democracy initiatives such as e-petitions can significantly strengthen the representational ties between citizens and policymakers, highlighting in turn how online political participation can feed into channels of influence. Indeed, the wider literature on parliamentary e-petitions has underscored their potential to realise the democratic goods highlighted in the preceding section because they are formally embedded to the political institution: the link between the public and the institution is guaranteed by the design of the system (Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Matthews, 2023). In the UK, this institutional ‘tie’ is realised through the work of the Petitions Committee, which I will come to explain shortly.

Whilst the linkage and policy development functions of parliamentary e-petitions systems are well developed and understood within the literature, the campaigning function as identified by Leston-Bandeira (2019) is less so. Within the campaigning role, Leston-Bandeira suggests that parliamentary e-petitions provide a centralising focus for citizens to group around a specific cause, and in doing so develop a sense of shared identity and enable the dissemination of a specific campaign to the wider public and policymakers. This mobilising function is supported by Rosenberger et al’s (2022) analysis of a range of formalised and non-formalised e-petition

systems in Austria. They find that e-petitions fuel public debate, disseminate claims and both build alliances and polarise the public. In the context of EU member states' e-petition systems, Böhle and Riehm (2013) identify mobilisation as a potential role because e-petitions generating greater public attention on the issue (see also, Escher and Riehm, 2017). Indeed, "if a petitioner or in most cases a group of petitioners make their concern public and ask for support in the form of signatures, the petition is a means to generate public attention, initiate debate to influence public opinion and to win supporters" (Böhle and Riehm, 2013: 4). 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. These findings largely echo the literature on other types of political campaigning activities which identifies non-institutionalised e-petition platforms as performing mobilising roles (della Porta et al, 2006; Halpin et al, 2022).

Institutional design

To achieve the potential range of functions listed above, there are considerable differences in the designs and processes of parliamentary e-petitions systems. Some have a legislative committee tasked with the oversight of the system and who considers the appropriate actions to consider petitions (Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Bochel, 2013, 2016). This is how the UK House of Commons parliamentary e-petition system was designed, so that "the potential to bring about a significant enhancement of the relationship between the petitioning public and their elected representatives" could be realised by the Petitions Committee (HC 235, 2014-15: para 81). In comparison, other systems utilise petitioner's hearings and debates (whereby petitioners can present their concerns directly to the legislature) to consider petitions (Riehm, Böhle and Lindner, 2014). Notable variations also exist in submission mechanisms across systems. Some, like the Queensland Parliament, require petitions to be sponsored by a Member of Parliament which requires mandatory contact with an MP prior to submission, or like the Norwegian system require prior contact with local administration (Lindner and Riehm, 2009). Others, like the UK system, have very few constraints on submission beyond citizenship or residency requirements.

The design of parliamentary e-petitions systems matters because the processes used have an impact on the democratic functions and outcomes of the system (Rosenberger et al., 2022) - the potential to achieve the democratic goods outlined in the previous section. For example, Carman (2010) suggests that perceptions of procedural fairness are key to the successful implementation

of e-petitions systems because users need to view the system as being fair and politically neutral in order to engage; process matters for public evaluations of political institutions. This is further supported by Bochel (2016), who argues that petitioners' treatment by the systems affects not just how they view the e-petition system but also how they view the elected bodies that establish them.

E-petition outcomes and 'success'

The design and characteristics of e-petitions systems also matter because they feed directly into the experiences and expectations of users. Previous literature suggests that a well-designed parliamentary e-petitions system will make users feel that they have had their voices heard even if they do not get what they wanted (Carman, 2010; see also Bochel and Bochel, 2017) but nonetheless underscore that success is "likely to depend on who you are, what role you have within the petitions system, what expectations petitioners have ... and so on" (Bochel, 2012: 156). This is a particularly important trend within the literature because it throws up challenges for petition systems about how to measure success and present success to petitioners, who may have expectations that exceed the ability of the system. In an attempt to create a framework of e-petition outcomes, Bochel (2020) focuses on specific stages of the petitions process that are contingent on the actions of individual clerks and the petitions committees, underscoring that there are various formal actions which may be taken on e-petitions, and so success should be viewed on a continuum. A recent cluster analysis of 600 petitions by Rosenberger *et al* (2022) highlights, like Hough (2012) and Leston-Bandeira (2019), that petitions serve three different democratic functions: voice in parliament, link with constituents and public mobilisation. But their findings emphasise that different petition instruments and procedures impact the outcomes for petitioners, who respond and view the system accordingly. They highlight how the procedures implemented directly influence the extent to which petitioners are aware of the functions, advantages and disadvantages and potential outcomes of petitions, showing that the design and process of petitions affect not just the democratic functions of parliamentary e-petitions but the motivations and expectations of petitioners about likely outcomes. This is an important finding to highlight because it underscores how design has important consequences for perception. Indeed, wider discussions of the 'outcomes' of parliamentary e-petitions highlight that not all of the objectives or potential functions identified above will be achieved at once, and nor can a system achieve all possible democratic goods because the systems are necessarily limited in scope.

Demographics of users

The final trend within the literature is with regard to the demographics of e-petition users. We have seen how the purpose and potential outcomes of parliamentary e-petitions systems are manifold, but scholars rightly highlight concerns about participatory inequalities in terms of who is able to participate with parliamentary e-petitions and how, and whether all users are able to reap the same benefits or outcomes. For example, Lee, Chen and Huang (2014: 44) raise concerns that the Taiwanese system, whilst able to overcome participation inequalities through e-democracy, potentially reinforces inequalities by invariably conveying the views of “certain groups, [and] certain specific political issues, [who] can utilise [mechanisms] for vocalisation”. Lindner and Riehm (2011) similarly raise concerns that petitioner demographics in the German Bundestag’s system are not representative of the wider public, instead composed of men with higher-than-average education levels. They conclude that “public e-petitions seem to amplify existing inequalities in societal participation patterns as they predominantly attract mobilised and politically active individuals” (p.17). Escher and Riehm’s (2017) findings echo these concerns, noting that citizens with university degrees had considerably higher knowledge of the German e-petitions system than those without a degree. In a similar vein, Puschmann, Bastos and Schmidt (2017: 215) find highly uneven dynamics of participation and that a small number of highly active users “extend their influence beyond that of ‘ordinary’ users”. Focusing on the UK case, concerns have been raised that the system amplifies the voices of those who shout the loudest (Matthews, 2021) and so there has been new research with seldom heard groups (Leston-Bandeira and Tacheva, 2024) which seeks to uncover various barriers to engagement. Furthermore, Chaney, Jones and Fevre’s (2022) analysis of animal welfare e-petitions submitted between 2010 and 2019 finds that 65 percent of petitions that achieved 100,000+ signatures were submitted by or on behalf of NGOs, raising concerns about the extent to which the system has been taken over by large organisations and is not used by those the system was designed for: ordinary citizens. In this way, the literature on demographic inequalities brings into question the extent to which citizens are able to engage equally with petitions systems and whether or not petitions platforms may overrepresent and underrepresent certain groups.

Indeed, broader concerns about who is able or unable to participate via e-democracy or other online platforms have been raised. Particular focus has been placed on the ‘digital divide’ which might inhibit participation with new participatory tools like e-petitions, reflecting wider concerns

about digital exclusion. For example, Carman and Ipsos MORI (2009: 6) highlight the “strong relationship between social grade and having internet access in that internet access diminishes substantially as one moves down social grade”. Participatory inequalities are particularly important to acknowledge given that perceptions of e-petitions systems’ fairness is important in ensuring that e-petitions are able to enhance public opinion of and engagement with parliament (Carman, 2010; Wright, 2016). Interestingly though, much of the focus on demographic inequalities has been focussed on individual users, largely failing to recognise the broad campaigning function of e-petitions in which organisations may also be e-petition creators, and which may perceive and use parliamentary e-petitions systems in different ways. In a notable exception, Chaney, Jones and Fevre (2022)’s finding presented about the prevalence of NGOs above highlights the existence of an additional element to participatory inequalities, but this element is nonetheless understudied within the literature.

‘Systems thinking’

Alongside the burgeoning, but specific, e-petitions literature, there is a wider body of literature on democratic engagement and deliberative theory which provides a useful framing for understanding parliamentary e-petitions as a tool that seeks to address challenges of democratic dissatisfaction. The changes outlined in this chapter have led to a rapid expansion of opportunities for the public to engage in what has been described as an “era of communicative plenty” where public issues are contested in numerous spaces “well beyond conventional spaces of public debate” (Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2016). In recognition that no one democratic innovation can realise all of the democratic goods outlined in section 2.3, - “no single participatory design is suited to serving all [values]; particular designs are suited to serving specific objectives” (Fung, 2006: 73) - there have been calls within the literature for ‘systems level thinking’, which “expands the scale of analysis beyond the individual site and allow us to think about the deliberations that develop amongst and between sites” (Mansbridge et al, 2012: 2). There is widening agreement amongst scholars that siloed thinking around democratic innovations like parliamentary e-petitions cannot adequately further understandings of contemporary political engagement.

Grounded in deliberative democracy theory, systems thinking emerged in relation to deliberative systems which recognises that the characteristics of a democratic system as a *whole* are important, not just its parts. A scale of analysis which focuses on just individual level institutions (i.e. single

democratic innovations like participatory budgeting or mini publics) is problematic in systems level thinking because it fails to recognise complexity and the linkages that exist between sites of democracy (Dryzek, 2016). Instead, this approach recognises that democracies are complex and rather than focus on deliberation in one site, deliberative systems approaches instead place emphasis on the interdependence of sites within a larger democratic system (Mansbridge et al, 2012; Parkinson, 2012). This prevents focus on just what an innovation *is* to focus more broadly on the extent to which the deliberations that occur in or as a result of an innovation are able to achieve a wide range of democratic goods.

In the seminal edited collection *Deliberative System: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, the authors emphasise this need to analyse the interdependence of sites in order to understand democracy at large-scale societal terms: “we recognise that most democracies are complex entities in which a wide variety of institutions, associations and sites of contestation accomplish political work - including informal networks, the media, organised advocacy groups, schools, foundations, private and non-profit institutions, legislatures, executive agencies and the courts” (Mansbridge et al, 2012:2). This is an important point to emphasise because the turn towards systems thinking develops the notion that even non-deliberative actions can have important consequences on democracies (Owen and Smith, 2015). This includes the everyday talk used by citizens to “understand better what they want and need, individually and collectively” (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 211) highlighted in section 2.2 of this chapter. Whilst systems thinking is rooted in deliberative democratic theory it, therefore, has wider relevance in terms of altering scholars to the presence of multiple sites of political engagement and the connections between them that may occur in everyday spaces as well as through traditional mechanisms such as voting: “these different forms of participation can play different functions and therefore their combination may offer new options that realise a broader range of democratic goods” (Escobar, 2017: 431-432).

When considering a wider democratic system, particular questions arise about the connection of and transmission between different democratic sites (see Elstub, Ercan and Mendonça, 2016). This includes, for example, the integration of third spaces highlighted in section 2.2, and how various democratic ideals can be achieved by more informal political actions (Mansbridge, 1999; Curato *et al.*, 2017), not necessarily just those instituted by the formal sphere of political institutions. Connective mechanisms are conceptualised in the literature as complex political processes in which diverse viewpoints are expressed, acknowledged and facilitated and they are a

core concern of this thesis. Connection occurs when there is a recognition of claims from public settings within empowered formal spaces (Boswell, Hendriks and Ercan, 2016). Mechanisms of connection can vary, with developments in this field focusing particularly on the linkages - ‘coupling’ - of sites to build a more nuanced understanding of the roles played by different sites and actors within the democratic system and how they bear on one another. The idea of coupling was first introduced by Mansbridge et al (2012) to draw attention to the existence and strength of connections between different parts of the democratic system. In this research’s case, I refer to the connections between online everyday engagement (informal sphere), e-petitions and other parliamentary mechanisms (formal sphere). The concept of coupling has since been further developed by Hendriks (2016) who emphasises the need for ‘designed’ coupling. Designed coupling, unlike its more ad hoc version, is a top-down connective mechanism which is intentional and provides procedural guarantees that the views of citizens will be transmitted to formal spheres of influence. Such guarantees can be provided by legislative committees, and I will come to explain how the Petitions Committee plays this role in the UK context. But, designed coupling is not the only way through which such connections can be forged. Mendonça (2016) looks at the ‘inducers of connectivity’ in deliberative systems who facilitate connections between different democratic arenas and actors, and who are not necessarily tied to the political institutions. Bureaucrats, the media and activists are all essential in fostering 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). More focus, Mendonça (2016) suggests, needs to be placed upon the connective abilities of different ‘inducers’ to advance our understanding of systematic connections between civil society and representative institutions, and there have been additional calls in the literature for analysis of the actors who may forge connections between constituent spheres (see Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019, Ercan Hendriks and Dryzek, 2019).

Subsequently, our focus is drawn to sites of listening, about how these connections are forged, and who is listening, and how. Such foci are a central development in the literature because a proliferation of spaces for citizens to voice opinions on the actions of political institutions - an era of ‘communicative plenty’ (Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2019) as highlighted in section 2.2 - risks an imbalance between the opportunities for engagement and the space for listening and reflection. Attention ought to be given to actors who either ‘amplify’ or ‘muffle’ citizen’s voices, recognising that systems will comprise institutions, networks and groups which span the system

and connect to generate inclusive decision making (Boswell, Hendriks and Ercan, 2016). I turn now to explore how these approaches outlined in this section apply to the empirical case of this research, the UK Government and Parliament e-petition system, to delineate the gaps in our understanding.

The UK Government and Parliament e-petition system

The UK Government and Parliament system has featured often within the literature outlined above and it has proved to be incredibly popular amongst the public: in the short 2017-2019 Parliament there were 16,166,387 unique users on the website and a total of 33,181 e-petitions were submitted (House of Commons Library, 2020). 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 Website, no date).

Before outlining how the UK petition system works with the various roles or characteristics of e-petitions outlined above in mind, consideration of the specific UK context and the ways in which the UK Parliament has sought to innovate in the context of political apathy is necessary to understand both why the e-petition system emerged and to appraise the system's ability to realise the potential democratic 'goods' outlined in section 2.3. British democracy is characterised by the Westminster Model, a majoritarian representative democracy which prioritises government capacity and is forged on constituency links (Lijphart, 1999; see also Bagehot, 1867; Birch, 1964). In the traditional view of parliament, this means that parliament is the link between citizens and decision makers; the articulator of "the mind of the English people on all matters which come before it" (Bagehot, 1993 [1867]: 154) but that, historically, this link was expressed by voting, with formal engagement in elections at the centre. Indeed, the close constituency-MP link that comes from a first past the post electoral system was articulated famously by Edmund Burke as "the happiness and glory [for] a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence and the most unreserved communication with his constituents" (Burke, 1774: 95). In this interpretation, the expectation of representatives to be responsive to their constituents (Pitkin, 1967; see also, Birch, 1964) is, therefore, core to the essence of a parliamentary democracy. The prerogative to engage with citizens is that of MPs and political parties and the relationship is forged by the public's engagement with elections.

However, when we consider the history of petitioning in the UK, the picture of representation is more nuanced. The right to petition has a long history, predating the Magna Carta in 1215 (Connolly, 2009). By the fifteenth century, most petitions were directed to parliament (Dodd, 2007) and in the period before the franchise was extended, petitioning parliament was in its heyday. Between 1780 and 1918 over one million petitions were sent to the House of Commons (Miller, 2023) and by the nineteenth century, petitioning was not just about procedural requests but about the expression of participatory preferences (Huzzey and Miller, 2021), much like the ‘everyday politics’ of today. Petitioning became something that was “encouraged privately and publicly” by MPs (Miller, 2023: 230) and alongside petitions themselves, citizens engaged - then, as now - in a range of other actions such as marches and public meetings. Indeed, for Charles Tilly, petitioning at this time was part of a new repertoire of collective action that was emerging in Britain (Tilly, 1995; see also Tilly 2008). The growth of petitioning during this time, therefore, suggests that the link between the public and parliament, despite being in many ways being forged on constituent-representative relationships, should not be seen narrowly in terms of general elections and constituency work and that the history of the public’s engagement with politics is more complex, existing in various ways.

This wider view of political engagement is important to establish because it highlights a potential tension between the essence of the UK’s parliamentary democracy - MP-constituent links and a strong executive - and the nature of petitioning which historically stretches the boundaries of this relationship. With this tension in mind, the changes in contemporary political engagement practices outlined in the preceding sections raise important challenges for parliament because there is increasing demand amongst the public for new ways to engage outside of electoral periods. The once rigid fabric of British parliamentary democracy is, therefore, being stretched by the changing practices and expectations of the public whose practices in an ‘era of communicative plenty’ (Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2016) suggest that electoral politics is not enough.

With this challenge in mind, Judge and Leston-Bandeira (2018) draw our attention to the new and increasing role of *institutional* representation in which it is not just politicians who engage with the public, via traditional petitions, elections or otherwise but where parliamentary staff who work for and represent the institution of parliament play a role, too (see also Leston-Bandeira and Siefken, 2023). Such changes have been relatively recent and enable us to better understand the contemporary participation landscape because they represent how the institution

is seeking to respond towards the participatory preferences and practices highlighted in section 2.2. For example, the 2009 House of Commons Reform Committee recommended wide ranging, significant changes that included a “primary focus of the House’s overall agenda for engagement with the public to be shifted toward actively assisting a greater degree of public participation” (HC1117, 2008-09: p.6) and recommended changes to the Downing Street e-petitions system with this in mind. Changes under Speaker of the House, John Bercow, provided greater resources for such developments which means that, increasingly, parliamentary staff speak for parliament and act on the institution’s behalf. Interestingly, trends in this direction can be seen first in the UK with the creation of the Scottish Parliament, which from its beginnings was committed to community outreach (Seaton, 2005). In Westminster today, we see pushes towards wider public engagement in the work of the Education Centre which, amongst other activities, arranges visits to parliament that are “conceived, planned and implemented by parliamentary staff” (Leston-Bandeira and Siefken, 2023: 364). So, when we examine the role and function of the UK Parliament today we see a legislature that is “not just focused on the relationship with the executive but [that] plays an important role in mediating between public and governance” (Leston-Bandeira and Siefken, 2023: 367), suggesting that the institutional response to the challenges and trends outlined in this chapter has been one that seeks to reach out to the public. These developments mean that the democratic goods of enhanced public participation (Smith, 2009) and the transparency and inclusiveness of processes (Nabatchi, 2010) are increasingly prevalent in the work of parliament.

The UK Government and Parliament e-petition system was set up in 2015 within this wider context to bring about a “significant enhancement of the relationship between the petitioning public and their elected representatives” (Procedure Committee, HC 235, 2014-15: para 81). The system was established after the House agreed a motion for the creation of a collaborative system that would enable the public to petition the House and press the government for action. It followed an almost decade-long journey; despite successful implementation elsewhere in the world and the existence of two government-based systems in the UK - first the Downing Street system established in 2006 and second the HM Government system in 2011 - between 2005 and 2014, discussions about establishing a parliamentary e-petitions system were unsuccessful. The government systems had been marred by issues around ownership, implementation, moderation and public expectations (Wright, 2012; Bochel, 2016) and the mechanisms for government responses were not sufficient (Wright, 2016). Indeed, previous Downing Street systems were

criticised for failing to deliver on promises, and for risking “an exacerbation of public disillusionment with the political system in the long-term” (Hansard Society, 2012, p. 5).

Meanwhile, the matter of a parliament-based system bounced between various reports with seemingly little appetite for change. From the 2007 *Public Petitions and Early Day Motions* Procedure Committee report (HC 513, 2007) to the 2009 Reform of the House of Commons - ‘Wright’ - Committee conclusions that the issue be further discussed (HC 1117, 2008-09), the system as is now only came into fruition with the 2014 *E-petitions: A Collaborative System* Procedure Committee report (HC 235, 2014-15). It was this report that set out how to overcome challenges around cost and facilitation, and it noted how a collaborative system between government and parliament could improve the public’s relationship with the House by offering opportunities for the public to petition the House of Commons *and* press for action from the government, playing an important ‘linkage’ role identified above as a core function of petitioning (Leston, Bandeira, 2019; Hough, 2012). Importantly, the creation of the new system in 2015 marked the first time in the UK that members of the public could petition the House of Commons electronically, marking an altogether new era in which public engagement with parliament could take place online.

The system is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding between parliament and government. It is overseen by the Petitions Committee; a House of Commons select committee. The Committee has the ability to undertake typical select committee activities including receiving evidence and undertaking inquiries and it is an example of the ‘designed coupling’ (Hendriks, 2016) highlighted above because it acts as a formal link between the public and parliament in the following ways. When a member of the public submits an e-petition, it is moderated by the Petitions Committee who checks if the e-petition meets the requirements. Most notably, that it calls for different action to another e-petition and that the action it calls for is clear and is the responsibility of the UK Government or the House of Commons. Once published, the e-petition will stay live on the website for six months during which time it can be signed by members of the public. 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 Westminster Hall debate. Westminster Hall debates do not include votable motions and are instead intended to provide a platform for the e-petition to be heard in parliament. Throughout this thesis, I refer to these two signature thresholds as ‘formal milestones’. Additionally, the Committee can ask for more information, write to the

government, conduct inquiries, share the e-petition with other select committees, or conduct other public engagement activities such as meeting with members of the public who are directly affected by the issues raised in petitions. In terms of institutional procedures, the UK system is largely regarded as well designed, and the Petitions Committee is well-established within the literature as providing important procedural guarantees of a connection between the public and sites of decision making (Matthews, 2023).

2.5 Gaps in our understanding

The literature highlighted in this chapter underscores that, like other democratic innovations, parliamentary e-petitions ought to not be considered as a panacea to issues of democratic dissatisfaction. But they may reap a range of democratic goods as a tool for citizens to input into formal institutions and for these institutions to in turn understand the issues facing and the preferences of citizens, reflecting also new trends about how citizens choose to engage with politics. Indeed, Karpf (2017) argues that petition platforms offer a tool for ‘digital listening’ which provides ‘passive democratic feedback’ on the concerns and grievances of citizens. Institutionalised parliamentary e-petitions are an important tool in doing so because of the procedural guarantees they bring, shown in the literature to feed directly into policy making processes (Hough 2012; Leston-Bandeira, 2019) and strengthen institutional ties between citizens and policy makers (Blumenau, 2021). With the trends in the e-petitioning literature and calls for the application of a systems level approach to our analysis of various democratic tools and sites in mind, there are the following gaps in our understanding from which this thesis’s research questions are developed.

The focus within the e-petitions literature is overwhelmingly narrowed in on institutional processes, functions and design of petition systems. Whilst important for our understanding of how formal procedures affect uptake and the realisation of potential democratic ‘goods’, it is largely focused on parliamentary e-petitions in isolation, with little consideration of how they may interact with the everyday politics of citizens, how citizens themselves view and use the systems, and how parliamentary e-petitions systems may sit within wider democratic systems. Systems level thinking about *both* where engagement with e-petitions occurs and where this engagement is fed into the system has not yet been systematically applied. In this way, in terms of the connections between the public and parliament, we know little about the interaction of and interdependence between e-petitions and informal sites of political engagement such as

social media. These gaps are particularly acute in terms of the following points, which inform my three core research questions as outlined in Chapter 1.

Firstly, despite the trends outlined in sections 2.1 and 2.2, there has been little focus on the ‘everyday’ nature of parliamentary e-petitions, most notably about how they are utilised by citizens as a tool for activism in informal communicative spaces online. This is despite their inherent online nature and large signature thresholds (in the UK) which necessitate petitioners achieving a large ‘reach’ to gain signatures. Two exceptions to this are the studies of Asher, Leston-Bandeira and Spaiser (2019) and Matthews (2023) who both consider the Petition Committee’s social media accounts and practices. However, where these two studies do analyse the social media practices that exist around e-petitions, they were focussed on engagement with the Petitions Committee’s account on Twitter (now X) and so the dynamics through which the public use social media to engage with e-petitions themselves as opposed to the Committee still remains largely unknown. A lack of consideration of the public’s activities in relation to e-petitions is a limitation of the literature because we have seen how everyday politics is an increasingly important component of contemporary political engagement and e-petitions provide the public with opportunities to engage with politics in ad hoc, personally driven ways.

Related to this gap, acknowledgement of the campaigning role of parliamentary e-petitions is often in terms of the mobilising abilities of e-petitions: how the public may come together around an issue (e.g. Leston-Bandeira, 2019; Rosenberger et al 2022). In part because of the tendency to analyse e-petition systems in isolation (i.e. in terms of institutional processes), there has been little consideration of the campaigning activities of petitioners. That is, what their e-petition campaigns actually entail and the methods and strategies that petitioners might employ when engaging with the e-petition system. When considering this point against the literature on changing political engagement which highlights the increasing and changing repertoires of political action, there is a clear gap in our understanding of the role that parliamentary e-petitions play in this wider landscape. Bringing the focus on what specific everyday campaign activities are undertaken in relation to e-petitions enables greater understanding of how might (or might not) contribute to wider repertoires of political action today. Hence, RQ1 seeks to establish and understand the campaigning activities of petitioners, recognising that these activities are likely to take place in everyday spaces and on social media:

RQ1: What are the informal public sites in which everyday engagement with parliamentary e-petitions occurs, and what are the characteristics of the activities that occur within these sites?

Secondly, the insights from the ‘systems thinking’ literature underscore that it is important to also understand how parliamentary e-petition systems integrate the voices of citizens into the work of parliament: how the campaigning activities addressed in RQ1 ‘feed in’ to wider policy making processes. Given that parliamentary e-petitions sit at a juncture between institutionally instituted democratic innovations and the ‘everyday’ political practices of citizens, the relationship between these spheres merits empirical attention in order for a more holistic understanding of how parliamentary e-petitions systems feature as an “extension of the participation repertoire” (Hooghe and Marien, 2014). Indeed the various dynamics through which the public may be connected to parliament is an important point to consider because the petitioning literature has underscored that the mechanisms through which citizens are ‘listened to’ by policy makers matter for perceptions and experiences of engagement with the systems (Carman, 2010; Wright, 2012) and the ‘success’ of democratic innovations hinges on effective ‘throughput mechanisms’ (Schmidt, 2013).

Where this consideration has taken place, we have seen how such mechanisms can be formally tied, for example through legislative bodies like the Petitions Committee, which Hendriks (2016) underscores as a key coupling mechanism that “forge[s] links between the public spaces in a deliberative system and the more empowered spaces” (p. 57). But, where focus has been placed on the coupling of the public sphere to the formal sphere of parliament in petitioning, it has been almost entirely on this formal connection - ‘designed coupling’ (Hendriks, 2016) - through the role of the Petitions Committee. The role of other parliamentary actors or mechanisms outside of the Committee in connecting petitioners to parliament is underdeveloped and, with the exception of Matthews (2023), there has been little empirical focus on the connective roles of informal actors - other ‘inducers of connectivity’ (Mendonça, 2016) - like the media. Both other parliamentary actors and non-institutional actors are defined in this research ‘informal’ connective mechanisms because they are outside of the auspices of the ‘formal’ role of Petitions Committee. To address this gap in knowledge about the connections between petitioners and parliament and respond to Mendonça’s observation that there is “urgent need” for further research into the role of informal actors that promote connectivity between the public and representative institutions (Mendonça, 2016: 186), this thesis seeks to explore empirically the

formal *and* informal connective mechanisms between informal online sites of discussion and the formal representative institution of parliament in order to better understand interplay between ‘speaking’ and ‘listening’. As such, RQ2 is as follows:

RQ2: What are the formal and informal connective mechanisms that exist between sites of discussion in the sphere of citizen participation and the sphere of parliament?

Finally, focus on parliamentary e-petition outcomes is largely underdeveloped in the literature with very few studies seeking to directly address questions around outcomes and success, particularly in the UK context. Where focus is explicitly placed on outcomes, it is usually in terms of the procedures of the systems or based upon quantitative measures such as numbers of signatures. For example, Bochel (2020) underscores how different outcomes can be achieved from different e-petition processes, for example, how formal petitions committee discussions of an e-petition might lead to the ‘outcome’ of the petition issue being placed on the parliamentary agenda, highlighting in turn how ‘success’ might exist on a continuum. Similarly, Wright’s (2016) study of the Downing Street e-petition system (the predecessor to the current system) draws our attention to how the outcomes of the system may have been undermined by poor government responses but is outdated in the sense that the new collaborative system launched in 2015 is procedurally different to the Downing Street system.

By addressing the two gaps above about how the public are engaging with parliamentary e-petition systems in informal spaces and how their campaigning activities might be connected to parliament, this thesis is well positioned to develop further our understanding of e-petition outcomes and success by examining what happens to petitioners and their e-petition campaigns. In doing so it will provide greater empirical understanding of e-petition ‘success’ by identifying what e-petitions achieve from a broader perspective that considers the influence of non-institutional actions. As such, the final question guiding this thesis is simple, seeking to explore what the outcomes of petitioners actions (RQ1) and the connections to parliament (RQ2) are, and what the subsequent value of these two components of petitioning may be to petitioners:

RQ3: What are the outcomes of petitioners' campaign activities, and what subsequent value do these activities bring to petitioners' objectives?

2.6 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has provided a summary of the current scholarship on parliamentary e-petitions situated against a backdrop of democratic dissatisfaction and changing patterns of political participation. I have highlighted how repertoires of political action today encompass everyday forms of engagement, and how online political participation is increasingly popular. Responding to these challenges, political institutions have sought to extend their reach and relevance and engage citizens in new and innovative ways which can achieve a range of possible democratic goods such as enhanced participation. One such way has been through the introduction of parliamentary e-petitions systems which provide citizens with a direct channel into formal political spheres and sit at the juncture of the informal and formal spheres (Habermas, 2009) because they encourage online participation but are tied to the democratic institution of parliament. Despite extensive consideration of parliamentary e-petitions in the literature, there has not been a systematic appraisal of the following points.

Firstly, the sites where engagement with parliamentary e-petitions systems takes place including at the level of the ‘everyday’ and online. Whilst scholarship hints in this direction (see Asher, Leston-Bandeira and Spaiser, 2019), a neglect within the field to consider it in depth limits our understanding in terms of the relationship and connections between civil society where e-petitions are discussed and disseminated and the formal representative institutions where e-petitions are considered and actions are taken against them. Relatedly, current literature also neglects to focus on the range of connectors between citizens and parliament, tending to focus on the role of formal processes and connective mechanisms as instituted by the Petitions Committee. As a result, little consideration has been given to other ‘inducers of connectivity’ (Mendonça, 2016) that may exist beyond just the ‘designed coupling’ (Hendriks, 2016) of legislative committees. This skewed perspective means that we have an incomplete understanding of the integration of citizens ‘voices’ and formal and informal sites of listening. By taking a holistic systems-level approach whereby the scale of analysis is expanded to the distinguishable, but to some degree interdependent parts (Mansbridge et al, 2012; Parkinson, 2012) of the parliamentary e-petitions system, this thesis is positioned to focus on not just parliamentary e-petitions themselves but how they interact with and are linked to the wider political system, both in terms of parliamentary outcomes and engagement in civil society.

In his reflections on the state of the field, Smith (2019) argues that the relationship between democratic innovations and centres of power is ripe for research and suggests that there is scope to research the conditions under which democratic innovations are institutionalised and impact decision making. By considering not just the input of citizens to parliamentary e-petitions systems but also the mechanisms for ‘digital listening’ (Karpf, 2012), this research is able to do so. Theoretically this research contributes an application of systems level thinking to the study of parliamentary e-petitions and, analytically, it centralises the importance of the everyday to contemporary engagement with parliament. To realise these ambitions, the next chapter explains how the research will proceed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

At its core, this thesis aims to understand who is speaking to parliament through the e-petition system and, in turn, who is listening to petitioners within parliament. It seeks to understand both how - in terms of methods, strategies and mechanisms - and why actors come to be involved in the petition process, and what the subsequent outcomes are. In the previous chapter, we saw how everyday and online practices are increasingly important for our understanding of political participation as well as the need to consider the intersection of campaigning objectives and parliamentary procedures, and outcomes. This chapter addresses how I aim to bridge the gap between these two 'spheres' (Habermas, 2009) and answer the following three research questions through the methods of document analysis and semi-structured interviews.

- RQ1: What are the informal public sites in which everyday engagement with parliamentary e-petitions occurs, and what are the characteristics of the activities that occur within these sites?
- RQ2: What are the formal and informal connective mechanisms that exist between sites of discussion in the sphere of citizen participation and the sphere of parliament?
- RQ3: What are the outcomes of petitioners' campaign activities, and what subsequent value do these activities bring to petitioners' objectives?

This chapter is structured as follows. In section 3.1, I first consider my ontological and epistemological foundations - the 'fit' between theory and the methods I used - recognising that methodological choices reflect underlying ontological positions (Jackson, 2013). I then outline the approach I took to case study selection, reflecting both on the criteria I used to funnel down to the case studies and the practical elements of administering this criteria (section 3.2). I then explain the methods I used to collect my data - documentary analysis and interviews (section 3.3) - and how I analysed them (section 3.4). Having done the above, in section 3.5 I offer some reflections on the methods used and the potential limitations of taking this approach.

3.1 Theoretical foundations

Before I outline the methods I undertook, it is necessary to understand why I chose them in the first place: our assumptions affect our research. I take an anti-foundationalist ontological

position to research. The broad thrust of this approach is that there is no ‘real world’ or foundation out there to be discovered; the world is not objective to our understanding but rather it is shaped by our understanding, assumptions and perceptions (Furlong and Marsh, 2010). In contrast to positivist approaches that believe there is meaning ‘out there’ in the world waiting to be discovered, anti-foundationalist approaches take the principle that realities are constructed and that we, as individuals, do not have objective access to them. An anti-foundationalist approach, therefore, is committed to a more holistic approach to understanding because it focuses on perspectives as negotiated through communication and everyday actions (Deutsche, 1991). This approach is useful to understanding petitioning and the intersection of civil society and democratic institutions because it privileges both the experience of those involved and the relative importance attached to various parts of the petitioning process.

As such, I take an epistemological position in which interpretivist approaches are favoured. In line with Bevir and Rhodes’ (2003: 1) belief that “to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the belief and preferences of the people involved”, I hold that action is meaningful and so to understand the petitioning process and its relationship to parliament we must therefore uncover and understand the practices of petitioners and parliamentary actors. So, I sought to use methods that would enable me to uncover the motivations, methods, expectations and reflections of petitioners and parliamentary actors from their experience and point of view. In Chapter 2, I stated the importance of considering the ‘everyday’ practices of petitioners in order to understand the constituent parts of the petitioning process and how they relate. We saw how everyday spaces can act as the “crucible of negotiation between the public and private, the political and personal” (Graham, Jackson and Wright, 2016: 1384). As a result, the case study selection criteria and the methods chosen sought to uncover these everyday practices by both hearing from actors themselves about their practices and observing these practices through campaign materials and social media posts so that I could glean insight into the mindset of interviewees and their (subjective) analysis of their experiences (Rubin and Rubin, 2004). In doing so, focus is placed not just on why everyday practices are important for understanding contemporary democratic engagement, but also how everyday politics can be studied in relation to formal political processes.

In using interviews and documentary analysis I recognise the existence of a double hermeneutic. The basis of my data is the interpretations of actors involved in the petitioning process, either as articulated in interviews or implicit in social media posts, campaign material or parliamentary

documents. Whether direct recollection and interpretation of petitioning from the interviews, or interpretation in the form of documents or social media, the analysis and insights that I produce in this thesis are my interpretation of these interpretations. Described by Geertz (1973), this means that research provides “our constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (p.9). In line with the anti-foundationalist approach above, it is noted that the interpretations of those involved in this project and my own are not ‘whole’ or ‘true’ for two reasons. First, I, as the researcher, play an inextricable role in retelling these stories and that my interpretations of petitioners and parliamentary actors’ experiences are entangled in the findings I present in chapters 4 and 5. Second, the stories told by this research, in the words of Crang and Cook (2007: 8), “involve a recasting of the past, omitting some elements, stressing others, ‘forgetting’ much more and constantly referring outside the frame of the research encounter”. As a result, it is more than likely that within and between parts of these accounts there will be inconsistencies and contradictions but, given the commitment to understanding the subjective meanings of individuals involved in the petitioning process, such accounts are interesting and bring valuable findings to the three research questions guiding this thesis.

3.2 Case study selection

In the 2019-2024 Parliament, 52,033 e-petitions were submitted online, of which 13,753 were accepted and published by the Petitions Committee. But qualitative research prioritises depth, not breadth, and an analysis of over 13,000 e-petitions would not provide me with the rich insight needed to answer the three research questions. In this section, I outline the approach I took to narrow this number down, mapping out the decisions made at each stage of the process against the research questions and explaining why this process was beneficial based on the gaps identified in Chapter 2. The process I took is visualised in Figure 1. In Table 1, I present a more detailed overview of the selected e-petitions but to protect the anonymity of those involved, I do not include identifiable information such as the e-petition title.

Stage 1: Policy area

In order to understand the actions of petitioners and the subsequent value of petitioning, I sought to focus broadly on ‘issue areas’, operationalised as government policy areas, which may involve multiple petitions submitted over a period of time by numerous different petitioners, and which may incorporate a diverse range of formal and informal campaigns, tools, activities and

connections (RQ1). The policy communities literature highlights how the actions that occur within an issue area draw our attention to the relationships between actors involved in the policy making process beyond just that of politicians and civil servants by providing a narrowing focus (Helco, 1978; Richardson and Jordan, 1979). Given this research's explicit focus on actions in both the informal sphere where everyday politics takes place and actions in the formal sphere of parliament, by focusing on a specific policy area the possible number of case studies to select from is narrowed whilst still anticipating the complex, often asynchronous relationship between citizen input and policy output and the presence of multiple campaigns, tools or activities mentioned in Chapter 2. This narrowing focus is essential for in-depth qualitative research and by analysing petitions in one policy area as opposed to across multiple policy areas, this research is positioned to compare the details of e-petition strategies and outcomes across case studies.

All parliamentary e-petitions that received over 10,000 signatures from the start of the 2019 Parliament to March 2023 (when case selection took place) were categorised by general policy area (e.g. healthcare, education), in order to capture petitions within one issue area. The most frequent area was selected for stage 2. A cut off of 10,000 signatures was given because multiple studies indicate that signatories are an important indicator of petition salience (Jungherr and Jürgens, 2010; Lindner and Riehm, 2011) and it is at 10,000 signatures that the government will publish a written response to the e-petition request. It is, therefore, the first point at which there are formal guarantees that a parliamentary e-petition will receive the attention of policy makers. Additionally, choosing the cut off of 100,000 signatures (the second signature threshold) would risk prioritising the most highly organised and highly mobilised campaign groups or NGOs (Chaney, Jones and Fevre, 2022); 10,000 signatures offers a necessary floor and ceiling from which we can best understand the range of actions that occur around an e-petition campaign.

I downloaded the CSV data from the 'Open Petitions' page on the E-petitions website which provides the petition name, URL and signature count and uploaded this into an Excel spreadsheet. As above, I filtered out e-petitions which had not received 10,000+ signatures. 786 e-petitions remained which had received 10,000+ signatures by March 2023. I then assigned a topic to each of the remaining e-petitions aligned to a general policy area, taking inspiration from the Comparative Agenda Project's topic codebook which seeks to classify government and public agendas according to the policy areas they address (Bevan, 2019). Example topic areas include 'education', 'immigration' and 'defence'. Within the 786 e-petitions, the two most

populous areas were ‘animals’ (83) and ‘healthcare’ (70) petitions.¹ Based on frequency - to maximise the number of potential e-petitions I could select from in later stages - I proceeded with ‘animal’ e-petitions.

Stage 2: Common petition sub-topics

To narrow down further, I employed the same strategy as in stage one and considered the most populous subcategories within the ‘animal’ parent topic. I applied sub-topics from the approach of Chaney, Jones and Fevre (2022), who determined 16 animal welfare sub-topics featured in e-petitions in successive parliaments, 2010-2019. Example topics include ‘farms’ and ‘testing’. After assigning sub-topics to all of the remaining 83 e-petitions, the two most frequent were ‘pets’ (19) and ‘wildlife conservation’ (19). As above, continuing to the next stage with the two most frequent topic areas maximised the potential options to select from in the next stages and selecting two subcategories ensured that I wasn’t unduly narrowing focus. These sub-topics together total 38 e-petitions.

Stage 3: Ensuring variation

To narrow down this pool of 38 e-petitions to a smaller number appropriate for case study research, in stage three of the process I prioritised the following considerations, both of which map onto the priorities of my three research questions and enable in-depth comparison across case studies.

Consideration A: Petitions Committee and relevant actions (RQ2)

Within these 38 e-petitions, consideration of the range of possible parliamentary and non-parliamentary actions taken on petitions within the topic network was given so that points of difference could be interrogated, particularly in terms of campaign activities (RQ1) and how connections might be forged between these actions and parliament, for example, by the Petitions Committee or informal actors (RQ2). So, I prioritised including e-petitions where there had either been little or no involvement from the Committee versus one where there had been (e.g.

¹ There were 232 Covid-19 e-petitions but these were not considered for selection because of my focus on the situation of parliamentary e-petitions within long term, wider campaigning activities. The short-termist nature of Covid-19 petitions did not allow for this consideration.

letters to government departments) or where there had been a variety of external campaigning actions (e.g. picked up by the media). This was so that I could consider the outcomes of different formal connections and interventions compared to actions in the informal sphere and by non-institutional connective actors such as the media (RQ2).

In practice, this meant undertaking a period of desk-based research in which I looked at documents from the Committee and petitioners as well as social media posts and news articles to determine what actions had taken place.

Consideration B: E-petition creator (RQ1 and RQ3)

In order to prevent potential bias towards areas where campaign networks are already well-established, which might prevent understanding of the actions of petitioners and the subsequent merits and value of parliamentary e-petitions to less visible groups, the selection process placed emphasis on the creator of the e-petition (i.e. the person or organisation behind the e-petition), where applicable and identifiable. My aim was to include a range of creator types, determined by the relative size of the campaigning team or organisation. At this stage, I only used very broad categories for the types of petitioners - individuals, small groups, or large groups - to capture this range of types. In the data analysis stage, I fleshed these out in more detail based upon the content of available documents or interview transcripts, noting for example differences in prior experience of petitioning or resources. Some examples of the initial categories are shown in Table 1 but I outline this analysis process in section 3.4, and I present the findings about petitioner types in detail in Chapter 4.

In practice, petitioners were identified by first examining if the creator was named on the petition website. If named, I undertook desk-based research into the creator's petitioning background and that of their organisation or group, if applicable. If not named, I explored the petition's online presence, for example, if a creator, organisation or campaign group has shared it online and identified themselves as the creator or if it is featured on a website. In taking this approach, a range of creators were identified and included in the case studies. This was an important research design principle because it helps to prevent bias towards highly networked, highly visible groups whose campaign networks exist regardless of and independent of parliamentary e-petitions. Importantly, this approach enables this research to explore the ways in which campaign activities and the connections forged between petitioners and parliament may be

different between different petitioner types (RQ1 and RQ2), and if this leads to different outcomes (RQ3).

Making final selections

In order to map out the various contours of considerations A and B, I placed the 38 e-petitions from Stage 2 into an Excel spreadsheet and noted the formal and informal actions that had taken place (consideration A), and the type of creator (consideration B). For the majority of these 38 e-petitions there was a large chunk of information missing. For example, I could not identify all creators or there had been a lack of online presence which meant I could not determine the campaign actions that had taken place. Of those where I could identify all of the relevant information, I was able to narrow down to a total of five e-petitions which demonstrated a range of the considerations outlined above. Table 1 shows the (anonymised) petitions that were chosen mapped against their different qualities. In all, the petitions I selected represent a range of campaign activities and petitioner types.

Figure 1: Case selection process

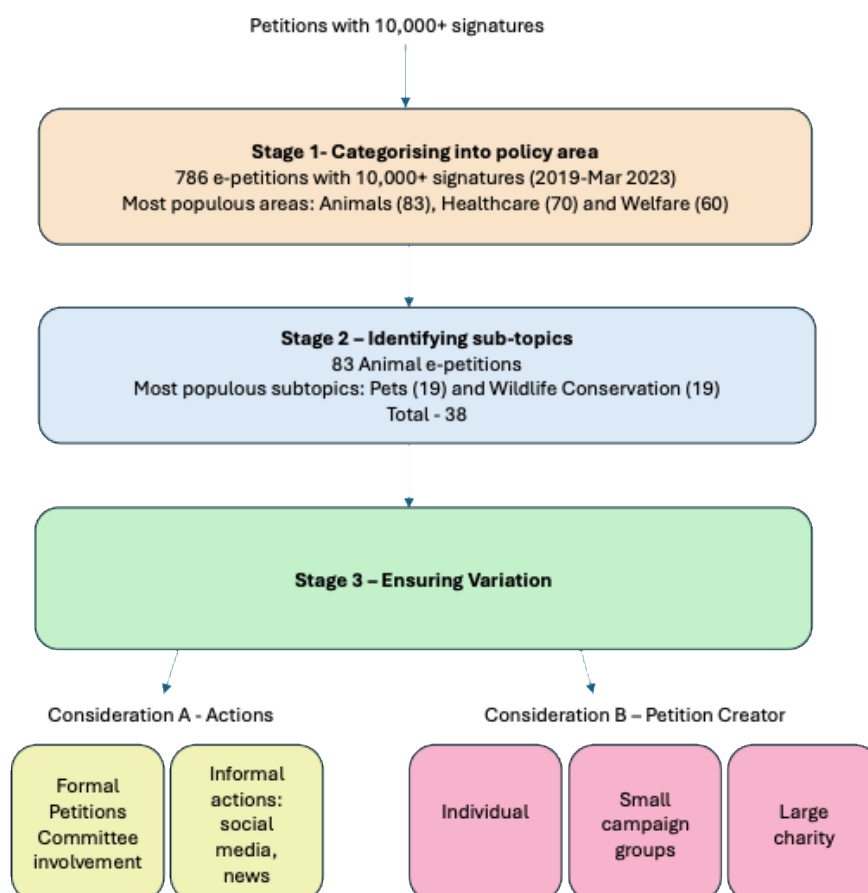


Table 1: Selection process of five case study e-petitions

Petition	Subtopic	Signatures	Petitions Committee action	Other parliamentary actions	Campaigner type	Media presence
1	Wildlife conservation	109,000+	Government response; E-petition debate	Amendment to a bill tabled; Private Members' Bill	Individual. No prior campaigning experience; supported by major large national charity and two smaller charities	Significant social media presence; specific 'tactics'; significant engagement with media outlets
2	Wildlife conservation	107,000+	Government response; E-petition debate; Committee wrote to and received letters from Defra	Collaboration with MP and Peer; general lobbying; letters to and from Defra	Small but highly active group; high-profile campaigners including celebrity; established parliamentary relationships; volunteers	Significant social media presence; resources to run ads; some engagement with media outlets
3	Pets	109,000+	Government response; E-petition debate	Early Day Motion; Private Members' Bill; meetings with ministers	Small group; volunteers; few resources	Some social media presence; some engagement with media (radio) outlets; reliant upon volunteer manpower
4	Pets	12,600+	Government response	Private Members' Bill; evidence to a select committee inquiry; Govt 'action plan'; Govt consultation; meetings with ministers	Two individual campaigners. Some prior experience of campaigning and came together for petition; few resources; submitted multiple e-petitions	Some social media presence; some media presence; award winners within campaigning area
5	Both	108,000+	Government response; E-petition debate; Committee wrote to and received letters from Defra	Opposition day debate; Already a bill in progress	One individual. Little prior campaigning or petitioning experience but with credibility within the field due to job; highly networked; celebrity connections	Significant social media presence, some media presence

How this approach enables me to answer the research questions

With each stage and consideration brought together, the selection criteria I used enabled me to consider the large number of potential variables, as indicated by the literature, that affect the ‘fate’ (Font et al, 2018) and outcomes of parliamentary e-petitions, including the institutional and non-institutional ‘coupling’ mechanisms (RQ2) (Hendriks, 2016) and the ‘repertoires of collective action’ (Tilly, 1984; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001) that are utilised by campaigners (RQ1 and RQ3). This approach is favourable for a number of reasons.

Firstly, this strategy better reflects the reality of e-petitioning, where some issues come up repeatedly via a number of e-petitions. For example, in the three parliaments from 2010-2019, over 2500 e-petitions on animal welfare were submitted and sub-topics including ‘testing’, ‘imports’ and ‘slaughter’ varied in line with “changing media attention to issues, greater reporting of animal abuse, legal and policy gains, as well as exogenous campaigns by civil society groups” (Chaney, Jones and Fevre, 2022: 822). This approach enables, therefore, a better understanding of how petitions accumulate around certain topic areas or campaigns and how a variety of actors are involved in the process. As highlighted in Chapter 2, a focus on the intertwining of e-petitions and wider political activities through the actions of petitioners is something that has not been prioritised by extant research on parliamentary e-petitions and this approach, therefore, enables this research to provide necessary empirical knowledge about the intersection of petitioners’ motivations, campaigning activities and links to parliament.

Secondly, this strategy is intended to ensure consideration of the range of the wider campaign actions of petitioners *and* the range of parliamentary and non-parliamentary actors who may be involved in disseminating e-petitions and connecting them to parliament (Dryzek, 2010) (RQ2). As we saw in Chapter 2, existing literature has highlighted the important role of legislative committees in facilitating public input, listening, deliberation and public judgement (Hendriks and Kay, 2019) and, indeed, the Petitions Committee has been underscored elsewhere as a prominent institutional actor (e.g. Matthews, 2023; Leston-Bandeira, 2019). But, by considering actions additional to those of the Petitions Committee, this research is able to fill the gap in extant literature in terms of the range of formal and informal actors that play facilitative roles and reflect the long term nature of policy processes and campaigning which occurs in multiple sites both in and beyond parliament (RQ2) (Mansbridge, 1999; Mansbridge et al, 2012).

Thirdly, prioritising issue networks in which a range of actors are involved prevents privileging just those voices with the money or resources to campaign. Chaney, Jones and Fevre's (2022) analysis of animal welfare e-petitions submitted between 2010 and 2019 finds that 65 percent of petitions that achieved 100,000+ signatures were submitted by or on behalf of NGOs. It is, therefore, an important design principle of this strategy that attention is placed on those less resourced petitioners who have less mobilising capacity.

Brought together, this strategy is intentionally exploratory, reflecting the fact that we know little about the everyday, online campaigning activities of petitioners, the various formal and informal avenues through which these actions are fed into parliament and the subsequent outcomes of these activities. An approach that explores petitioning within a general policy area maximises the likelihood that a range of actions or policy outcomes have occurred whilst still allowing for meaningful comparison across cases.

In line with approaches which recognise that valuable insights that can be gleaned from non-academic, practitioner-based knowledge, (Flinders, Wood and Cunningham, 2016; Firchow and Gellman, 2021) the design of the case study selection process was shared with Petitions Committee staff for their feedback before final selections were made. Then, the five selected were also shared. I did so in case the Committee had internal knowledge of other parliamentary actions or campaigning activities that might be useful considerations. Whilst final selections did not change following this feedback - the Committee agreed that the petitions chosen reflected the case study criteria outlined - it was useful nonetheless because the Petitions Committee was also able to suggest actors that I should consider interviewing based on the petitions I selected. Whilst I did reach out to these people, I also ensured that I undertook my own desk-based research into who would be useful to interview, as I will outline in section 3.3, to prevent a selection bias. I return to the Petitions Committee's involvement in later stages of the research in section 3.3 *Data Collection*.

The strategy in practice

The intent of this exploratory strategy was to select cases which provided me with the widest range of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary actions and petitioner types as possible so that comparisons about petitioner strategies, connections and outcomes could be gleaned. Because of

this, I was open to snowballing e-petitions from within the issue area if it was likely to add valuable insight into the two considerations outlined above.

In practice, this meant that a number of interviewees told me of their wider campaigning activities and suggested that I speak to some of the actors involved. The additional actors I chose to interview had all created their own petitions and supported the case study e-petition campaigns in some way. In this way, I was able to ‘snowball’ from the original five case studies and explore a wider network or ecosystem of campaigners who were all working on broadly the same areas (RQ1 and RQ3). It became clear that within the circle of pet welfare campaigners in particular that many individuals and organisations not only worked on similar issues but actively worked together to achieve campaigning goals. Interestingly, and somewhat surprisingly, sometimes petitioners across all of the case studies would mention one another when I had no inclination that they had collaborated. This was because they had worked together behind the scenes instead of publicly and it was, therefore, not evident during desk-based research that this relationship existed. In the end, I interviewed actors who had been involved in a total of nine different e-petitions and the characteristics of these additional e-petitions broadly mirror those of the original ones chosen, as shown in Table 3, but they have additional characteristics such as celebrity influence that provide interesting similarities and differences to the original five chosen.

Whilst I acknowledge that the final number of nine case studies is at the larger end of case study research (Boddy, 2016), and that there is a risk of selection bias when snowballing in this way (Leuffen, 2007), focussing on these additional e-petitions likely gave me a broader perspective on the types of petitioners and petition campaigns that utilise the system. It gave me additional understanding as to how the activities of petitioners may generate networks of campaigns - their outcomes (RQ3) - that operate in and around parliament because the case studies were often overlapping in their campaigns. In Chapter 4, I explore these networks in depth.

Table 2: Frequency of total e-petition topics

Petition topic area	Frequency
Wildlife conservation	2
Pets	5
Both	2
Total	9

Table 3: Additional e-petitions

Additional petitions	Subtopic	Petitions Committee action	Other parliamentary actions	Campaigner type	Media presence
1	Pets	Government response; E-petition debate	APPG; general lobbying	Individual with prior experience; highly networked; creation of a formal campaign group	Child of a well-known TV personality; significant media presence; some social media presence; creation of a website
2	Pets	Government response; E-petition debate	None	Individual with no prior experiences; able to tap into celebrity connections	Some social media presence; some media presence including on major daytime TV show
3	Pets	Government response; E-petition debate	APPG; general lobbying; meetings with ministers; government consultations	Celebrity; well-connected and highly networked	A celebrity campaigner; significant social media and media presence
4	Both	Government response; E-petition debate	General lobbying; preexisting relationships with ministers and MPs	Large international charity	Charity's significant social media presence

3.3 Data collection

The methods used in this research are document analysis, including of social media posts, and semi-structured interviews. I undertook the research in a two-step process which began with document analysis followed by interviews, for reasons I outline below. Both of these methods are consistent with the theoretical foundations outlined in section 3.1 and are also consistent with previous research in the field. For example, recent research on parliamentary e-petitions systems has interviewed petitioners (Leston-Bandeira and Tacheva, 2024), drawn on document analysis (Matthews, 2023), and analysed conversations about e-petitions on Twitter (Asher, Leston-Bandeira and Spaiser, 2019). In this section I outline, for both methods, why I chose that approach, its application and relation to the case study strategy outlined above, and any challenges I encountered. All aspects of this research received ethical approval from the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield.

Document Analysis

Both petitioners, as campaigners, and parliament, as an institution, produce a large number of documents, all of which tell us something about the campaign strategies or formal procedures employed, respectively. Campaign materials from petitioners, such as blog posts, website pages, letters and social media posts are likely to provide valuable insight into not just how they campaign during the petitions process but also why, highlighting in different ways their motivations, expectations and experiences of the process (RQ1 and RQ3). Similarly, parliamentary documents such as debate transcripts, questions, motions and select committee reports bring the formal actions of parliamentary actors to life by demonstrating various actors' formal positions (RQ2). Informal documents from parliamentarians including social media posts, media statements or websites are likely to further provide interesting insights about how they interpret and present their work to the public (RQ2). Brought together, documents provide a rich landscape from which it is possible to make sense of the petitioning ecosystem. I chose to undertake documentary analysis first because it would enable me to build up foundational knowledge of each e-petition campaign and highlight aspects to discuss further from which I could prepare for interviews.

Application

I began documentary analysis in summer 2023 and sought out a range of materials for each case study. The documents are split into the following categories: petitioners' campaign materials and parliamentary material. I also collected social media posts about the campaigns, which I come to later.

I undertook a multi-step process to documentary analysis. I first identified campaign documents by exploring petitioners' websites and blogs in the first instance and then identified linked documents on their social media accounts. This is because on social media petitioners often linked to a range of outputs that they had produced or utilised in their campaign including, for example, news media materials that petitioners were featured in and shared. This was an exploratory stage in which I undertook basic searches using the e-petition title and petitioner or organisation name on Google and on Twitter and Facebook.

However, to ensure both robustness and that I did not rely solely on material self-selected by petitioners on their websites and social media pages I also used the database Nexis to identify news material or mentions of e-petition campaigns. I did so using key words and phrases including the e-petition title, petitioner or organisation name and slogans or hashtags. I identified e-petition slogans in my initial searches on social media, where it was evident that certain terms and phrases were being used by campaigners. Appendix 3 provides a full list of the search terms I used for each case study. The documents collected were in the form of webpages and PDFs and the full list of documents collected is below in Table 4.

I set a time frame for the searches, which was the date the e-petition campaign was published online until the date of data collection because this would enable consideration of the momentum during and after a e-petition campaign was 'live' in line with the case study considerations outlined previously in this chapter. The timeframes for each case study are included in Appendix 3. In some case studies, petitioners had created multiple e-petitions, usually prior to the case study e-petition, and it became clear that this was an important but unanticipated research finding. So, in interviews where petitioners indicated that they had created multiple e-petitions, I asked petitioners for details of the e-petition and repeated the Nexis search with the 6-month period that these e-petitions were live for. In doing so, I was better positioned to understand the broader campaigning activities of petitioners who had campaigned over a

period of time. There is, however, a potential limitation that these case studies therefore have enhanced data compared to those where additional e-petitions were not mentioned, so future research that seeks to explore the long-term activities of e-petition campaigns should embed considerations of prior or additional e-petitions in the research design.

To collect parliamentary material, I explored Parliament's website and used Hansard to identify relevant documents or activities, using the same e-petition titles or tag lines and petitioner or organisation names (see Appendix 3) as in the Nexis search to identify the parliamentary actions that had taken place. I also used the same time frames. Hansard includes proceedings in the Commons Chamber and Westminster Hall, as well as written statements, petitions, corrections and some select committee work, which means it is a useful tool for an exploration of the range of parliamentary activities that have taken place around a campaign. For parliamentary material, I downloaded PDFs and webpages from Parliament's website and the plain text (txt) file from Hansard.

In total the campaign materials collected included petitioners' websites, blog posts, submitted written evidence to select committee inquiries, news articles and video transcripts from petitioners' media interviews, providing a wide range of pertinent sources. Similarly, the parliamentary documents I collected included Westminster Hall debate transcripts, other parliamentary debate transcripts, select committee reports, government responses, Private Members' Bills, Early Day Motions, Petitions Committee correspondence and House of Commons Library briefings. In total I collected 68 documents. In order to protect the anonymity of those involved in each e-petition campaign I do not provide a full list of these documents, however, Table 4 breaks down the type of document against the frequency of document.

Whilst the criteria I used above were designed to include all of the relevant materials, there will inevitably be some documents I have missed. To mitigate for this, and because I undertook documentary analysis first before interviews, I asked interviewees if there was any material that they thought was important for me to analyse and I included these to ensure the documents collected were reflective of the range of campaign activities undertaken in and out of parliament, in line with the case study priorities outlined in section 3.2. For example, I asked parliamentary actors and campaigners for their knowledge of any parliamentary activities that may have been taken on the e-petition campaign, and asked campaigners if there were any documents that they thought were relevant to their campaign. In practice, the documents suggested were most often

those I had already collected, but asking the question was an important safeguard to further extend the results of documentary analysis, and interviewees' responses acted as a useful talking point during the interview. So, whilst the documents collected cannot be exhaustive, they represent a range of activities that took place in and around e-petition campaigns (see Table 4) and acted as a useful spring-board for the in-depth qualitative interviews that I undertook next.

Table 4: Documents

Type of document	Frequency
Petitioner websites (all website pages including blogs)	7
News articles (including video transcripts)	21
Press releases	2
Petitioner letters to Defra	2
Government documents	2
House of Commons Library briefings	3
Government bills	1
Debate transcripts (all types)	9
Early Day motions	1
Private Members' Bills	3
Government responses	9
Letters from the Petitions Committee	2
Letters to the Petitions Committee	2
MP websites	4
Total	68

With regard to social media posts, I treated them in the same way as the documents above because I was primarily interested in the substantive content of the posts as opposed to the frequency of words, nodes or links between people, as done, for example, in the quantitative approach of Asher, Leston-Bandeira and Spaiser (2019). I was interested in what actors post and how they build a narrative and campaign online (RQ1) through the content of their posts as opposed to the associations between users or posts which would favour a more quantitative approach like that of social media network analysis. Whilst I was interested to see who

petitioners targeted and how they went about reaching them, this was easily achievable by focussing on the content of their posts, for example who they ‘tagged’ or mentioned.

Social media posts were scraped using the Web Data Research Assistant, a Google Chrome Plugin developed by the University of Southampton so that I could examine the content of the posts according to the data analysis approach outlined below (section 3.4). To narrow the searches, specific keywords related to each e-petition were used as parameters. This included the URL of the e-petition, the e-petition name, the creator’s username, known hashtags and other related phrases used by petitioners that I had identified through initial exploration of their social media posts. Specific date ranges from when the e-petition went live until the day of scraping were given so that irrelevant posts were filtered out. In total, 9913 posts were collected which included Tweets from petitioners and other users about each of the e-petitions. A significant amount of these, however, were not relevant in terms of the content. For example, they were Retweets and therefore were duplicates of other Tweets in the dataset, had no substantive content beyond just the petition hashtag, or were generated by bots, so I omitted these from analysis (see Driscoll and Walker, 2014). Whilst Retweets can, like ordinary Tweets, be regarded as an act of everyday politics (Highfield, 2016) and generate exposure for e-petition campaigns, because the text in the Retweet is the same as the original post, they provided no additional content for documentary analysis. Similarly, ‘Quote Tweets’, which enable users to share someone else’s post and add their own commentary, featured in the total number of posts rarely, and when they were used, they included very little additional content, often just including the petition hashtag or repeating the substantive text of the Tweet. So, these were omitted from analysis too. After this data collection had taken place, I also periodically checked relevant social media accounts to check for updates in the petitioners’ campaigns. I did this in July 2024 and February 2025.

Ultimately, because there was a large volume of irrelevant Tweets in the initial dataset, I found that the most interesting posts were those from the petitioners themselves because it was these Tweets which most clearly expressed petitioners’ experiences and demonstrated who they were targeting or engaging with. So, I imported these into NVivo for analysis alongside the documents and interview transcripts, which I explain further in section 3.4. But, in recognising that Retweets may be illustrative of everyday politics and wider campaign reach, in Chapters 4 and 5, where relevant, I include the number of Retweets that posts received to illustrate the wider campaigning exposure that the Tweets achieved.

In my initial exploration of petitioners' social media accounts, it was clear that Twitter was the preferred platform based upon petitioners' frequency of posting; it was used by all petitioners. However, three petitioners were also active on Facebook. On Facebook, petitioners posted about their e-petition campaign much less frequently, with posts often irrelevant to the e-petition because the content of their 'pages' was broad. To analyse petitioners' use of Facebook, I collected posts that had been posted in the six-month duration of when the e-petition was open to signatures that were about the e-petition. This approach enabled me to identify relevant posts and discard posts which were about other matters. As with Twitter posts, I checked the pages periodically to see if there had been any newer posts about the e-petition campaigns. I did this in July 2023, July 2024 and February 2025. In total, I collected 106 Facebook posts.

Brought together, the documents and social media posts allowed me to ascertain how petitioners were campaigning in terms of their activities (RQ1), what some of the outcomes of these activities were (RQ3), who they were targeting and how campaigns were advancing in and outside of parliament (RQ2). How I analysed them is highlighted in section 3.4, *Data Analysis*.

Semi-structured interviews

As well as the document analysis, I used semi structured interviews with petitioners and parliamentary actors. Whilst I did do some of the document analysis and interviews concurrently, the majority of the interviews took place after I had done the document analysis which meant that I had good foundational knowledge of each e-petition before interviewing relevant actors; interviews allowed me to contextualise and understand the content of the documents and social media posts by hearing from actors in their own words. This was beneficial because it meant that I could dive deeper into questions that got to the heart of why actors had chosen to be involved in the petitioning process as opposed to needing to understand the ins and outs of what they did. Usefully, interviews also complement document analysis because they can reveal the assumptions and implicit motivations behind various documents (Seldon, 1988) and this meant I could, for example, ask petitioners about their websites or blog posts, and social media posts often prompted ideas that I wanted to dig deeper into during the interviews. As the interviews were semi-structured, they were guided by a set of questions I wanted to ask, but they remained largely open-ended and I was able to pivot during interviews to explore the topics brought up by the interviewees. The interview schedules for petitioners, MPs and parliamentary officials are

available in Appendix 1. The ability to adapt during interviews was an intentional decision as I wanted to explore “how people understand their world” (Furlong and Marsh, 2010: 200) and allow interviewees to “reveal their own versions of events in their own words” (Crang and Crook, 2007).

Application

I carried out 36 semi-structured interviews in total. Interviewees, like the documents above, were identified during a period of desk-based research after case selection had taken place and on the following basis. First, they are the named e-petition creator or they had been involved in the campaigning process for the e-petition, referred to throughout this thesis together as ‘petitioners’. Second, they were a Member of the Petitions Committee. Third, they were a Member of Parliament who had been involved in the e-petition in some capacity, for example, they had supported petitioners by speaking in a debate or submitting a written question. Fourthly, I chose to also interview parliamentary officials involved in the e-petitions system because research has demonstrated the important function played by parliamentary officials in embedding new forms of non-electoral or between-election engagement (see Judge and Leston-Bandeira, 2018; Geddes, 2019). The specific details of the officials, such as their job title or relationship to the e-petition system are not given in order to keep participants anonymous. I approached all interviewees via email using my institutional University of Sheffield email address, explaining the purpose of my research both in the email body and by attaching a participant information sheet, and I explained why, to each interviewee, their insights were useful to this research. All interviewees gave written and verbal informed consent to take part in this research and the consent form and participant information sheets are available in Appendix 2.

Table 5: Breakdown of interviewees

Reason for interviewing	Number of people interviewed
Named petition creator	7
Petition campaigner	9
Media group employee	1
Current or former Petitions Committee officials	5
Current or former Petitions Committee MP	3

Current or former Petitions Committee chair	2
Non-Petitions Committee MP	6
Member of the House of Lords	1 Note: This Peer was formerly an MP so is referred to in text by anonymous identifier 'MP C'
Current or former other parliamentary officials	2
Total	36

Table 6: Distribution of interviews

General category	All	Percentage
Petition creators and campaigners	16	44.44%
MP/ former MP	12	33.33%
Parliamentary officials/ former officials	7	19.44%
Other	1	2.78%
Total	36	100%

Interviews took place between July 2023 and March 2024. All interviewees were given the option to meet online or face to face to accommodate interviewees' busy schedules. I was granted access to the Palace of Westminster with a parliamentary pass to facilitate in person meetings with parliamentarians and officials. Five of the interviews with parliamentarians took place face to face in the Palace of Westminster and the remaining seven were online. All interviews with petitioners took place online and often in the evenings as most petitioners had full time jobs that they were working around their campaigning activities. All interviews with parliamentary officials took place online. However, I also spent some time with Petitions Committee officials discussing my research more generally both in the lead up to my fieldwork and during my fieldwork in person and online. These conversations have helped to inform the thesis and provided me with invaluable information and feedback, but because they did not constitute formal interviews, I only used notes from these meetings as prompts for more background research. I did not code them in the way that I coded interview transcripts and the discussions are not drawn on explicitly in the empirical chapters.

Online interviews have been highlighted as potentially limiting the rapport that is typically built between interviewer and interviewee in an in-person interaction (Salmons, 2015; Fontana and Frey, 1998). However, since the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent moves towards hybrid working, online interviews have become more commonplace and people are now both more familiar and comfortable with online video platforms, so I felt that the rapport built with interviewees was strong despite being online. In recognising that using video conferencing platforms often comes behind a paywall and that each platform operates differently (Villiers, Farooq and Molinari 2022), I let interviewees know in advance that we would be using the Google Meet platform provided by the University of Sheffield and that they could test the meeting link in advance to familiarise themselves with the platform. Prior to interviews taking place, I notified interviewees that in the event of any issues which meant the interview could not continue, I would email them to arrange a follow up interview. Despite the potential for problems to arise, such as poor internet connections or failing tech, I only had one interview where we had to pause while the interviewee found their device charger. That aside, I faced no problems and conducting the majority of my interviews online likely meant that I could interview people who were otherwise inaccessible due to monetary constraints or time limitations. My research is thus likely to be richer for conducting online interviews than it would be if these interviews were unable to be conducted in the first place.

The average length of interview was one hour, though some of the petitioner interviews took longer and some of the parliamentary interviews were shorter, the shortest being 35 minutes. On the whole, I sought interviews of about an hour in length to ensure that I was able to build rapport with the interviewee and really understand how and why they became involved in the petitioning process. It was important to me that petitioners in particular were free to tell me about their experience without time pressure and that there was space for interviewees to ask me questions, too. I recorded all interviews on two devices to ensure accuracy of transcription and as a failsafe in case one device failed. I took notes during the interviews and afterwards I wrote up my initial reflections in a private fieldwork diary. This helped me to gather my thoughts and I could use my notes as prompts for more documentary analysis or for points to raise in other interviews. I transcribed all of the interviews as soon after the interview as possible to ensure contemporaneous analysis using the computer aided software TRINT provided by the Department of Politics and International Relations.

In line with the department's ethics approval process, all data was stored on my University Google Drive account and backed up onto my University X Drive.

Access and ethical considerations

It is well established in the literature that interviewing political elites can be challenging for academic researchers. As mentioned, I interviewed petitioners, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff which are noteworthy distinctions because the power balance constructed during the interview was different depending on which category of interviewee I was speaking to. The literature on interviewing political elites (i.e. Members of Parliament or those with similar authority) describes elite interviewees as someone with "close proximity to power or policymaking" (Lilleker, 2003) which may pose certain challenges over the course of an interview. For example, interviewees may wish to shut down lines of inquiry that they are uncomfortable with or seek to 'test' my knowledge or 'right' to be interviewing them, problems that are well established in the literature (e.g. Odendahl and Shaw, 2002; Burnham et al, 2004; Rhodes et al, 2007). To mitigate against potential challenges as much as possible, and because I took a semi-structured approach, in preparation for interviews I undertook desk-based research about the MP, their involvement in the e-petition campaign or e-petition system and their wider parliamentary history from which I developed a detailed interview schedule that I could return to in the interview for more details if necessary. I was fortunate that I faced no such challenges; all of the parliamentarians I interviewed were incredibly forthcoming with their experiences and evaluations, despite some questions being potentially 'difficult'. One of the reasons why I felt as though I did not face these challenges may be because, as has been highlighted by Bailer (2014), parliamentarians may also feel vulnerable during an interview, and perceive me as an 'expert' on the topic, thereby shifting the balance my, the researcher's, favour. Indeed, prior research has also highlighted that such a willingness to engage with the interview may also be because elite interviewees may be seeking a sympathetic ear (Crewe, 2015) for their actions or inactions on the topic.

On the other hand, when interviewing petitioners, it is likely that this balance of power was in my favour and that there may have been a tendency for interviewees to provide me with socially desirable answers, for example, because they perceived me as an authoritative voice on the topic (Nederhof, 1985). To mitigate against this challenge, I restated the purpose of my research at the beginning of interviews and explained why I was interested in petitioners' personal experiences,

about which they are the experts. Across all interviews, I gave all participants the opportunity to ask questions about my research before interviews began, sought both written and verbal consent to take part, and I have kept all participants anonymous in the hope that these measures would encourage a forthcoming discussion.

Other challenges with elite research arise in terms of access. Whilst I was able to interview 19 parliamentary actors (12 MPs, 7 officials), in total I had contacted 60 MPs either by email, via the Petitions Committee, or, on one occasion via social media. 12 agreed to an interview, five got back to me to decline my interview request and I did not hear back from the other 43. This left me with a 'success rate' of 20 per cent which is in keeping with the difficulties of accessing elites (see Harvey, 2010; Ostrander, 1993). In comparison, I was able to interview all of the officials and all but two of the petitioners I reached out to. Notwithstanding this challenge, the interviews I was able to undertake represented a range of actors involved in each of the case study e-petitions; for every case study petition I was able to interview petitioners, parliamentarians and parliamentary officials which ensured that I achieved as well rounded of an understanding of each case study as I could within the constraints.

It is likely that much of my success in interviewing parliamentarians came from the fact that the Petitions Committee was supportive of my research. Key members of staff played an important role in determining whether the selected case studies were appropriate as mentioned in section 3.2, but they were also important actors in terms of identifying and reaching out to various parliamentary actors to take part in this research. In the early stages of this project, I met many times with staff to talk through my research design and methods, which meant that when it came to recruiting participants there were a number of advantages. In the first instance they were able to point me in the right direction of who to reach out to for interviews based upon their existing knowledge of the case studies, though I did also reach out to several parliamentarians who they had not suggested, in order to control for any potential biases. Secondly, they could make first introductions on my behalf. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the Committee provided endorsement of my research which conferred credibility and trustworthiness. This, for example, meant that I could include this endorsement in my recruitment emails. It is well established within the literature that the role of such institutional gatekeepers can be fundamental to the success of research because they provide or revoke access to individuals, and this is particularly acute amongst elite communities who may perceive researchers as untrustworthy (Ostrander, 1995). For me, the Committee's support of my research provided me with credibility and

legitimacy which I could draw on when attempting to contact parliamentarians and petitioners. In this way, the support and involvement of the Committee in the early stages of this project was key to ensuring that I could undertake the research design as proposed. In the latter stages of the project the Committee were less involved, however. Rather, during the fieldwork stages I would periodically check in with some key findings to discuss and staff would inform me of any updates about their work or insights they had, if appropriate. As I mention above, I noted these reflections or developments in my fieldwork diary to inform the research more broadly. As this project reaches its conclusion, the findings presented in this thesis will be developed into a form of policy briefing for the Committee in order to inform their future work.

The major ethical consideration to grapple with when interviewing the various actors involved in the petitioning process was about how to maintain anonymity for those who I interviewed. Because of the elite status of some of the interviewees, as a general principle anonymity was provided as the default option on the consent forms for all interviewees. Only one person said that they wanted themselves and their e-petition to be named in this thesis. However, I chose to keep this person anonymous because of the risk that other interviewees who had been involved in this campaign and who did want to remain anonymous would become identifiable by association. This is also the reason for remaining vague about the details of the e-petitions themselves, which are easily searchable online and are linked to petitioners and those who supported them. As such, throughout the thesis petitioners are referred to by number e.g. Petitioner 1 and parliamentary actors by 'type' and letter e.g. MP A, Official B. Petitions, where necessary to distinguish, are referred to by their subcategory, pets or wildlife conservation, or the type of petitioner, which I will come to delineate in Chapter 4.

As mentioned above, I provided all interviewees with a participant information sheet to read and a consent form to sign. Before the interview began, I also sought verbal consent and provided interviewees with the opportunity to ask any questions about what would happen during the interview, after data collection and about my research more generally.

3.4 Data Analysis

One of the main objectives of this research was to understand what the experiences of petitioners and parliamentary actors are when using and implementing the parliamentary e-petitions system in order to understand the efficacy of petitioning as a tool for addressing

democratic dissatisfaction. As a result, I aimed to learn from the data and let it do the talking, rather than approach it with assumptions of the codes or themes I would uncover. My analysis was therefore inductive in its approach; I did not have predetermined codes or themes that I took to the data to look for (Bowen, 2009). So, rather than develop a separate list of codes and themes to apply to the data, I took a two-step ‘initial’ and then ‘focussed’ coding approach outlined by Charmaz (2014) in which I assigned codes to the data as I went along (see also Rubin and Rubin, 2004).

This approach requires multiple rounds of coding in which codes are added, taken away or merged at each round once familiarity with the data increases and patterns emerge from the data. In the first instance, ‘initial coding’ (Charmaz, 2014) involves noting down early thoughts and reflections about the data. Because I collected data in a two-step process starting with documentary analysis, I noted down initial reflections about the documents and social media posts as I collected them in a private fieldwork diary. These reflections were then a springboard for my interview schedules and for analysis. Initial coding of interviews began at the transcription stage, in which I wrote down notes on the transcript of my initial thoughts and reflections about the data, for example where there were similarities or differences across interviewees or compared to the documents. This step helped me to become familiar with the data and draw initial links between the various data I had collected. For all the data (interview transcripts, documents and social media posts) I developed these initial reflections into initial codes that sought to capture the broad content of the data. All of the data was imported into NVivo.

Once imported into NVivo, I undertook three rounds of focussed coding in which, based upon the initial codes I had developed, I identified additional codes and then merged or elaborated codes as new threads for analysis became apparent to me (Charmaz, 2014). Because I coded multiple times, my initial very long list of codes was narrowed down and refined until I felt happy that I had represented the content within all the data accurately within the codes. Whilst time consuming, this ensured consistency and familiarity with the data and was a necessary part of the ontological and epistemological commitments of this research. From that point onwards, I grouped the final list of codes into different ‘themes’ which then offered a valuable starting point from which I could begin to frame my findings. These are highlighted in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Themes and codes

Themes	Relevant codes
Motivations for involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Agenda setting and capturing the attention of the government ● Legislative change ● Non-Committee MP rationale ● Committee set up (historical) ● Committee MP rationale
Petitioner type (by size)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Individual - no experience ● Individual - prior experience ● Small group ● Large group ● Resources
Campaign strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social media ● Networking ● Campaign 'reach' ● Prior experience ● One method amongst many ● Celebrity influence ● Other parliamentary mechanisms
Experience (positive and negative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● External contexts ● Formal processes ● Relationship building ● Petitioner expectations ● Political literacy ● Committee support and capacity

Throughout the empirical chapters I draw extensively on quotes and excerpts from interviews and documents because they are illuminating and are the most authentic way of portraying the findings of this research. There is a risk when drawing on quotations that “by plucking chunks of text out of the context within which they appeared, such as a particular interview transcript, the social setting can be lost” (Bryman, 2012: 578). To mitigate against this, before inserting quotes into the empirical chapters I referred back to the whole transcript and the line of questioning or discussion that happened preceding the quotation, or the preceding section of the document, to ensure that I had understood the context within which the quotation was taken (Bryman, 2012). In doing so, I believe that the quotations provided throughout the empirical chapters are the best representation of the points made and illuminate the analysis.

3.5 Reflections and limitations

Undertaking inductive qualitative research analysis can be a taxing process, and it requires a degree of reflexivity and reflection on the positionality of the researcher (Holmes, 2020). Whilst

the issue areas I researched were not sensitive topics, I nonetheless found myself emotionally affected by the stories that petitioners shared. Those who know me know I am an animal lover, and it was sometimes difficult to hear of the loss of people's pets, or the risk of extinction of species. As a result, I found myself empathising with petitioners and their experiences, which in the end helped with the initial rapport building during interviews because I was perceived by the interviewees as a supporter of their cause. This was beneficial in terms of the openness with which petitioners were willing to talk about their experiences, but it also meant that, on occasion, petitioners had an expectation that my research would help them to 'do something' about the issue. It was, therefore, difficult but necessary for me to restate the aims and likely outcomes of my research as a piece of academic work that was, unfortunately, unlikely to help petitioners achieve their end goals. Fortunately, all petitioners continued to engage with the research once my aims and the purpose of their participation were restated.

In terms of limitations, a possible limitation of this research approach is that I focus solely on one topic area: animal welfare e-petitions. Whilst I have argued in this chapter that focusing on one topic area enables the meaningful comparison across case studies necessary to address the research questions, the extent to which the experiences of those featured in this research would be the same if the e-petitions were on a different policy area such as healthcare or education is beyond the scope of what I can reasonably conclude. Indeed, one may suspect that the nature of animal welfare campaigns is different to human or otherwise focused campaigns, perhaps because of different levels of controversy. Animal welfare is generally uncontroversial – though campaigns around animal shooting can be very polarising, often along partisan and class lines – and this may account for some of the success of these campaigns in terms of signature thresholds, activities in and outside of parliament and the vast volume of campaigns on animal topics. The extent to which the conclusions in this thesis apply to other types of campaigns, including those more controversial or polarising is unclear, and marks an interesting avenue for further research. Indeed, some highly contentious e-petitions have seen significant popularity, for example the 'Revoke Article 50 and remain in the EU e-petition' submitted in early 2019 received 6.1 million signatures, suggesting that the question of e-petition controversy and popularity is worthwhile focus of further research.

Returning to the point of animal welfare, however, the aim of this research is not to produce generalisable results about e-petitions. It is to understand how and why everyday practices and campaign activities are important for contemporary engagement with parliament (RQ1, RQ3)

and identify the connections forged with parliament as a result (RQ2) in the context of widespread democratic dissatisfaction. This is achievable through the approach outlined in this chapter and focusing on one topic area which has seen a large frequency of campaigns, animal welfare, allows this research to better understand the interaction between parliamentary or government attention and wider campaigning activities. Additionally, empirical focus on animal welfare is warranted based upon the frequency of animal welfare e-petitions. This policy area was chosen because it was, at the time of case selection, the most petitioned area. Recent research has also identified that there has been increased parliamentary focus on animal welfare in recent parliaments (see Chaney, Jones and Fevre, 2022), which together suggests an active interest amongst the public and in parliament about animal welfare issues.

A second limitation may arise from this thesis's focus on e-petitions which achieved the 10,000 signature threshold. Whilst I have explained this decision based upon existing understandings of e-petition salience and because such a starting point means there has been at least some level of public and parliamentary attention, which is necessary for understanding petitioners' wider campaigning activities, it does mean that some of the findings presented in the following chapters are caveated and may not be generalisable to e-petitions which do not reach this threshold. Indeed, a future point of research into e-petition success would be to explore e-petitions which do not reach 10,000 signatures, in order to better understand what makes a campaign 'take off'. This would be especially interesting given the large volume of e-petitions submitted online and because most e-petitions do not reach the two signature thresholds. I return briefly to this point and the above point about animal welfare as a topic area in Chapter 7 when I consider points for further research.

3.6 Chapter conclusion

Brought together, the case study strategy and the methods outlined in this chapter enable this research to understand not just what petitioners and parliamentary actors do during petition campaigns but also *why* and what the outcomes of such actions are because, together, documents and interviews allow me to uncover the motivations, expectations and actions behind the petitions process. Whilst I recognise the potential limitations of this approach, I have highlighted how they enable me to answer the research questions and have demonstrated how this approach is in line with the ontological and epistemological foundations set out in section 3.1.

With my methodology set out, I now turn to presenting my research findings, focussing first on ‘who speaks’: the campaigns and experiences of petitioners.

Chapter 4: Patterns of engagement: Who speaks?

Introduction

This chapter is the first of two chapters in which I present my research findings. It presents findings on who is ‘speaking’ to parliament, and how, based on the documentary analysis of e-petition campaign materials and the 16 interviews undertaken with petitioners. It is split into three sections, each of which address primarily research questions one and three. Research question two is dealt with mostly in Chapter 5, but is touched on in section 4.4 briefly:

- RQ1: What are the informal public sites in which everyday engagement with parliamentary e-petitions occurs, and what are the characteristics of the activities that occur within these sites?
- RQ2: What are the formal and informal connective mechanisms that exist between sites of discussion in the sphere of citizen participation and the sphere of parliament?
- RQ3: What are the outcomes of petitioners' campaign activities, and what subsequent value do these activities bring to petitioners' objectives?

The first section, 4.1, presents the contours of the e-petition case studies according to petitioner profile. It does so to add to findings about petitioner demographics and set the stage for later sections about the campaign strategies employed. Section 4.2 presents petitioners' motivations for petitioning to situate our understanding of outcomes in the initial expectations of petitioners and thereby add to our knowledge about this underdeveloped element within the literature (RQ3). The bulk of this chapter sits within sections 4.3 and 4.4, which turns to the petition campaign journey both in and outside of parliament, focusing on how petitioners disseminate their petitions to explore the ‘everyday politics’ of e-petitions as a tool for affecting political change (RQ1). Finally, section 4.5 focuses on the experience of petitioning by presenting the reflections of petitioners in order to appraise the ability of the e-petition system to overcome challenges of disillusionment. Each of the findings I present in this chapter are illustrated in brief in Table 8 below as a reference point. I unpack each of these findings in Chapter 6.

Table 8: Key findings: who speaks?

Research Question	Finding
RQ1: What are the informal public sites in which everyday engagement with parliamentary e-petitions occurs, and what are the characteristics of the activities that occur within these sites?	<p>The diversity of petitioners and their motivations, prior campaigning experience, petitioner networks and resource sharing</p> <p>The core features and 'locations' of petition campaigns: social media, traditional media, celebrity influence</p>
RQ2: What are the formal and informal connective mechanisms that exist between sites of discussion in the sphere of citizen participation and the sphere of parliament?	<p>Network and relationship building with MPs, Lords and officials; role of social media and non-institutional intermediaries; e-petitions as a vehicle through which relationships are built</p> <p>The Petitions Committee and formal e-petition mechanisms; a formal link to the government through signature thresholds</p>
RQ3: What are the outcomes of petitioners' campaign activities, and what subsequent value do these activities bring to petitioners' objectives?	<p>Networks and relationships built both in and outside of parliament</p> <p>Awareness raising in the public and keeping issues on the political agenda</p> <p>Other parliamentary or extra-parliamentary mechanisms</p> <p>Petitioner experiences: the added value of campaigning for the individual</p>

4.1 Who is speaking? Petitioner profiles and networks

Amongst the 16 petitioners interviewed, there was a significant diversity of actors. They are broadly split into categories based on their level of experience and access to resources (Table 9 and Table 10, respectively). These distinctions are made because previous literature has underscored the importance of petitioner demographics (e.g. Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Escher and Riehm, 2017; Chaney, Jones and Fevre, 2022); the 'type' of petitioner may affect the amount of resources that were available to them during the e-petition campaign and therefore also affect their campaign activities (RQ1) and subsequent outcomes (RQ3).

As mentioned in Chapter 3, during case selection I prioritised selecting a range of petitioner types to ensure that it was possible to understand the various campaigning strategies employed by petitioners, but at this stage I had only very broad definitions: individual, small group and

large group. I analysed the campaign documents and social media posts of petitioners in which they documented their e-petition campaign activities and history and in interviews I asked questions which focused explicitly on petitioners' resources and experience. Based upon this, the following categories of petitioner type emerged, differentiated by size, experience and available resources:

1. Individuals without prior campaigning or petitioning background or experience: those who started their petition journey alone and who have not campaigned previously on the issue. The petition was the starting point.
2. Individuals with prior campaigning experience: those who had submitted multiple e-petitions before the e-petition they were interviewed about and/or who have campaigned on the topic prior to using the e-petition system.
3. Informal campaign groups: often composed of like-minded individuals who come together to work together on a campaign but who are not formally organised or resourced. Some members may have some campaigning experience.
4. Formal campaign groups: who have not-for-profit or charity status but who do not have many resources or any full-time paid staff. They are reliant on volunteers.
5. Large national or international charities: highly staffed (paid staff) and resourced.
6. Celebrity or influencer creators: these are distinguished from individuals because their public status brings additional benefits that other individuals did not have.

Table 9: Petitioner types and frequency

Category	Type of petitioner	Frequency	Petitioner (by anonymised number)
1	Individuals - no experience	3	1,3,4
2	Individuals - prior e-petition or campaign experience	4	12,14,10,15
3	Informal campaign groups	5 (all 5 were members of the same group)	5,6,7,8,13
4	Formal campaign groups	2	2, 16
5	Large organisations or charities	1	11

6	Celebrities or influencers	1	9
	Total	16	16

The campaign documents collected from petitioners' websites, blogs and social media posts highlight that more experienced or resourced petitioners (categories four to six) were able to easily call upon other resources that included money, staff or volunteers who could ensure a steady stream of posting online and other professionals, for example, legal advisers, designers and content creators, who could provide support during the campaign. Other less tangible resources included prior knowledge of the petitioning process or access to other actors who could provide advice or contacts. These resources are mapped out in Table 10 below, though it is worth noting that this is not an exhaustive list because, as will be explored later, the nature of campaigning is fluid and it was not always possible to discern from interviews or documents the full repertoire of resources that petitioners had available to them at the time of the case study campaigns.

Table 10: Petitioner's resources

Petitioner category	Available resources
1. Individuals - no experience	Social media
2. Individuals - prior e-petition or campaign experience	Social media; prior knowledge of the petitioning process and/or prior knowledge or experience of various campaign strategies
3. Informal campaign groups	Social media; a range of knowledge and skills; sometimes prior knowledge of the petitioning process and/or prior knowledge or experience of various campaign strategies
4. Formal campaign groups	Social media; a range of knowledge and skills; prior knowledge of the petitioning process and/or prior knowledge or experience of various campaign strategies; access to individuals who are able to support the campaign in other ways e.g. lawyers, graphic designers; contacts with policy makers; some monetary funds
5. Large organisations or charities	Social media; a range of knowledge and skills; prior knowledge of the petitioning process and/or prior knowledge or experience of various campaign strategies; employed staff; access to others who are able to support the campaign in other ways e.g. lawyers, graphic designers; established lobbying channels and contacts with policy makers and other charities; monetary funds; established databases of supporters
6. Celebrities or influencers	Social media followings; contacts with policy makers or charities; contacts within the media/able to 'appear' on traditional media

These distinctions are important because the experience of the four petitioners in petitioner categories four to six at the beginning of their campaign was substantively different to individuals or informal campaign groups (categories 1-3), though we will come to see that this changed over the duration of the campaign. At the beginning, petitioners in large or better resourced campaign organisations had more resources easily available to them to support different stages of their e-petition campaign compared to those who were less resourced or experienced. One petitioner in category one, for example, built their campaign from scratch having had no prior campaigning experience or engagement with parliament - they described politics as ‘not for them’ - and spent considerable time and effort attempting to learn about parliament, policy making and who could help them. Others who had campaigned before relied on existing supporter bases to reach the signature thresholds of 10,000 and 100,000 signatures quickly, and one of the formal campaign groups (category 4) used their existing contact with a lawyer to check for any legal concerns around their e-petition campaign’s ‘ask’. They also contacted previous supporters to ‘sense check’ whether the campaign was likely to be supported by the public, and the other formal campaign group drew upon contacts with graphic designers to produce campaign materials. Whilst only one petition in this research was created by a large international organisation, they already had a database of supporters, social media following and connections in Westminster that their team working on the petition could call upon, which the petitioner recognised gave them an initial advantage, especially in terms of easily reaching signature thresholds:

“It doesn’t take much for us to get a petition over the line, really. We have a database of supporters who will reliably support us. It still takes a lot of effort, a team effort, but yeah, to get things over the line it is probably quicker than for others” (Interview, Petitioner 11)

One of the concerns highlighted in the literature is about the co-opting of the petitioning process by large charities or NGOs (see Chaney, Jones and Fevre, 2022). The finding that resources differ and that greater access to resources was an advantage is therefore not particularly surprising. It is well established in wider political campaigning and social movements literature that more resources is a benefit because access to resources enhances the likelihood of effective action (see Edwards and McCarthy, 2004). What is instead interesting about the petitioners in this research and the resources available to them is that whilst most petitioners were in categories 1-3 (see Table 9) and thus began the process alone, or with limited resources, across all petitioners their overall petition campaign was rarely undertaken entirely alone and by their limited resources; at some point, resource imbalances were evened out. Rather, petitioners would

work with other groups or individuals to support their campaign at various points, including before the e-petition was submitted online and during the petitions process to overcome challenges about their (lack of) experience or resources, creating a vast network of support. For example, all of the individual creators with no prior experience began their journey alone but built up a coalition of support through working with other animal welfare campaigners and organisations as their campaign progressed, and I will come to present how utilising social media was essential in doing so. One individual petitioner who was new to campaigning entirely relied on the status of a large animal welfare charity who agreed to support her to provide legitimacy to her petition's ask of the government and used a small amount of money they gave her to fund some social media adverts to boost her petition's signatures. Later, she then used a smaller charity's experience in the field to get advice about next steps of the petition. Similarly, one of the formal campaign groups interviewed would not only create their own e-petitions but would also support individuals who were under-resourced and inexperienced through their own petition campaign, either by boosting their social media posts, providing advice about the campaign process, or providing funding. Despite initial challenges in identifying like-minded and willing individuals, (I explain how petitioners achieved this in section 4.3), all petitioners undertook their campaign with a much wider network of support than that which they began with, meaning that their campaigns were not defined by how they had started.

In terms of the extent of their networks, what was interesting is that during our interviews petitioners would mention one another, either as having received or given support, or I would find in documents or on social media that other petition(er)s in this research were mentioned. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, whilst I deliberately wanted to remain 'open' to hearing about other e-petitions so that I could potentially explore the wider campaigning activities of petitioners - and I as a result snowballed from petitioners' suggestions - I was often surprised when seemingly unrelated e-petitions, for example in the separate pet and wildlife conservation categories, had received support from other petitioners that I had interviewed. In some cases, petitioners would mention one another as having supported or being supported by them, without it being clear publicly that such relationships existed because much of the support happened privately away from public sites of social media and without me disclosing who else I had interviewed due to the anonymity given to all participants. Throughout the duration of the fieldwork period, it became clear that what I had stumbled upon was a network of campaigners who, for the most part, knew and supported one another through the petitioning process in ways that were not always discernible online. These relationships are illustrated in Figure 2. Such findings are

significant because the network of campaigners that petitioners could tap into had tangible benefits for their campaigns in terms of leveraging other's resources: "I was like the one woman show but like the whole point is that I managed to use resource, willing resources. I was like the sun and they kind of orbited around me" (Interview, Petitioner 1). For example, petitioners who belong to resourced organisations, or who had connection to them through others, articulated the benefits of affiliation to others in terms of access to other resources such as email databases and newsletters: "I drove about 20,000 signatures through [organisation]. Just by the ads on their website and putting it in the newsletter and like sending stuff out to email databases" (Interview, Petitioner 10). Other benefits arose in relation to social media, where large social media followings and connections to those with large followings helps petitioners to achieve signature thresholds, and which I will explore in depth in section 4.3: "we say to [celebrity who is part of campaigning group] could you give this a bit of a retweet? And then things happen" (Interview, Petitioner 16).

Interestingly, such findings mirror the literature on policy communities and networks which draws our attention to the variety of relationships between actors in policy making beyond just that of the bureaucracy (Atkinson and Coleman, 1992; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992). The networks built amongst petitioners are important to highlight because different levels of support and resources amongst petitioners affected the extent to which they were able to campaign effectively not only at the beginning, but also over a longer period of time. Whilst all petitioners did tap into wider networks and many of the campaign activities that we will come to see in section 4.3 were common regardless of petitioner types, figure 2 shows how some petitioners were more connected to each other than others. For those without such support at the start - i.e. in categories 1, 2 and 3 - and who struggled to build this wider network of support, the petitioning process was in their view, more taxing both on the resources that they did have, and on their emotional wellbeing and resilience to keep petition momentum going, an issue which I return to in section 4.5

"Some of the welfare petitions have support from [celebrity] and are like high profile people and even [Petitioner 10]'s got quite high-profile organisations that follow him [...] it's a lot easier. But little old me who is just like nobody, doesn't have any big organisations or like celebrities. It's very, very hard and I don't think people realise how hard it is to get 100,000 signatures." (Interview, Petitioner 4)

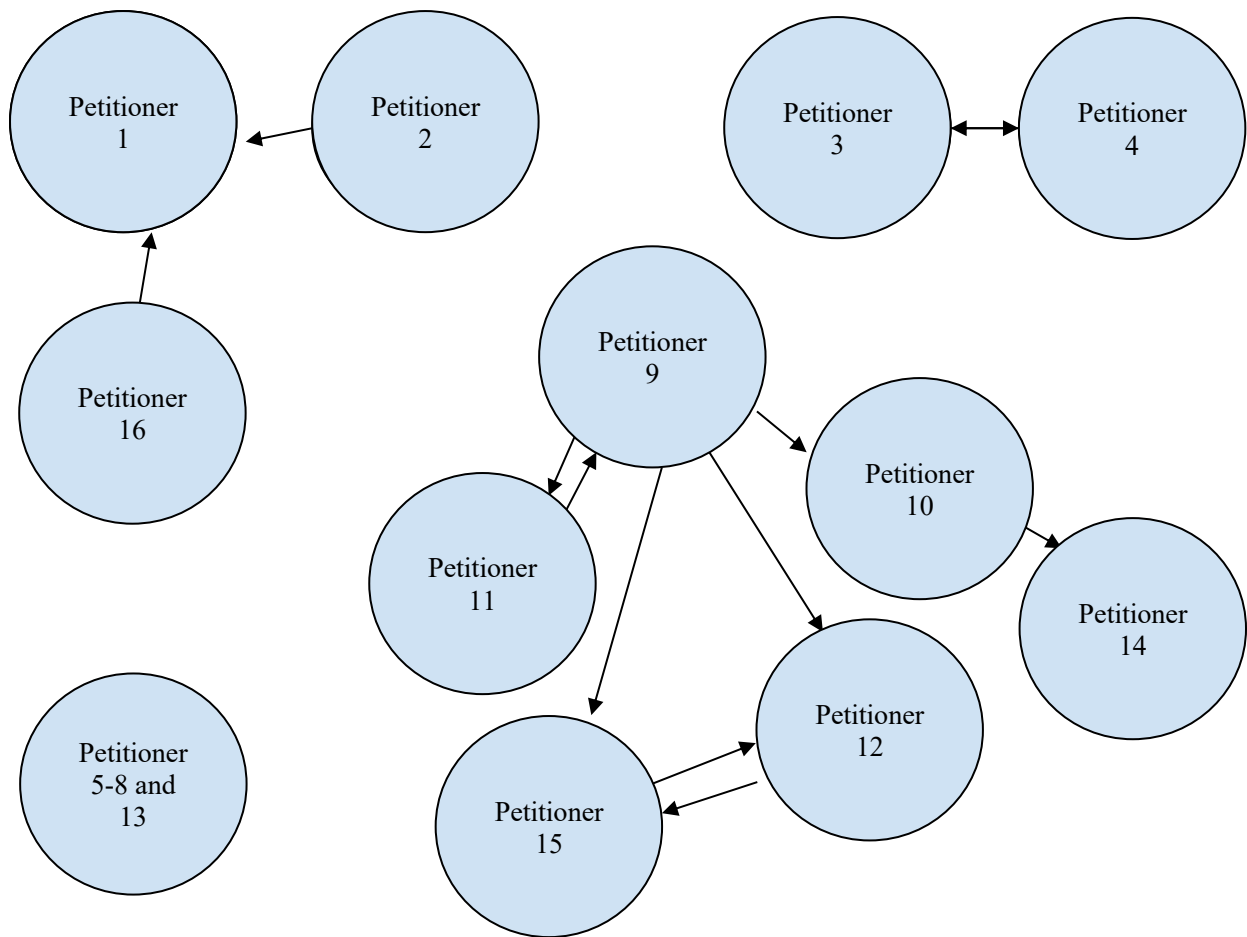


Figure 2: The relationships between petitioners. The direction of the arrow shows the direction of resource input. Typical resources include advice, money or other resources previously outlined.

With regards to resource imbalances and the extent to which petitioners are or are not able to overcome them, these findings are interesting because they suggest that e-petition campaigns are not undertaken in isolation and that it matters who creates petitions, who is involved in the campaign and who one is ‘connected’ to, especially if it leads to an imbalance of resources and whose voice is heard, or if it indeed does help to overcome imbalances that may exist at the outset. I return to this point and the wider implications of petitioner ‘types’ in section 4.3 when considering the campaign activities strategies employed by the petitioners in this research.

4.2 Why are they speaking? Petitioner motivations

Where petitioners were diverse in their background and in terms of access to resources, in terms of their motivations, intended outcomes and associated expectations of the petitioning process,

they were largely analogous. Petitioners' initial motivations for petitioning are summarised as follows: bringing an issue to the attention of the government, seeing a change in legislation and keeping issues on the political agenda.

The Attention of Government

All petitioners expressed a clear understanding of the benefit of utilising a parliamentary e-petitions system over a non-institutionalised one such as Change.org, and this was usually reflected in an overarching desire to have the government pay attention to the petition topic. Whilst, historically, the public have the right to petition the House of Commons to raise grievances, and the House has the right to consider them, today, the petitions system is intended to bring issues to the attention of parliament and of government, articulated by the UK Parliament website as “an easy way to bring your concerns to the attention of government and parliament” (UK Parliament, no date). It is, therefore, no surprise that petitioners indicated that their core reason for creating an e-petition in the first place was to bring it to the attention of the government. For some, this was about showing the weight of numbers through signatures behind their cause; that 100,000 or more people have signed a petition is a tangible display of public support, or outcry, on an issue. Though, as one MP interviewed pointed out, 100,000 people is just over one constituency's worth of people, and there are 649 others (Interview, MP C). For most, it was about keeping the issue alive on the government's radar and sustaining both pressure and momentum, in line with Leston-Bandeira's (2019) policy function in which there is a “drip drip process identifying problems to solve” (p.8).

Bringing the issue to the attention of the government was a motivation usually articulated first in reference to the first formal milestone at 10,000 signatures, the government response, and then secondly in reference to the Westminster Hall debate at 100,000 signatures. Whether or not all petitioners were aware of the different thresholds at the time of petitioning was sometimes difficult to discern because interviews were undertaken retrospectively, and petitioners did not always articulate the knowledge that they held of the petitioning process at the time of petitioning. Rather, they would speak of what they had learnt through petitioning. Despite this, campaign documents from the time of the petition campaign suggest an awareness of the thresholds that need to be met, and during interviews, petitioners articulated the view that there is a degree of legitimacy brought to an issue when signed by so many members of the public and

that it helps their wider cause and the likelihood of the government to take note of the issue if they are able to show this.

“Our petition will be debated in parliament having reached over 100,000 signatures. MPs will discuss the petition and a minister will explain government thinking. Although the debate can’t change the law it will raise awareness amongst MPs and put pressure on the Government to do something” (Paraphrased excerpt from a press release put out on a formal campaign group’s website. It was published after the petition reached 100,000 signatures.)

“We have reached enough signatures for a government response and are keen to see what Defra says about our proposal. We have written to them previously and they have been dragging their heels. This petition is a nudge in the side to make them address our proposal” (Paraphrased excerpt from a campaign website outlining the rationale for creating their e-petition.)

It is worth noting here that in interviews petitioners *always* spoke about wanting to bring their e-petition to the attention of government, not parliament, despite the first signature threshold of 10,000 being the only element of the petitioning process related to the government; the debate process at 100,000 signatures is a parliamentary proceeding (though a government minister does attend), and the Petitions Committee is a parliamentary committee. This was the case even when discussing the petition debate and the work of the Petitions Committee. One possible reason for this may be because the first procedural element of the petition system is at 10,000 signatures, where the petitioner will get a response from the government, not from parliament, and so the attention of the government is foremost in petitioners’ minds. Another reason might be because the e-petition website is presented as ‘UK Government and Parliament’. Interestingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, it tended to be petitioners in categories 1-3 (i.e. those with less experience of petitioning, or those with access to less resources) who referred to government when discussing parliament, perhaps reflecting less understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of parliament and government or their lack of experience of engaging with parliament. However, as this was not specifically referred to by petitioners, we cannot be sure of the reasons why this occurred. And despite petitioners using the two terms interchangeably, they did articulate that the overarching benefit of using a parliamentary e-petition system (compared to a non-institutionalised one) was that the first signature threshold was a guaranteed way for the government to be made aware of an issue, and for the government to articulate a response to the petition’s ask: a formalised link between the government and the public (RQ2).

Changing Legislation

The second, related motivation was about changes to legislation. It is related because the motivation for getting the attention of the government usually came with the hope or expectation that something would also change in legislation as a result. For example, petitioners who were part of an informal campaign group (category 3) were calling for “Government to introduce regulation of all websites where [pets] are sold” (E-petition page). When asked what motivated the creator to start their petition and seek this legislative change, all interviewees spoke, often passionately, about the issue that their petition is about. For most, a direct personal experience or long-standing interest in the issue was what motivated them:

“When we lost [dog] my heart broke but I could see how many other people can have their heart broken by purchasing a puppy and losing it straight away. And I was like, if I can stop others going through it, if I can help, I’ll do that” (Interview, Petitioner 5).

“I was asked why I am doing this, and I said, ‘because if we don’t our wild neighbours will become extinct in our lifetime’” (Paraphrased Tweet, Petitioner 1)

In this way, ‘the cause’ was the driving force behind petition campaigns and the main motivation for creating a parliamentary e-petition was to see a change in legislation related to this cause:

“My point of view is that I wanted it to become law and that was it. I didn’t see anything else. It was just to become law.” (Interview, Petitioner 3)

“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)

Importantly, the hope for legislative change was placed on the formal e-petition processes, meaning that petitioners hoped through the government response and debate that they would achieve the change they were striving for. But this perspective also depended somewhat on the type of petitioner. Individuals or informal campaign groups with little or no prior experience of petitioning (categories 1,2 and 3) generally held the hope that the government would do what the petition asked, and generally in the immediate term. As well as being a motivation for petitioning, it was an expectation that this would happen through the formal e-petition milestones. It was not until later on in their campaign journey or post-hoc that this expectation changed, and this was

largely because their e-petition had not achieved the legislative change they had hoped for. Those whose motivations had changed from the start of their campaign described this in terms of a lack of understanding about what the milestones could achieve, coupled with a prior ‘naivety’ about how likely the government is to enact new legislation, or indeed even change position on an issue, and suggested that through the process of petitioning multiple times that they had undergone a difficult learning curve:

“And I was so naive at the beginning. I thought just because you have 100,000, 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)

Because of this learning curve, the perceptions and expectations of what the e-petition system could achieve had, as a result, developed over time, and this was something that all petitioners in categories one to three emphasised during interviews. Knowing from experience that they were unlikely to achieve legislative change through the e-petition’s formal milestones meant that petitioners recognised additional value to their campaigns and their efforts went into other avenues, which will be explored in the following section and unpacked in Chapter 6. But what is important for now is that petitioners began their campaigns with the hope for legislative change through the formal e-petition processes and this has important implications for both their campaign activities and outcomes.

In contrast, those interviewees representing or who had worked closely with larger formal groups or organisations, or who had prior experience of petitioning, recognised from the outset that the e-petition milestones were unlikely to lead to legislative changes and that their core ask was unlikely to be met by the government so saw the awareness raising and political agenda functions as more beneficial to their wider political campaign (RQ3). For example, the petitioner from a large international charity reflected on their motivations for petitioning in terms of what it enabled them to do with their wider campaign process: giving their supporters something tangible to focus on, or themselves something to refer to when speaking with MPs through lobbying channels. In this particular case the petitioner felt satisfied with the petitioning process even when the government did not change its position on or do anything about the petition topic because their goals or expectations were different:

“We have relationships already. We look to an e-petition to say to an MP, we’d write to them and meet with them through usual lobbying channels and refer to e-petitions in those conversations. This is so that they can see if this issue is going to be popular and get brownie points for it. It is good for us. It gets us on the radar” (Interview, Petitioner 11)

For more experienced petitioners who knew the likelihood of the government acting on the petition ask was unlikely, keeping the petition topic on the political agenda was generally seen as the only realistic result that would come from petitioning, and, upon reflection, expressed it as ‘good enough’ secondary to legislative change. In this way, where petitioners were motivated to keep the issue on the political agenda and not narrowly motivated to achieve legislative change, their expectations and subsequent satisfaction of the outcomes of the petitioning process were different than those who were motivated solely by changing the law. Generally, they were happier with their outcomes and expressed more positive emotions towards the process. This is unpacked in more depth later in section 4.5 when considering petitioner experiences.

But what is most interesting for understanding petitioner motivations is the fact that multiple interviewees have petitioned numerous times despite not achieving legislative change through the process, illustrated in Table 11. This was a finding that was across petitioner ‘types’ and is, therefore, suggestive of other widely recognised benefits to petitioning that exist beyond this goal. These are now unpacked in section 4.3, where I explore the petition campaign journey and in Chapter 6 I unpack further the extent to which legislative change through parliament is or is not the end-goal during e-petition campaigns, considering whether or not petitioners were ‘successful’ (RQ3).

Table 11: Number of e-petitions created by petitioners

Petitioner(s) by anonymised number	Petitioner category	Number of petitions created (as of November 2024)
1	Individual - no experience	1
3 & 4	Individuals - no prior experience (working together)	3 (together)
5-8, 13	Informal campaign group	1 (as a group)
9	Celebrity/influencer	4

10	Individual - prior e-petition or campaign experience	1
11	Large organisation or charity	7 (as an organisation, on different issues over multiple parliaments)
12	Individual - prior e-petition or campaign experience	4
14	Individual - prior e-petition or campaign experience	4
15	Individual - prior e-petition or campaign experience	7 (over multiple parliaments)
16	Formal campaign group	2 (as an organisation)

4.3 Campaigning outside of parliament

Given the diverse backgrounds of petitioners, the campaign journeys that they went through to achieve their petition ‘ask’ featured a range of strategies and tools and took place on different timelines depending on the ease with which they could begin campaigning. But there were nonetheless typical strategies that were employed by all petitioners, and petitioners moved through various formal and informal campaign ‘milestones’, enacted or influenced by the use of online everyday practices on social media. It is worth noting at the outset that it was not a linear process; petition campaign strategies varied at different stages and according to aspects already explored such as petitioner type. Sometimes petitioners went back to using prior strategies as priorities and circumstances changed and not every petition featured the same milestones. Rather than attempt to create a ‘tick list’ of what petition campaigns ought to involve, this section highlights that there are different campaigning strategies employed by petitioners that result in a range of potential outcomes both in relation to the e-petition processes but also more widely (RQ3).

Social media

All e-petitions must start with submission to the petitions.parliament.uk website. Once they are published and are, therefore, open to signatures, the natural first step for petitioners is to share it as far and wide as possible, to build up support and gain signatures. Without doing so would mean that an e-petition just sits on the petitions.parliament.uk website and does not hit the

thresholds needed to receive a government response or Westminster Hall debate. Petition creators did so by utilising social media platforms Twitter² and Facebook. In cases where they had been campaigning prior to the e-petition, petitioners built upon previous support networks; whilst the creation of the e-petition is the first part in the formal petitioning process, it was very often not the start of the wider campaign. Before creating their petition and submitting it online, a number of petitioners had already been campaigning on the petition topic, using informal channels such as social media or formal channels through speaking to constituency MPs to get their cause onto the political agenda. They did so in order to “hit the ground running” (Interview, Petitioner 9) and achieve the formal milestones as soon as possible. But, as highlighted at the outset of this Chapter, such abilities were not available to all petitioners and those who had very little experience or resources to call upon could not prepare in this way.

Regardless of how prepared petitioners were at the beginning, their social media practices were focussed initially on achieving signature thresholds and were embedded in their day-to-day practices and lives. Activities on social media involved posting about the e-petition topic, for example about the reasons for petitioning and the personal stories and motivations that led petitioners to campaign. Or, they would be about the e-petition itself, explaining what they were calling upon the government to do, or asking other members of the public to ‘sign and share’ in order to reach the formal e-petition milestones at 10,000 and 100,000 signatures. To extend their reach as far as possible, petitioners would frame their posts in emotive or relatable ways, posting photos of the animal they were petitioning about such as their own pet or the species they were seeking to protect, reflecting the literature which suggests that everyday politics occurs in relation to personal issues, stories or motivations (e.g. Bang, 2005; Mansbridge et al, 2012). Tweets would often include hashtags that petitioners had created, and those petitioners that used Facebook would engage extensively in conversations with supporters in the ‘comments’ section, building rapport by sharing their story. When e-petitions began to make some headway on traditional media outlets like television news, petitioners would take clips from these segments to then post online themselves too, often accompanied by their hashtags, and they would pull quotations from various individuals or organisation to show the strength of their support.

² I refer to the platform as Twitter because this was the platform’s name at the point of the case study e-petition campaigns, and petitioners almost exclusively referred to their use of ‘Twitter’. The platform was renamed X during my fieldwork and since then a number of users have stopped using X as a platform, for reasons outlined in Petley, 2025; Hoffman, Leslie and Ifeanyichukwu, 2025; Pérez-Curiel, 2020. The implications of the platform’s change in both name and nature for petitioners will be addressed in Chapter 6.

Across all social media sites, all petitioners would utilise the ‘tagging’ function, for example tagging other campaigners, charities or MPs so that the e-petition could be disseminated as widely and visibly as possible. Similarly, petitioners also used the @ function to reach audiences who could help them, for example, celebrities they knew had worked on similar issues and had a lot of followers, charities they thought might be able to support them with resources, and other campaigners who had already forged connections in both the informal and formal sphere with charities and organisations, or MPs and civil servants, respectively. One group of petitioners learnt how to use ‘QR codes’ so that they could post physical pamphlets in their local areas that would still enable the public to sign the petition online and follow them on social media. All petitioners also had their own websites which they would direct members of the public to on social media so that they could find out more information and other ways to support.

Image 1: Redacted post from Petitioner 3 and 4’s website in which they link to their e-petition and Twitter account

The author has redacted this image for anonymity.

Image 2: Redacted post from Petitioner 6's Facebook campaigning page. The dog photographed is Petitioner 6's pet, who she described in our interview as "campaigning on behalf of... because she doesn't have her own voice" (Interview, Petitioner 6. It has 384 likes, 70 comments and was shared 18 times.

The author has redacted this image for anonymity.

One area where there were differences in social media practices was in terms of the use of paid adverts. It was only those petitioners with money (e.g. category 6) or those who could rely on the monetary support of others who used adverts, amounting to three petitioners in total.³ The benefit of using paid adverts online was articulated by Petitioner 16 whose group was able to fund a small number of Facebook adverts as being able to see "the surge in signatures" when it would "coincide with us spending money on Facebook" (Interview, Petitioner, 16). Interestingly, much of the existing literature on the use of paid adverts in political campaigning is focussed on their use in electoral campaigns (Dommett, 2019; Dommett and Power, 2024) or by established, large charities (Hamill et al, 2015) with less empirical focus on their use by smaller grassroots campaigns. Whilst only a small feature of the case studies in this research such findings are interesting because it shows how adverts may play an important role in the dissemination of e-petition campaigns in informal communicative spaces, too.

With this breadth of practices available online, almost all petitioners articulated the need for, and placed high importance on, having a sustained social media campaign in which they strategically considered how to use social media effectively. The methods highlighted above and the benefits of employing such methods was something that less experienced petitioners (categories 1 and 3) realised organically, whereas more experienced (category 2) or organised (categories 4-6) petitioners planned their social media strategies at the outset, sometimes before the e-petition had been created. The reasons for this are multiple. Firstly, social media was the main way in which petitioners were able to reach signature thresholds. Social media provided a relatively easy

³ Petitioner 1 received monetary support from a small charity but I was not always able to discern conclusively from either documents or interviews where petitioners' money for paid adverts came from. However, all three petitioners who used adverts mentioned here have donation pages listed on their websites.

way for them to share their petition with thousands of people (as shown in the Tweet metrics featured throughout this chapter) and all petitioners placed high importance on doing so because they wanted to ensure that they reached the formal petition thresholds that necessitate further action. It was well-recognised by all interviewees that achieving signature thresholds was a desired first step in their campaign to achieve their aims outlined in section 4.2, and as a result, significant time and resources were placed on achieving this step because it aligned directly to petitioners' motivations about legislative change. In all interviews, petitioners underscored how they could not have achieved this without having posted extensively online.

“Thank you to the 54,000 people who have signed our petition. We are grateful for more retweets and signatures so please share” (Paraphrased Tweet from Petitioner 16's campaign group. It was Reposted 138 times)

“We have 58k signatures to go to trigger a parliamentary debate. Please help. We need friends, family, groups and organisations who support animal welfare to help us” (Paraphrased Tweet from Petitioners 3 and 4's Twitter profile)

Secondly, the nature of posting on social media also meant that petitioners were able to build a following or support base, oftentimes individuals or organisations who they had identified as being sympathetic to the petition cause, and petitioners could utilise this support base to further push their petition out to relevant audiences. This was a two-step process: as above, it was first to reach signature thresholds but it was then also to identify and reach potential supporters who could aid the campaign in other ways in terms of resources and next steps once signature milestones were reached. For example, supporters could contact their own networks, write to MPs, donate money or further push the e-petition out on social media. In section 4.1, I highlighted how the network building aspect of the e-petition campaign was an important one particularly for petitioners with less resources or experience (categories 1-3); whilst some of the experienced petitioners already had supporters to tap into, others did not. Social media therefore provided petitioners with opportunities to either build a support base or nurture it so that all petitioners could tap into additional resources. Building or calling upon networks was usually achieved by using the hashtag function which marks the topic of the post, feeds algorithms, allows for the aggregation of posts and experiences and, importantly for petitioners, initiates campaigns. Once campaigns are initiated, hashtags are beneficial because they are searchable and recognisable, with people often following hashtags rather than individual users (Laucuka, 2018; see also Saxton et al, 2015; Rauschnabel, Sheldon and Herzfeldt, 2019). In this way petitioners

were able to extend their ‘reach’ and contact a wider audience, and in doing so all of the petitioners interviewed were able to find like-minded individuals interested in the e-petition cause who helped them to get signatures or who could point them in helpful directions of other parliamentary or non-parliamentary avenues to explore.

“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. It was Retweeted 93 times, and liked 99 times)

Indeed, as well as wider support networks, social media also enabled petitioners to connect with politicians outside of the formal auspices of the Petitions Committee. This was key to all e-petition campaigns and is unpacked in greater depth in the next section of this chapter. This was possible because Twitter was a platform that, at the time of researching, a number of MPs utilised as a way to share their work with constituents. Like with other campaigners, this enabled petitioners to contact and engage with MPs who they thought might be sympathetic to the e-petition cause but who they otherwise could not reach (most MPs will respond only to constituent enquiries when dealing with their email or post inboxes). Additionally, petitioners often asked their supporters to contact their own constituency MPs. Whilst none of the petitioners directly quantified how many MPs they were able to contact in these ways, all the petitioners who used Twitter mentioned the platform as a way for MPs to ‘see’ what their campaign was working towards, and articulated Twitter as a useful tool for raising their visibility to otherwise inaccessible people. Additionally, petitioners could use MPs’ social media activities to research their prior history and work on an issue, helping petitioners to identify whether or not an MP was likely to be supportive of an issue or identify who else might be supportive. Other online platforms such as MPs’ websites were also useful ways for petitioners to identify whether MPs shared interests related to the petition topic, and they could additionally contact MPs in this way.

Tying these two benefits together, posting on social media sites enabled petitioners to not just reach necessary signature numbers but build a coalition of support that included interested members of the public, other campaigners, charities or well-known figures and MPs who were able to advocate on behalf of petitioners. It enabled them to share their motivations for petitioning, their campaign progress, success and failures to ultimately build coherent narratives online about why the issue needs to be addressed, and how the government or parliament were

(or were not) supporting the cause. The benefits of social media in campaigning have been highlighted elsewhere as enabling horizontal communication where campaigners can engage one another (Jensen, 2017) and the extensive campaigning activities of petitioners pushes back against criticisms that everyday political practices online are little more than ‘slacktivism’ (see Christensen, 2011). Far from it, the campaigning activities that petitioners undertook on social media were fundamental to their political campaign. It meant that even once signature thresholds were achieved and Westminster Hall debates were over, that the campaign could continue in other ways. I return to this point in section 4.4, where I consider the parliamentary campaign in more depth.

“That was a poor response from both the government and shadow ministers on [Petitioner 1’s] petition [in the debate]. Many MPs are in favour. Wildlife has been let down. This is a no brainer solution that is simple, cheap and effective” (Paraphrased Tweet from Petitioner 16’s campaign group, who supported Petitioner 1. It was viewed 7053 times, reposted 72 times and liked 159 times)

The final benefit of social media to e-petition campaigns is that it can be used alongside other strategies, for example by working hand-in-hand with traditional media sources such as TV, newspapers or radio. This was a campaign activity that most petitioners utilised and was not aligned to petitioner type. For example, one individual with no prior experience of petitioning or campaigning (category 1) was featured on a daytime television programme, an accomplishment they attributed to their successful social media pages. In comparison, the petition created by the large international charity was not picked up by traditional media sources, for reasons the petitioner could not pinpoint.

When petitioners did utilise other media outlets, it became an important component of the wider campaign by working hand in hand with social media. Virality on social media helped to get the attention of news outlets or well-known individuals, and clips from news outlets or quotes from supporters could be used to support posts on social media and drive signatures. For example, one petitioner in particular found speaking on news programmes useful because it enabled them to piggyback off press coverage: “I would go in the comments of the press coverage on social media and then start like talking about the petition and sharing those petitions and driving people that way. I find that really helpful because obviously the press already have a following” (Interview, Petitioner 10). Petitioners with more sophisticated campaign strategies recognised this benefit from the outset and drove their campaign around using both types of media. One

wildlife conservation petitioner, for example, took a more sensationalist approach to their petition launch, knowing that it was likely to make a ‘splash’ with the media:

“I realised I needed to make a splash in the media to launch the petition. It comes down to this restriction as a member of the public. I felt like I had two options to get this in the media and one was to break the law and do something disruptive like all of the historical and environmental activists right now [...] but crucially the [...] element is non-disruptive but it is sensationalist enough to get in the media which it obviously did.” (Interview, Petitioner 1)

The petition launch was successful in capturing the attention of the media and featured in a number of national newspaper headlines the following day. Much like Petitioner 10, Petitioner 1 was able to use the news coverage to drive their own campaign on social media. At the time, said petition was the fastest growing petition in its first week, which the petitioner attributed to their sophisticated and coordinated media strategy. They, in turn, attributed their ability to reach signature thresholds and gain the support of multiple MPs to this.

Image 3: Redacted 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

The author has redacted this image for anonymity.

As well as being able to tap into other media outlets, other strategies that petitioners could employ as a result of their campaign included meeting with stakeholders. For example, petitioners 3 and 4 who had no prior experience of petitioning campaigned on an issue related to microchipping and were able to meet with veterinary associations to discuss the issue and the changes needed. They attributed this outcome to the credibility that featuring on television brought them and their campaign. Others met with various charities or regulatory bodies through connections brought in their wider network. Together, then, the avenues opened up to

petitioners through their campaign tactics and activities were vast and extended far beyond just achieving the formal signature thresholds.

Image 4: Redacted Tweet from Petitioner 5-8's campaign group linking to an ITV news article about the e-petition campaign. It was reposted 44 times

The author has redacted this image for anonymity.

In sum, connecting with a range of voices meant that alongside resources and campaign credibility, petitioners were able to receive advice from those who had been through the petitioning process before, or who had an intimate knowledge of how policy making in Westminster works, and where else changes may be possible outside of a focus just on legislative change. Knowledge sharing about which MPs are likely to support them, which charities to approach, which social media platform to use for which objective or which news outlet to reach out to, and how, were core benefits that petitioners gained from developing and utilising their networks. Advice on how to keep momentum going as campaigns reached troughs and signatures slowed down was something that all petitioners identified as important support throughout the process, explained by Petitioner 10:

“[Petitioner 9] and I just talk regularly about the state of play in Westminster for animals and obviously he runs [group] and has a fantastic network of advocates that respect him and take a lead from him. So, he is always a good sounding board if we’ve got ideas we want to press with, where to go next.” (Interview, Petitioner 10)

This is a particularly fundamental point of the e-petition campaign for creators who begin the process with very few resources or connections. The proverb “it takes a village” feels appropriate

here; without finding and depending on the support of others, petitioners are unlikely to reach signature thresholds let alone capture the attention of the government or other actors.

Table 12: The benefits of social media

Benefit of social media	Why?
A media 'ecosystem'	It provided petitioners with the ability to share petitions on social media and tap into traditional media outlets such as newspapers, TV and radio to increase the reach and visibility of their campaign
Reach	It provided petitioners with the ability to achieve signature thresholds via followers, hashtag and @ functions
Networking	Through social media petitioners were able to find and connect with supporters and other campaigners to further their campaign or tap into additional resources
Link to parliament	Petitioners were able to contact or show MPs and Peers their campaign, its goals and success so far via social media. Especially useful where MPs would not respond to emails.

It is, however, important to recognise that, as highlighted in section 4.1, petitioners with prior experience (category 2), or who were part of organised groups (categories 4 and 5) were at an initial advantage with their social media campaigns because in all cases they all already had this base from which they could draw before the e-petition campaign had begun. Practically, for these experienced petitioners or those with greater public profiles, this meant that the early days of the petition campaign were planned around - often before it was launched - pushing the petition out to the public for signatures and then drawing on their supporters, compared to individuals without prior experience who spent this time simply trying to find who these warm audiences might be and build up followers to reach, often slowly, signature thresholds (categories 1-3). Even though this is the case, analysis of all of the case study e-petitions highlights that whilst this may have been an initial advantage, all petitioners eventually built a network of supporters which became important in later stages of the campaign and all articulated the benefits of a social media strategy during interviews regardless of their prior experience or access to resources. And all petitioners saw 'success' with this strategy either by reaching desired signature thresholds or by reaching other campaigners, charities, stakeholders or MPs, albeit on differing timescales.

The influence of well-known voices

However, a key influence on petitioners' campaigns that may suggest imbalances exist in how the public can connect with parliament was petitioners' ability to tap into networks of well-known celebrity voices, defined by Driessens (2013) as those with accumulated media visibility, or 'recognisability'. This was a thread that ran through almost all of the e-petition campaigns: celebrity voices were an important component of the social media strategies outlined above and often helped petitioners to forge connections with parliamentarians (RQ2). Whilst only one petitioner featured was a celebrity themselves (category 6), four other e-petitions studied in this research had one on the wider campaigning team, and one received some initial support from a celebrity. A different petitioner benefitted from being the child of a much-loved TV personality and they attributed their early campaigning success to their parent being able to advocate for the cause publicly on their behalf. In total, all but three e-petitions had the involvement of a celebrity in their campaign in some capacity, and of the three remaining, one was the large international charity that could rely on their organisational credibility and, therefore, did not need celebrity endorsement. By way of showing the status of some of the celebrities involved without compromising anonymity and identifying them, one of the celebrities involved in the e-petitions had, in October 2024, 14.7m followers on Twitter. Others who were comparatively less well-known but nonetheless were still recognisable public figures had 627.6k, 50.6k and 49.6k followers on Twitter. Two feature frequently on daytime television programmes. This is an important finding because the role of celebrity voices was an important element of petitioners' ability to overcome resource imbalances or differences in social media followers; the overall reach that petitioners had largely depended on their followings or established supporter base, *unless* they could draw on celebrity amplification. That is, tapping into celebrity networks became an important way for petitioners to increase available resources or 'reach'. The only exception to this was the large international charity (category 5) who had a large reach on Twitter irrespective of celebrity endorsement. Whilst still a nascent aspect of the literature, celebrities' role in petitioning has been highlighted by Matthews (2023) as potentially acting as non-institutional intermediaries, which is an important point to draw emphasis on here because of the advantages brought by having a celebrity or high-profile individual that supports the petition campaign, summarised as follows.

The first, and perhaps most notable advantage was that celebrities with large followings could, by nature of promoting the petition to more people, drive more signatures compared to petitioners

or other supporters who had less followers. Petitioner 16, who campaigned alongside a celebrity summarised the benefit in honest terms:

“But there are an awful lot of women about my age that are about [celebrity’s] age who think that [celebrity] is wonderful and that if he promotes anything then they will quite mindlessly I will say, sign up to them. And that is incredibly useful because you can target by gender and geography and age and interest on Facebook. So, it is quite, it is fascinating. It is still quite hard work but it is quite an efficient way to do it.” (Interview, Petitioner 16)

This meant that signature thresholds could be achieved quickly and without much effort, allowing petitioners to put their energy and time into exploring the other campaign strategies outlined above.

Alongside the power of a celebrity to draw in signatures and supporters, other benefits arose in terms of the popularity and credibility that celebrity voices can bring to a campaign, for example, because “if you create something that is noticed by relevant, cool celebrities, people will be sucked in” and it creates “a fear of missing out” (Interview, Petitioner 9). In Chapter 5, we will come to see how the additional publicity that comes from having a celebrity on board was a motivator for some MPs getting involved in petition campaigns, and it was noted by a number of petitioners that having a celebrity to support them also meant that they were more likely to be featured on television, in the news or on radio, all of which could then be used to publicise their campaign again on social media. Similar benefits come from organisational voices, who are also ‘well known’, albeit in different ways. A public show of support from a legitimate, powerful voice - celebrity or organisational - on animal welfare gave petitioners a justified platform on which to stand and conferred credibility for petitioners when seeking to establish relationships with MPs. Petitioner 1, for example, was supported by a major charity and celebrity, and articulated the benefit as a “strategic collaboration” that gave “as much weight behind me as possible to succeed” so that even if perceived as a “crazy lady” she was nonetheless “supported” (Interview, Petitioner 1).

Those petitioners that had the support of such voices often attributed them with helping to push the petition over the finishing line, both in terms of signature thresholds but also with regard to amplifying the petition to other contacts who could help with the petition campaign. For example, a number of celebrities were highlighted and thanked for their support in campaigning for a change in regulation that was a direct result of a case study petition’s campaign:

“[Law] is the consequence of a long-term grassroots and multi award-winning campaign [...] by a coalition of campaigning groups [...], All Party Parliamentary Groups and celebrities including [...] Brian May, Ricky Gervais, Peter Egan, [...] Deborah Meaden and cross-party collaboration”
(Paraphrased excerpt from a Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs press release after a petition campaign led to a change in regulation. A number of names have been removed to protect the anonymity of the petition)

The trust derived from celebrity and organisational status and the idea of a ‘fear of missing out’ is a compelling one because for those petitioners who received them, celebrity or organisational endorsements were followed, in their eyes, by more MPs showing public support for the petition. When evaluating the role of powerful endorsement or involvement petitioners were always positive; it was never indicated that there were either unforeseen consequences to such involvement and nor were celebrities seen to have ‘hijacked’ campaigns. Whilst this is a risk that is highlighted in the literature (e.g. Becker 2013), for the case study petitioners network building and finding powerful voices on social media who can support the petition and amplify its message was a critical element of a ‘successful’ e-petition campaign that had no unforeseen consequences. Indeed, this finding about the value of celebrity endorsements to petitioners is in line with literature that suggests that celebrity influence can sway opinions and behaviour, for example in terms of consumers (Yeshun, 2006; Erdogan, 1999; Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016) and in politics (Street, 2012; Madinga et al 2019).

In this way, many of the campaigning activities of petitioners that I have highlighted in this section were supported by the role of celebrity voices. We have seen how petitioners’ campaigns were often characterised by both a suite of campaigning activities and a suite of support, explained by Petitioner 11 as a “cog in the wider campaign sort of arsenal, weaponry if you like” (Interview, Petitioner 11), but necessary nuance to these activities is that it was largely because of celebrity influence that petitioners were able to create the vast networks of support that enabled them to first reach signature thresholds but secondly identify other avenues for change. Later, in Chapter 5, I come to how celebrity influence may have also incentivized parliamentarians’ involvement in petitions.

Platform differences

A final point worth noting about the use of social media is that not all media platforms are created equal and this impacted where petitioners would share their e-petitions. With social media platforms, there is a discernible difference between the functions that each platform performs for petitioners. The two platforms used most commonly were Twitter and Facebook. All petitioners placed high importance on using Twitter as a way to connect with a significant number of people with relative ease and there was no real pattern according to petitioner types. The character limits imposed by the platform ensured that messaging was clear and concise. This meant that petitioners could sustain a higher level of posting which in turn enabled them to stay in the spotlight without relying on the support of traditional media outlets. Furthermore, the hashtag feature of Twitter enabled two petitioners to work together to make their messaging clear and the petitions ‘memorable’, and tweetable. With that said, the most significant benefit to Twitter as a platform is that it was the platform that most MPs petitioners targeted were on, the benefits of which were outlined above. It is also the platform where most large charities and NGOs have a presence. The ability to tag these groups and MPs was mentioned by numerous petitioners as a large help in their campaign. Even if the individual MP or group did not engage with the petitioner beyond tweeting, their large followings were suggested to have helped to further get the petition message out.

“The other reason why Twitter is so much more important than Instagram is because the politicians are on it and all the CEOs and the conservation groups. I only got the [large national charity] to support my campaign because I directly messaged the CEO of the [charity]. Six months later I'm having a meeting with her, with the minister. The reason why [Member of the House of Lords] 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)

In contrast, Facebook's groups feature was preferred by two petitioners (though three were active on the platform) because it enabled them to build a closer-knit community of supporters. One petitioner had built up a supporter base on Facebook based on posting their personal story about their pet prior to any political campaigning and once they had created a petition they were able to share it with this already well-established group of people who cared about and felt connected to the petition cause. The other relied on their group members as a reliable source of support and signatures through different petition campaigns.

“We have signed, shared, and got friends and family on board to overturn this outdated barbaric law, [pet] and yourself deserve all the backing and support we can give you, keep up the good work, love [pet], the little beauty xx” (Facebook comment from one of Petitioner 14’s posts asking people to sign the petition)

As above, a few resourced petitioners also utilised Facebook’s adverts feature. Whilst they noted that the extent to which this drove signatures was difficult to determine, they indicated that signatures did increase following a Facebook advertisement and that it was a cost-effective way of driving the petition campaign particularly when momentum slowed down. These differentiations are interesting because they reflect the changing, and changeable, nature of political campaigning online, as well as the impact of different platforms, which largely echoes the wider literature on contemporary political campaigning in online spaces (e.g. Wright, 2012; Vaccari, 2013; Vromen, 2016).

4.4 Petitioners’ engagement with parliament

The findings presented so far in this chapter underscore a range of campaign strategies that revolve around the use of social media and that bring about a number of outcomes and benefits to the wider e-petition campaign beyond just achieving the formal signature thresholds, largely in terms of building support, accessing others’ resources or amplifying campaigns in the public sphere. This section now turns to how these strategies relate to parliament to understand the connective mechanisms between citizens and parliament (RQ2) through petitioning, and subsequent e-petition outcomes (RQ3).

The Petitions Committee

The only ‘standardised’ form of contact with parliament during the e-petition process is that which occurs through the Petitions Committee. The e-petition process starts when a petitioner submits their e-petition online and it goes to the Petitions Committee for moderation and approval. For all e-petitions, this is the first point of contact with the Petitions Committee. For two petitioners, this moderation process involved a degree of back and forth with the Committee to clarify the intent of the e-petition or regarding the declaration of a charity’s involvement. But for most, it was straightforward and their petition was published online without any changes.

The second contact occurs at the formal milestones: 10,000 signatures and 100,000 signatures.

Every petition in this research had reached the signature threshold of 10,000 responses which meant that every petition received a response from the government. In cases where either the petitioner or the Petitions Committee did not feel that the government had provided an adequate response, for example, without jargon and written in a way that the public can understand, the Petitions Committee would write to the government to request a revised response be given. This is standard practice for the Committee, who uphold the view that government responses ought to respond carefully and considerately to petitioners, for whom this may be the first time they have ever engaged with parliament outside of voting in elections.

Almost all of the petitions in this research reached 100,000 signatures, which meant almost all were debated at Westminster Hall. The Petitions Committee will engage with petition creators before the debate, with the MP leading the debate often speaking directly to the petitioner beforehand to understand more about the petition background. Petitioners found this engagement to be positive, noting for example that “[MP] really did put in the homework to make sure what he was saying on the day was on point, which was helpful” (Interview, Petitioner 10). Some petitioners met with Petitions Committee officials who explained the various steps in the process, but this was not something that all petitioners experienced.

However, petitioners did not view these two milestones as particularly useful moments in their campaign, largely because neither the response nor the debate signalled any movement towards further action from the government, or indeed from parliament. In section 4.5 I will come to explore petitioners’ reflections on these processes, but for now it is noteworthy that whilst petitioners did utilise their campaign activities listed above to reach the signature thresholds, once achieved petitioners’ tended to view them as ‘dead ends’ and, indeed, beyond these two formal milestones, contact with the Committee tended to remain limited. The Petitions Committee has the same formal abilities as other House of Commons select committees, which means that it can, for example, undertake an inquiry and gather oral and written evidence. This has been done in previous parliaments by the Committee but none of the petitions in this research were involved in such, nor were they involved in any other public engagement outreach or activities. This is largely down to the Committee’s limited resources as opposed to a lack of willingness; in interviews, a number of former or current Committee officials and MPs expressed pride in prior inquiries and engagement activities and they expressed a desire to do more whilst noting that they were constrained by reasons beyond their control. But because none of the petitioners experienced any of these types of activities, they could not speak to this element of

the Committee's role. Instead, they tended to view the Committee as a useful procedural function but through which they did not receive many additional benefits.

Other parliamentary Routes

Section 4.3 has briefly addressed how one of the benefits of social media is that it provided a means through which petitioners could reach out to parliamentarians alongside other supporters. Petitioners would target their constituency MPs in the first instance, followed by MPs who they knew had worked on animal welfare issues previously and who might be supportive of the petition ask. For example, one MP was targeted because "[petitioner] knows that I'm a very keen birdwatcher and conservationist" and "I have been a member of the RSPB for [many decades] because my grandfather signed me up as a small child" (Interview, MP C). Most often this would be done by emailing MPs (one petitioner emailed all 650!), by reaching out to them directly on social media or by asking the supporters they had built up, who might have had contact with MPs before, to put them in touch.

"Thank you to [Peer] for championing [cause] with me. Our government meeting went well and there is some hope. Thank you to supporters and [Peer] for continuing to support the campaign" (Paraphrased Tweet from Petitioner 1 following a meeting with the government, made possible by a Peer who had previously been a member of the government frontbenches)

"Good luck to [MP] at the #WestminsterDogShow. Thank you for including us in your list of animal welfare issues that need to be addressed. [Petition link]" (Paraphrased Tweet from Petitioner 15. Attached to the Tweet is a photo of the MP, Petitioner 15 and Petitioner 12 holding a sign with the e-petition hashtag")

Additionally, petitioners would try to show the campaign's credibility by highlighting on their posts the number of signatures or followers that campaigns had, by highlighting TV appearances or news articles, or they would use their aforementioned networks built up on social media to achieve this goal. They would, for example, ask their supporters to contact their own MPs on social media or write them letters (and often write the material for them to avoid generic campaign emails) to encourage more MPs to attend the debates or speak to sympathetic colleagues. Interestingly, the necessity of an MPs' personal interest was sometimes a barrier for petitioners. One petitioner's constituency MP was in particular not interested in their campaign - "he couldn't care less" (Interview, Petitioner 1) - which made it increasingly difficult for the

petitioner to find an MP who would support them, not least because MPs tend to only respond to emails from their constituents and because the petitioner was unable to find MPs who had publicly supported their somewhat niche cause before. The 'luck of the draw' on whether one's own constituency MP is willing to support either through constituency link or personal interest meant that the extent to which petitioners could rely on this varied greatly amongst all those I interviewed. This finding was the case regardless of the petitioner types. The more networked or resourced petitioners still had to identify and convince willing MPs to get involved, especially if it was a new topic they had not petitioned on before, or if parliamentarians who had supported them previously were no longer willing or able to support them, which meant that there was no advantage for more experienced or resourced petitioners in this way.

The hope for many was that by casting their net as wide as possible on social media, building support and showing credibility, they would 'catch' one or two MPs with whom they could develop a relationship. It was the depth of relationship, rather than breadth, that petitioners viewed as important when it came to their parliamentary connections. Whilst petitioners used social media to capture a wide range of support in the civil sphere - dissemination was key - when it came to engagement with parliament it was more about establishing deep support with parliamentarians whereby the relationship could continue over time and through various stages of the campaign. As with other aspects of their e-petition campaign, more experienced petitioners (e.g. categories 2, 4-6) knew this from the outset, whereas those with less experience (category 1) learnt the importance of these relationships organically over time. The focus of petitioners on forging these connections is an interesting mark of difference between the ability of the parliamentary platform and non-institutionalised versions such as Change.org which tend to emphasise breadth rather than depth of campaign. In this way, the intention behind this assortment of strategies was to identify and connect with MPs (and sometimes Peers) who would support them by attending debates, asking questions, speaking to colleagues or pursuing other parliamentary mechanisms after the formal milestones had been achieved. For example, three petitioners went on to work with an MP to introduce a Private Members' Bill (PMB) on the petition topic. Unfortunately, at the time of interviewing, none of these had progressed - only one progressed beyond first reading and none beyond the second - but those petitioners expressed that they were still exploring other avenues with supportive MPs. One petitioner went on to work with a Member of the House of Lords to lobby the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), and the Peer submitted an amendment to a Bill in progress. 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 potential avenues for change. One MP facilitated a meeting between a petitioner and a professional organisation who had the power to implement some of the petitioners' desired changes. Multiple petitioners had their e-petitions mentioned in either written or oral questions, and another petition was featured in a government policy paper:

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)

Across all interviews, petitioners noted how forging a depth of relationship was necessary because these additional mechanisms could further their campaign beyond the formal milestones. Where petitioners were successful in doing so it was suggested that this was a core moment in the campaign:

“[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)

It is this point that is the crux of this thesis. The relationship built with MPs (or Peers) was a fundamental next step in the e-petition campaign once the petition had reached its procedural end point at 100,000 signatures. This is because it provided access to a vast range of other parliamentary mechanisms that are not a part of the formal e-petition process, which petitioners tended to view as a 'dead end' because the formal milestones do not guarantee further action. That is, the e-petition campaign did not end after the formal milestones were achieved, instead extending their campaign into a multitude of various other parliamentary avenues. In this respect, it is not necessarily the fact that the parliamentary e-petition system has formalised parliamentary actions inbuilt in the process that is the benefit to petitioners. Rather, it is that the petition acts as

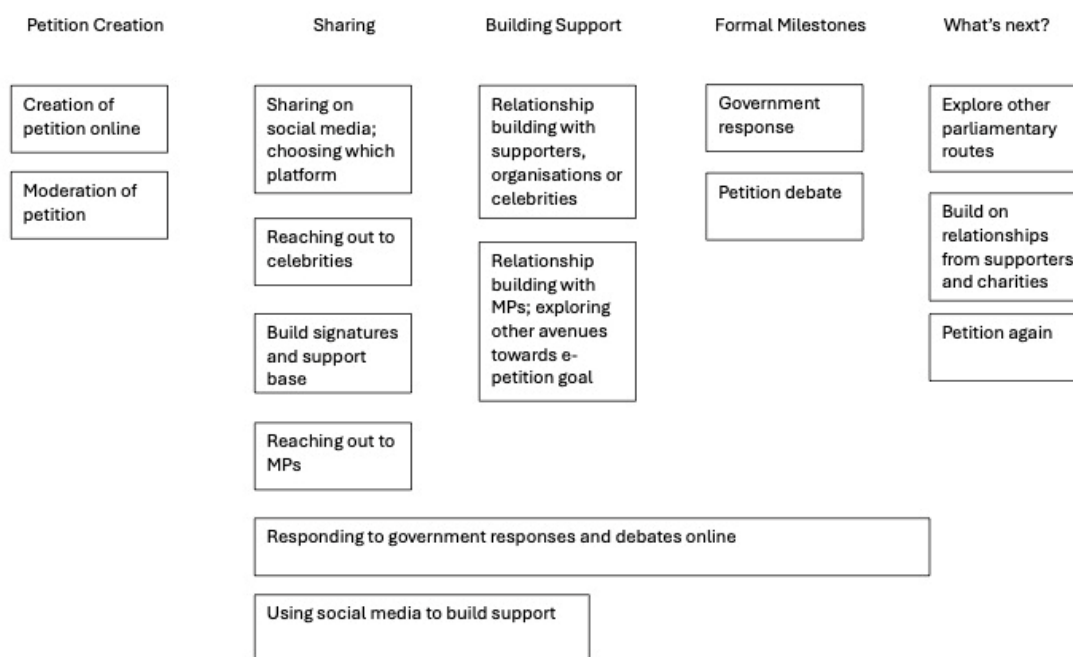
a vehicle through which relationships are built between parliamentarians and campaigners and therefore opens up opportunities for other parliamentary (or, in some cases, non-parliamentary) mechanisms to be used, so called ‘spillover effects’ (Matthews, 2023) because they are outcomes of petitioning that exist beyond the formal e-petition milestones. It is well established in the literature that policy making and change in Westminster is slow, happens behind the scenes and is reliant on multiple pressure points over time (e.g. Russell and Cowley, 2016). So, even where a petition may look on the surface to have been unsuccessful -i.e. that the specific ask of the petition was not agreed to by the minister in the Westminster Hall debate- the extensive nature of the petition campaign and the spillover benefits that arise from it in terms of other avenues that can be explored means that ‘success’ is dynamic and does not come to an end when a petition reaches 100,000 signatures. In this way, e-petitions were a step into parliament through which campaigners can build relationships with MPs who might be able to support them both with their petition and in other ways beyond it. This finding was particularly evident for those petitioners without prior experience with parliament, for example, through typical lobbying routes. For those petitioners who began from nowhere (e.g. category 1), the e-petition was a door into parliament that may have otherwise been closed and they have all cultivated relationships with MPs that have continued on beyond the petition itself. Linking back to the learning curves mentioned in section 4.2, all petitioners came to recognise this as a valuable part of the process:

“Even though we didn’t win the first [e-petition], it taught us so much about the system that it was successful in its own way. It eventually happened, it took a while and made us realise how hard it was. In the end I got 94 MPs on board, who then went away to work on getting it out there in parliament. The things that went on behind the scenes were something else” (Interview, Petitioner 9)

Importantly, for many, building up these connections was the most difficult part of their campaign journey. MPs are busy; attending a petition debate or submitting a Private Members’ Bill 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. One petitioner would spend days at a time in Portcullis House and would attend APPG meetings to engage with MPs face-to-face to build up relationships and keep the petition in the spotlight. Given the rules around visitor access in the Palace of Westminster this petitioner was privileged to be able to do so, which they themselves attributed to their celebrity status and the fact that they are known amongst circles of animal welfare supporters, including MPs. But because the majority of

petitioners did not have this level of access, attempts to build these connections would largely play out on social media.

Figure 3: Common campaign milestones



One risk that may be levied against these relationships is that MPs may seek to support petitioners for their own personal gains, for example because of the visibility that arises from being involved in a high profile and successful campaign, but this was not intuited by petitioners who instead suggested that MPs were supportive and keen to ensure that petition campaigns were undertaken in the way that petitioners wanted. Indeed, the fact that most of the petitions featured in this research have not been ‘successful’ in purely legislative terms suggests that piggybacking off of petition success is not a primary motivator for MPs to support the campaigns. I explore what did motivate parliamentarians’ involvement in Chapter 5.

In summary, relationship building with parliamentarians was both a fundamental aspect of the campaign but also a tiring one, which I will come back to in section 4.5. But it was worth it for petitioners for the following key reason. Whilst having an MP on board meant that they show petitioners support and advocate for the cause in the Westminster Hall debate, more importantly, petitioners suggested the relationship fostered brings other benefits that would help the wider campaign after the petition process itself was over, best explained by Petitioner 9:

“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, to then show that XYZ MPs support me.” (Interview, Petitioner 9)

Summarising the campaign activities of petitioners, the online and offline strategies and components of the campaigns outlined are diverse and interchangeable, with petitioners employing different aspects at different times, depending on which was deemed the most effective and according to the resources available. The everyday online practices of petitioners are core to their campaigns including the attempts that petitioners make to connect with MPs, build up social media followings, build relationships with other campaigners or derive benefits from celebrity influence and drive the petition topic through other parliamentary channels. It is through these activities that petitioners access both of the formal milestones of the e-petitions process, but also, and perhaps more importantly through these varied campaign activities petitioners access multiple informal ‘touch points’ with parliament through which they are able to continue campaigning.

4.5 The experience of ‘speaking’

With this in mind, this final section of this chapter considers petitioners' reflections both on the formalised elements of the petitions process and on the impact of these informal touch points. It presents findings in relation to RQ3 by exploring how petitioners viewed their campaign and outcomes, contributing to understandings of e-petition success by considering outcomes from the perspectives of petitioners themselves. These findings are pulled from the interviews I undertook with petitioners in which I asked them to reflect upon their experience, the ups and downs and the extent to which they were happy with the petitioning process as a whole. Understanding the experiences of petitioners is both interesting and important to highlight because if e-petitions are considered a way in which to address apathy and disillusionment then consideration of the emotional and physical impact and the outcomes of the system matters.

As has already been established in this chapter, whilst petitioner backgrounds and experiences were diverse, many of their motivations for petitioning and the campaign strategies that they employed were similar. Across all petitioner types, experiences with individual Petitions Committee officials and MPs were often expressed as positive. On the whole, petitioners felt

that the Committee was supportive, for example, when answering petitioners' questions about the process, and felt that MPs who lead the petition debates were attentive to the core aspects of the petition.

Some, however, felt that the Committee could do more, particularly with regards to pushing back against the government responses that did not adequately address the core ask of the petition. It was the case for three of the petitions that the government response was not felt to fairly address the petition by petitioners. For one of these three, following dialogue about the issues with the Petitions Committee, it was agreed that the response was not sufficient and the Petitions Committee requested a revision. But some petitioners felt that the failure of the government to provide an adequate response in the first place was a problematic part of the system that ought to be addressed by the Committee as a more fundamental issue. One petitioner had particular concerns that poor government responses were doing more harm than good because it damaged perceptions:

“The DEFRA response is just not a proper response to our petition. Most of it is just faff and padding. It is the type of response that will turn the public off engaging in the petitions process because it treats their request with disdain and completely avoids addressing its key issue. Actually, it is insulting. So, I respectfully asked the Petitions Committee to solicit a proper response from DEFRA and ask for it to be provided as a matter of urgency” (Interview, Petitioner 16)

The overarching concern with poor government responses is that it was often a source of disappointment for petition creators because they do not signal a commitment to change or progress petitioners towards their goal of legislative change; they are, in the words of Petitioner 2, “a dead end” (Interview, Petitioner 2), even though they do capture the attention of government. Previous research suggests that petitioners are happy to have had their voice heard so long as they have been ‘fairly’ heard, even if desired outcomes are not achieved (Carman 2010; Bochel 2012). The reflections of petitioners suggest otherwise: petitioners expressed that they were upset with the responses and felt as though the government had failed to seriously listen to or consider their request because responses tended to restate the government’s position without adding anything new or indicating any willingness to consider taking the issue forward. Whilst they had been heard and had been heard through a ‘fair’ and politically neutral process, petitioners did not feel that they had been meaningfully listened to and instead they felt largely ignored. The more cynical petitioners suggested that despite clear processes the system was little

more than a way for the government to present itself as listening to the public, without meaningfully doing so:

“There is this process that people naively believe means that you are bringing your concerns, not our personal concerns, the concerns of a vast number of people in this country given the numbers and the support and all the rest of it we’ve got. And they [the government] go through the bloody motions and they do nothing. It doesn’t say much to the art of representative governance, does it?” (Interview, Petitioner 7)

Similar disappointment was also expressed in relation to Westminster Hall debates. One reason is because, like the response, the debate does not guarantee the government is going to take any actions on the issue. But an additional reason is related to the findings presented earlier in this chapter about the extensive campaigning process that petitioners undertake not just to reach 100,000 signatures but to also get MPs to attend the debate and support them afterwards. Many petitioners felt that the debate was little more than a government response read aloud. The explanation for why this might be given by MPs in interviews was that the minister in attendance typically is the last to speak and will read a pre-written response. Some ministers will deviate somewhat in response to the points made by other MPs but generally speaking they will know what it is they are going to say beforehand (Interview, MPs B, E and K). Because of this, many petitioners felt that the government had failed to engage with the spirit of a debate, and this was a major source of disappointment amongst most petitioners, including those who had petitioned before.

“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 taxpayer’s 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).

Many also felt as though not enough MPs had attended for it to be a satisfactory debate. Of the five original e-petitions selected as the case studies for this research, the average number of MPs in attendance, including the minister, was 15, with the highest number of MPs attending one of the debates being 21 and the lowest 12. There are no publicly available statistics regarding Westminster Hall debate attendance which makes it difficult to discern whether this average is

representative of wider Westminster Hall debates. Westminster Hall debates also remain a highly under researched area of parliamentary studies, but it has been suggested that Westminster Hall as a debate chamber is secondary in importance to the main chamber in the House of Commons (e.g. Kelso, 2009). Nonetheless, what matters for this research is that petitioners felt as though the debate process was disappointing and unlikely to further their e-petition aims and that this was largely because the government were not seen to have engaged with the spirit of a debate, or because not enough MPs attended.

Unlike other aspects of the petitioning process, these feelings of disappointment were a commonality between all petitioner types at some point in the process, regardless of experience or resources. Whilst those with more experience and who had undergone the learning curve outlined in section 4.1 expressed more understanding that the government responses and debate are not intended to lead to an immediate change in policy they too indicated that these were points at which the system had let them down in previous petitioning attempts:

“The minister got it wrong. He got the facts wrong. So, he said we (government) need to do our own figures. We can’t rely on the figures from insurance companies and the people who put this together. We need a paper. Well [Petitioner 12] wrote an academic paper on this. He had all the facts. You can’t rely on the [minister in the debate]. We left that one there and had to start another [e-petition] in 2019” (Interview, Petitioner 15 who at the time of interviewing had petitioned multiple times already)

Importantly, these findings highlight that the points at which petitioners felt disappointment were generally with regard to the formal processes. Such experiences cut across petitioner types, raising a core question about the risks of public engagement systems like parliamentary e-petitions doing more harm than good, which is unpacked later in Chapter 6. Two petitioners expressed this concern directly, raising the point that petitioning was a democratic right that they did not feel had been satisfactorily fulfilled by the process: “I’m not convinced that the end result was democratic. It is a false promise and it is not fair on the person doing it” (Interview, Petitioner 1). Linking back to the findings about petitioner motivations presented in section 4.2, this may be because petitioners were largely focussed on achieving legislative change and so the processes not leading to this outcome may have been disappointing to petitioners. This is even though the e-petitions processes are not intended to lead to legislative change but rather “are an easy way for you to make sure your concerns are heard by government and parliament” (Petitions Website, no date). Indeed, whilst agenda setting and capturing the attention of the

government were also motivations, these were secondary to legislative change. What is particularly interesting about this finding is that it largely echoes the earlier findings of Leston-Bandeira (2019), who identified that the instances when petitioners did not feel listened to related when debates did not reflect appropriately their original petition, noting also that the debates can hinder the various roles performed by the e-petition system - the democratic 'goods' I highlighted in Chapter 2. This suggests that challenges around the formal processes are persistent, and I return to the implications of these challenges in depth in Chapter 6.

Additionally, even though the Petitions Committee has the ability to take other action in relation to e-petitions, for example, undertake an inquiry or share e-petition details with other committees, the work of Petitions Committee did not extend beyond the formal e-petition milestones in any of the case study e-petitions. Whilst many petitioners did not know the Committee had this remit, a small number of those who did know this were disappointed no further action had taken place because they felt as though their e-petition was deserving of additional consideration. These findings perhaps suggest that there is an issue of expectations management about what the formal processes are designed to and likely to achieve, a point which I also return to in Chapter 6.

The positive aspects of the process were expressed in relation to the other informal 'touch points' with parliament highlighted in the previous section. For example, where petitioners had built up relationships with MPs they expressed these relationships as key aspects of their campaign, and points at which they felt that their petition was making good progress. It meant that petitioners felt 'heard' by those in power, even if MPs were not in government because it often signalled some kind of commitment to other parliamentary action, unlike the government responses or Westminster Hall debates. Furthermore, petitioners recognised the benefits of and placed high importance on these relationships in terms of the access it granted them to otherwise inaccessible parliamentary processes. One such example that was highlighted in the preceding section is the ability to connect with civil servants, who, it was hoped, could gently encourage ministers to further consider the petition topics when other strategies had been exhausted.

The support of MPs at various points of the campaign was a tangible benefit because they provided petitioners with informal touch points to other parliamentary mechanisms, but these connections also provided intangible benefits for petitioners. This is because of the emotional support provided by MPs who could demystify parts of either the petitioning process or other

parliamentary procedures that were unfamiliar to petitioners. For example, many of the MPs with whom petitioners had built relationships would stay after the petition debates to debrief and in some cases discuss next steps for the campaign (explored later in Chapter 5).

Importantly, in general, petitioners' recognition of these informal touch points as useful moments in their campaign came post hoc, after they had received the government response or had their debate. By and large, petitioners suggested that at the time of petitioning they were tunnel vision on achieving legislative change through the formal e-petition milestones, which meant that they didn't necessarily recognise that tapping into wider parliamentary networks was a benefit until after they have achieved the milestones and little had changed as a result. Once the formal e-petitions processes were over, their attention then turned to the other avenues towards change. Like many aspects of the petitioning process, less experienced petitioners learnt this as part of their aforementioned 'learning curve', whereas more experienced petitioners knew the importance of various channels of influence earlier on. But nonetheless the beneficial impact of relationship building with parliamentarians and the subsequent connections that arise from it was expressed consistently by petitioners and reflects previous research on the incremental, beyond-parliamentary policy process whereby other actors beyond ministers are core in the policy making process (Richardson and Jordan, 1979). It is this point that highlights the importance of coalitions of support because, for example, other campaigners who did have connections with MPs who were able to personally introduce petitioners to them were vital support mechanisms during both attempts to reach the formal milestones and as part of a wider campaign.

Petitioners' various feelings towards different aspects of the process are compounded by the workload that they put in in order to achieve the formal signature thresholds and build relationships with MPs. I have established throughout this chapter that one of the core aspects of the e-petition campaign is in building up coalitions of supporters both in the public and in parliament. Doing so is not a simple task and many petitioners would put in hours of campaigning work alongside other responsibilities or commitments such as jobs and families:

“And I think we both got to the point at one stage as well where you think, how long can I keep doing this? Because it got so emotional and so overwhelming and detrimental. [Petitioner 4] and I have both got families, we've both got dogs, we've both got children. It took over everything and it still does really and for it to be dismissed like that was just horrendous. And I tell you what, if I ever met [minister] or [Petitioner 4] met him, I would not like to say what I would say to him.”
(Interview, Petitioner 3)

This was particularly acute for those with few(er) organisational resources (categories 1-3) who would begin campaigning largely alone and unsupported because it took considerable time and effort to undertake the various activities highlighted in this chapter. Even those with the support of others would spend the early hours of the morning on social media or checking the number of signatures online: “you’re up all night on Twitter and just tapping away on Facebook or whatever” (Interview, Petitioner 10). Indeed, one petitioner who was still actively campaigning at the time of our interview said that they were relieved to spend the duration of the interview away from their petition campaign (Interview, Petitioner 12). Such personal sacrifices of campaigning took both physical and emotional tolls on petitioners. One petitioner, on their second e-petition, described experiencing stress levels so high that they were hospitalised (Interview, Petitioner 9). Whilst not all petitioners will experience the process in this way, many others described it as “taxing” (Interview, Petitioner 7), something “you lose a lot of your life to” (Interview, Petitioner 10) and described feelings of burnout and needing to “slow down” (Interview, Petitioner 8). And so, whilst petitioners were keen to emphasise how the various support both in and outside of parliament had been a positive moment during the campaign, those who struggled to achieve this at the beginning highlighted that this was a frustration, especially when compared to other e-petitions they knew of and emphasised how this took up much of their time and focus.

As such, given the amount of effort petitioners put into the process, compounded with their desires for legislative change, it is perhaps no surprise that feelings of disappointment with the government response and petition debates were so largely felt and petitioners felt most optimistic when they were working towards other avenues for change.

Additional context

However, the context of the somewhat ‘out of the ordinary’ 2019-2024 Parliament is also important to highlight because the events - both in and outside of parliament - affected the e-petition campaign journeys and the procedural aspects of the e-petition process, therefore potentially impacting the reflections presented above. As such, the findings of this research need to be contextualised as affected by these events.

Firstly, the Coronavirus pandemic beginning in 2020 brought along positives and negatives for the petitioners in this research. Petitioners who were not employed during the various lockdown

periods of the pandemic were afforded an opportunity to spend much of their time working on their e-petition campaign, putting in significant numbers of hours to undertake the campaign activities highlighted in this chapter. Similarly, the free time experienced by some members of the public during the pandemic may be a reason as to why, based upon the reflections from petitioners, more people were signing petitions. In this respect, for some of the petitioners that I interviewed, the pandemic was described as a 'golden era' of petitioning and many have since struggled to reach the same levels of momentum noting that, at the time of interview, it was much harder to get the required levels of petition support than it had been previously (Interviews, Petitioners 3, 4, 9, 10 and 15).

Whilst the pandemic may have helped to drive public support for petitions, the need for parliamentary proceedings to rapidly move online to prevent the transmission of the disease meant that the formalised aspects of petitioning were inhibited. Hybrid proceedings beginning in March 2020 meant that petitions which had reached the 100,000-signature threshold and were due to be debated were either cancelled or moved online. There was also a backlog of petitions which continued even after all Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. In some cases, petition debates were combined together and more than one petition was considered in a debate. Petitioner 14 was particularly affected by this change and their petition was debated alongside another which led to, they felt, all attention being placed on the other e-petition and their e-petition not being considered fairly or in any meaningful depth. This was one of their main motivations for creating another e-petition later on once proceedings moved back in-person but they then struggled to build the same levels of support as before. Other petitioners felt that the delays to proceedings also negatively affected their momentum, meaning that they needed to maintain their campaigning activities online for longer, contributing to the issues of stress and burnout above.

The 2019-2024 Parliament also saw three Prime Ministers. Boris Johnson resigned as Prime Minister following a Privileges Committee report into lockdown parties at Downing Street in June 2022. He was succeeded by Liz Truss who was appointed in September 2022, but who only lasted a total of 49 days in office, resigning in October 2022 following a disastrous mini budget. Finally, Rishi Sunak was then appointed and stayed as Prime Minister until the general election in July 2024. The turbulence over this period in 2022 had significant effects on e-petitions at the time. Procedurally, the changes of government caused some delays to petition responses and debates, but the effects were felt more acutely by the petitioners I interviewed.

As Prime Minister, Boris Johnson built a reputation as supportive of animal welfare issues and so his government was generally receptive to animal welfare campaigns. For example, it banned ivory sales and glue traps, and increased jail terms for cruelty against animals. Petitioners campaigning at this time felt to be making good progress with the government, and many were able to build constructive relationships with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), shown in some of the campaign excerpts in this chapter. When Liz Truss assumed office, petitioners were relieved to see Penny Mordaunt, then Leader of the House of Commons, show a commitment to animal welfare by announcing that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill would return to Parliament for report stage. However, Liz Truss's short premiership and succession by Rishi Sunak was a considerable blow to animal welfare petitioners and, to continue the same example, the Kept Animals Bill was (controversially) later dropped entirely. In contrast to his predecessors, Rishi Sunak showed little commitment to continuing a programme of animal welfare issues and commitments made to petitioners that had been built through extensive campaigning, often over multiple years and through back-to-back petitions, were dropped. Petitioners affected by these changes in government describe the effects of high turnover as putting things 'on hold' and losing momentum:

“And [Defra minister] made commitments but of course what happened very soon after that is we went through serial Prime Ministers and all the rest of it. It's never, we never managed to get the momentum back is how I feel about it” (Interview, Petitioner 8).

Whilst somewhat unique, these factors influencing the 2019-2024 Parliament are important to highlight because it shows the impact they had on e-petition campaigns, and how a sympathetic government matters to petitioners. Whilst it is well-established in the e-petitions literature that processes matter (Bochel 2016; Leston-Bandeira, 2024) and we have seen in this chapter how petitioners' perspectives are linked to their experience of these processes, when asked about what had impacted their e-petition outcomes, petitioners often mentioned these challenges alongside reflections about the formal processes. That is, petitioners felt frustrated in cases where circumstances out of their control affected the 'success' of their petition on top of when the formal procedures did not contribute to their aims. In the words of Harold Macmillan “events, dear boy, events”⁴ blow not just governments off course, but petitioners too, and it is not possible to untangle petitioners' reflections on the processes from this context. Whilst the impact

⁴ Whether Macmillan ever actually said this is contested - see Knowles (2006) - but it is nonetheless an illustrative quote for why petition campaigns can be challenging for petitioners who are at the whims of external contexts.

of external events is not something that the Petitions Committee can seek to solve, it is important to highlight as a key experience because it highlights potential difficulties of delivering the formal milestones and managing petitioner expectations.

Table 13: Drivers behind positive and negative experiences for petitioners

	Positive experiences	Negative experiences
Formal petitions processes and stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Petitions Committee support in explaining what to expect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Poor government responses ● 'Ineffective' Westminster Hall debates
Informal touchpoints and pathways to influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Relationships built with parliamentarians, exploration of alternative avenues to further campaign ● Support from other campaigners: resources, advice, social media amplification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Time consuming and difficult to build parliamentary and wider support
External contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Covid-19 lockdowns freeing up time for petitioners to campaign and members of the public to support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Covid-19 lockdowns requiring the pausing of parliamentary proceedings, or those proceedings moving online ● Changes in government thwarting progress

Brought together, these points of disappointment and disillusionment raise questions about the resilience of an e-petition system which requires so much for petitioners to undertake. Criticisms of petitions systems as forms of 'slacktivism' (Beato, 2014) do not hold true for those who create and campaign on them. Those who were most burnt out from their campaign were those who expressed the most apathy: "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). Whilst it must be said that Petitioner 15 shortly went on to create another e-petition, and still campaigns at the time of writing, such a visceral response highlights the challenges petitioners face when using e-petitions as a tool for political change. It highlights the potential negative impact of petitioners pouring in time, energy and resources to a system which does not bring perceived success relative to the effort being put in, with the risk being that feelings of disappointment and apathy felt towards the political system and political engagement more widely are exacerbated by a system which is intended to overcome it. But at the same time these findings also raise important questions about expectations management, including whether expectations about likely outcomes were realistic or whether petitioners were able to recognise

the additional benefits of engaging with parliament in other ways from the outset. These are core issues which are unpacked later in Chapter 6.

4.6 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has presented findings on ‘who speaks’ to parliament through the e-petitions system, why and how in order to address RQ1. In section 4.1, I outlined the diversity of petition actors by distinguishing between petitioner ‘types’ according to prior experience or resources and by outlining various motivations for petitioning (4.2). In doing so, I highlighted important findings about the benefits that might arise from petitioners having more resources at the outset, but I have also highlighted how petitioners are able to tap into networks of support that are largely built through social media and that bring about a range of benefits. Petitioners articulated these benefits in terms of advice from others, access to databases or money and the amplification of e-petitions both in and outside of parliament. Indeed, in terms of the everyday political practices of petitioners (RQ1), the findings of this section highlight how social media affords petitioners with the ability to tap into large campaigning networks and identify supporters in the public sphere and in parliament. We have seen how, as a result, petitioners’ campaigns were often characterised by both a suite of campaigning activities and a suite of support, explained by Petitioner 11 as a “cog in the wider campaign sort of arsenal, weaponry if you like” (Interview, Petitioner 11). I have caveated these findings by emphasising how many of the campaigns featured in this research were dependent on some degree of celebrity amplification, the implications of which I return to in Chapter 6. But, most importantly, these campaign arsenals continued to be a significant source of support and resource even once signatures thresholds were met and formal petition mechanisms had been exhausted as options, an outcome of petitioning that has hitherto been neglected within the literature (RQ3).

I concluded this chapter by presenting petitioners’ experiences of petitioning in line with a methodological commitment to understanding the process of petitioning from those with experience of the system. In doing so, I have established important findings about where petitioners place value (largely in terms of the informal touch points and pursuit of other parliamentary mechanisms) and where they felt disappointment and disillusionment with the system (in terms of formal e-petition milestones).

In sum, by underscoring the importance of social media to e-petition campaigns both in and out of parliament, I have demonstrated how everyday political practices online are a core element of petitioners' campaign repertoires, thereby contributing to both RQ1 and RQ3 about petition strategies, outcomes and the value of utilising parliamentary e-petition systems. The next chapter now focuses on who it is that 'listens' to petitioners, outlining the findings from interviews with parliamentary actors in relation to RQ2.

Chapter 5: Who ‘listens’, and how?

Introduction

This chapter follows directly on from Chapter 4 by focusing on who it is that ‘listens’ to petitioners, how and why. It draws on qualitative interviews with 19 current and former parliamentary actors to build on the findings about the connective mechanisms that exist between petitioners and parliamentary actors by exploring how and why they come to be involved in the case study e-petitions (RQ2). In this chapter, I tease out the distinctions between the parliamentary actors that were involved in the petitions process. Seven were officials who had been involved with the Petitions Committee or the e-petition system in some capacity, and five were current or former Committee Members. Seven were backbenchers who were not involved with the Petitions Committee, but who became involved in e-petition campaigns for reasons that will be outlined below. The distinction between the types of parliamentary actors involved is important to make because the parliamentary tools available to each actor are procedurally different and so they supported petitioners in different ways. The findings presented in this section are drawn primarily from interviews undertaken with parliamentary actors as opposed to documents or social media, as most of these two data sources pertained to the campaigns undertaken by petitioners.

This chapter is split into the following sections. Section 5.1 outlines how and why Petitions Committee MPs and officials were involved with the case study e-petitions. Section 5.2 follows directly on by outlining how and why non-Committee MPs came to be involved with petition campaigns, focussing additionally on their motivations for supporting petitioners. Sections 5.3 and 5.4 follow directly on by presenting parliamentary actors’ reflections on the system, setting the scene for the next chapter in which the implications of Chapter 4 and this chapter are discussed. The perspectives of the Petitions Committee and non-Committee MPs are kept in separate sections because the experiences and views expressed are, on the whole, different, but it is worth noting that there is a degree of crossover between views with regard to the opportunities and challenges of the system.

Table 14: Key findings: who listens?

Research Question	Finding
RQ2: What are the formal and informal connective mechanisms that exist between sites of discussion in the sphere of citizen participation and the sphere of parliament?	<p>The mechanisms through which parliamentary actors are able to support petitioners, with particular emphasis on the parliamentary tools utilised by non-Committee MPs that draw on their parliamentary networks outside of Petitions Committee actions. (Also, RQ1 and RQ3)</p> <p>The motivations of MPs for joining the Committee or supporting a petition campaign in terms of both instrumental and intrinsic benefits.</p> <p>Perspectives of the system with regard to both its operation and its underlying principles and commitments.</p>

5.1 Who is listening, how and why? The Petitions Committee

As we saw in the previous chapter, petitioners spent a great deal of energy trying to reach and build connections with MPs to support their e-petition campaigns. The means by which petitioners did so was dependent on a number of factors such as social media reach or the ability to call upon well-known celebrity or influencer voices. We also saw that petitioners would seek out the support of MPs who would be involved at various stages of the e-petition campaign. With regard to the two formal e-petition procedures - the government responses and the petition debates - these were when petitioners had most contact with the Petitions Committee officials and MPs, addressed now in turn.

Petitioners would firstly engage with petitions officials who were there to support petitioners through the process and encourage Committee Members to “sit down with petitioners and make sure [the MP opening the debate] would do their research about the petition” (Interview, Official L). We saw in the previous chapter that petitioners praised the work of the Committee officials they engaged with and viewed them as helpful guides through the procedural aspects of the process. This is because one of the main tasks that was raised by Committee officials was to explain the parts of the process to petitioners, for example what to expect during the Westminster Hall debates, but it was noted that there are challenges in doing so, usually due to capacity constraints. Committee officials also noted their role in requesting revisions to government responses and this function was usually well regarded by petitioners: “[the officials]

were very helpful and supportive about [request for a government response to be revised]. The clerks, everyone I spoke to, they're a really nice bunch" (Interview, Petitioner 11). Despite the Committee having the remit to undertake other actions such as requesting further evidence or undertaking other public engagement activities, the extent of contact between the officials and petitioners in these case studies was limited to the procedural elements of the government responses and Westminster Hall debates.

Concerning Committee MPs' involvement, all interviewees referred to how they would lead on e-petition debates and introduce the e-petition in Westminster Hall. To do so, most MPs would speak to the petitioner to ensure that they had properly understood the aim of the petition. However, not all of the petitions in this research had this engagement with Committee MPs, which suggests that this is not a standardised element of the Committee's work. Some Committee MPs mentioned that they would also gather information from other relevant stakeholders to ensure a well-rounded understanding of the petition topic (Interview, MP H; MP J). Beyond this, however, Committee MPs had little involvement with the e-petition campaign, and they rarely spoke of the details of their role, instead wanting to discuss the system's benefits and problems, or how they might support as 'ordinary' constituency MPs, which I will come to later.

In terms of why they chose to sit on the Petitions Committee, all of the Petitions Committee MPs articulated similar motivations to one another for choosing to sit on the Committee. These can be split into two main categories of benefits which can be both intrinsic and instrumental:

- the variety of e-petition topics
- the public engagement priorities of the Committee

The Petitions Committee is different from other select committees because it is not departmental; it does not directly scrutinise the work of a government department but rather considers the wide range of cross-cutting e-petition topics, from solar panels to vape flavours to settlement schemes for refugees. This means that the work the Committee does is varied, and it enables Members to learn about and become involved in topics that they may have never come across before. As a result, when discussing their motivations for joining the Petitions Committee, all the Committee MPs spoke of their interest in being able to cover a lot of topics, either because of personal motivation to learn about a range of new topics or because of the instrumental benefits that arise from being abreast of a number of issues in terms of potential

electoral or constituent issues. For example, the Petitions Committee provides members with the opportunity to “experience anything and everything” which comes with it a degree of “freedom” (Interview, MP J). For some MPs this benefit was more acute because the Petitions Committee provided them with different opportunities to other committees:

“I am a Scottish member and a lot of issues in Scotland are devolved, so we don't really deal with them at Westminster. So, a lot of the other committees the work they do it's just not relevant [to me]. Whereas, with petitions, there's so much stuff that there's always something relevant and something different. You know, so it ticks so many boxes there in terms of keeping me in the loop about what is concerning the public.” (Interview, MP E)

As well as the breadth of topics covered by the Committee, the Petitions Committee is also different from other committees because of its more explicit public facing role. When the Procedure Committee inquired into the creation of a collaborative e-petition system between the House and Government, they concluded that the new system had the potential to “improve significantly the House’s engagement with petitioners and prospective petitioners” (Procedure Committee, HC 235, 2014-15: para 40). This is because public engagement priorities relating to, for example, public understanding of what parliament does were built into the Committee from its creation:

“Together with the rebranding and redesigning of the e-petition website, the establishment of a Petitions Committee with its own team of staff could vastly improve the information which is available to petitioners about what the House of Commons does and the many ways in which Members of Parliament use the opportunities the House offers them to respond to the public’s concerns.” (HC 235, 2014-15: p.3)

In practice today, this commitment is demonstrated by the work that Committee MPs and officials do to directly engage with petitioners, for example, by supporting them through the debate process. This commitment also exists both implicitly through the transparency of the Committee, for example, in publishing government responses on the website, and explicitly through the actions of Committee Members and officials to reach out to petitioners (Interview, Official L; Official M). Whilst some of the reflections of petitioners in Chapter 4 and indeed the relatively little engagement petitioners had with the Petitions Committee may call into question the extent to which this function is performed in reality, which I return to in Chapter 6, this function of the Committee was the second motivation for joining highlighted by members

because they argued that it enabled them to engage with the public in different ways to other committees, or indeed other parliamentary work. One member, for example, suggested that the public engagement priorities of the committee were unique vis-a-vis departmental select committees, which was of an intrinsic value motivating their involvement:

“There's also the question of the Petitions Committee itself. I wouldn't join the Defence Committee. It is based on the public engagement side of things, which is something I am interested in.” (Interview, MP F).

Other, more practical reasons such as simply having the time to be on a committee was also mentioned, but it was the unique features of the Petitions Committee compared to other select committees that specifically attracted Members to join.

5.2 The involvement of non-Petitions Committee MPs

The biggest difference in terms of how MPs were involved in the case studies is demonstrated in the actions of non-Committee MPs, who have different parliamentary tools available to them by virtue of not being involved in the procedural aspects of the petitions process. For example, non-Committee MPs tended to become involved in the period between the government responses and the e-petition debates, but their involvement would continue afterwards. They subsequently spoke more to their role *before* or *after* the debate in supporting or preparing petitioners, as opposed to involvement during, and placed more emphasis on the other parliamentary mechanisms that they could use to support petitioners. Largely, the reason for this was because non-Committee MPs viewed the e-petition debates as limited in impact, often echoing the concerns of petitioners themselves. I will return to this point later. Instead, the benefit of the debate was that it gave MPs the opportunity to meet with petitioners before or after to further discuss the campaign and their potential involvement. The most commonly mentioned mechanisms used by non-Committee MPs to support petitioners in this way are outlined below with the caveat that not all MPs placed the same level of importance on each mechanism.

Every petitioner I spoke to had at some point engaged with government departments, most commonly the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Typically, this occurred through written correspondence but a number of petitioners would also meet with Defra in

person or via online video call to discuss their campaigns. The MPs I interviewed occasionally mentioned facilitating these meetings, for example, by making initial contact or they mentioned sitting in so that they could establish any likely routes for progress. However, rather more commonly for MPs' involvement in the case studies was using internal parliamentary networks. MPs would engage with a range of colleagues - backbenchers, opposition or government MPs, not just ministers, to ask them to support the petition cause and explore other mechanisms towards policy change. In doing so, MPs would draw extensively on their own networks to support petitioners' aims: "you know, I'll go and have a chat with [other MPs], see what they think, show them the [debate] material⁵" (Interview, MP E). Others would find supportive colleagues in government who can feed into the minister, or colleagues who were selected in the Private Members' Bill (PMB) ballot or who were involved in relevant select committee or APPG work. For example, I mentioned in Chapter 4 how three of the case study e-petitions had been taken forward as a Private Members' Bill (PMB) by an MP successful in the ballot. Those petitioners who had a PMB related to their petition were generally happy that they had another form of parliamentary action take place even though it did not progress any further because it nonetheless signalled action beyond the formal e-petition processes. The MP I spoke to who put one of the bills forward highlighted that the bill was unlikely to progress to Royal Assent, as is typical for PMBs, but nonetheless concluded that the PMB was a way to have the petition cause heard in parliament, and that this may help future action to take place (Interview, MP J).

Finally, in Chapter 4 we saw that Petitioner 1 formed a close working relationship with a Peer in the House of Lords and through this relationship has continued to meet with ministers on their e-petition issue, and the Peer also tabled an amendment to a Bill that was already progressing through the Houses. Whilst the amendment was unsuccessful, the two continue to work together to lobby the recently elected Labour Government:

"The brand-new Labour MP gave a great impression tonight. If my gut is correct the birds have found a champion in parliament. Will it be [MP] who saves [birds] in the Commons?"

(Paraphrased Tweet from Petitioner 1 which shows their engagement with newly elected MPs.)

"...then [minister] went silent and he has refused to engage since. Now the future of this species is in his hands. I fear he is willing to let them go. It is unforgivable. After all his work, will this be

⁵ The House of Commons Library produces research briefings on upcoming e-petition Westminster Hall debates for Members.

his legacy?’ - @Peer” (Paraphrased Tweet from Petitioner 1 in which they quote the Peer supporting the petition.)

Some petitioners expressed the wish for their petition to be featured in an Early Day Motion (EDM), a motion used to draw the attention of the House to an issue. Only one case study e-petition had an EDM which received a total of 19 signatures. Almost all of the non-Committee MPs I spoke to refused to sign EDMs and did not view them as useful parliamentary mechanisms, largely because they are often created by lobbyists or are on trivial matters. Rather, the majority viewed them as a way for both MPs and organisations or campaigners to signal support for a cause without doing anything meaningful. Indeed, one particularly cynical MP described EDMs as “parliamentary graffiti” and viewed them and e-petitions as a way for MPs to lazily work on an issue, preferring instead to “writ[e] to ministers, [talk] to ministers, go up to the tearoom, mak[e] friends and influence people, building a consensus” (Interview, MP A), echoing the approach of using intra-parliamentary networks listed above. This sentiment was echoed across a number of interviews as the best way to achieve any kind of ‘change’ within parliament, and some MPs described the importance of trying to explain the complexities of parliamentary influence to petitioners, noting that it is not something that is always known by petitioners, or is made immediately clear during the petitioning process. Indeed, some parliamentarians prioritised getting to know petitioners before or after their Westminster Hall debates, using this as an opportunity to suggest to petitioners who they may wish to speak to and lobby, or suggest other mechanisms that they or their wider parliamentary network could pursue next. This can take the form of consensus building which involves “doing the hard yards, building cross party consensus, getting support for a cause” and “persuad[ing] parliamentary colleagues” (Interview, MP A).

In doing all of the above, parliamentarians’ involvement meant that petitioners had ‘informal touch points’ with parliament – i.e. connections outside of the auspices of the Petitions Committee – which meant that their campaigns were being fed into parliament in a number of ways. With that said, all of the non-Committee MPs recognised that their ability to create the legislative change that petitioners wanted, even through these additional avenues, was likely to be limited. Some were more cynical about the extent of influence of an individual MP to make *any* change; regardless of the effort put in, the government still controls the parliamentary agenda and if an issue is not of concern to the government of the day, then “realistically do any of [the

ways for backbench MPs to get involved] ever result in significant change?”, something that there is a “lack of understanding amongst the public” about (Interview, MP K).

But even with this caveat, MPs were keen to emphasise that the fluid nature of parliamentary influence meant that these additional parliamentary mechanisms were beneficial to petitioners’ broader campaigns, and they were a stepping stone towards petitioners’ goals. MPs recognised that even where their influence to change the view of ministers or government is limited, coalitions of support within parliament are fundamental to sustaining pressure and keeping awareness of issues on the political agenda and perhaps leading, slowly, to change. In the same way that network building was important for petitioners in their campaign because it gave them access to other campaigners and to parliamentarians, drawing on parliamentary networks was an important tool for MPs to utilise - both in the immediate and long term - because it can contribute to planting the seeds for later policy making decisions:

“Behind the scenes, you’ll see it is now on the order paper as a Ten Minute Rule Bill. At that point the government is forced to have a write round, to have a collective view on whether to accept it or not. That forces everyone to, at the very least, have a cursory glance at it. Some civil servants will get together and work out a cogent argument for why we do or don’t support it. [...] Then quite often you’ll see it suddenly becomes a different bill a year or two later because the work has been done behind the scenes and it has got into a policy, or into a different bill. These things do work but not in the way that the public thinks they work.” (Interview, MP G)

This relates back to the ‘agenda setting’ and ‘awareness raising’ functions that petitioners highlighted as motivations for petitioning in the Chapter 4 and that was highlighted in Chapter 2 as potential functions of e-petitions. In this way, the coalitions of support within parliament that build between not just petitioners and MPs but MPs and their colleagues sustains pressure on an and keeps awareness of issues on the agenda. As such, MPs rarely spoke of petition ‘success’, instead highlighting the various complexities and nuances of the parliamentary processes in which e-petitions sit. I return to the implications of this in Chapter 6.

MPs’ motivations for involvement

Much like the Petitions Committee MPs, the non-Committee MPs I interviewed became involved with e-petition campaigns for a number of reasons, again both instrumental and

intrinsic, and that are derived either from direct contact with the petitioner or indirectly through constituents or well-known figures such as celebrities. These are summarised as:

- constituency link,
- personal interest in the topic,
- personal connection built with the petitioners,
- the influence of 'known figures'

Constituency link

The first reason why MPs got involved was because an e-petition had a direct constituency link - it affected their local area - or because their constituents had asked them to support the petition. This is no surprise given the pre-eminence of constituency work (Crewe, 2015). Numerous non-Committee MPs outlined during interviews the importance of their parliamentary work being seen to relate to their constituency work and linked this back to why they may become involved in an e-petition. For example:

“There is a link between what happens in the constituency and what you do in parliament to try and change things. [...] So you try and do the link locally with your role in power in parliament. And I think there are two aspects of life that, they are separate in a way, the local stuff in the constituency and parliamentary work. But then they do link up very often and one informs and advises the other.” (Interview, MP K)

The main reason for this is because working on constituency issues was suggested to help boost, or maintain, popularity and electoral success. This is a finding which is largely in keeping with previous research about MPs' constituency work and which is something that a number of petitioners recognised. It is, for example, partly why they sought to make connections with their, or their supporters' constituency MPs.

Personal interest

However, constituency links were not always sufficient to ensure an MP's involvement. Most MPs articulated that while constituency input was one way for them to become aware of e-petitions, their personal interest for an issue was a necessary condition for getting involved and later pursuing some of the other parliamentary mechanisms outlined. This was usually because of the time pressures that MPs face. It is well established that there are numerous pressures on

MPs' time today, from party-level pressures to constituency casework to needing to build electoral success (Flinders et al, 2018), which means that personal motivations were important drivers for MPs to first get involved, and second to continue to be involved in a campaign which may add additional time pressures. Relatedly, for some, the breadth of sentiment indicated by tens or hundreds of thousands of signatures also marked the e-petition as one worthwhile of their investment. In terms of how this came about, three MPs indicated that their knowledge of and history of working with contemporary animal welfare campaigns would mean that related e-petitions would be on their radar from early on in the campaign either because they had seen it on social media, because they were contacted by organisations in the topic area, or because they had received correspondence about it, which I turn to now.

Personal connections

One element of MPs' motivations that came across strongly in all interviews was that MPs were more likely to engage with the tools outlined earlier in this chapter if the petitioner themselves made a clear, sustained effort to lobby them and foster a relationship; signatures were not always enough to warrant involvement, nor was contact from established charities or organisations or mass correspondence from constituents. The need to effectively lobby is particularly acute given the aforementioned time pressures that MPs face. It was explained to me by all of the non-Committee MPs that personal interest and the building of a personal connection to the petitioners and cause were important drivers to their involvement with e-petition campaigns because it signalled that petitioners were both passionate and willing to put in the work needed to work towards change. By personal connection I refer back to the extensive, long-term strategies employed by petitioners that made them known to MPs personally, as highlighted in Chapter 4. For example, one MP described the relationship built with the petitioner as (positively) pressuring them to engage with the petition debate (Interview, MP B), and another, when talking about a petition different to those included in this research that was about cancer treatment for children, described meeting the family of a young boy who died from cancer as having a profound effect on her, leading to engagement beyond the petition. Indeed, it was knowing the story of the young boy as told by the family that gave weight to the 100,000 people that signed the petition and humanised the statistics (Interview, MP G). But we saw in Chapter 4 that the work necessary to build these connections was extensive and the impact of doing so had implications for the emotional (and sometimes physical) wellbeing of petitioners and their

perspectives of the petitions system. Nonetheless, MPs suggested that this was an effective strategy and were keen to emphasise that this was necessary if they were to get involved:

“What [petitioners] don't understand is that actually beyond anything the most impactful thing is getting a real person to their MP because we're human, right. You can read a billion letters or see the pile of letters. These 100,000 people who really care about this issue have so much less impact than me meeting the family [of young boy] which afterwards made me become chairman of an All Party Group and do a lot of work on the back of it. I made it a kind of cause that I felt was mine. Because I felt emotionally engaged” (Interview, MP G)⁶

Interestingly, one MP who emphasised the importance of personal connections suggested that because these relationships are what matter the most, the petition itself is less important 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 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)

However, the relationships that MP A is referring to would not have been forged without the initial e-petition or the efforts of the petitioner - the connections and the e-petition are not dichotomous - suggesting that e-petitions are still important, albeit in different ways to what the formal processes envisioned. And while this view was held in the minority it is interesting nonetheless because it relates back to the connections forged between petitioners and parliamentarians identified in Chapter 4.

Relatedly, we know from the preceding chapter that the most common methods petitioners employed to build these connections were emailing MPs, or by contacting them through social

⁶ In this quotation, MP G is referring to an e-petition that was created when a constituent's son was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumour. MP G engaged extensively with the petition, the family and the wider campaigning activities that occurred.

media (RQ1). What was particularly interesting during interviews is that when MPs discussed the strategies building these connections it was normally about how *not* to do it. The strategy of getting supporters to email their own constituency MPs to encourage them to support the campaign was often referenced by MPs as an unuseful method and it could often backfire because it meant they received multiple - sometimes hundreds - of identical emails. Additionally, many of the MPs I interviewed disparaged the influx of auto-generated, unpersonalised campaign emails that they receive in relation to petition (and other) campaigns as an immediate way to put them off engaging, for example as highlighted in the quotes - quite powerfully- below.

“When it is the 75th letter I've had written in the exact same words written by 38 degrees it makes [less difference]. I'm still going to write back to that person and they're going to write back to me and say, ‘why have you sent me the same letter as everybody else that has written to you?’ Because you wrote exactly the identical words. You didn't think of it for yourself. Whereas that passion that person possibly had, if they had written to me personally I would've gone back to them saying ‘oh God how interesting I didn't know, how important. We must get something done about this. There is a Bill coming up next week. I'll go. Or I must go and talk to the minister and see if there is something we can do about this’. But actually, there's a whole industry out there and people who are being paid quite good wages probably not dissimilar to mine in organisations who are professional at lobbying MPs who actually aren't actually doing a very good job. They're just getting MPs backs up.” (Interview, MP G).

It is important to note that the parliamentary e-petition platform does not auto-generate emails, so when referring to auto-generated emails MPs were usually referring to emails from one of two different types of external platforms. Firstly, emails that had been autogenerated as an additional part of the wider parliamentary petition campaign through charity websites. Secondly, emails that were generated as part of an e-petition campaign from a non-institutionalised petition platform such as Change.org, petitions for which Parliament has no remit. At times in interviews the different types of correspondence from charities or from non-institutionalised platforms were conflated with the campaign material about parliamentary e-petitions. This is even though none of the petitioners in this research utilised other petition platforms in their campaigns and nor did they autogenerate any emails from charities. Even so, it was often brought up by parliamentarians as a frustration that they received influxes of auto-generated emails about petitions or charity campaigns, generally, and they suggested that they often ignored any material they thought was auto-generated.

Instead, as is perhaps not surprising given the emphasis placed on building personal connections, MPs favoured personal correspondence with constituents where it was clear that time and effort had gone in, or to meet constituents in person in surgeries because these methods enable MPs to understand better what it was that petitioners were asking for. Any impersonal correspondence that was auto generated was highlighted by MPs as a way to discourage them from getting involved because it suggests that the sender is not willing to take the time to write to the MP themselves, resulting in MPs “becom[ing] a little bit deaf to their inbox” (Interview, MP H) and leading to “a law of diminishing returns” (Interview, MP N). In this way, reaching out to MPs and telling them the reason why they were petitioning was a more fruitful way for petitioners to engage because it provided a story through which MPs could relate and empathise with. MPs, as a result, gave advice that “anybody wanting to do a petition should try and get their followers to go and have a surgery appointment with their MP to explain it and get them to understand and care” (Interview, MP H). We saw in the previous chapter that Petitioner 1 recognised this and placed considerable time and effort towards writing bespoke emails for her supporters to send to their constituency MPs.

There is a degree of irony here: MPs valued personal correspondence from petitioners and so petitioners, in turn, went to great lengths to ensure that they provided it, but petitioners noted - often disparagingly - that the responses they received were often generic and impersonal: “it was clear [MP] hadn’t even read the email. They don’t care. They’re not listening or reading what [we] say half the time. They read the headline and they copy and paste a letter to send out” (Interview, Petitioner 14). Williamson (2009) noted that then, as now, MPs were struggling to deal with the influx of emails, perhaps explaining the irony. However, this was not something that any interviewees reflected on themselves.

Perceptions of success and well-known voices

Pragmatically, MPs were also concerned with how likely a petition was to ‘take off’ in the public and in parliament. This was the largest motivator for the MPs I interviewed, and it was mentioned in all interviews, sometimes in very forthcoming terms.

“I think it's just a question of whether something comes up that you feel has a sufficient reach to warrant a significant effort. We will get involved at the local level. But one on a national scale is another degree and it's work and commitments about whether you think that's something that is likely to take off. Is it simply put up there and a few hundred people will decide to get engaged

with it or is it the sort of mass reach that you think, "Oh yeah, that something really could fly?"”
(Interview, MP K)

Given the competing pressures on MPs’ schedules, it is not surprising that MPs were largely motivated to support campaigns that they thought would be successful. They were concerned that their time and effort may not be worthwhile personally or professionally if the petition was not able to reach signature thresholds or gain much public support. So, they would largely only agree to be involved if they had the sense that the petition was likely to be popular both in and outside of parliament. One reason for this is because of the instrumental benefits of being involved in a campaign that is successful in the public eye, for example, because being seen to do something about an important topic or supporting constituents affected by the petition topic can bolster electoral support. Indeed, MPs recognised that being seen as supportive in campaigns that gained additional publicity was likely to help their image in the public, for example in the media, and most were very forthcoming in interviews about this being a motivator for their involvement alongside some of the more intrinsic motivators like a personal interest in the issue.

In terms of how MPs judged the likelihood of an e-petition ‘taking off’, we know from the previous chapter that the involvement of celebrities in e-petition campaigns has benefits in terms of ‘reach’, particularly on social media, and creates a ‘fear of missing out’ in the public sphere on a campaign that is likely to be successful. As a result, it also indicates to parliamentarians those areas where a topic is likely to receive, or is already receiving, significant public attention and, therefore, where it may be beneficial to spend time and energy. For example, the influence of celebrity involvement was something that was articulated by one of the non-Committee MPs involved in a petition campaign as bringing them and their work additional publicity:

“To be perfectly honest, it was only because I was asked by [celebrity] to help with this [...] If petitioners can then organise a meeting in parliament with that high profile celebrity there's two things that happen, first of all, it gives it publicity. And the other thing you'd be surprised, or perhaps you won't be surprised, is how MPs gravitate towards celebrities for the chance of a selfie or something to go on the social media.” (Interview, MP C)

In this way the e-petition campaign and their associations with well-known voices offered MPs opportunities to self-promote, shown in some case studies by photos with celebrities that MPs posted online on their campaign websites and on social media. But it also meant that MPs could make a judgement call on where their input was likely to be worthwhile in terms of spending

time and effort to pursue the range of actions highlighted in this chapter. Whilst there are potential risks associated with celebrity involvement, for example, if celebrities are embroiled in controversy or not seen favourably by the public, MPs nonetheless indicated that, with due diligence, the benefits of involvement in these campaigns in terms of publicity and supporting petitioners through various processes outweighed these risks. Indeed, a number of celebrities were highlighted and thanked for their support in campaigning for a change in regulation that was a direct result of a case study petition's campaign:

“[Law] is the consequence of a long-term grassroots and multi award-winning campaign [...] by a coalition of campaigning groups [...], All Party Parliamentary Groups and celebrities including [...] Brian May, Ricky Gervais, Peter Egan, [...] Deborah Meaden and cross-party collaboration”
(Paraphrased excerpt from a Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs press release after a petition campaign led to a change in regulation. A number of names have been removed to protect the anonymity of the petition)

Interestingly, the non-Committee MPs that I spoke to rarely mentioned the involvement of the Petitions Committee as a reason for why they became involved. Only a handful mentioned glancing over the list of upcoming e-petition debates that is sent round by the Petitions Committee, and even fewer suggested that they would use this as a way to get involved with a petition. This suggests that it is not a primary way that they get involved with petition campaigns. Rather, emphasis is placed on the intrinsic and instrumental motivations and connections with petitioners highlighted.

5.3 The view from inside: The reflections of Petitions Committee Members and officials

Having established both how and why the parliamentary actors interviewed were involved with the case study e-petitions, I now focus on what their perceptions and evaluations of the system were. During interviews, I asked interviewees to reflect upon their experience of the e-petitions system and the areas in which the system was and was not working well with the wider context of apathy and disillusionment in mind. All interviewees were incredibly open and honest about their views and they are presented here because they echo some of the petitioner perspectives raised in Chapter 4.

Petitions Committee MPs

The views of Petitions Committee Members are valuable for a holistic understanding of petitioning because they provide insight into the benefits and challenges of the system ‘as is’. The views expressed by Petitions Committee MPs were, on the whole, optimistic about the potentials for public engagement that the petitions system poses. Where concerns were raised, we will see that it was often in relation to the day-to-day operation of the system or about the capacity of the Committee to achieve its aims.

Firstly, some Committee MPs expressed that the petitions system enables the public to engage with parliament in different ways and that this may enable greater understanding of what it is that parliament does. This was a potential function of e-petitions highlighted in the 2014 Procedure Committee report. When I asked interviewees to elaborate on how this works and how public understanding is improved, the tendency was to discuss prior examples of inquiries (the most recent inquiry was in 2021) in which the Committee engaged with the public. When I asked if there were any examples of wider public engagement activities outside inquiries, no examples were given, and some Members did call into question the extent to which petitions improve public understanding, suggesting instead that there may still be confusion about, for example, the different roles and responsibilities of parliament and government. This is an important finding because in Chapter 4 we saw how petitioners did not express either engaging with parliament or understanding more about parliament as a motivation for petitioning, and nor did they suggest that it was an outcome they experienced. Indeed, some conflated government and parliament, suggesting that there may still be some confusion about the different roles and responsibilities of the two arenas and about what is a feasible outcome from the petitioning process. But rather more commonly, petitioners’ underscored how their focus was overwhelmingly on how to persuade the government to pursue legislative change and their reflections were about how the various e-petition processes had not led them to this goal, suggesting that there is perhaps some incongruence between potential functions of the system and what petitioners are experiencing.

In contrast, all of the Committee MPs recognised that the petitions system was a tool through which parliament could be kept up to date with issues of concern in the public that might not come through other channels such as their constituency correspondence. This was an important feed-in mechanism provided by the e-petitions system because it “keeps parliament current and in tune. It means that the public perspective is on the agenda of the politicians in Westminster

and in the government” (Interview, MP H), echoing petitioner’s desires to keep their petition issue alive on the wider political agenda. One MP suggested that petitions did influence the government because it “gives the government an idea that the issue is big enough to warrant 100,000 people actively signing a petition” and that this has a “long term effect on the government and the agenda” (Interview, MP H). As we saw in Chapter 4, agenda setting and gaining the attention of the government on the petition issue was one of the motivations that petitioners expressed for utilising the parliamentary e-petitions system over non-institutionalised systems such as Change.org or 38 degrees, suggesting some congruence between the desires of petitioners and the perceived reality expressed by MPs. These reflections also support the literature on parliamentary e-petitions’ potential for policy influence identified by Hough (2012) and Leston-Bandeira (2019).

Importantly, all of the Committee MPs recognised the additional benefits of petitioning that were highlighted in the previous chapter: that petitions open up other channels of influence and helps to keep pressure on a topic, and they were keen to emphasise this as something that they can do that could be better highlighted to petitioners:

“If we think of the [parliamentary] process. The government creates a bill; the bill goes through. It’s adopted. But before that happens, many people might have had the Ten Minute Rule Bills. They might have raised questions or motions in parliament to try and deliver something. They know that it isn’t going to do it there and then but they know that they are adding pressure to eventually get the government to bring in a bill in one year or five years’ time” (Interview, MP H)

MPs suggested that better recognition of these additional outcomes is important because problems still exist with the formal milestones. For example, they highlighted some of the problems mentioned by petitioners, namely the petition debates which are “not cut and dry” and which “are not things that achieve policy change because it is only one part of a wider campaign” (Interview, MP J). This was largely because of the lack of tangible outcomes of the debate and the likelihood that petitioners would be disappointed if the minister does not support them. In terms of why this is the case, MPs highlighted how petitioners tended to expect more from the system than what is likely in reality but that these expectations were set before they engaged with petitioners, so Committee MPs recognised that they were limited in the extent that they could overcome this issue. Whilst they tried to emphasise that they explain the likely outcomes to petitioners before the debate, it was often too late. In this way, MPs were keen to highlight a

need for more clarity to petitioners about what can be achieved outside of the formal auspices of the Petitions Committee earlier on in the process, a point which I will return to in Chapter 6.

One MP raised concerns about who it is that the petitions system reaches, and indeed who it is that petitions in the first place, highlighting, for example, a concern about whether underrepresented communities were able to access the system and the extent to which petitioner experiences and expectations may be skewed according to certain demographics. For example, concerns about whether e-petitions are only created by those in London and the South East or by those with higher levels of formal education, or prior experience of the system and of parliament. There is a need for “more outreach work by the Committee [...] to get out to underrepresented groups, ones that are marginalised. Because if it becomes a system that is only for middle class people who are tech savvy junior doctors⁷ then it won’t work and will have failed in its aims” (Interview, MP D). Whilst the findings about petitioner types and the campaign strategies employed by petitioners in Chapter 4 adds necessary nuance to debates about petitioner demographics, this concern nonetheless echoes wider concerns about imbalances in who ‘speaks’ in the literature and has been the subject of recent research by Leston-Bandeira and Tacheva (2024).

Nonetheless, even where each of these concerns above were raised, the Petitions Committee MPs were always positive about the potentials for the system, and believed that the system provided a ‘net good’ because it does help to know what issues are in the public’s mind, supporting the scrutiny function highlighted by Leston-Bandeira (2019), Hough (2012), Lindner and Riehm (2011) and the policy making functions highlighted by Carman (2006) and Escher and Riehm (2017).

Petitions Committee officials

Of all the parliamentary actors interviewed, it was instead the Committee officials who expressed the most concern about the e-petitions system, both with regard to the operation of the system and its underlying principles. Like the Members, officials recognised that the Committee was operationally limited in its ability to manage expectations. When the system was set up one of the

⁷ In July 2015 an e-petition titled [‘To debate a vote of no confidence in Health Secretary the Right Hon Jeremy Hunt’](#) was created. It followed an ongoing dispute between junior doctors and then Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt. The e-petition received 231,136 signatures and was debated in Parliament on 14th September 2015.

priorities was in ensuring that petitioners felt as though they had had their voices heard by parliament (Interview, Official O), and that the process was seen to be fair (Interview, Official P). Whilst still a guiding thread of the work of the Committee, during interviews current staff highlighted how the current priority of Committee officials and Members has developed to emphasise how the petition is one part of a wider suite of campaign activities, echoing the reflections above, whilst recognising that this is difficult to show in reality. The motivation for this priority was to better manage petitioner expectations about likely outcomes from the formal milestones of the petitions system from the outset, and to potentially alleviate pressures on what e-petitions can achieve in isolation.

“One of the big challenges we have is drawing threads. These things take a really long time to come through. It’s hard to show [petitioners] and even us, in the team, what had an impact and what didn’t because there is not one moment of change. Maybe the families could have campaigned without [petition]. Maybe it was the article in the Sun. It shows how it all works together. For comms we need to be able to tell that story, of that wider campaign to show petitioners how it works. I think that is the big challenge” (Interview, Official P)

However, Committee officials also recognised that this was something they struggled with, largely because of issues around a lack of time and resources which means it is difficult to support petitioners at various stages, and because petitioners were already starting the process with inflated expectations about what the e-petition itself can achieve; petitioners’ underlying assumptions were that petitions would lead to change. In Chapter 4, we saw how recognition of the wider campaigning benefits in terms of access to other parliamentary mechanisms was something that petitioners recognised post-hoc or through having had multiple experiences petitioning, which suggests that the attempts of the Committee to make this element clear may not be breaking through to petitioners, at least initially. Officials like the Members above, as a result expressed concerns that unmanaged expectations whereby petitioners do not at the time of petitioning understand the value of tapping into a wider set of parliamentary activities is resulting in petitioners coming away feeling disappointed. Their concerns are that this could, in turn, result in less engagement in the future, not just with the petitions process but with wider parliamentary or political processes, too. One official, for example explained that “there is that feeling in me, which worries me a little bit, that this is a really great tool to combat disillusionment, but is it also creating disillusionment in some respects” (Interview, Official P).

This echoes concerns raised by MPs that feelings of disappointment might be “worse than if [petitioners] had never engaged at all because then they will have hostile feelings towards Parliament or they’ll walk away and then they are lost to us” (Interview, MP S). The findings of Chapter 4 suggest that the issue of expectations management may not have been entirely resolved; as above, whilst some petitioners recognised their petition as a step in the process, most felt disappointed with the process at least at one point and recognition that the petition had opened up other opportunities towards change, when it did occur, was post hoc. By and large, whilst many of the case study petitioners were serial petitioners, they felt as though they had not been listened to during the formal petition processes and were often quite disparaging about their experiences and the MPs involved. This is ultimately a challenge for the Committee that they have not yet been able to overcome and which raises questions about the abilities of the system to overcome challenges of democratic disillusionment.

Interestingly, when speaking to former officials it was clear that when the system was originally set up there was a degree of optimism about the potentials that the e-petition system may fulfil, but that this optimism has waned in the years since. The 2014 Procedure Committee report highlights this optimism: “the potential is there, we believe, for the establishment of a new system overseen by a Petitions Committee to improve significantly the House’s engagement with petitioners and prospective petitioners.” (Procedure Committee, HC 235, 2014-15: para 40). However, the reflections of all officials I interviewed were much less optimistic, and most members of staff highlighted their concerns that the system was not achieving the intended aim of improving public engagement, largely because the extent of petitioners’ engagement with the petitions system was limited to the formal milestones. What is interesting about this reflection is that we have seen throughout Chapter 4 and this chapter that public engagement with parliament more broadly was something that the petitions process *did* enable because of the doors to other parliamentary outcomes that were opened as a result of petitioner's campaigns. The wider links to parliament are forged, just not through the formal e-petitions process. However, this link was not something that anyone explicitly reflected upon, instead tending to focus on how the e-petition system’s formal processes did not enable this goal to be realised. I return to this point in Chapter 6 because it has important implications about e-petition outcomes and highlights a potential point at which the benefits of the system could, perhaps, be reframed.

“And I think a lot of the caution about the system and scepticism about the system, especially at the outset, was that it would raise expectations that could never be satisfied. And I think it does

do that. And it continues to do that. People think they've got 100,000 signatures. They've got their debate, so something's going to shift. And then it doesn't. But we were conscious of this in building the system and staffing the system and equipping it in the sense that we wanted to create this feedback loop with the petitioners so that they at least got a sense that they have been heard. Yeah, and I think that is the key. If one can point to any specific gain, it's very hard as a citizen to feel that.” (Interview, Official I)

In terms of the extent to which the system can really listen to petitioners, the concept of a feedback loop, as highlighted by Official I, came up in multiple interviews. The idea being that petitioners need to feel as though their input into parliament is not just heard but acted upon in some way. Officials often expressed a view that just hearing petitioners through the government response and debate is not enough and that this does not amount to being properly listened to. Petitioners need to be shown that someone in parliament has taken their concern seriously and considered next steps. The extent to which the Committee itself can do this is limited because the government responses and debates are not enough for petitioners who want to see policy change or engage directly with an MP. Not least because the Committee is also limited in its capacity. Multiple officials interviewed expressed to me the difficulties they face with regard to resources and time, suggesting that a large chunk of their capacity is still taken up trying to clear petition backlogs after the pandemic and changes in the government. But this feedback loop is also not forged because supporting petitioners within this wider ecosystem is not within the Committee’s remit. Whilst the Committee does make a considerable effort to showcase work that is relevant to the petition issue across parliament to petitioners, for example, “other debates, select committee inquiries, government consultations” (Interview, Official Q) this does not enable the two-way discussion that petitioners desire (and which we have seen are beneficial to petitioners’ wider campaigns). Additionally, it was not clear whether this element of the Committee’s work was known to or valued by petitioners because they only referred to the work of the Committee in limited ways about the government responses and Westminster Hall debates.

“There is a real issue here. If we’re doing all this ‘engagement’ and say parliament is listening, which is great, but then the petitioner comes back and says, ‘parliament has listened, I wonder what they will say in response’ and then two people turn up to the debate then we are not doing the engagement job properly. We’re just doing a little proportion of it. All good engagement is that first you listen. Then you decide what to do and then you communicate back to the audience. It is no good if we are only doing a third of that.” (Interview, Official L)

Staff suggested that this problem may exist in part because of the culture within parliament, suggesting that there exists a tension between public engagement being the responsibility of parliament or the responsibility of individual constituency MPs. This is best summarised by a former official, who suggested that this was a historical tension whereby pushes for greater public engagement in response to the challenges to democracy outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 are met with resistance, and that the e-petitions system has further brought the tension into the light:

“It had been very much the resistance by the ‘old guard’, the sense that parliament as an institution had no business dealing with members of the public. It should be mediated entirely through the constituency MP. This shifted with Bercow who was very keen on the outreach stuff and a huge amount of money was invested in staff for this purpose. There was an important conceptual shift that parliamentary staff could be allowed to represent the institution in that way, and the petitions system shows that. But ten years ago, it would have been regarded as something that is not really acceptable” (Interview, Official I).

Another former member of staff also highlighted that “there are a lot of people within the House of Commons who don’t believe that the Commons or that parliament should have a relationship with the public” (Interview, Official L). The extent to which this issue limits the petitions system and is a cause for the problems highlighted in this thesis is interesting even though neither official was able to indicate the strength of the issue. It demonstrates how the Committee finds itself caught between a desire to promote public engagement and transparency of the institution whilst simultaneously being limited to do so, for reasons of capacity, resistance or remit. As a result, the Committee finds itself confronted with the fact that the petitions system, despite all its benefits, may actually further fuel public apathy or cynicism towards parliament. The strength of this argument and the implication of it are both unpacked in depth in Chapter 6.

A final perspective raised by Committee officials was with regards to the e-petition system’s ability to act as a form of parliamentary scrutiny. This is related to prior points about the agenda setting function of petitions identified by petitioners and points about awareness raising of a variety of issues identified by MPs. One former official suggested that e-petitions may act as a type of scrutiny not just because of its agenda setting potentials but also because it enables the Committee to push back against, for example, an unsatisfactory government response to the e-petition. In doing so the government is forced to, at the very least, go back and formulate a more

meaningful response to the petitioners. The implication of this being that the government is also forced to think more seriously about how they engage with the public (Interview, Official P). We know from Chapter 4 that this was highlighted by petitioners as something that the Committee did well and it was suggested by officials that this was an ability that the Committee valued and wanted to ensure it was used carefully so as not to lose its power. Further scrutiny potentials arise from the petitions acting as a ‘safety valve’ (Leston-Bandeira, 2019) in which issues that are not normally addressed can be raised, debated and scrutinised. Indeed, e-petitions as a tool for keeping them abreast of a range of issues was mentioned often by MPs as one motivation for their involvement. In recognising this scrutiny function, it was suggested by staff that public engagement with parliament was a way through which greater trust could be built:

“[Petitions] have a role in enhancing the quality of parliamentary scrutiny. That doesn’t always occur to people. When they think about petitions people think ‘oh this is all good and nice’. The perception can be that over here with [petitions] you’ve got your nice public engagement. That’s lovely. But over here we’ve got our proper scrutiny and they are different. But for [us] it was important that they were part of the same thing.” (Interview, Official P).

Another former member of staff suggested that petitions help to “keep the government honest” (Interview, Official Q) because of the reasons outlined above and because the petitions system’s creation led to agreed standards with the House that did not exist before. There was a point raised that the government responses might be viewed as a way to channel public dissent into channels that are easily “ignored or rebuffed” by the government (Interview, Official Q), but this was raised as a hypothetical concern rather than as something which plays out in reality. That the government must respond to the petitioner, and that the Committee has established in practice that this must be done in a way that requires the government to think honestly and take the petition’s ask seriously is a benefit of the petitions system that did not exist in prior set-ups. As such, generally, Committee officials valued the scrutiny function that the government responses in particular provided.

5.4 The view from outside: How non-Committee MPs view e-petitions

As we explored in section 5.2, non-Committee MPs were, on the whole, involved with the case study e-petitions either before the debate stage, or afterwards when they pursued other parliamentary mechanisms. With regards to the e-petition debates, views were mixed. On the one hand, MPs viewed the debates as limited in impact which is why they preferred to be involved in

other ways. We saw in Chapter 4 that the nature of Westminster Hall debates as ‘general debates’ in which there are no motions to vote on means that attendance can be low and they are unlikely to be venues for policy change. Instead, they are venues for concerns to be raised in a parliamentary setting. As a result, concerns from ordinary MPs, much like those from the Petitions Committee officials and MPs, were raised about the extent to which the debates may lead to disappointment and, perhaps, public disillusionment or apathy with the process.

“[Petitioners] were actually pretty disappointed by the debate and they said they wanted my advice on how we can have a proper debate next time. So, like with the minister genuinely engaging. And I said, well, that isn’t how this works. You know, everyone gets up and says their thing and the minister reads out, you know if it is a good minister who is confident they’ll engage a bit more. But generally speaking, the minister knows what they’re going to say before they turn up. So, I’ve sort of had to deflate their expectations a bit on that front.” (Interview, MP B)

Because of this, a handful of MPs went so far as to suggest that votable motions ought to be the next step in improving the petitions system because it would warrant some additional actions being taken on the e-petition:

“We need to manage people's expectations more as to what they could expect out of it. It is, you know, is publicity for the cause that they're interested in. And maybe that there's other ways of following things up, whether that's parliamentary questions or letters to the ministers or just, you know, get some press coverage that alerts more people to the issue that they're concerned about. And then it's what you do next. Because it's just one I mean, none of these debates will end with a vote or anything. And generally, people want some kind of change. Unless the minister says, yeah, we're going to do that, that's pretty unlikely to happen very often. Maybe we should have a vote at the end. That might help with attendance and the rest of it” (Interview, MP E).

“So, I think the question is, should we have a vote at the end? That might be one interesting reform. But if you have a vote does it mean anything? Who shows up? You can’t vote with two people” (Interview, MP K)

However, in Chapter 4, I discuss the average attendance at the case study e-petition debates, which was 15 members including the minister and Committee MP opening the debate. There are no publicly available statistics on Westminster Hall debate attendance which makes it difficult to discern whether this figure is indicative of wider Westminster Hall debate trends. If debates ended in a vote then it is likely that debates will need to occur in the Main Chamber, where low

attendance may be more acutely felt. In this way, there is a risk of further inflating expectations about likely outcomes of the vote, or of increasing apathy if the debates look to be empty.

On the other hand, as the quote above from MP E alludes to, there was a recognition amongst MPs that the Westminster Hall debates formed one part of a wider campaign process that, together, might be able to lead to the change petitioners desired because they are like “Ten Minute Rule Bills in that they don’t look like much but cumulatively these are all ways of raising issues and lighting the blue touch paper. It may not go bang immediately, but it may go bang eventually” (Interview, MP A). This is an element of petitioning that we have seen Committee MPs and officials (and to some extent petitioners) recognise too and it is a core finding of this thesis, but it was suggested by MPs that their prior attempts to present the debates in this way to petitioners seemingly fell upon deaf ears because expectations about what the debate should achieve were already set. I consider the implication of this in Chapter 6.

Interestingly, these concerns were held not just about the debate but about the underlying principles of the wider petitioning process. The non-Committee MPs I interviewed were split in their views of the wider petitions system. Some recognised the benefits that exist by the nature of interacting with parliament: “It has provided another avenue through which the public can engage with Members of Parliament, which has got to be good” (Interview, MP N). Others were more cynical, noting, for example, that e-petition responses or debates were unlikely to lead to any measurable change. Some, as a consequence, expressed concerns that negative experiences with the petitioning process could lead to wider apathy and disillusionment which would be “worse than if they’d never engaged at all, because then they will have a hostile feeling towards parliament or they’ll just walk away and [...] be lost to us” (Interview, MP D).

Given the disappointment expressed by petitioners highlighted in Chapter 4, there is evidence to suggest that these concerns may not be entirely unfounded. Nonetheless, most MPs took the stance that, despite its potential problems, the petitioning process provided a ‘net good’, for example, that “it may not change the world, but it is better than not having it” (Interview, MP N). Even the most cynical Members recognised some of the benefits of the system. For example, it is a system which enables the public to engage with parliament and raise issues that are otherwise unnoticed, in line with the scrutiny functions highlighted above. As a result, MPs tended to value the input that the system provides and recognised that it was another channel they could draw on for understanding public opinion.

“I think that the concept is brilliant. It gets us to talk about things we don’t know about. You can have a petition and people from different constituencies can get involved. That's making us look at things that we wouldn't necessarily look at from people we wouldn't necessarily look at. And I think that's really good, I definitely think that is a good thing” (Interview, MP G).

In this way, parliamentary actors’ interpretations of ‘success’ were different from petitioners, owing to an established understanding that the petitions processes were unlikely to lead to a change in policy. MPs recognised the benefits to petitioning beyond the petition responses or debates, hence their exploration of a variety of other parliamentary mechanisms, in ways that petitioners did not perhaps realise until after the formal milestones had been exhausted. The implications of these interpretations of success are unpacked next, in Chapter 6.

Table 15: Comparison between petitioner and parliamentarian perspectives

Research question	Petitioner strategies and views	MPs' views	Officials' views
RQ1: What are the informal public sites in which everyday engagement with parliamentary e-petitions occurs, and what are the characteristics of the activities that occur within these sites?	<p>Social media as a site for building supporter bases, getting signatures, reaching out to wider campaigning networks and parliamentarians</p> <p>Benefits to large social media followings e.g. that of celebrities</p>	<p>Necessity of personal correspondence and the need for petitioners to take the time to forge connections rather than rely on numbers or auto generated content</p> <p>Recognised the value of well-known voices and petition campaigns that were likely to 'take off'</p>	N/a
RQ2: What are the formal and informal connective mechanisms that exist between sites of discussion in the sphere of citizen participation and the sphere of parliament?	<p>E-petitions as a vehicle through which relationships with parliamentarians can be forged</p> <p>Value of other parliamentary mechanisms vis-a-vis formal petitions processes but recognised this post hoc</p>	<p>Value of network building and cross party consensus</p> <p>No one tool to use but a suite of mechanisms that can support e-petition campaigns within parliament</p> <p>Formal milestones as part of this process, but not the end</p>	Petitioner disappointment with formal processes a problem; limited in capacity and resource to address this issue within the Committee
RQ3: What are the outcomes of petitioners' campaign activities, and what subsequent value do these activities bring to petitioners' objectives?	<p>Networks and relationships built both in and outside of parliament</p> <p>Awareness raising in the public and keeping issues on the political agenda</p> <p>Other parliamentary or extra-parliamentary mechanisms towards ultimate goals</p>	<p>The need to manage petitioner expectations about likely petition outcomes and outcomes of other parliamentary tools</p> <p>Seeking consensus on petition topics</p>	<p>A greater need for petitioners to recognise the other parliamentary mechanisms available and their benefits</p> <p>The need for an off ramp to support petitioners beyond the petition</p>

5.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has presented findings on ‘who listens’ to petitioners in parliament, why and how, presenting findings to RQ2 about the connections forged with both Committee and non-Committee actors. The chapter began by exploring the involvement of Committee MPs and officials highlighting how much of their involvement was limited to the procedural elements of the petition process, largely echoing the findings of Chapter 4 which suggest that petitioners had little involvement with the Petitions Committee. I then outlined how much of petitioners’ involvement with parliament rather came from their connections with ordinary constituency MPs, exploring how MPs draw on wider parliamentary networks and the importance of relationship building both with petitioners and with other parliamentarians. Relating this finding with the findings of the previous chapter, it is interesting that when petitioners did reference ‘success’ or the aspects of the petitioning process they viewed as points at which they were able to make progress, it was often in relation to having had the support of an MP in some capacity. The findings of this chapter suggest that these relationships were viewed similarly positively by MPs, and MPs were keen to emphasise the benefits of tapping into wider parliamentary networks to petitioners. This is a core finding of this thesis because it suggests that there are outcomes or benefits to petitioning that extend beyond just the formal processes of the system (RQ3).

In terms of why parliamentary actors became involved with the e-petition process, the main motivations for Committee and non-Committee MPs were instrumental in nature, for example because it helps them to keep abreast of issues, demonstrate their support for various causes, or promote their work to wider audiences. However, some motivations were intrinsic in nature, for example because the e-petitions system allowed them to explore topics of interest or undertake a more public facing role by engaging with petitioners. We also saw how celebrity influence can be a motivating factor for parliamentarians’ involvement because of their ability to popularise and promote e-petition campaigns, suggesting that celebrities may be important non-institutional intermediaries between petitioners to parliament.

The reflections on the e-petitions system were similar across all of the parliamentary actors. Petitions Committee MPs and officials often lamented their lack of capacity to deal with petitioners’ expectations but noted that it was a ‘net good’ that the system existed because it provided citizens important ways to engage with democracy, and because it gives parliament

necessary insight into what issues the public may be concerned with. Most officials suggested that there were challenges about the formal e-petition processes not leading to the outcomes that petitioners wanted or expected, suggesting that this may actually cause more problems about disillusionment, all the while noting that they did not have the ability to overcome this challenge. Similarly, non-Committee MPs were sceptical about the ability of the formal milestones to achieve anything but they recognised - and were keen to highlight - that the system provided petitioners with various other ways to engage with parliament which may contribute to petitioners' wider campaigning objectives. This sentiment cut across all parliamentary actors, with most suggesting that petitioners did not always recognise or understand the value of petitioning in terms of the additional avenues that are opened up within parliament (at least, not at the time – see Chapter 4), and that more needs to be done to explain the complexities of parliamentary influence and how e-petitions might feed into various channels to mitigate against further potential disillusionment.

Together, the insights gathered here and in Chapter 4 are valuable for our understanding of the intersection of online everyday political practices and the parliamentary ecosystem within which the petitions system sits. They provide interesting findings about the moments where petitioners and parliamentary actors did (or did not) extract value from the system, and the findings highlight areas where there may be scope for change, for example in terms expectations management and highlighting how e-petitions can open up various avenues for change. However, these findings also provide necessary caveats to when such opportunities may arise. I unpack these now, in Chapter 6 which focuses on how the e-petition system is, or is not, placed to overcome the perennial challenges of dissatisfaction and disillusionment.

Chapter 6: Understanding the ecosystem: the implications of e-petition campaigns

Introduction

So far, I have outlined how and why petitioners came to use the UK Government and Parliament e-petition system, underscoring the value of the avenues opened up by e-petition campaigns and with a specific focus on social media as a site of political engagement (Chapter 4). I have outlined how and why parliamentary actors come to be involved in the petitions system (Chapter 5) and have presented the reflections and evaluations of both petitioners and parliamentary actors about the system (Chapters 4 and 5). Drawing on the empirical findings presented in the two preceding chapters, this chapter now seeks to bring the two ‘halves’ of the empirical findings together to reflect on the points of convergence and disconnect between petitioners and parliamentary actors. It teases out the significance of the campaign characteristics of the case study e-petitions and the differences in perceptions that exist not just between petitioners and parliamentary actors but also between different MPs and officials. I do so in order to understand the efficacy of the e-petitions system as a process through which the public are able to engage with parliament, and as a system designed to overcome challenges of public disillusionment and apathy.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, in section 6.1 I briefly restate findings on who ‘speaks’ via e-petitions (RQ1) and I reflect on the similar campaign strategies employed by different petitioner ‘types’. In section 6.2 I develop this analysis by focusing on what we have learnt from the campaign activities of the case study e-petition campaigns with regard to everyday politics and the spillover benefits that arise from using a parliamentary e-petitions system (RQ1 and RQ3). By foregrounding the informal political practices of petitioners - the use of social media and everyday online practices – I highlight how enabled petitioners themselves act as ‘inducers of connectivity’ (Mendonça, 2016) between the public and parliament, whilst also reflecting on the risks that arise from a system that necessitates social media usage for success. In doing so, I address calls from the literature for empirically grounded research about the connections between citizens and their representative institutions (e.g. Mendonça 2016; Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Matthews, 2023), demonstrating in turn the value of ‘systems thinking’ to our understanding of democratic innovations like e-petitions (RQ2). In section 6.3 I offer some critical reflections on the perspectives provided by petitioners, MPs and Committee officials. To

do so, I reflect on whether the feelings of disappointment felt by petitioners about the formal processes and the subsequent need for MPs and officials to manage expectations is indicative of more fundamental problems with the e-petitions system, and I consider potential solutions to this challenge.

6.1 Petitioner types, campaign strategies and ‘imbalances’?

One of the risks levied at parliamentary e-petitions processes - both by academics and practitioners - is that the system would become overrun by high profile, large scale campaigns organised by highly resourced groups or charities, or that marginalised voices are unlikely to engage in the process (Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Matthews, 2021). Built into this research design was consideration of the use of e-petitions both by charities and by other less organised groups or individuals, in order to understand the different contours of who is ‘speaking’ to parliament. I have outlined in Chapter 4 how the majority of petitioners in this research were not highly organised and how petitioners were diverse in terms of available resources and experiences. The various campaigner ‘categories’ that I identified range from those who had very little or no prior experience of engaging with parliament or campaigning in the past, to those who had created multiple e-petitions or those who had extensive campaigning backgrounds and resources at their disposal (see Tables 9 and 10 for a full breakdown). As a result, the findings of this research add additional nuance to conversations about petitioner demographics by highlighting different imbalances about who is able to ‘speak’ through the e-petition system and the effect of different resources on the experiences of petitioners, as follows.

Primarily, the findings of Chapter 4 suggest that the picture of petitioners’ resources and how they came to bear on petitioners’ campaigns is complex. When the petitioners in this research began their e-petition campaign, individuals (categories 1 and 2) and small, informal campaign groups (category 3) largely only had access to social media through which they built up followers and support. Some of those who had campaigned before already had networks they could tap into and had prior knowledge of the process. Formal campaign groups (category 4) were similar, though they also had access to actors who could support their campaign in other ways, for example, content creators to help with their social media posts, and sometimes they had already established relationships with parliamentarians. In comparison, the one large charity (category 5) featured in this research was able to take much of their early campaign for granted because not only did they have staff time dedicated to the campaign, but they also already had access to

policy makers who they could lobby and a database of supporters they could tap into for e-petition signatures. This meant that for individual and informal groups of petitioners, considerable time and effort went into building up coalitions of supporters both in and outside of parliament in order to advance the e-petition campaign and ‘catch up’ to the stages that other petitioners reached with ease. The main difference was, therefore, the speed with which petitioners could begin campaigning, accounting for the time it takes to build up followers on social media, identify other campaigners and build relationships, but it was something that nonetheless all petitioners achieved. Once their supporter base was built up, petitioner experiences were then broadly quite similar in terms of the tactics employed and the major campaign milestones (Figure 3), regardless of petitioner type (RQ1). These core milestones are:

- The use of social media to mobilise supporters and connect with parliamentarians
- Pushes to reach the formal e-petition milestones: government responses and Westminster Hall debates
- Relationship building with parliamentarians and the exploration of other parliamentary and non-parliamentary mechanisms
- The support of well-known voices

In this way, the main finding about petitioner ‘types’ and their campaigns is about this ‘catching up’ and how petitioners overcame resource imbalances to achieve the various campaign milestones and outcomes that we have seen are possible. This is largely because petitioners’ wider networks, once built, were able to support them in numerous ways, for example by lobbying their own MPs, pushing the e-petition out to the news media or simply encouraging others to ‘sign and share’. Other benefits that petitioners derived from a network of active supporters included: access to email databases, newsletters and increased followers or reach on social media which help to level out the process. From MPs, the major benefits derived were in relation to access to wider parliamentary networks and mechanisms because it enabled petitioners to continue their campaigns in other ways. This suite of resources that petitioners could tap into amounted to, according to Petitioner 11, “a cog in the wider campaign arsenal, weaponry if you like” (Interview, Petitioner 11), which ultimately boosted the e-petition in both informal and formal spheres, and this was something that all petitioners achieved, albeit in different ways and on different timescales.

Importantly, these networks were tapped into via informal communicative spaces such as on social media, which meant that petitioners leveraged both institutional (parliamentarians) and

non-institutional (other campaigners, celebrities) actors to further the campaign towards petitioners' goals. Aside from the use of paid advertisements, social media was a free resource available for all petitioners to use regardless of resources or experience, and it enabled each petition campaign to build these coalitions of support. It was this ability to draw on the benefits of social media that enabled petitioners to tap into these wider networks and which 'levelled' the campaign process out between different petitioner types. This is not to suggest that those more highly resourced did not have an advantage from the beginning, but it is to say that social media afforded all petitioners with opportunities to network and reach out to those who could advance their e-petition campaign either inside or outside of parliament. This supports previous findings about the potential for social media to act as a 'levelling' tool (see Holt et al, 2013) and the benefits about community building and achieving a larger 'reach' highlighted above are in keeping with extant literature which has identified social media's potential for grassroots mobilisation (e.g. Freelon et al, 2018; Leong et al, 2021). In this way, the findings of this research demonstrate social media's value as a tool for enabling support for e-petition campaigns and online political engagement more widely (Hale, Margetts and Yasseri, 2013a; 2013b).

But, whilst digital marginalisation was not something experienced by the petitioners in this research, the necessity of social media and networks of support built online to e-petition campaigns does raise important questions about whose voice can be heard if much of e-petition 'success' is reliant upon using informal communicative spaces like social media effectively. This is because these findings add nuance to debates about who petitions, their outcomes and 'success' by demonstrating that the ability to (at the very least) achieve the signature thresholds and later pursue some of the other parliamentary or non-parliamentary avenues for change identified in Chapters 4 and 5 is largely reliant upon petitioners' ability to leverage wide communities of support online (RQ3). We saw how this was no easy feat. 'Catching up' and reaching the various informal and formal milestones was something that required learning-whiles-doing, and the extensive campaigning activities sometimes negatively impacted petitioners' emotional and physical health. So, there remain questions about the extent to which this element of 'success' is one available to most members of the public, for example, in situations of digital marginalisation whereby petitioners are not able to leverage online tools for campaigning or where petitioners do not have the time or capacity to campaign in such a way, particularly if they begin with little prior networks or experience of engaging with parliament. Indeed, not all petitioners are likely to be able to exploit algorithms or recognise what 'trends' they need to engage with in order to extend their reach. As a result, there still needs to be greater consideration of imbalances in who can

speak to parliament through e-petitions, orientated around which voices are privileged online. This is a point which I return to in the next section, and which guides some of the broader reflections in this chapter.

Of course, these findings about petitioner types, resources and campaign strategies can only be said for the small sample of e-petitions that formed the case studies for this research. The extent to which these findings are just reflective of the chosen topic or it is the case for all e-petitions cannot be determined by this research. Notwithstanding this, the cases highlighted in this research provide us with interesting insights into the types of petitioners and how their campaign strategies are broadly similar despite initial resource differences which is an important nuance to add to debates about petitioner demographics and campaign activities, but which nonetheless do raise additional questions about the extent to which social media is a leveller for all.

6.2 Campaign characteristics: everyday politics and the connections between the public and parliament

Everyday politics (RQ1)

The use of social media by all petitioners and the importance petitioners placed on its use as a core component of their campaign shows the intersection of political activity and our everyday lives (Highfield, 2016) and social media's affordances to political participation (Middaugh et al, 2017; Kaskazi and Kitzie, 2023) because petitioners were campaigning on issues that resonated with them personally. The *Motivations* section of Chapter 4 highlighted that the majority of the individual petitioners and the informal campaign groups (categories 1, 2 and 3) featured in this research were petitioning because of a perceived injustice in their lives, most often related to the loss of a pet. Their campaign activities show how the personal and the 'ordinary' (such as posting images of a pet) becomes political (by linking the post to an e-petition or tagging MPs) in that petitioners' social media posts became a public illustration of the intersection of their personal lives with a parliamentary process. The link between the personal and the political in this way is best shown by the framing and presentation of their e-petitions; petitioners often mention the personal loss or injustice that they felt and, for example, were driven by a desire to prevent others experiencing the same:

“When we lost [dog] my heart broke but I could see how many other people can have their heart broken by purchasing a puppy and losing it straight away. And I was like, if I can stop others going through it, if I can help, I’ll do that” (Interview, Petitioner 5).

Interestingly, Miller’s (2023) research into the history of petitioning in the United Kingdom highlighted how then, as now, petitioning was a political activity that was embedded in everyday practices and how petitioning shows representation to be a dynamic process that “connects formal and informal politics and emphasises the importance of informal and non-electoral forms of representation” (p.17). Crewe’s (2021) anthropology of parliaments similarly highlights how politics is entangled with people’s social, cultural and emotional lives. The contemporary literature on social media and everyday politics underscores how our understanding of contemporary political engagement is inextricably linked to seemingly mundane activity online and that the ‘personalisation’ of politics means how people engage with political processes is different now than it was before social media proliferated into people’s lives (Highfield, 2016; Dean, 2019). As I have just addressed in section 6.1, it was because of the various campaign activities opened up through social media - the extensive networking and relationship building practices highlighted in Chapters 4 and 5 – that enabled petitioners to pursue a range of outcomes both in and outside of parliament. As such, a recognition of the eminence of social media to petition campaigns is fundamental to our understanding of how everyday political practices online shape contemporary engagement with political processes, because the e-petition campaigns in this research demonstrate the existence of a linked and ‘extended hybrid media system’ (Highfield, 2016; see also Chadwick, 2013) in which various campaign activities in the informal sphere and formal spheres interact.

Leveraging well known voices (RQ2)

We also saw in Chapters 4 and 5 the significance of well-known voices that could support e-petition campaigns, including how they may act as intermediaries between petitioners and parliament by amplifying e-petition campaigns in online spaces, for example, through their large social media followings and incentivising parliamentarians’ involvement. Extant research into celebrity involvement in politics has highlighted the potentially mobilising force of celebrities, for example, in encouraging young people’s civic engagement in Taiwan (Wen and Cui, 2014), bringing added visibility and attention to otherwise overlooked issues (Thrall et al, 2008), influencing voting behaviour in elections (Veer, Becirovic and Martin, 2010) and influencing

general voter attitudes (Jackson, 2008). In comparison, their involvement in e-petition campaigns and processes is an underdeveloped area within the literature, with the notable exception of Matthews's (2023) study which highlighted how celebrity voices can be leveraged by the Petitions Committee to foster engagement with e-petition inquiries (Matthews, 2023).

Whilst only one of the case study e-petition campaigns was started by a celebrity, a majority of them benefitted from affiliation to celebrity voices, either on the wider campaigning team or through connections on social media. This is because petitioners were able to tap into celebrities' vast social media networks to boost views and support, leverage celebrities' abilities to create a 'fear of missing out' on a topic that is receiving attention in the public sphere, and petitioners could utilise existing relationships within wider policy communities in cases where celebrities had campaigned on similar issues in the past or by drawing on their wider experience of engaging with traditional media like the news or daytime television programmes. Additionally, the findings of this research suggest that one of the reasons why MPs chose to get involved with e-petition campaigns was because of the involvement of well-known voices like celebrities. MPs were often concerned with whether or not a campaign was likely to 'take off' because they are time-constrained, and campaigns which look to be successful justifies their time and effort and boosts their profile. MPs recognised that celebrity involvement increases this possibility because of celebrities' larger reach in informal communicative spaces, which can amplify campaigns in the public sphere. Indeed, celebrity involvement can also provide credibility to the cause and capture the attention of broader groups of policy makers and others who may be able to support the e-petition campaign.

In this way petitioners' ability to tap into celebrity networks online meant that "things happen" (Interview, Petitioner 16), both in and outside of parliament, suggesting that celebrities may play important roles as intermediaries between petitioners and parliament. This is an important finding because it demonstrates how the leveraging of celebrity endorsements by petitioners was a useful tool for engagement and for credibility, and how celebrities are potentially important non-institutional intermediaries between the public and parliament (RQ2). This is also broadly in keeping with wider literature which suggests that celebrity involvement and perceived influence can affect people's political behaviour (e.g. Nisbett and DeWalt, 2016).

It is important to note, however, that social media and the connections forged with or via celebrities raise further important questions about whose voice is privileged during the petition

campaign process, adding further nuance to the discussion in section 6.1 about petitioner types and imbalances. I have established how petitioners who were able to tap into these networks were technologically literate and able to, first, recognise the benefits of using social media and tap into celebrity networks and secondly use them in their favour, requiring a level of social media literacy (Valle et al, 2024). Secondly, the celebrities involved in the case study e-petitions were perceived by both the public and parliamentary actors as ‘credible’ having not been involved in any scandals and usually having a long, public history of campaigning in the e-petition areas. Existing research suggests that risks exist when leveraging celebrity voices depending on how they are perceived by the public (Becker, 2013) and whilst those in the case studies may have been perceived positively, there is no guarantee that this would be the case for other e-petition campaigns that leverage celebrity voices. Indeed, Matthews (2023) highlights challenges that the Petitions Committee faced balancing the voice of celebrities with commitments to hearing a range of voices in her analysis of Katie Price’s campaign to end the online abuse of disabled people because of Price’s controversies, including a restraining order for verbal abuse. It is, therefore, perhaps only because these celebrities were viewed as legitimate voices that the benefits highlighted above arose, adding further nuance to whose voices may be privileged in e-petition campaigns.

The risks of social media

As such, when considering the role of social media in the petitioning process, there are several issues that this thesis has highlighted with regards to how sustainable or resilient these practices are, and whether petitioners can undertake e-petition campaigns in the same way going forward. First, section 6.1 underscored the dependency of e-petition campaigns on social media and how it may provide petitioners opportunities to access other actors who may support them, highlighting how various channels of influence can be reached through online practices. This, in turn raises questions about how some voices are privileged over others in reaching the ‘ears’ of policy makers and about the degrees of ‘levelling’ that can be achieved when there is no certainty that all future petitioners have the same level of social media literacy as the petitioners in this research. Secondly, the extent to which this issue is exacerbated when celebrity voices are leveraged in e-petition campaigns, and whether celebrity involvement exacerbates concerns that the voices of those who already shout the loudest are amplified during e-petition campaigns (Matthews, 2021).

Thirdly, I have highlighted petitioners' preference for Twitter as a platform (for a more detailed breakdown of the affordances of different platforms see Theocharis et al, 2023; Ruess et al, 2021). The interviews conducted in this research took place between July 2023 and March 2024. In October 2022 tech billionaire Elon Musk bought the platform Twitter and in July 2023 renamed it 'X'. Since then, there have been a number of changes to the platform that have impacted its use such as the relaxation of content moderation, the increase in bots and the promotion of far right or conspiracy content.⁸ The seeds of these changes were visible during my interviews, but it is only since I concluded my fieldwork that the impact is clearer. Over the course of the interviews a handful of petitioners intuited that their e-petition campaigns online were changing in nature. For example, it was highlighted by one petitioner that they were unable to reach as many people as previously despite their number of followers having stayed the same or increased. Others found that they were receiving more automated 'bot' messages - computer algorithms that automatically produce content (Ferrara et al, 2016) - or messages filled with hate and spam, which they had not received in the past. Whilst the impact felt by petitioners at the time of interviewing was marginal because these changes had only just begun, since my fieldwork finished in early 2024 the changes to X have accelerated and it is now the case that an increasing number of X users are leaving the platform for others such as 'Threads' or 'Bluesky'. In February 2024, approximately one fifth of daily X users had left the platform since Musk's takeover in 2022 (Ingram, 2024; Hern, 2024). A brief desk review of these alternative platforms I undertook in February 2025 suggests that most of the petitioners in this research have not yet transitioned to an alternative platform (only one person was active on Bluesky). Recent polling from Rice and Cooper (2025) finds that of 111 MPs, 56% are frequently using Bluesky, but note that there is a discrepancy between political parties, with Labour or Liberal Democrat MPs much more likely to use the platform, which similarly raises questions about how petitioners may or may not be able to reach parliamentarians or identify those who may be willing supporters of their campaign.

We rely on trustworthy and trusted institutions, even more so with platforms like X because they act as unique intermediaries between the public and the digital world (DeNardis and Hackl, 2015) and yet, we have increasingly seen the undermining of the vibrancy and trustworthiness of the digital sphere (Balkin, 2021). The changes to Twitter that occurred between the start of this research and the end highlight that the stability of social media platforms cannot be taken for granted which begs questions about how citizens can continue to use such platforms for

⁸ For detailed analysis of these changes, including X's use by the far right see Petley, 2025; Hoffman, Leslie and Ifeanyichukwu, 2025; Pérez-Curiel, 2020.

engagement with our representative institutions. It is a possibility that the immense work put into building up networks of support on social media will be wasted as some platforms become less attractive places for people to campaign and the dispersal of accounts to different platforms may mean that intended audiences are not necessarily in the same place as you. These changes are particularly challenging for new participatory tools like e-petitions because the findings of this thesis highlight that the places where engagement with them happen are largely in these informal spaces online, removed from the auspices of formal processes like the Petitions Committee, and it therefore not a challenge that parliament has the capabilities to address directly.

As a result of these challenges, there remain questions about first whether social media platforms act as a levelling tool if e-petition success is contingent on tapping into large networks of supporters or celebrity voices online, especially if those petitioners in this research are more technologically proficient than most. And second, questions remain about the extent to which social media can remain a site for everyday political engagement with political institutions if its uptake is contingent on its stable ownership and regulation. These emerging political questions are not something that I am able to answer within the confines of this research, so I return to them in Chapter 7 when considering avenues for further research, but there is an important conclusion to be drawn about social media usage in e-petition campaigns that must be considered in future research into political participation: the extent to which informal communicative spaces like social media can facilitate citizens' engagement with parliament in the future cannot be taken for granted. The potential implications of this for practitioners of public engagement initiatives and the remit for future research are considered in the next chapter; whilst petitioners seek out alternative approaches, practitioners too will need to consider how to create a more resilient and - perhaps - proactive system that is able to mitigate some of the challenges posed by these developments.

Spillover effects and 'inducers of connectivity' (RQ2 and RQ3)

By highlighting how e-petition campaigns largely take place in informal communicative spaces in which petitioners leverage institutional and non-institutional actors towards their goals, this thesis raises interesting findings about the ways in which petitioners are connected to their representative institutions. By connection, I refer to the deliberative systems literature which suggests that connections occur when there is recognition that issues raised by the public are considered in empowered formal spaces like parliament (Boswell, Henriks and Ercan, 2016), and which largely relates to the linkage role of e-petitions systems as identified by Leston-Bandeira

(2019). But what benefit do these connections with parliament bring for petitioners, and through what mechanisms are they established? We saw in Chapter 5 that non-Committee MPs were particularly keen to emphasise the value of petitioning beyond the government response and e-petition debates, and we saw in Chapter 4 how these informal touch points with parliament were valuable to petitioners for their wider campaign. MPs, for example, suggested that their abilities to support petitioners lay in their ability to “[build] consensus, cross party consensus. Getting support for a cause” (Interview, MP A) and so they call upon their parliamentary networks to push petition campaigns further. This is no surprise. There is an abundance of literature on the leveraging of parliamentary networks to build cross-party support; in many ways that is what parliament *is* and how it functions (Crewe, 2015; 2021; Geddes, 2019).

What these case study e-petitions highlight as a point of departure from extant literature on petitioning and add to our understanding of the linkage function of e-petitions (Leston-Bandeira, 2019), is how both petitioners and parliamentary actors underscored the importance of these informal touch points to the campaign and comparatively give little weight to the formal processes and role of the Petitions Committee as the mechanism from which these connections are established (for a discussion of the role and processes of the Petitions Committee see Bochel, 2016; Bochel, 2020; Leston-Bandeira, 2024). Across all interviews with petitioners, non-Committee MPs, and to some extent, Petitions Committee MPs and officials, the role of the government responses, petition debates and the support provided by Committee officials were viewed as useful points in the process in the sense that they acted as clear petition milestones and gave clarity to the process. But, for petitioners and non-Committee MPs, such formal milestones or Committee actions were not viewed as the most important points of contact for furthering the e-petition campaign, or for building wider consensus both in and out of parliament. For example, even where petitioners utilised their upcoming e-petition debate as a mobilising force on social media, the subsequent benefits came from connecting with other campaigners who could help them to boost their profile, feature in the news or give them access to money and databases of supporters. Benefits also came from informal intermediaries (i.e. outside of the auspices of the Petitions Committee) such as celebrities who could further push the campaign out in the public and in parliament, or an ordinary MP who committed to submitting a Private Members’ Bill. These were benefits that petitioners suggested they realised post hoc, after they had already been through the formal milestones, and therefore have taken forward into subsequent e-petition campaigns. As such, whilst it would be unfair to suggest that these formal processes during the petition campaign were useless - they were still important milestones to

achieve at the time - they were not the point at which petitioners upon reflection placed the most value, and it was not the point at which petitioners referenced 'success' towards their wider goals. Instead, petitioners reflected on how the value of the e-petition system is that the formal milestones act as a stepping stone into other campaign activities both in and outside of parliament. These are so-called 'spillover' effects (Matthews, 2023) in that they are benefits not solely related to the procedural aspects of the petitioning process but that arise *because of* the e-petition campaigns. They add to our 'framework of outcomes' (Bochel, 2020) outcomes that exist outside of the formal petitions process, including both in and outside of parliament (RQ3).

Thinking in terms of spillover effects is a useful framing because it draws our attention to the 'added value' of a parliamentary e-petition system (RQ3) to petitioners' objectives. Largely, that the e-petition system enables petitioners to connect with parliamentarians because the e-petition offers a legitimate tool through which petitioners can reach out and show the merits and success (in terms of public 'reach') of their campaign. In turn, it is these avenues opened up through the system that provide instrumental benefits to petitioners beyond their initial experience of the formal processes because the relationships forged with parliamentarians exist after the formal elements of the petitioning process are exhausted. We know from previous literature in the field that parliamentary and policy making influence is complex, subtle and takes place behind the scenes (see Russell and Gover, 2017, for example). Richardson and Jordan (1979) highlight how pressure group activity is not always focussed on influencing parliament but rather tapping into different elements of the executive or bureaucracy, and they signal a need to orientate our focus on policy communities that exist beyond just formal procedures. These were sentiments that were given by the MPs in this research, who were keen to emphasise that their abilities to support petitioners lie in their abilities to keep things ticking over in parliament and keep the e-petition issues on the political agenda with the hope that "doing the hard yards" and "building consensus" (Interview, MP A) may lead to change eventually. As such, the e-petitions process should not be seen narrowly in terms of its two formal milestones but widely in terms of the network of opportunities that are created and amplified inside and outside of parliament as a result. I return to this point in section 6.3.

Importantly, these connections with various parliamentarians and campaigners were informal, driven by petitioners themselves as opposed to instituted by the formal role of the Petitions Committee. As such, in relation to RQ2, I put forward that the case study campaigns highlight three informal intermediaries that are important in forging connections between petitioners and

parliament, two of which I have already alluded to in this chapter. Firstly, other parliamentarians who, as above, link petitioners to wider parliamentary processes and who enable a range of broader outcomes outside of the e-petition milestones. Secondly, celebrities who I have highlighted as performing possible links in connecting the public sphere to these parliamentarians because of their 'reach' and ability to amplify campaigns in public and formal spheres. And thirdly, petitioners themselves who, by seeking out relationships with MPs that are likely to benefit them beyond the e-petition itself, act as 'boundary spanners' (Williams, 2002) by forging these connections and bridging gaps to parliament. The extensive social media campaigns, for example, which are characterised by attempts to build coalitions of support both with members of the public who can help campaign and with MPs shows how petitioners drive the connections to parliament through their everyday political practices online. Petitioners strategically target Members that they think can support them - either because of professional or personal affiliation to the cause, constituency or an 'in' to the government - and go to extensive lengths to connect to these MPs. In this respect, petitioners themselves can be seen to be the 'inducers of connectivity' (Mendonça, 2016) between the informal public sphere of society and the formal sphere of parliament because they facilitate the connections to parliament through their vast campaigning activities.

So, 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. Where previous scholarship has established how integration into the legislative system via the Petitions Committee is necessary for petition outcomes (e.g. Bochel, 2020; Leston-Bandeira, 2024), I put forward that such integration does not have to be instituted by the Petitions Committee and integration into legislative processes can occur outside of the Committee in other parliamentary networks. Additionally, the findings about the role of other non-institutional intermediaries like celebrities in supporting the campaign and facilitating connections to parliament further underscores how integration may occur outside of the formal auspices of the Petitions Committee. Such findings develop those of Matthews (2023), and respond to Mendonça's (2016) call for further research into non-institutional intermediaries, adding that petitioners themselves ought to be considered within this process and that the wider petition outcomes highlighted in this research are perhaps less contingent on the Petitions Committee than other scholarship has suggested. It is, however, interesting that petitioners'

recognition of their connections to parliament beyond the Petitions Committee came after the fact and was not something that they acknowledged at the time, a point which I return to shortly.

These findings are important because they underscore the usefulness of ‘systems thinking’ (Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2019) for our understanding of parliamentary e-petitions systems as well as the value of considering the subjective assessments of those involved in the petitioning process. This is because this approach highlights the dynamic nature of e-petition campaigns where connections to parliament is not contingent only on the Petitions Committee, but on a range of actions that occur in relation to e-petition campaigns in the formal and informal spheres. That is, this approach highlights how focusing on the constituent parts of the democratic system, the actors within and the connections between them is fundamental to understanding the efficacy of innovations like e-petitions systems and the intersection of everyday politics and institutions like parliament. This is an important contribution of this research because extant literature has highlighted the importance of considering how “the actors in discussing in a particular point in time and space ought to be affected by, whilst also affecting, discussion happening in other time and space” (Mendonça, 2016: 178) and the mechanisms for “convergence, mutual influence and mutual adjustment” (Mansbridge et al, 2012:23).

In summary, the core contribution of this research is 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 to connect with well-known voices and parliamentarians (RQ1 and RQ2). The linkage to parliament that subsequently comes through relationships with MPs or other well connected individuals, in turn, ‘adds value’ to e-petition campaign outcomes because they enable access to other parliamentary mechanisms (RQ3). Where previous research has recognised the necessity of formal linkages between citizens and parliament as conducted by the Petitions Committee it has focussed primarily on this formal institutional ‘tie’. By providing empirical evidence from recent e-petition campaigns about their activities and the parts of the process that are the most important and valuable to petitioners, this thesis draws attention to the tendency within the literature to privilege the role of the Petitions Committee as the core connective mechanism between citizens and parliament (Bochel 2016; Bochel 2020; Leston-Bandeira, 2024), highlighting instead the influence of other intermediaries: other parliamentarians, celebrity voices and petitioners themselves. Whilst ‘systems thinking’ is most

often used in reference to deliberative democracy, by bringing back into the conversation the “participatory rights of those who persist in having non-deliberative preferences” (Saward, 2001: 371), these findings demonstrate how focus on the descriptive qualities of the activities in the informal sphere and in the formal sphere (RQ1), and the connections between the two (RQ2), is a necessary precondition for a more encompassing approach to understanding democratic participation via new participatory tools like e-petitions.

6.3 Reflections on expectations and outcomes

We have seen throughout this thesis that there are multiple functions of petitioning including agenda setting and consensus building, and Chapters 4 and 5 have underscored the importance that petitioners and parliamentary actors place on utilising a range of parliamentary mechanisms to support e-petition campaigns. Based upon this, I have highlighted the importance of recognising the dynamics of parliamentary influence through petitioning as fluid. But what is particularly interesting about the findings of this thesis is that petitioners largely felt disappointed about the formal e-petition procedures and suggested that they recognised opportunities to connect with parliament via informal touch points as benefits to petitioning after the fact. As a result, there is an important question about petitioners’ expectations at the time, the extent to which the benefits of using other parliamentary mechanisms is likely to be recognised by petitioners, and whether or not failures to manage expectations around the formal petitions processes are the reason for petitioners’ feelings of disappointment about the system. This section deals with the nuances about motivations, expectations and outcomes and seeks to advance the argument that the e-petitions system can be better presented as feeding into a range of informal and formal processes.

In Chapter 4 we saw how petitioners were motivated by a desire to achieve legislative change through their e-petition. Related to this motivation, one of the reflections that came out strongly from petitioners was that the formal e-petitions processes were a source of disappointment and disillusionment because petitioners often felt as though the government response and the Westminster Hall debate did not lead to any kind of meaningful outcome towards this goal. Part of the reason for this is because of the tumultuous periods in parliament caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and a series of changes in government which meant that government responses and petition debates were delayed or, in the case of some debates, did not happen. But it was nonetheless something that came up across all interviews, not just those with petitioners who

were affected by these contexts, and this is a finding which echoes extant scholarship that suggests petitioners the formal processes matter in terms of petitioners' perceptions (e.g. Carman, 2010). We saw in Chapter 5 that concerns about petitioner motivations and disappointment were also raised by parliamentary actors, who take on the role of expectations management to, usually, prepare petitioners for the likely outcomes of Westminster Hall debates. Across a number of these interviews concerns were raised by parliamentary actors that because petitioners were coming away feeling disappointed with the formal processes that there was a risk of petitioners disengaging from parliament entirely, thereby contributing to feelings of apathy, not solving it.

However, we have also seen how petitioners felt positively about the progress they had made when working towards other parliamentary mechanisms. In interviews, petitioners suggested that they had recognised, post hoc, that their e-petition campaign had been successful in influencing parliament in other ways. Even though these informal touch points with parliament also did not lead to quick legislative change, petitioners recognised that the pursuit of other mechanisms signalled some effort or steps towards change, whereas the e-petition milestones were viewed as 'dead ends' that had not contributed towards petitioners' goals. But, because petitioners at the time of petitioning were focussed on achieving legislative change through the formal e-petition processes, these additional outcomes were not something that petitioners recognised at the time.

In this respect, a discussion of what e-petition 'success' entails and the challenges around petitioner expectations is necessary. The limited literature on e-petition success highlights how it may be defined specifically in terms of the system's functions - are government responses received? Does the petition debate go ahead? - or widely in terms of petitioner satisfaction with the process (e.g. Carman, 2010). Bochel (2012: 153) adeptly notes that:

"a 'successful' outcome is ... likely to depend on who you are, what role you have within the petitions system, what expectations petitioners have, the extent to which the system is fulfilling its stated aims, and so on"

With the contestable nature of success in mind, these findings about e-petition milestones compared to other informal touch points with parliament raise a question about not just why petitioners expect change from the formal e-petition processes, but also whether it is an issue that can be, or should be, resolved, and whether a reframing of e-petitions as one element of a wider campaign that includes these informal touch points is necessary.

Why do petitioners feel this way?

Firstly, with regards to expectations about the formal e-petition processes, Petitions Committee officials (and sometimes MPs) were keen to emphasise that they do all that they can to educate and explain to the public what the formal e-petitions processes entail, and that part of this is, for example, informing petitioners that the debate does not feature votable motions, and that the debate is intended as a venue to raise the topic in parliament. Indeed, the information about e-petition debates on the Parliament.uk website says the following:

“Debates help raise awareness of an issue and can influence decision-making in government and parliament. Petition debates are 'general' debates which allow MPs from all parties to discuss the important issues raised by one or more petitions and put their concerns to government ministers. Petition debates don't end with a vote to implement the request of a petition. This means MPs will not vote on the topic at the end of the debate.” (UK Parliament, 2023)

In this way, the information about the formal procedures and likely outcomes of the formal e-petition processes is available online, and as mentioned in Chapter 5, the Committee attempts to inform petitioners of the processes and their likely outcomes when they meet with petitioners. In some interviews with officials who had more experience of the e-petitions website (petition.parliament.uk) and the Petitions Committee page on parliament's website (parliament.uk), it was noted that the existence of two sites can make it confusing for petitioners to find the information that they need about what to expect. This is because most of the information about the petitioning process (and what to expect) is on the Committee's page, for example the excerpt above, but most petitioners will only ever come across the e-petitions website because it is there that submission of e-petitions takes place. Compared to the Committee's parliament.uk page, there is less information about what the e-petitions process is likely to achieve on the petitions website. As a result, it may not be entirely clear for members of the public trying to engage with the system what the process and outcomes are likely to entail at the outset because the information is not in the place that they are accessing for submission. This was a challenge that a few officials spoke to, but it was not ever mentioned by petitioners which makes it difficult to determine if this was a contributing factor to petitioners' expectations in this research. Nonetheless, it is important to raise given the wider question I posed in sections 6.1 and 6.2 about challenges of digital exclusion and literacy, and which may contribute to potential 'information gaps' about the petitioning process.

Website issues aside, it may also be the case that petitioners come to their e-petition without sufficient understanding of e-petitions or wider parliamentary processes and influence, and expectations are set before any engagement with the e-petitions system, including the website, occurs. One may levy the idea that petitioners feel disappointed about their experiences of petitioning because their expectations about the success of non-electoral mechanisms within a representative democracy are unrealistic. For example, a number of the petitioners I interviewed referenced the e-petitions process as part of their “democratic right to have their view reflected” (Interview, Petitioner 11). Subsequently, they viewed the - in their eyes - poor government responses received as “undemocratic and betray[ing], a lack of accountability” (Letter to the Petitions Committee from a formal campaign group) and the debates in which ministers are not seen to engage in a meaningful discussion or outcome 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). Previous research on parliamentary e-petitions has suggested that petitioners are, generally, happy with having their voices heard in parliament, even if intended outcomes are not achieved so long as the process is both fair and politically neutral (see Carman 2010; Bochel, 2016; Bochel and Bochel, 2017). However, it is also recognised that e-petition systems face “a number of common challenges, including the need to manage expectations, and to educate people more about the petitions process” (Bochel, 2020: 236; see also Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee, 2015; House of Commons Petitions Committee, 2016). The consistency with which petitioners in this research expressed a higher expectation around their engagement with and the result of the e-petitions process and subsequent discontent that they felt suggests that being heard is not viewed as enough, and that there are ongoing challenges about petitioners’ expectations of the democratic potential of e-petitions.

It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the trends outlined in Chapter 2 - the UK’s long history of petitioning, recent pushes towards greater public engagement with political processes, and increasing public expectations about what politicians should do - have played some role in why petitioners feel this way. Because who could participate in voting was narrow, across the eighteenth and nineteenth century petitioning in the UK became something that politicians “encouraged privately and publicly” (Miller, 2023: 230) and petitions became central to “all major campaigns of the period [and] the practice of petitioning underpinned a broader repertoire of collective action” (Miller, 2023: 276). Today, the image of petitions as a popular tool for

democratic participation is combined with an ‘era of communicative plenty’ (Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2019). That is, we find ourselves with increasing volumes of and opportunities for communication, both online and in person, which have been demonstrated in extant literature as leading to increased expectations amongst the public about what politicians ought to be doing. For example, Norris (1999) describes this in terms of the ‘critical citizen’ who is more educated and informed and who, rather than rely on those in power to formulate their views, develops these elsewhere - shown today by social media - and therefore is more willing to critique policy makers.

As a result, the communicative abundance enabled by the internet and by social media has been suggested to have enabled a “sharper link” between politicians and the public in which the sheer pace with which information is shared has led to a ‘monitory democracy’ where the actions of politicians is under constant scrutiny and where increased responsiveness to the public is expected (Keane, 2011; see also Dalton, 2004; Van der Meer, 2017). Indeed, in the wake of the expenses scandal in the United Kingdom, we saw a greater recognition that more public participation outside of election cycles would confer greater legitimacy on decision making and enable greater representativeness of decision making (Fox, 2009), and populist trends in the last decade have since advocated for more people-centred modes of participation (Zaslove et al, 2021). Whilst representation and the “need to sense demands and moods, grapple with them and transform them” (Leston-Bandeira and Siefken, 2023: 363) have always been a fundamental part of parliamentary democracy, the excess of information in contemporary society means that citizens simply expect more of their representatives and their political systems. It may also be the case, as I have alluded to throughout the empirical chapters of this thesis, that it is not always clear to petitioners what the different roles and responsibilities of parliament and government are which may compound this challenge of expectations, and which has been highlighted elsewhere as an ongoing challenge (see Kalitowski, 2009; Flinders and Kelso, 2011). Taken together, the increased expectations of the public about what politicians should do and what parliament can and can’t do may highlight potential reasons as to why petitioners felt so strongly about the fact that the government ought to act upon their e-petition’s request.

A final explanation for why these issues about expectations exist might be because it is not always clear to petitioners what the e-petition system is for and that there is some incongruence between what the UK system was set up to achieve and what is interpreted by the public; the presentation of the system may be inflating expectations. When the system was set up in 2015 it

was following a series of Procedure Committee inquiries into the creation of a parliamentary e-petitions system. Previous government systems were not functioning as required and had an “uneasy relationship between the House and the Government”. So, a collaborative system was proposed in which the public could petition the House of Commons *and* press for action from the government (HC 235, 2014-15). In this way, one of the major rationales for moving away from the Downing Street petition system was to move away from the image of petitions as being only about action from the government; the first Procedure Committee report into petitions sought to “reinforce [its] historic role as the proper and principal recipient of public petitions and [ensure] that the public has a better understanding of the work and role of parliament as distinct from government” (HC 235, 2014-15: para 15). One of the proposed benefits of this joint system was, because the public do not always distinguish between ‘parliament’ and ‘the government’, or conflate the two as one and the same, that a connected system would enable *both* the attention of parliament to be drawn to an issue and for the government to respond. It has never been about convincing the government to change its position or agenda, despite the findings about petitioner motivations perhaps suggesting it would. As such, one of the strongest arguments put forward for the e-petitions system at the time was that it would “improve significantly the House’s engagement with petitioners and prospective petitioners” (para 40), enable them to learn about what both parliament and government does and move away from the notion that petitions would necessitate government action.

However, the extent to which the notion of parliament as the proper and principal recipient of petitions is recognised by petitioners is unclear and may be related to challenges about public understanding of the roles and responsibilities of government and parliament. The motivations of petitioners in this research suggest otherwise because they prioritised outcomes relating to capturing the government’s attention, and the government subsequently changing its position on an issue. Even though a number of interviewees did sometimes conflate ‘parliament’ and ‘government’ when I sought clarity on whether petitioners meant parliament or government, for example, when discussing whose attention they sought to capture, they would clarify that they meant the government. Overwhelmingly, they referred to wanting the government to listen to and enact change on their e-petition through the formal milestones and in no interview with petitioners did they see the purpose of the system as educating them on what parliament does, or having their issue talked about in parliament, despite these being part of the aims set out by the Procedure Committee. This suggests that there is a disconnect between the desire to restate the position of the House as the proper recipient of petitions and overcome the pitfalls of previous

systems and what petitioners, in reality, view it as being for. Indeed, it likely does not help that the system is titled as ‘UK Government and Parliament’, because the inclusion of ‘government’ may well mean that actions from the ‘government’ about their petition are at the forefront of petitioners’ minds. This could also be compounded by the fact that the first milestone is that which *does* receive action from the government, the government response, and so an expectation of further government action is set at this stage.

The extent to which petitioners view the system as being about capturing the attention of government versus parliament is a significant finding - and challenge - that must be considered by practitioners because there is a continued risk that a system set up with the intention of improving public relations with parliament and overcoming challenges of democratic disillusionment is doing the opposite. Similar risks about the exacerbation of mistrust have been levied at other parliamentary initiatives such as Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) (see Hazarika and Hamilton 2018; Hansard Society, 2014), suggesting that this problem is not just confined to e-petitions and is a wider challenge for parliament.

Is there a solution?

Given these challenges, there is an important question about how petitioner expectations can be addressed. The crux of this thesis is about how, through e-petition campaign activities, connections are forged with parliament in various ways which leads to a range of possible outcomes both in and outside of parliament. We have seen that petitioners are unlikely to achieve the outcome they want from the formal milestones of the petitions system alone - and that the petitions system was not designed to fulfil expectations of legislative change - and so it is the relationships forged between them and parliamentarians that matters for the pursuit of change. Indeed, Judge’s (1993) *The Parliamentary State* reminds us that the British state is about the nexus between parliamentarians, the public, interest groups and policy stakeholders which, together, is “entangled, dynamic and unpredictable” (Crewe, 2021).

As such, the proposed solution below is largely about better presenting parliamentary e-petitions as feeding into the wider parliamentary ecosystem and better supporting petitioners to understand the various dynamics of parliamentary influence. Whilst it may not be able to address all of the potential reasons listed above, it may help to reframe in petitioner’s minds what e-

petitions can achieve, and better understandings of the complexities of parliamentary influence. I flesh out the practicalities of this approach in Chapter 7.

Some interviewees raised the idea that there is no ‘off ramp’ for petitioners, which relates to the extent that the informal touch points with parliament highlighted in this research are at the front of petitioners’ minds once they come to the end of the formal e-petition processes. We see from the findings of this research that the next steps for petitioners are contingent on the ‘ears’ of parliamentarians who may be willing to support them going forward. This was, largely, the moment at which petitioners *did* express positive reflections on their campaign journey, and as mentioned earlier in this section, it was a recognition that came post hoc. But, once the debate is over there is no clear procedure for how the Petitions Committee could support petitioners in making this next step in their campaign and nor is there clear guidance on whether they should.

As a result, there is room for improvement here in how these additional avenues for change are articulated to petitioners by the Committee before they campaign, so that expectations on the outcomes of the formal e-petition processes are lessened and a broader understanding of parliamentary influence is achieved. At the moment, clearer signposting which provides petitioners with guidance on how they can continue campaigning and how they can tap into other parliamentary mechanisms alongside or after the petitioning process is not something that is currently done in sufficient depth by the Committee. Clear recognition of how e-petitions may sit within a wider ecosystem of parliamentary influence is key because petitioners it would mean that could receive more wraparound support. However, any mechanism for doing so is likely to put immense pressure on an already stretched amount of resources and there remains questions about whether expectations would be placed on these other parliamentary mechanisms, instead; the Committee will still not be able to force the change that petitioners expect to see.

Nonetheless, developing opportunities for improving public understanding of how parliamentary influence works may be a step in the right direction to improving public understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of government and parliament, and how parliamentary influence might be achieved. Indeed, building this into the petitions process would help to achieve the original hope that the UK system may improve public understanding of parliament. In Chapter 7 I consider a series of recommendations for practitioners which are designed with this challenge in mind.

Wider challenges

Finally, these challenges about petitioner expectations also speak to a wider debate about public engagement, representation and the role of parliament. In Chapter 5, some officials highlighted a tension that exists about whose responsibility public engagement is, whether parliament as an institution should have a direct relationship with the public, and if it does, who are the voices of parliament. In a traditional view of parliamentary democracy, public engagement is the responsibility of individual constituency MPs alone by virtue of being elected representatives, and parliamentary democracy's design for strong government and strong MP-constituent links leaves little space for any institutional public engagement. At the same time, the challenges highlighted in Chapter 2 about democratic disengagement with formal processes like elections means that there is increasing pressure for new public engagement activities, and we have seen changes to this effect. For example, the creation of parliament's Education Centre signalled a clearer public engagement role for parliament, and further changes like the introduction of parliamentary e-petitions suggests that today there is a role for those other than MPs to take on more public facing engagement activities. In this way, there are greater attempts to forge public engagement as a core institutional function of legislatures (Leston-Bandeira and Siefken, 2023), and this largely relates to institutional drives to address challenges about democratic disengagement, as highlighted in Chapter 2.

However, previous literature has highlighted how there is no one speaker for parliament - no authoritative voice or collective view. So, it is not always clear who has responsibility to integrate attempts to improve public perception or engagement with parliament, and it has been suggested that it is responsibility of both Houses to demonstrate a "proactive and collective response", which can be a slow and arduous process because parliament as an institution is often cumbersome and resistant to change (Norton, 2017: 191; see also Wright, 2004; Kelso, 2009). The conundrum faced by the e-petitions system is in many ways an example of a battle between contemporary pushes towards parliament having a responsibility for public engagement - institutional representation (Judge and Leston-Bandeira, 2018)- and an institutional set up and history that is slow to respond. When we consider the history of the UK context there exists an ongoing tension between what Birch (1964) describes as 'representative' government (strong, stable) and 'responsible' government (responsive to public demands and opinion). Even though representation has always been at the heart of what parliament does, because it was also founded on principles of strong government that did not include a proactive role for the legislature, the increasing push towards parliament as the enactor of public engagement has been a slow and

arduous process. And, because parliament is a collective institution, there is no clear demarcation about who takes on the responsibility for this objective so change has not occurred at the pace the public expects, and we therefore see a subsequent tension between what citizens expect from an institution that is largely sclerotic in its approach to change.

Democratic innovations like e-petitions and institutional drives towards public engagement are, as such, emblematic of attempts to “strengthen the diversity and influence of citizens’ voices and choices in decisions that affect their lives - regardless of the outcomes of elections” (Keane, 2009: 693; 2011) but which exist in a historical context where the relationship between the public and their representatives has been about the balancing of expectations and demands for how politicians should behave, work and represent (Flinders and Kelso, 2011). Whilst not necessarily a challenge that this thesis is able to directly address, these findings do nonetheless add interesting empirical insights about this tension, leaving ample room for future consideration about how parliament might be able to respond to challenges of increasing public expectations and preferences for new ways to engage. I return to this wider challenge in Chapter 7 when considering further avenues for research.

6.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has critically engaged with the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5. I have reflected on both who speaks to parliament, who engages back, and how, and the intersection of everyday politics and the parliamentary e-petitions process. In noting the reliance on social media for e-petition campaigns in both the public sphere and in parliament, I have flagged the potential risks that may arise for the petitioning process going forward as we enter an uncertain period of change in the technology landscape.

By bringing together findings about the intersection of everyday politics and the process of petitioning as well as the reflections of petitioners and parliamentary actors (RQ1), I have highlighted how petitioners prioritise relationship building with individual parliamentarians instead of the Petitions Committee because of the avenues for engagement - informal touch points - that are opened up beyond the e-petition itself, so called spillover effects (RQ2), as a result. In turn, I have demonstrated the potential for e-petition campaigns to lead to a range of possible outcomes (RQ3). As a point of departure from the extant literature, the findings of this research underscore the role of petitioners as ‘inducers of connectivity’ (Mendonça, 2016) by the

nature of their extensive online and offline petitions campaigns and relatedly highlight the limitations of the formal petitions processes as ‘dead ends’ for petitioners’ campaigns. As such, I have reflected on the extent to which the Petitions Committee is able to overcome the challenges to the petitions process highlighted throughout the empirical chapters. Instead of over-inflating the role of the Petitions Committee, by presenting the petition campaign as an ongoing, fluid process that is contingent on multiple touch points with parliament and the amplification of e-petition campaigns in both the public and in parliament, I have demonstrated the value of bringing ‘systems thinking’ to the study of parliamentary e-petitions processes. In doing so, I have argued that the petitions system ought not to be viewed in terms of the two formal milestones but much more broadly as an important hinge point between the public, interest groups, celebrities and policy makers, who through the spillover effects of petitioning become aware of different aspects of the public mood and who perhaps can enact change over time.

These findings have implications both narrowly for e-petitions systems and widely for public engagement with parliament. Narrowly, these findings highlight questions about whether the UK Government and Parliament e-petitions system is achieving what it set out to do given the institutional constraints highlighted and the increasing expectations of the public, and whether a reframing of the outcomes of e-petition is therefore necessary. Broadly, these questions also exist for public engagement initiatives more widely and there are risks about the system’s reliance upon social media and the leveraging of well-known voices for success. The next chapter, which concludes this thesis, considers these implications and how practitioners may seek to address them in more detail.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Introduction

“Legislatures matter”, Norton (2012: 520) suggests, “because they are the essential link between the people and those who govern them”. This thesis set out to unpack and understand how parliamentary e-petitions today form a part of this link by exploring the ways in which they are used by the public and how parliamentary actors come to listen to them. In this final chapter, I pull the empirical findings together with the aims, questions, and contributions of this thesis to offer some final reflections on progressing our understanding of parliamentary e-petitions in the context of democratic disengagement and disillusionment.

It is structured as follows. The first part of this chapter restates the aims and purpose of this thesis (section 7.1). The second part brings together the key findings to answer the three research questions that guide this thesis (section 7.2):

- RQ1: What are the informal public sites in which everyday engagement with parliamentary e-petitions occurs, and what are the characteristics of the activities that occur within these sites?
- RQ2: What are the formal and informal connective mechanisms that exist between sites of discussion in the informal sphere of citizen participation and the formal sphere of parliament?
- RQ3: What are the outcomes of petitioners' campaign activities, and what subsequent value do these activities bring to petitioners' objectives?

In doing so, I set the foundations to consider the implications and contributions (7.3) of this research, both empirically and practically, followed by potential avenues for further research (7.4). Section 7.5 offers some final reflections on this thesis.

7.1 - Thesis overview

In recent decades, there has been a marked decline in public faith in democracy in which citizens have become increasingly disillusioned with and disengaged from their political institutions (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). Such declines are illustrated by decreasing voter turnout (Pattie, Hartman and Johnson, 2019), decreasing partisan alignment (Van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014)

and rises in anti-political sentiment (Jennings and Stoker, 2015). In the UK, there are low levels of trust (Duffy et al, 2023), and recent statistics suggest that 28% of people are dissatisfied with the way that democracy works (Electoral Commission, 2025).

But at the same time, patterns of engagement have changed, and ‘everyday’ political action is increasingly prevalent vis-à-vis traditional forms of participation like voting. Developments in informal communicative spaces like social media have opened up a myriad of opportunities for the public to express their political preferences, ideas and formulate political communities and identities (Dean, 2019; Highfield, 2016).

It is against this backdrop that legislatures worldwide have innovated to provide citizens with new ways to participate, recognising the changing appetite for different ways to do ‘politics’. Whilst there are numerous new mechanisms for engagement, each of which achieves a range of democratic ‘goods’ from enhanced deliberation to increased transparency, parliamentary e-petitions are arguably one of the most popular. They are particularly interesting as a site of study because they are emblematic of institutional attempts to bring the public ‘in’ to parliamentary and policy-making processes, but engagement with them happens primarily outside of parliament in various informal communicative spaces. In this respect, parliamentary e-petitions mark an interesting territory that sits at the juncture of the informal sphere of public society - where citizens sign, share and promote campaigns - and the formal sphere (Habermas, 2009) of parliament, where actions are taken against the e-petitions. They have captured the public imagination and have been set up around the world at national, regional and local levels. The UK Government and Parliament e-petition system was established in 2015. It was designed with the potential for bringing about a “significant enhancing of the relationship between the petitioning public and their elected representatives” (HC 235, 2014-15: para 81) in mind. It has proved to be incredibly popular with the British public. 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 Website, no date).

In Chapter 2, I identified the following trends and gaps in the existing literature on parliamentary e-petitions. Firstly, I identified how extant literature has focused on the design, implementation and institutional characteristics of e-petition systems, for example, considering the outcomes from various institutional procedures (Bochel, 2020). In the UK, focus has been placed on the

facilitative role of the Petitions Committee in connecting citizens to parliament, largely in terms of institutional design and procedures for government responses and Westminster Hall debates (see Lindner and Riehm, 2011; Bochel, 2016; Leston-Bandeira, 2024). However, I argued how an institutional perspective risks overlooking contemporary trends for more informal political participation, suggesting that because of this tendency we know little about how citizens engage with e-petitions in the informal sphere of civil society (Habermas, 2009): how they advocate, share and promote their campaigns, particularly in online spaces such as social media. I identified how in order to understand political participation via tools like e-petitions, consideration of multiple informal communicative spaces where engagement may occur beyond just formal political processes is necessary. Particularly relevant to this research is political engagement which occurs in ‘everyday’ spaces where citizens may share personal stories, complaints and concerns that, when linked to the political sphere, act as a “crucible for negotiation between the public, the private, the political and personal” (Graham, Jackson and Wright, 2016: 1384). Increasingly, these spaces exist online, and on social media sites like X, Facebook and Instagram, which enable everyday posting practices to link citizens to various political processes (Vromen, 2016; Vromen et al, 2016; Highfield, 2016). In this way, I argued that despite parliamentary e-petitions’ unique positioning as a tool that is connected to the formal sphere of parliament and that sees engagement with it in online spaces such as social media, this latter aspect has been neglected by the literature in favour of approaches that view e-petitions as discrete activities disconnected from informal, online participatory spaces. As a result, I positioned this thesis as shining a light on the relationship between the growth in informal political engagement and new participatory tools within formal spheres of parliament.

Secondly, and related to bridging this gap, I introduced the guiding framework of this thesis, ‘systems thinking’, as an approach that encourages us to consider e-petitions in the context of wider sets of processes and engagement activities. I highlighted in Chapter 2 how a systems-level approach better encourages us to focus on the complexity and linkages between parts of the system (Dryzek, 2016) and helps us recognise that various sites might accomplish political goals from formal political institutions like parliament, to advocacy networks and everyday spaces (Mansbridge et al, 2012). In terms of these connections, I highlighted how, as above, much of the e-petitions literature has focused on the formal connective role of the Petitions Committee and, in doing so, has largely neglected the role of informal connective mechanisms outside of the auspices of the Committee. This is an interesting omission given the extensive literature on policy communities, which underscores the important roles played by various actors outside of

just parliamentarians in policy influence (see Richardson and Jordan, 1979; Atkinson and Coleman, 1992; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992). Springboarding off Mendonça's (2016) call for further research into the 'connectivity' brought by non-institutional actors and developing the findings of Matthews (2023), which highlight the connective potential of informal intermediaries in petitioning, this thesis, therefore, sought to understand the various formal and informal connective mechanisms through which the public is connected to parliament through petitioning.

Finally, because of tendencies to analyse parliamentary e-petitions as disconnected from informal, online participatory spaces and in terms of the institutional procedures for running the system, I highlighted how little is understood about the campaigning function of e-petitions identified by Leston-Bandeira (2019). Consideration of this function has been overwhelmingly on the mobilising ability of e-petitions (e.g. Rosenberger et al, 2022) - how the public may come together around an issue - rather than what the campaigning activities of petitioners both look like and achieve in terms of outcomes. In this way, neglect of the campaigning activities of petitioners has also led to an underdeveloped understanding of what these campaigns achieve in and outside of parliament - their outcomes - including what 'success' may look like. This is coupled with a general lack of consideration of e-petition outcomes outside of the formal e-petition processes (see Bochel, 2020).

To address each of these gaps, I argued that focus ought to be placed on the following: where citizens are engaging with e-petitions - where they are 'speaking' - where parliamentary actors are engaging back with them - where they are 'listening' - and how these elements are connected. Resultantly, the three aims of this research were as follows. First, to establish how parliamentary e-petitions are disseminated and discussed by citizens and organisations in informal communicative spaces to better understand the intersection of institutionally designed participation mechanisms and online, everyday politics (RQ1). The second, related, aim was to identify the formal and informal coupling mechanisms (Hendriks, 2016) that bring these actions in the informal sphere to bear on the formal sphere of parliament, acknowledging the role of intermediaries beyond just that of the Petitions Committee (RQ2). The final aim was to establish a deeper understanding of the value of parliamentary e-petitions by understanding what outcomes petitioners achieve from their campaigns in order to move away from scholarship that considers e-petitions in isolation from the wider democratic ecosystem in which they fit (RQ3) and contribute to a wider understanding of e-petition campaigns.

To achieve these aims, I set out to understand petitioning from those with first-hand experience of the system: petitioners and the parliamentary actors who support them. I identified a total of nine case study e-petitions for which I undertook documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews to “grasp the relevant meanings, the belief[s] and preferences of the people involved” (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 1). By focussing on the perspectives of petitioners and those who supported them, this thesis presents findings that are grounded in experiences as articulated by those most familiar with the system, enabling us to understand the parts of the process that are the most important and valuable to them.

7.2 - Key findings

RQ1: What are the informal public sites in which everyday engagement with parliamentary e-petitions occurs, and what are the characteristics of the activities that occur within these sites?

First and foremost, I sought to explore how petitioners were campaigning and how their campaigns fit into their everyday lives in order to understand the intersection of informal, everyday politics and parliamentary e-petition systems. Through analysing campaign documents and social media posts and speaking directly to petitioners, I found the following.

Firstly, petitioners are diverse. The case study e-petitions featured in this research included those who had never petitioned before, or indeed even engaged with parliament beyond voting, to those who were on their seventh e-petition or who worked for a large international charity that regularly lobbied parliament. Overwhelmingly, however, the majority of the petitioners in this research were ordinary citizens who were campaigning for a cause they cared deeply about, often because of personal circumstances or experiences. They were motivated by a desire to see something change, to capture the attention of the government and pursue legislative change, findings which largely echo the scarce literature on petitioner motivations in Germany (Lindner and Riehm, 2011) and Austria (Rosenberger et al, 2022) and which add nuance to the experiences of petitioners in the United Kingdom by highlighting common motivations across petitioner types.

Secondly, even where differences did exist in terms of petitioner types (see Table 9 in Chapter 4 for a breakdown of petitioner types), when it came to the campaign process and the strategies

employed, most of these petitioners had very few resources at their disposal, relying overwhelmingly on building their networks in order to campaign effectively. This research finds that much of this building largely took place in informal communicative spaces. Petitioners relied overwhelmingly on the use of social media because it enabled them to both identify and connect with various actors both in the civil sphere and in parliament. For example, petitioners identified other campaigners or like-minded individuals with either the knowledge or experience of campaigning and reaching parliament, who might be able to support monetarily or by sharing the petition with larger databases of people, or who might be able to amplify the campaign on traditional media outlets like the news. In this way, every petitioner I spoke to told me of the necessity of a successful social media campaign in the informal sphere to first achieve signature thresholds and secondly to reach the ‘ears’ of other campaigners who could support their campaigns. Importantly, these campaign activities helped those petitioners that were less resourced or experienced at the beginning to ‘catch up’ and campaign in broadly similar ways, but it took varying time and effort for petitioners to do so.

In terms of parliamentary influence, oftentimes petitioners would target their social media posts or use their wider networks to capture the attention of MPs who had a track record of working on issues related to their e-petition, or who they believed would be supportive due to personal interest in the issue. Similarly, they would use MPs’ social media or website presences to map out previous work in the petition areas to understand what work has already taken place, and where there might be opportunities for further parliamentary activities to take place. We saw how throughout their campaigns that these relationships led to a range of additional outcomes for petitioners - so-called ‘spillover effects’ (Matthews, 2023) - which enabled petitioners to further their campaigns towards their goal. Some examples of those mechanisms that were mentioned by petitioners included Early Day Motions, Private Members' Bills, Opposition Day debates, amendments to bills or oral questions, suggesting that their initial e-petition campaign gave them a platform from which they could campaign in broader ways. Indeed, some petitioners, through these connections, were also able to explore wider avenues for change, for example, with civil servants, other lobbyists or professional organisations in their area, amounting altogether to a much broader campaign that extended beyond just attempts to reach the formal e-petition milestones. I will return to this point in relation to RQ3.

An interesting finding about petitioners’ social media campaigns arose during the course of this research: the amplification of e-petition campaigns that can arise because of celebrity or well-

known voices. Almost all of the petitioners in this research were able to tap into celebrity networks during their campaign, utilising celebrity ‘reach’ to achieve more signatures and more publicity, and also to show their campaign to be credible. In Chapter 5, we saw how this acted as a motivator for parliamentarians' involvement because MPs' motivations were often instrumental in nature: they were often concerned with whether a campaign was likely to take off or whether their efforts would be worthwhile, and celebrity amplification helped to create a ‘fear of missing out’ in the public and formal spheres. Whilst it has been suggested that celebrity voices can reduce credibility (Becker, 2013), the findings presented in this thesis suggest that celebrity involvement was a benefit, not a hindrance, and celebrities played important roles in enabling petitioners to tap into vast networks of support both in and outside of parliament. Whilst somewhat surprising - only one other study has acknowledged the role of celebrity voices in petitioning in the UK (see Matthews, 2023) and celebrity involvement was not an explicit focus of the case study strategy outlined in Chapter 3 - such findings are interesting because they raise important questions about whose voice is privileged in the petitioning process and calls into question the extent to which ordinary citizens - the people the system was designed for - are really able to pursue the range of campaign avenues that we have seen are possible if effective throughput into parliament may be contingent on louder voices. I come back to this point in section 7.4 when discussing which research findings merit further empirical research.

Finally, we also saw how dedicated petitioners were to their campaigns, with petitioners' social media campaigns often becoming intertwined with their everyday lives, shown, for example, in their posting at all hours of the day, before, during and after work. In one case, such high workload and stress led to detrimental health and across several of the case studies petitioners lamented the effort that they had to put into the campaign because they did not perceive the petitions processes (the government responses and debates) as supporting them towards their goals, namely legislative change, largely because the government response and Westminster Hall debate was a ‘dead end’ which did not signal any future action. This finding is particularly key because it emphasises petitioners' level of dedication to their campaign and being ‘successful’, but it also highlights the negative experiences that petitioners may have when campaigning so extensively and dedicating such a significant proportion of their time to campaigning, raising important questions about the resilience of a system that demands so much from its users. Indeed, this challenge is also related to issues of public expectations whereby the public demand more than what parliament can feasibly offer - it cannot, after all, force the government to change its position - and whether the likely outcomes of the process are sufficiently

communicated to petitioners. In Chapter 6, I reflected on this challenge in the context of the Westminster system, which has an uneasy relationship with wider pushes towards public engagement and which can be slow to respond to public demands outside of election processes. I also considered how the broader campaign benefits could be better articulated to petitioners, a point which is a core thread of the remainder of this chapter.

Brought together, these findings highlight that by applying an ‘everyday’ online lens to the study of parliamentary e-petitions that considers how engagement occurs in informal communicative spaces online and how such activities may extend into the formal sphere – and how parliamentary e-petitions sit at this juncture - what appears on the surface to be mundane activity online becomes clearly political, motivated and enacted according to the concerns of citizens engaging with the e-petitions system, and which has a range of outcomes. I return to these outcomes shortly.

RQ2: What are the formal and informal connective mechanisms that exist between sites of discussion in the sphere of citizen participation and the sphere of parliament?

Previous research into e-petition systems has suggested that petitioners are happy with their experience even if intended outcomes are not achieved, so long as the process is seen to be procedurally fair (see Carman 2010; Bochel, 2016; Bochel and Bochel, 2017). We also know from existing literature on parliamentary e-petitions in the United Kingdom that the Petitions Committee is fundamental to the successful running of the system, playing an important role in ensuring that the e-petitions procedures are undertaken correctly (e.g. Bochel 2016; Bochel 2020; Leston-Bandeira, 2024). Additionally, the Petitions Committee has been identified as performing an important linkage role between the public and parliament by offering the means and opportunities for people to engage with parliament (Leston-Bandeira, 2019).

However, when considering petitioners’ experiences of the system, this research has highlighted challenges about the extent to which the formal connections forged by the Committee are valued by petitioners. Whilst petitioners were always positive about individual members of the Petitions Committee and about staff, a significant finding is that petitioners did not feel they were being meaningfully listened to by the government responses and debates of the e-petitions system. These milestones were viewed negatively by petitioners - and some parliamentary actors - as at best not helping petitioners to achieve their goal, and at worst as actively contributing to the

feelings of disillusionment and apathy that e-petition systems were set up to mitigate. Petitioners were often scathing about how the response or debate had not helped them towards their goals, for example, suggesting that “the debates are pretty worthless” (Interview, Petitioner 16) and after the debates they felt “deflated” and that they would “never do another e-petition” (Interview, Petitioner 14).

Instead, the point at which petitioners did feel as though meaningful ‘listening’ was happening was outside of the formal auspices of the Petitions Committee, suggesting that the role of other informal intermediaries merit serious consideration when analysing the connections between citizens and parliament. There are three related informal connective mechanisms highlighted by these findings.

Firstly, petitioners felt as though progress was being made when engaging with the parliamentarians with whom petitioners had formed informal connections through the methods outlined in response to RQ1. These are ‘informal’ connections because they are outside of the formal auspices of the e-petition system. Petitioners reflected on how these connections enabled them to explore other avenues to support their campaign - informal touch points with parliament - with common examples being through Private Members’ Bills, questions, amendments to bills or through engaging with wider civil servants or lobbying channels. This finding is particularly interesting because Chapter 6 highlighted how there are challenges with expectations management in which petitioners expect to see legislative change from the formal e-petition milestones, which is unlikely, but come to realise post hoc that there are a multitude of other parliamentary tools they can explore, and that are valuable to wider campaign objectives because they may contribute incremental changes towards their ultimate goal of legislative change. Whereas, they viewed the government responses and the Westminster Hall debates as dead ends that didn’t signal any further movement towards change. The realisation of the benefit of other informal touch points with parliament was usually not something that petitioners came to at the time - they were tunnel vision on the formal milestones - so a move away from viewing petitions as a discrete activity, isolated from the wider parliamentary ecosystem is, therefore, important in terms of showing where e-petition campaigns can progress.

Secondly, in response to RQ1, I highlighted the important role of celebrity voices in the e-petition campaigns. The literature on ‘listening’ highlights that connections between the public and representative institutions occur when there is recognition of claims from the public that are

considered within empowered spaces (e.g. Boswell, Hendriks and Ercan, 2016; Mansbridge, 1999). That is, the expression of voices and subsequent acknowledgement of them in parliament are necessary preconditions for 'listening' in parliament to take place. We have seen how celebrity amplification of e-petition campaigns supports the expression of petitioners' campaigns in the public sphere by extending reach and visibility. But they also influence the subsequent acknowledgement of e-petition campaigns, for example, by creating a 'fear of missing out' on a campaign that has seen much popularity which incentivises involvement from a range of actors including parliamentarians. In this way, well-known voices play important roles as non-institutional intermediaries by supporting those who 'speak' to be heard by parliament, and this was a common thread across the majority of the campaigns in this research. On this point in Chapter 6, I raised a wider question about whether celebrity involvement in e-petition campaigns risks muffling the voice of ordinary citizens because whilst it was not something that any petitioners in this research alluded to, the risks of certain voices being amplified over others is well established in the literature (e.g. Becker, 2013). With this risk in mind, I also return to the connective roles played by celebrities in section 7.4 when considering avenues for further research.

Third and finally, this thesis finds that petitioners themselves become 'inducers of connectivity' (Mendonça, 2016) who ensure that their voice is being received by parliament through their extensive campaigning activities, which includes identifying and leveraging well-known voices and other parliamentary actors, sometimes to the detriment of themselves and their wellbeing. They bridge the gap between their campaign and the sphere of parliament, bringing 'affects' to those in empowered spaces whilst also being 'affected by' wider actions within parliament (Mendonça, 2016). As such, although the designed coupling function (Hendriks, 2016) of the Petitions Committee matters for the government responses and debates, integration with parliamentary processes does not happen only in this way, and petitioners placed more value on these informal touch points with parliament than they did on the formal e-petition milestones. I consider the wider implications of these findings about informal connective mechanisms shortly in *Contributions*.

RQ3: What are the outcomes of petitioners' campaign activities, and what subsequent value do these activities bring to petitioners' objectives?

The findings of RQ1 and RQ2 highlight together how the ‘success’ of parliamentary e-petition campaigns is broadly conceived and may be achieved beyond the formal milestones of the system. It adds to Bochel’s (2020) observations that success ought to be considered as a continuum by highlighting how petitioners’ campaigning activities are extensive and bring about a range of ‘spillover’ (Matthews, 2023) outcomes in and outside of parliament. That is, through using the parliamentary e-petitions system, petitioners are able to tap into other networks of support to further their e-petition campaigns, amounting to various outcomes outside of the formal e-petition milestones and outside of the formal auspices of the Petitions Committee. Examples of such additional outcomes include the connections forged with other campaigning groups or charities who may be able to provide tangible and intangible benefits in terms of resources or advice, and connections forged with parliamentarians who can pursue a range of other mechanisms on behalf of petitioners. Whilst these outcomes exist beyond the formal, procedural aspects of the process such connections exist *because of* the parliamentary e-petition campaigns undertaken by petitioners. In terms of value add, because the formal milestones were viewed as dead ends, these additional outcomes mark important opportunities for petitioners to continue their campaign outside of the formal e-petitions process, amounting to a much wider political campaign which can contribute towards petitioners’ goals, in line with literature which highlights that progress towards legislative change is likely to be indirect and slow (Russell and Gover, 2017), but which “may go bang eventually” (Interview MP, A). In this way the outcomes of the petitions in this research add to conversations about e-petition outcomes and success that petitioning should not be seen narrowly as a discrete activity isolated from informal communicative spaces and other touch points with parliament, and instead should be articulated as a participation tool which imbues users with access to a wider ecosystem that can, in small and slow ways, influence parliamentary and policy making processes and agendas.

But because petitioners recognised these spillover outcomes after they had engaged with the formal e-petitions processes, throughout the thesis, I have grappled with concepts of ‘success’, when and how it is defined, and the challenges of expectations management that arise when petitioners begin their campaign wanting to achieve legislative change through the formal e-petition milestones. As a result, I have advocated for a reframing of e-petition campaigns as embedded within this wider ecosystem whereby these informal touch points with parliament may act as additional stepping stones in the hopes that expectations about what the government responses and Westminster Hall debates achieve might be lessened. As mentioned in Chapter 6, it is not necessarily clear whether this would in itself overcome challenges of expectations of the

system - would petitioners' expectations for change simply be placed on these additional mechanisms? - and so I return to this point of expectations management in 7.3 in terms of wider implications and in section 7.4 in terms of avenues for future research to grapple with this question.

7.3 - Contributions

The contributions of this thesis are relevant for three audiences. Firstly, it has wider implications for scholars seeking to understand parliamentary e-petitions and, indeed, other parliamentary initiatives that seek to bring citizens into the legislative process to address challenges around disillusionment and disengagement. Secondly, it has practical implications for petitioners that form the basis of four recommendations for members of the public who may seek to utilise e-petition systems in the future. Similarly, I make four recommendations for parliamentary practitioners who design and implement new participatory mechanisms to consider going forward. With each of these three prongs considered together, this thesis makes original contributions to the field and useful contributions to those who use, design and implement new participatory mechanisms.

Contributions to the literature

Firstly, this thesis demonstrates how parliamentary e-petitions mark an interesting territory that sits at the juncture of the informal sphere of public society - where citizens sign, share and promote campaigns - and the formal sphere (Habermas, 2009) of parliament, where actions are taken against the e-petition. I highlight how this framing is important for understanding and bridging the gap between institutional drives to bring the public back 'in' and contemporary preferences for online, ad hoc, and personally driven engagement within the wider context of democratic dissatisfaction because it encourages us to focus on how e-petition campaign actions in the informal sphere come to bear on the formal sphere of parliament. This is because research that focuses just on the formalised aspects of the petitioning process - such as the institutional design of systems or the role of legislative committees - neglects consideration of the place where engagement with the system really happens: online on platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (Graham, Jackson and Wright, 2016; Vaccari, 2013; Vromen, 2016). By embedding a focus on the online everyday experiences of petitioners into the design and methods of this research, I have highlighted how practices on social media are fundamental to the connections between the public and the e-petitions process, an element of the e-petitioning

process that has hitherto been neglected in the literature because of a tendency to analyse parliamentary e-petition systems as separate from online communicative spaces. I have done so by highlighting how these actions in informal communicative spaces were at the heart of the petition campaigns featured in this research and enabled petitioners to tap into the wider networks that supported their e-petition campaign both in and outside of parliament. By doing so, I have demonstrated how a more holistic view of new participatory mechanisms like e-petitions can be achieved by tying together the insights from social media and other online practices to actions in formal spheres like parliament. This is an important contribution because it highlights how taking a non-institutional lens offers a more rounded understanding of how the public are engaging with their representative institutions today.

Secondly, whilst the existing literature on parliamentary e-petitions underscores the importance of legislative committees (e.g. Bochel 2016; Bochel 2020; Leston-Bandeira, 2024), I have highlighted the roles played by other, informal intermediaries in bringing the voices of citizens to bear on parliament. 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 informal ‘everyday’ means. In this way the findings of this research respond to calls for research to identify the ‘connectivity’ brought by various informal actors, demonstrating the ability of petitioners themselves to act as ‘inducers of connectivity’ (Mendonça, 2016: 171; see also Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2019).

Relatedly, by foregrounding the actions of petitioners in the informal sphere (Habermas, 2009), I have also highlighted interesting findings about the benefits that arise from the addition of well-known or celebrity voices that can amplify petition campaigns online, capturing the attention of both the public and of MPs. I demonstrate how the leveraging of celebrity voices, who thereby act as important non-institutional intermediaries between the public and parliament, is an important element of the petitioning process that is a largely uniting factor across all of the e-petitions in this research. Such findings are particularly important because they highlight the risks associated with a democratic process that may be influenced by the credibility and reach of well-known voices and raise further additional questions about the fairness of a system that relies on the voices of those already heard. In this way, these findings raise important questions about the accessibility of new participatory mechanisms and which voices may amplify or muffle the public’s input into representative institutions like parliament (Boswell, Hendriks and Ercan,

2016). Indeed, the various means by which petitioners' activities come to bear on parliament is a contribution that I discuss in Martin (2025) because they enable us to better understand how connections are drawn and the capacity of citizens to affect policy making processes. In sum, then, by exploring the connections forged in informal communicative spaces and through informal intermediaries, this thesis demonstrates the value of an approach that considers the "expressive, reflective and decision making functions, [...] linkage and transmission across spaces" (Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2019: 24) by showing that linkages can be developed in a range of ways, for example, through social media and how actors like petitioners and celebrities "discussing a particular point in time in space" might be "affect[ed] by, whilst also affecting, discussion happening in other time and space" such as within parliament (Mendonça, 2016: 178).

Finally, by examining the everyday, online, parliamentary and non-parliamentary activities that take place in e-petition campaigns, I have also shown that the campaigning function of parliamentary e-petitions systems is wider than just that of giving members of the public an issue to mobilise around (Leston-Bandeira, 2019). Rather, I have shown that e-petitions encompass an 'extended, hybrid media system' (Highfield, 2016:15) that brings with it a range of 'spillover effects' (Matthews, 2023) for petitioners that impact their campaign more broadly. The e-petition, therefore, is a valuable tool for campaigners because it is a useful vehicle through which wider connections can be made and additional parliamentary (or non-parliamentary) mechanisms can be pursued. In this respect, these findings add an additional element to the literature about the outcomes of parliamentary e-petitions: that they add value to petitioners' wider campaigns because they enable the creation of a support network of bilateral MP relationships that may continue to exist after the petition campaign is over. This, in turn, suggests the existence of intrinsic democratic benefits to petitioning that exist beyond the procedural aspects of the system and has wider implications for our understanding of contemporary political campaigning. In this way, the initial aims of the specific UK e-petitions system to improve the relationship between the public and the House are also largely being met because whilst the e-petition formal milestones themselves may be limited in impact, the system brings about multiple other opportunities for the public to engage with parliament in a range of ways. This is an element of the process that should be more readily recognised by both scholars and practitioners as a major benefit of the e-petitions system, that is not at present given the necessary attention.

Bringing the above together, the findings of this research underscore the usefulness of systems thinking (Ercan, Hendriks and Dryzek, 2019) to the study of new participatory mechanisms like e-petitions. This is because systems thinking encourages focus on democratic systems as a whole, not just their constituent parts, and on the linkages between parts of the system (Dryzek, 2016; Mansbridge et al, 2012). It alerts scholars to the presence of multiple sites of democratic action - such as legislatures, advocacy networks and everyday spaces - and how actions in each of these places might be connected and shared. As a result, our attention is drawn to the manifold listening practices between the public and institutions, focusing, for example, on actors who either 'amplify' or 'muffle' citizen's voices, recognising that the ideal system will comprise institutions, networks and groups which span the system and generate inclusive decision making (Boswell, Hendriks and Ercan, 2016). When applied to the scale of parliamentary e-petitions, a systems level approach therefore encourages focus on not just where and how citizens engage with them but also where and how parliamentarians come to listen to them. We see how parliamentary e-petitions sit within, interact with and affect a wider parliamentary ecosystem and may influence policy making processes in a range of ways. Against a backdrop of widespread disengagement with political processes, this thesis therefore, makes important contributions to our analysis because it demonstrates how parliamentary e-petitions and the associated campaigns are an important tool for contemporary engagement that taps into a range of other activities both inside (in terms of other parliamentary mechanisms) and outside (in terms of other campaigning tools) of parliament, and that engagement with parliamentary e-petitions amounts to a much wider repertoire of activities than just achieving signature thresholds. Parliamentary e-petitions are important facilitators of wider democratic participation.

Contributions to petitioners

The findings of this research are relevant beyond the academic community. They provide real world insights into the perceptions, activities and experiences of petitioners and parliamentary actors that will be valuable to practitioners of the UK system, but also more broadly to other participatory mechanisms which attempt to bring the public back 'in'.

For petitioners, these contributions come in the form of four recommendations about how a parliamentary e-petition campaign could be approached based on the successes, failures, positive and not-so-positive moments as articulated by other petitioners who kindly shared their experiences as part of this research. They are overlaid by the reflections of parliamentary actors

involved in the system about what works and what doesn't work which, I hope, provide a range of useful points of consideration for prospective petitioners about how to pursue a realistic e-petition campaign.

Importantly, these recommendations are designed with expectations management in mind. They are intended to highlight how legislative change through the formal e-petitions processes is not guaranteed - or indeed all that likely - but that there are a range of other outcomes and possibilities that an e-petition campaign can achieve, and which may act as important stepping stones in a petitioners' wider campaign. In this way, these recommendations are largely concerned with broadening one's view that parliamentary e-petitions are one way to tap into a much wider network of support and develop campaigns in ways beyond just achieving formal e-petition milestones. The following recommendations to petitioners are summarised in Table 16.

Recommendation 1: Warm audiences

Figure 2 in Chapter 4 shows the relationships that exist between the petitioners in this research and we saw in Chapter 4 how relationships with others who had been through and understood the system proved invaluable in terms of advice, guidance and resources. Outside of other petitioners, we also saw the value of finding other supporters - individuals, organisations or charities - who could similarly offer support, guidance and resources to petitioners at various stages of the campaign process. Amenable well known voices such as celebrities are also likely to provide petitioners with useful amplification, helping to both boost signatures and to capture the attention of other campaigners, organisations or parliamentarians. Importantly, such networks were built overwhelmingly online through social media, and enabled petitioners to expand their campaign beyond the limitations of what one person or a small group of people can achieve.

As such, the first recommendation to future petitioners is to identify 'warm audiences': other campaigners working on similar issues, those with the knowledge or experience of petitioning parliament, or lobbying it in other ways, those with access to monetary or other resources that petitioners might be able to utilise and learn from, or high profile voices who may help to amplify the campaign both in public and formal spheres.

Recommendation 2: Supportive MPs

Relatedly, identifying warm audiences extends into the sphere of parliament. Through the campaign process, by casting their nets far and wide to capture supporters in the informal sphere, petitioners were also able to identify supportive MPs who might be able to further their campaign inside parliament. By establishing relationships with parliamentarians, the petition campaign is able to continue beyond the procedural milestones of the government responses and Westminster Hall debates. Indeed, one of the core contributions this thesis makes is to demonstrate how fundamental this moment is for petitioners and their campaigns. The second recommendation to petitioners, therefore, is to identify who these supportive MPs are likely to be. We saw in Chapters 4 and 5 that relying on constituency link is not necessarily the best approach; just because a petitioner is an MP's constituent, it does not guarantee that their MP will support them. What was more important to petitioners and to MPs in this research was personal interest in the topic, the influence of well-known voices or prolonged and personalised attempts by petitioners to build relationships with the MP. Supportive MPs can therefore be identified by their established record on a topic, for example through their Hansard contributions, membership of select committees or APPGs, or via their social media posts in which they highlight current work, to name a few avenues. Advice from those more familiar with petitioning or with engaging with parliament in other ways (related to recommendation one) might be helpful in identifying amenable MPs.

Importantly, we saw in Chapter 5 that the least effective way to get an MP on board to support is to spam them with auto-generated emails. Taking the time to personally draft correspondence that gets to the heart of the petitions' motivations is received much more positively than impersonal mass emailing and it is, therefore, also important that once prospective petitioners have identified MPs who might be interested in their cause that they take that time to build the relationship in this way.

Recommendation 3: What else can parliament do?

Petitioners will benefit from asking themselves what else they may be able to achieve within parliament, and what a realistic outcome might be given the non-linear nature of policy influence where parliamentary actions and agendas are developing and changing constantly. An understanding that policy making processes can be slow to change and require sustained pressure is, therefore, an important starting point for petitioners to understand at the outset. With this in mind, we saw how several petitioners in this research pursued other avenues within parliament,

for example, with Members tabling amendments to already established bills, putting forward Private Members' Bills, or contributing to select committee inquiries or APPGs. Such activities are important to the wider parliamentary ecosystem; whilst they "might not go bang immediately... it might go bang eventually" (Interview, MP A) and it is therefore beneficial to keep the issue on the parliamentary agenda by exploring the range of other avenues within parliament. By viewing the petition solely in terms of the formal milestones and legislative change, one is narrowing the opportunity to explore the myriad of other parliamentary avenues that exist. Linking each of the recommendations so far together, if petitioners are able to build their campaign networks in and outside of parliament, as recommendations one and two encourage, then petitioners will have more wraparound support for this third recommendation.

Recommendation 4: A plan for social media (and beyond)

The final recommendation for petitioners ties all of the above together. This thesis has shown that none of the campaigns featured in this research could have existed without the use of social media and the extensive network building that it enables. There are only six months between a parliamentary e-petition going live online and it closing to new signatures. To first reach the signature thresholds required for the formal processes and then identify supporters and parliamentarians requires forward planning. My final recommendation to petitioners is, therefore, to identify the platform(s) most useful to them and explore how to sustain a long term campaign online. Consider, for example, the community-building ability of Facebook groups or the ability for mass reach on platforms such as X, Bluesky or Threads. Adjacent focus on how to reach charities, news media, celebrities or politicians on these platforms is also important to building a long term campaign that is able to sustain momentum. Finally, tying this in with other activities such as submitting written evidence to select committees, writing to MPs or reaching out to charities is important for a wide reaching, holistic campaign.

Table 16: Recommendations for petitioners

Recommendation to Petitioners	Explanation
1. Warm audiences	Find and build a supporter base of individuals and organisations who can provide both tangible (money, data etc.) and intangible (advice, prior learnings) resources.
2. Supportive MPs	Identify MPs who are likely to be supportive of the cause, often because of personal interest in the topic or because of historical engagement in the area in parliament. Such MPs are likely to be those other than just the petitioner's constituency MP.
3. What else can parliament do?	Explore other parliamentary avenues beyond just the formal e-petition milestones. Using the networks built from recommendations one and two would enable petitioners to identify which other parliamentary mechanisms are possible and useful to pursue.
4. A plan for social media (and beyond)	Establish a plan for social media and the wider e-petition campaign, including how all the steps in the process might work together to reach signature thresholds and to establish the support of other campaigners and parliamentarians.

Contributions to parliamentary practice

As for petitioners, this thesis has findings that are both interesting and useful for practitioners of the UK Government and Parliament e-petition system, specifically, but that are relevant for practitioners of wider public engagement initiatives too because they are focused on making small changes within institutional constraints and are largely intended to support expectations management. The recommendations outlined below are based on what worked and what did not work for petitioners. They fall within the following categories: clarity of information before the process begins, improving existing processes, and identifying moments where petitioners may need additional support. Whilst they may require some upfront costs to implement, they would support committees' workloads by reducing the number of repeated e-petitions, attracting more signatories and managing petitioners' expectations about what the formal e-petition processes are likely to achieve. However, I also acknowledge that expectations management may be a more fundamental issue that tweaks to existing procedures may not address, and so I return to this challenge in section 7.4. Notwithstanding this, the recommendations below are a step in the right direction. Table 17 summarises the recommendations to petitioners, and Table 18 ties the recommendations to petitioners and to practitioners together.

Whilst these recommendations are designed to reflect the limited capacity of the Petitions Committee – they largely complement existing practices – there will inevitably be other issues about which I am not aware. The Committee’s workload when it comes to simply moderating and publishing e-petitions is extraordinary and it may be necessary to address these more rudimental challenges before the recommendations below can be considered. For example, raising the signature thresholds and thereby reducing the number of e-petitions that the petitions process must deal (in terms of government responses and Westminster Hall debates) with may help to free up parliamentary time. But this touches on some of the challenges this thesis has raised about whose voice is heard or privileged and may not therefore be an appropriate solution as it risks the system being used by only those with sufficient followings or ‘reach’. However, some of the recommendations do speak to the challenge of the Committee’s capacity – for example recommendation 7 about categorisation - and so in this respect the recommendations below should be considered in tandem with other work which seeks to address ongoing challenges about the Committee’s capacity and resources.

Recommendation 5: Signposting realistic outcomes

Challenges still exist in terms of inflated petitioner expectations of the formal milestones - the government response and Westminster Hall debate. Disappointment in outcomes and inflated expectations could be mitigated against by improvements to the visibility of information before petitioners embark on their e-petition campaigns. The petition.parliament.uk website is separate from the Petitions Committee’s page on parliament.uk, which means that the ‘useful information’ section on the latter website is hidden from prospective petitioners, who will likely be navigating the petitions.parliament.uk website to start their e-petition. Additionally, the ‘how petitions work’ section on the petitions website is focussed, understandably, on the formal procedures of the process and the standards for e-petitions. But this means that information about what the government responses and Westminster Hall debates set out to achieve is missing for petitioners.

As such, I recommend that the Committee revise the petitions website to enable more clear signposting of what each milestone achieves, and what they can’t achieve. If this information was more readily available online at the point at which someone may choose to start an e-petition, then it could help to ensure that petitioners have a better understanding of what the government

responses and Westminster Hall debates are set up to achieve, and, more importantly what they are not able to achieve. In turn, this would also help to level the playing field between those with prior experience and knowledge of petitioning or parliament and will make the next two recommendations possible. These recommendations should therefore be viewed as a suite of measures to be taken forward together.

Recommendation 6: Alternative avenues

Similarly to recommendation five, the ability to tap into wider parliamentary networks is not clear on either the petition.parliament.uk website or the Petitions Committee's webpage. Considering petitioners' expectations and experiences, this thesis has shown that the points of the e-petition campaign where petitioners extracted the most value were not in relation to the work of the Committee. The value to petitioners instead came from the support and work of parliamentarians who are able to pursue a range of other parliamentary mechanisms that enabled the e-petition campaign to continue beyond the formal processes. This was an element of the processes that was expressed consistently by petitioners, but it was something that they recognised after the fact, suggesting a gap in knowledge about potential other outcomes at the beginning. This finding does not mean that there is no place for the Committee. An additional section that explains how petitioners may seek to explore other parliamentary avenues, perhaps with case studies of petitioners who have done so, would help petitioners to identify other routes within parliament that might be worth exploring. It would also complement the recommendation above, which together could also help manage expectations by highlighting the dynamic nature of policy change and influence.

There is also a role that Committee MPs can play here, which is broader than just editing the website. Given the importance of internal parliamentary networks to petitioners' experiences, Committee MPs are well placed to support petitioners by identifying colleagues who might be able to support in these other avenues. Each Committee MP, when opening an e-petition debate, is already tasked with meeting the petitioner before their debate to discuss the e-petition.

However, the findings presented in Chapter 4 suggest that petitioners' contact with the Committee can be quite ad hoc: not all petitioners spoke with officials, and not all Committee MPs took the time to meet with petitioners before their Westminster Hall debate, which may be a contributing factor to why petitioners have unrealistic expectations or a lack of understanding about what to expect from the formal milestones. This meeting would be an opportune time for

a discussion with the petitioner about what other avenues might be fruitful, would enable MPs to do the necessary signposting and, if time and capacity allows, support petitioners to make further contacts. So even if initial expectations about legislative change have been set, this, in practice, could be a simple way for Committee MPs to support petitioners in their campaign activities and perhaps pivot expectations to recognise the value of tapping into a wider parliamentary network. This recommendation would tie in with the recommendations for petitioners above but the Committee would need to work to ensure that this process is something provided to all petitioners as part of their already established practices, and that it is standardised as part of the petitioning process.

Recommendation 7: E-petition categorisation

A related recommendation about the clarity of information available to petitioners is in relation to the categorisation of e-petitions into subgroups. Currently, e-petitions are not tagged by topic area, which means that it is not immediately obvious to petitioners whether there are similar e-petitions already live. To find this information currently, one would have to manually read through all of the open e-petitions to identify any which may be similar. At the time of writing, there are 1,864 e-petitions currently live. The Comparative Agendas Project may provide a useful starting point for this recommendation as it seeks to enable scholars, policy makers and practitioners to investigate trends in policy making over time and between countries (Comparative Agendas Project, no date; see also, John et al, 2013). It provides a single, universal and consistent coding scheme of 20 major topics and over 200 subtopics which is likely to encompass the range of e-petition topics that we see published on the e-petitions website.

Categorising e-petitions at the point in which they are accepted and enabling e-petitions to be filtered by category would have the following benefits. Firstly, it would enable petitioners to identify e-petitions that are similar in nature to their own idea and, based upon this information, they might be able to 'team up' - recognising the benefits of networking identified in this thesis - or wait until the already live e-petition has closed before submitting their own. In doing so, this would reduce the number of repeated e-petitions that the Committee has to reject and would enable petitioners to tap into already existing networks of campaigners, support and influence, rather than viewing them as discrete campaigns that have no relevance to one another. Secondly, categorisation would enable petitioners to see what similar petitions have set out to achieve, how their campaign has progressed and who might be well placed to support them in and outside of

parliament. It would, therefore, tie in with recommendations one through four by enabling petitioners to identify ‘successful’ campaigns, useful tactics and potential supporters in and outside of parliament.

Thirdly, from a research perspective, the categorisation of e-petitions into topic areas would improve the accessibility of e-petitions data and give greater encouragement to researchers who are interested in understanding parliamentary e-petitions. Given the Committee’s established collaborations with academic partners, opening up the accessibility of the process to researchers would provide the Committee with the potential to make robust comparisons between e-petition topic areas, e-petition trends over time and indeed between different e-petition systems, which is currently difficult to do in the current set-up.

Recommendation 8: Support after the debates

Given that very few e-petitions reach the threshold of 100,000 signatures and have a debate in Westminster Hall, a process that would tie in with the above recommendations and add relatively little to the Committee’s workload would be to arrange debriefs with petitioners after the debate. Such debriefs could, like the pre-debate support suggested above, help petitioners to identify next steps and provide support and signposting on how to proceed. Petitioners would come away with a better understanding of what the other avenues are that they might look to explore, and they will have had help to identify who can support them through these next stages. This would help to even the playing field for petitioners in light of more experienced or better resourced petitioners and will help to overcome the challenges that petitioners face with regard to workload and the capacity to campaign over a prolonged period of time, because expectations will have been managed at various points in the process. It will also help to ensure that petitioners receive support - or at the least have the knowledge of where to seek out support - beyond the formal processes that the Committee currently has responsibility for, addressing issues with a lack of ‘off ramp’ identified in Chapter 6. This recommendation would add relatively little to the Committee’s workload because of the relatively few e-petition Westminster Hall debates that take place; in the ten years since the system opened, there have been only 382 debates held (UK Parliament, no date).

Table 17: Recommendations for the Petitions Committee

Recommendations to the Petitions Committee	Explanation
5. Signposting realistic outcomes	Signpost more clearly to petitioners on the website what each formal milestone is intended to achieve
6. Alternative avenues	Related to recommendation five, in light of likely formal milestone outcomes, identify and explain on the website the alternative avenues for petitioners to explore within parliament once the formal milestones have been exhausted.
7. E-petition categorisation	Categorisation of e-petition topic areas similar to the Comparative Agendas Project to enable petitioners to identify similar e-petitions, reduce the number of repeated petitions and improve the ability for academic stakeholders to work alongside the Committee.
8. Support after the debates	Establish meetings after the Westminster Hall debate to help petitioners to identify next steps now that the formal petitions process is over.

Brought together, these recommendations would tie the e-petitions system more closely into the wider parliamentary ecosystem and could further the opportunity for connections between citizens and parliament identified in this research. Importantly, whilst some may require some additional upfront costs and time, these recommendations can be implemented in a relatively short time span and would ultimately reduce the Committee's workload by better managing expectations and reducing the need for the Committee to, for example, reject or review e-petitions. In table 18, I set out each of the recommendations, and how they relate to one another to build a suite of measures that would make significant steps towards improving the experience for petitioners and help to overcome some of the challenges for the Committee, making valuable contributions to the day-to-day experiences of those who use and implement the system. More broadly, these recommendations offer useful starting points or points for improvement for other participatory mechanisms which seek to bring the public 'in' to parliamentary processes because they are designed to better integrate tools into wider parliamentary ecosystems, and to better manage users' expectations about possible outcomes.

Table 18: Tying recommendations together

Recommendation	Related recommendations	Explanation
1. Warm audiences	2, 4	By identifying other actors within civil society who can support the e-petition campaign, petitioners can tap into wider networks. Within these networks petitioners might be able to receive advice about how to identify potentially supportive MPs. To do so, petitioners will need to establish a plan for how to use social media.
2. Supportive MPs	3, 5, 6	By identifying supportive MPs, and potential ‘advocates’ petitioners can explore what other parliamentary mechanisms might be able to further their e-petition campaign. The Committee can support this process by signposting early on how petitioners can do so (for example, looking at select committee membership, MPs’ contributions etc).
3. What else can parliament do?	2, 5, 6	As above.
4. A plan for social media	1, 2	Petitioners need to identify which social media platforms to use to achieve their goals, and in doing so need to build a network of support around them. This network of support should encompass other campaigners, enable petitioners to identify supportive MPs and potential petition advocates.
5. Signposting realistic outcomes	3, 5, 6	Expectations management is a core challenge that can be achieved with better signposting on the website that enables petitioners to identify the likely outcomes of the responses and debates and identify potentially supportive MPs. Committee staff and MP support at later stages about ‘what comes next’ can help petitioners to identify realistic next steps in and beyond the petitions process.
6. Alternative avenues	5, 2, 3	The Committee can signpost the realistic outcomes of the formal milestones and follow on from them by identifying the various parliamentary mechanisms that petitioners could explore after the formal milestones are exhausted.
7. E-petition categorisation	1	E-petition categorisation would enable petitioners to view similar e-petitions, identify their campaigners and supporters (in and outside of parliament) and potentially ‘team up’ to strengthen the campaign.
8. Support after the debates	3, 5, 6	The measures intended to support petitioners before the process begins (5 and 6) can be strengthened by debriefing with petitioners about what comes next which would help petitioners to identify (if they haven’t already) alternative avenues within the wider parliamentary ecosystem

To summarise, the contributions and recommendations of this thesis set out here make an overarching contribution to our understanding of the effectiveness and sustainability of parliamentary e-petitions systems as new participatory mechanisms generally, and the UK House of Commons system, specifically. They demonstrate how the use of parliamentary e-petitions enables users to tap into a wider parliamentary ecosystem that brings with it a range of beneficial spillover effects that ultimately mean that even once the formal e-petition milestones have been exhausted, there are ongoing opportunities for petitioners to engage with parliament. In turn, this highlights how public engagement with parliament is dynamic and ongoing and should not be viewed in terms of static formal processes. Such conclusions can be better communicated by the Committee to petitioners and all of the above recommendations are provided with this in mind.

7.4 – Avenues for further research

The findings of this research raise a number of important points about the ability of parliamentary e-petition systems to tackle challenges of disillusionment and disengagement. But they also raise important wider questions about democracy and attempts to forge connections between the public and democratic institutions in the context of increasing participation in informal communicative spaces online.

Firstly, this thesis raises important questions about expectations and success, including how success with parliamentary e-petitions, or indeed other new participatory mechanisms can be defined, and where and how public expectations about participation may arise. It is not an exaggeration to say that most petitioners like those featured in this research are unlikely to achieve their ultimate goal of legislative change through the formal processes of the e-petition system. But we know from the literature on parliamentary influence and policy making progress that progress towards legislative change is likely to be indirect and slow (Russell and Gover, 2017), and I have shown that viewing e-petitions solely in terms of legislative change unduly narrows our understanding of how the system affords the public with opportunities to be politically active with parliament. So, given the challenges that I have highlighted around expectations management and the extent to which the complex dynamics of parliamentary influence are recognised by petitioners, there is much scope for future research to delve deeper into what public expectations of new participatory tools are, but perhaps more importantly how they develop and how they can be addressed or managed. Indeed, this is particularly necessary given broader trends towards public engagement as a core institutional function of legislatures

(Leston-Bandeira and Siefken, 2023) so that we are better positioned to understand how such tools are, or are not, able to combat challenges around apathy and disengagement. Whilst I have offered important contributions about this in the context of e-petitions, this thesis has only touched the surface of these much broader questions, and so future research on this challenge would contribute further to the literature on democratic innovations, parliamentary engagement initiatives and political literacy. Such research would undeniably provide useful practical insights to practitioners of such new tools, too.

Secondly, this research has shown the value of taking a non-institutional lens to the study of new participatory tools, highlighting how actions in informal communicative spaces come to bear on formal institutions like parliament. I advocate for further research to take this approach and consider other ways how actions in spaces like social media may facilitate connections between the public and parliament, following on from Leston-Bandeira's prior work on social media (see Leston-Bandeira, 2012; Griffith and Leston-Bandeira, 2012; Leston-Bandeira and Bender 2013) but in the context of a much more volatile social media landscape today. Examples of how informal communicative actions may influence MP-constituent relationships, form the basis of new institutional public engagement activities or feature in the outreach work of select committees, whose practices are constantly evolving to reflect new landscapes in the public sphere (Geddes, 2023), are areas still ripe for research. This is necessary because in recent years we have seen the quick pace of change online - indeed much changed from the beginning of this research to the end - which means that, in many ways, the stability of social media as a tool through which citizens can connect to their representative institutions can no longer be taken for granted. But the confines of a PhD thesis means that there was not scope to consider these changes in more depth. As such, future research should explore not just how these practices in informal communicative spaces may forge connections to representative institutions but should also explore more fundamental issues about how institutions can utilise - or encourage citizens to use - social media or other online tools in the context of a volatile online landscape.

Thirdly, given the influence of celebrity and well known voices to e-petition campaigns, there is scope to further understand if and, if so, how celebrity voices may (inadvertently) quieten the voices of ordinary citizens when using these participatory tools. Indeed, there remain broader questions about celebrity involvement with other parliamentary mechanisms such as APPGs and select committees, for example, and whether this has wider democratic implications about whose voice is amplified or muffled as a result. As all aspects of political life become increasingly

contingent on online technologies where well-known voices are privileged by algorithms, both of these areas will become all the more acute as sites for scholarly research and have important bearings on how we understand the means by which ordinary members of the public can engage with democratic processes.

In terms of research design, whilst I was able to engage with a range of actors involved in the petitioning process (see table 5 for a full breakdown), it is interesting to consider who I wasn't able to reach. Whilst a product of the chosen research questions and so not a limitation per se, everyone involved in this research had been involved in the e-petitions process in some capacity and were selected on that basis. Upon reflection, to really understand the efficacy of the e-petitioning as a new participatory tool for engagement it would have also been beneficial to speak to those who chose to *not* be involved in the system and understand their reasoning for why, as this may illuminate or provide additional nuance to the challenges of new public engagement tools that this thesis has highlighted. This is largely because whilst the MPs I did interview were very forthcoming about the challenges the system faces, they nonetheless saw merit in what the system is trying to achieve and tended to conclude that the system was providing a 'net good'. There will be a number of parliamentarians whose choice to not be involved with e-petition campaigns would be an interesting agenda for future research on new participatory tools because it would inevitably uncover some additional challenges and reflections that would add to the contributions of this research.

Finally, in Chapter 3 I address two potential limitations of the case study approach taken in this research. Firstly, the focus on campaigns which have reached the 10,000 signature threshold means the conclusions presented in this thesis apply to campaigns which have already 'got off the ground'. Whilst we have seen how petitioners achieved this through the vast range of activities on and off social media, a point of further research would be to explore campaigns which have not met this threshold in order to understand any similarities or differences in petitioners' strategies and activities and whether the milestones presented in Chapter 4 are necessary prerequisites for 'success'. Secondly, focus on animal welfare campaigns may mean that the findings of this thesis are not generalisable to other types of campaign, a potential limitation which can only be explored by further research that considers a greater range of topic areas. Indeed, given the popularity of animal welfare as a topic, one particularly interesting area for research and related to the point above would be to analyse unpopular or controversial e-petitions, as they may provide an interesting point of contrast to the cases included in this thesis.

7.5 - Final reflections

This chapter opened with a reminder that legislatures matter because they form important links between the public and those who represent them. In the wider context of disengagement from traditional forms of participation like voting and the rise in informal, often online forms of engagement, this thesis has underscored the importance of considering the intersection of informal participatory actions and attempts by representative institutions to bring the public ‘in’ by exploring parliamentary e-petitions, which sit at the juncture between these two trends. It has shown how parliamentary e-petitions provide an important platform for the public to ‘speak’ to parliament and has considered the many ways in which parliament may come to ‘listen’ back by examining the range of campaign activities undertaken by petitioners which largely occur in informal communicative spaces, but which lead to a range of outcomes both in and outside of parliament. In doing so this thesis has made important contributions about how the links between the public and parliament today are dynamic and changing in nature, whilst simultaneously recognising a number of challenges about which voices are amplified or muffled, the stability of such practices, and ongoing issues with expectations management.

Notwithstanding such caveats, as a point of departure from previous literature of parliamentary e-petitions, this thesis highlights how connections are brought not necessarily because of the inbuilt formal procedures for petitioning, but rather because the extensive campaigns of petitioners in informal communicative spaces like social media also extend to parliament, where petitioners are able to tap into various informal touch points towards parliamentary influence. As a bridge between everyday, informal political action and parliaments, parliamentary e-petitions are, therefore, important mechanisms for the public to ‘speak’ and for parliament, in a range of ways, ‘listen’ back.

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Appendix 1: Interview schedules

Petitioner interview schedule

Focus area	Common Questions
Background to the petition (<i>motivations</i>)	<p>Can you tell me the background to your petition work and why you decided to use a parliamentary e-petition?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: Why this tool and not another way? <p>(If relevant) Can you tell me about the other petitions you have promoted (or created?)</p> <p>What did you hope to achieve by creating the petition?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: Did you have any expectations about the system going into it? ● Follow up: Have these changed since your petition finished?
The campaign	<p>Once you had created the petition, what campaigning did you do?</p> <p>Can you tell me about your campaign and other activities you have done around the e-petition or the topic?</p> <p>How did you reach signature thresholds?</p> <p>How/where did you promote the petition?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: Was one method more effective? <p>Did you use social media platforms?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: Which platform did you use? Why that platform? <p>Did you use traditional media? (e.g. news, radio)</p> <p>(If relevant) What effect did [celebrity or charity] involvement have?</p> <p>Did you have support from organisations?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What were the benefits? (resources etc) <p>(If relevant) Did [your organisation] work with other charities or organisations?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you support other petitioners? How?
Parliament and Petitions Committee	<p>How was your engagement with the Petitions Committee?</p> <p>Did you engage with any other politicians?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How did that come about? <p>Did you engage with Parliament in any other way?</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: How did you pursue other parliamentary mechanisms?
General reflections	<p>Can you tell me how you found the whole experience?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow ups: What was good/bad about the system? <p>What do you think could be improved, if anything?</p> <p>Which aspect of the whole campaign was most valuable, do you think?</p> <p>(If relevant) What role do you see petitions playing in [your organisation's] work?</p>

Non-Committee MP interview schedule

Focus Area	Common Questions
Involvement in petitions	<p>What has your involvement with the petitions system been like?</p> <p>How do petitions come to your attention?</p> <p>What functions do you view e-petitions as performing?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: Do you use petitions as a way to gauge public opinion? <p>How do you engage with creators or stakeholders?</p>
[Specific case study petitions]	<p>How did you come to be involved with this petition?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: What is your motivation for getting involved? <p>What work have you done relating to the e-petition?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If relevant: Is this different as a Lord? <p>What other parliamentary tools are useful to explore/ have you explored for an e-petition?</p>
General reflections	<p>What do you see the role of e-petitions as?</p> <p>How do they influence government thinking?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: How do they influence the parliamentary agenda? <p>How do petitions influence your work personally?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (If relevant): You've been an MP since before the system was set up, what differences do you see today? <p>Are there better parliamentary mechanisms?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: Which are they/ which mechanisms do you think are most effective?

	<p>Is it a good system?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: How could it be improved? <p>What does public engagement mean to you?</p> <p>Why do you think animal petitions are so popular?</p>
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Committee MP interview schedule

Focus Area	Common Questions
Background / involvement in Committee	<p>Can you talk me through why you chose to join the Petitions Committee?</p> <p>What does it involve?</p> <p>I'm specifically looking at animal welfare petitions; can you talk me through your involvement with these?</p>
(If relevant) [Specific e-petition]	<p>Can you talk me through your engagement with [e-petition]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: How did you engage with the petitioner? ● Follow up: Did you do any follow up work? <p>Can you talk me through your [other parliamentary activity]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: Why did you choose to pursue other avenues?
General reflections	<p>What do you think the purpose/ aim of the petitions system is?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: How is it achieving these aims? <p>Do you think the system is working as planned? What is or is not working?</p> <p>How can it be improved, if anything?</p> <p>What does public engagement mean to you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: How else might you engage with the public as a constituency MP? <p>How do you choose whether to take an e-petition further?</p> <p>I've been reading back through some of the procedure committee reports, and it had a very specific idea of what the committee might do. This is especially in terms of the ability of the committee to improve the information available to the public about how Parliament works, do you think it has been successful in this aim?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up: Can this system do this? What are the challenges to achieving this aim?

Committee officials interview schedule

Focus area	Common Questions
Their job	<p>Can you talk me through how you came to work with the Committee and what your job involves/involved?</p> <p>Can you talk me through current/former priorities of the committee?</p>
General reflections	<p>Do you think the system is working as planned?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (If relevant) - Discuss reflections on the aims of the 2014 Procedure Committee report <p>What do you think the system is for? / What is its purpose?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up: How is it achieving these aims? <p>What functions is it performing?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up: Has this evolved? And might it continue to change? <p>How are petitioner expectations managed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up: Are there problems with outcomes? What might they be? <p>How can the system be improved, if anything?</p> <p>What does public engagement mean to you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up: Are petitions the best route or are there other avenues?
Specific questions about formal processes	<p>What is the purpose of the government response and debates?</p> <p>Creators have expressed some disappointment with formal processes, why do you think this is?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up: Is this disappointment inevitable? • Follow up: Is there an alternative? <p>Can the Petitions Committee play a more active role? How might this evolve?</p> <p>Does the clerk have different ideas to the MPs? How so?</p> <p>Why are animal petitions so popular?</p>

Appendix 2: Participant information sheet and consent form

Participant Information Sheet (Example: Petitioners)

1. Research Project Title

‘Who Speaks and Who Listens? The Democratic Ecology of Parliamentary E-Petitions’

2. Invitation Paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a PhD project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you would like to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the project’s purpose?

This research aims to provide a large-scale analysis of parliamentary e-petitions. It will establish how parliamentary e-petitions are disseminated, discussed and used by citizens, organisations and campaigning groups. It hopes to determine; the ‘added value’ of parliamentary e-petitions compared to other campaigning tools and the role that parliamentary actors such as the Petitions Committee play in bringing the ‘voice’ of citizens to the ‘ears’ of policymakers.

This is a 3 year PhD project, with fieldwork taking place between Autumn 2023 and Spring 2024.

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen to take part in this research because you are the creator or were involved in the creation of one of the parliamentary e-petitions chosen as a case study for this research.

5. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this research. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. You can withdraw anytime up to April 2024; it is at this point at which data collection for this project will end and your data will be analysed.

Please note that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between you and the University of Sheffield.

6. What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

If you agree to take part in this research, I will ask you to sign a consent form. If the interview is taking place online I will send you an invite link to join the interview via Google Meets. If it is taking place in person, I will arrange with you a suitable location. In the interview, I will ask you some questions about your e-petition covering a range of topics such as why you created the e-

petition including the context around the e-petition; what you hoped to get from the e-petition and how you shared the e-petition. Interviews will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length. All data used from these interviews will be made anonymous and may include the use of anonymised quotes.

This information is important to the research because it seeks to understand how parliamentary e-petitions are being used by citizens to engage with Parliament, how these e-petitions are shared and discussed and how they are utilised by individuals and groups in pursuit of campaigning objectives.

7. Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio recordings of your interview made during this research will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside of this project will be allowed access to the original recordings. Before the interview takes place, I will ask for your permission to record the interview. Once this research concludes, all audio recordings will be destroyed. In the meantime, all recordings will be stored securely on my University Google Drive account.

8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause you disadvantage or discomfort. Interviews will be no longer than one hour so disruption to your day will be minimal. You may decide that you do not want to answer some of the interview questions. This is fine and no further questions on that topic will be asked.

9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that this work will contribute to understanding of how citizens engage with, discuss and disseminate parliamentary e-petitions and how parliamentary e-petitions are connected to spheres of policy making. This research is important because citizens are engaging in politics in new ways and it is important to appraise the tools by which citizens remain engaged with political institutions.

10. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect about you during the course of this research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to myself. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. If you agree to sharing the information you provide with other researchers (e.g. by making it available in a data archive) then your personal data will not be included unless you explicitly request this.

11. What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

12. What will happen to the data collected and the results of the research project?

The data collected will only be accessible by myself during the research process. Once the project ends, non-identifiable data will be stored for the standard TUoS retention period of 10 years in a data repository.

13. Who is organising and funding the research?

This PhD research is funded by the University of Sheffield Faculty of Social Sciences

14. Who is the data controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

15. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the Department of Politics and International Relations

16. What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?

If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact Professor Felicity Matthews; f.m.matthews@sheffield.ac.uk in the first instance. If you feel your complaint has been not handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of Department of Politics and International Relations Professor Charlotte Burns; charlotte.burns@sheffield.ac.uk

If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

If you wish to make a report of a concern or incident relating to potential exploitation, abuse or harm resulting from your involvement in this project, please contact the project's Designated Safeguarding Contact Professor Felicity Matthews; f.m.matthews@sheffield.ac.uk. If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the head of department of Politics and International Relations Professor Charlotte Burns; charlotte.burns@sheffield.ac.uk and/ or the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Manager Lindsay Unwin; l.v.unwin@sheffield.ac.uk

17. Contact for further information

You can contact me at my email address: lmartin2@sheffield.ac.uk Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact me, you can contact my supervisor, Professor Felicity Matthews: f.m.matthews@sheffield.ac.uk

Participant consent form

Please tick the appropriate boxes

Taking Part in the Project	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated July 2023 and the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being interviewed. I understand that the interview audio will be recorded for research purposes but that this audio will not be shared externally to the research team and that it will be stored securely according to university guidelines.		
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study before April 2024; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named or identified in any other way in these outputs unless I specifically request this.		
I give permission for the anonymised, non-identifiable data that I provide to be deposited in the University of Sheffield's data repository, ORDA, so it can be used for future research and learning		
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.		

Name of participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher [printed]

Signature

Date

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Appendix 3: Document analysis

The e-petition titles, creator names and key words listed below were used for both the Nexis and Hansard searches outlined in Chapter 3. The timeframe is the date the e-petition was opened (i.e. went live online) until the date of data collection in summer 2023. In cases where creators mentioned campaigning through other e-petitions, the 6 months that said e-petition was live is also included.

E-petition title	Named creator	Key words	Timeframe
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REDACTED – The author has redacted this appendix for anonymity reasons.