

Petitioning and People Power in Twentieth-Century Britain

This text is chapter seven of ten in the publication *Investigative Methods: An NCRM Innovation Collection*.

How to cite this document

Bocking-Welch, A., Huzzey, R., Leston-Bandeira, C. and Miller, H. (2022) Petitioning and people power In twentieth-century Britain. In: Mair, M., Meekin, R. and Elliot, M. (Eds) *Investigative Methods: An NCRM Innovation Collection*. Southampton: National Centre for Research Methods, pp. 75-86. DOI: [10.5258/NCRM/NCRM.00004550](https://doi.org/10.5258/NCRM/NCRM.00004550)

7. Petitioning and People Power in Twentieth-Century Britain

Anna Bocking-Welch (University of Liverpool), Richard Huzzey (Durham University), Cristina Leston-Bandeira (University of Leeds), Henry Miller (Durham University)

In their contribution, Bocking-Welch, Huzzey, Leston-Bandeira and Miller set out their historico-political approach to the investigation of petitioning as a practice over a one-hundred-year period. In this context, specific petitions or even public discussion of specific petitions provide trace data for exploring the practices which produced them. Rather than a single, stable set of practices, Bocking-Welch, Huzzey, Leston-Bandeira and Miller show those practices are embedded in, shape and are shaped by wider social, cultural and political contexts. By tracing petitioning outwards to these varied contexts, they expand the notion of the political by expanding our understanding of where politics happens and what is involved.

Introduction

What is the point of petitioning? It is a question many UK citizens ask, given the twenty-first-century expansion of e-petitioning, but one that we are pursuing in the twentieth-century history of Britain. Drawing on and drawing out the methodological insights we have gained from prior investigative research in the fields of politics and history (see below), by focusing on a practice – the creation, signature, and reception of petitions – over 100 years, in our current work we are surveying the ideals and practices of political participation, tracing how petitioners, petitions, and the reception of petitions changed with the extension of universal suffrage or the reconfiguration of the state. Many historical or contemporary investigations of politics in this period focus on particular institutions, such as national parties and pressure groups, or specific issues, such as immigration or abortion. Investigating a particular practice over a century of democratic reinvention and social change, by contrast, allows us to investigate the dynamics that have connected and indeed still connect these fields.

Our aim in this paper, and as our contribution to the broad theme of the collection, is to show that by uniting expertise and methodologies from political studies and historical research, it is possible – as we shall discuss in what follows – to employ different kinds of data sources, search strategies, and forms of intellectual collaboration in investigative inquiries to forge new understandings of historical and contemporary practices; here, of the connections between political institutions, social movements, and voluntary action through petitioning. Versatile, cheap, and accessible, petitioning flourished well beyond official, regulated systems for inviting and receiving petitions. Though Parliament or local councils had procedures to receive petitions, many other bodies or individuals might be addressed or confronted with them. As investigators, in this context we feel it is important not only to explore how authorities, such as Parliament and 10 Downing Street, implemented and tweaked centralised systems and rules for formally receiving petitions, but also how campaigns launched petitions ‘in the wild’, without any invitation or procedure for petitioning. In our research, this involves recovering democratic strategies and beliefs by tracing how and when petitions addressed individuals (from the Prime Minister, to a parliamentarian or local councillor, to a head teacher) or bodies (from the government, to Parliament or a local council, to the BBC or the World Bank). We also consider petitions as evidence of collective action by existing bodies (such as charities, lobbies, parties, or churches) and as the formative activities founding new forms of collaboration. Studying a practice rather than particular organisations or forms of organisation enables us to link together disparate literatures (on NGOs, parties, or churches, for example) with a focus on looser collectives (such as parents,

neighbours, or customers). Our investigative focus is, then, how far petitioning has formed part of a wider repertoire of tactics or proved a gateway to further activism.

The signatures upon petitions embody the practice of politics beyond the realm of elections – since many petitioners, before universal suffrage, did not enjoy the right to vote and many signatures, after it, continued to come from non-citizens and young people. Extensions of the franchise (to women and poorer men after 1918/1928 and to 18-21-year-olds after 1969) structured mass democracy, but petitions identify still wider participation in it. In particular, our research examines how recourse to petitioning from younger Britons and non-citizens of the UK (as defined by 1905, 1948, and 1981 acts) and responses to their mobilisation reveal changing cultural attitudes about youth and race, respectively. The focus on petitioning thus permits investigations of a form of democratic participation and representation for non-voters, glimpsing a wider political public than that on the electoral roll.

The significance of petitioning for petitioners – and, now, researchers – lies beyond an ‘objective’ or ‘instrumental’ assessment of immediate results or lack thereof. While our case studies, the details of some of which are discussed in what follows, may highlight particular conditions for petitions to “succeed” in winning a desired response, we are conscious that the “point” of petitioning is subjective, even if reduced to the crudest assessments by many politicians and commentators. Among signatories and addressees petitions variously represented the strength of opinion, shared information, mandated action, or publicly expressed a set of values or duties. Social movements, political parties, and local campaigners used petitions to build affinity with supporters and to mobilise further activism. Newspapers and, eventually, television routinely pictured public opinion through the presentation of signature sheets to a police officer at the door of 10 Downing Street. Some Britons experimented with transnational campaigns to pressure global bodies or foreign governments, while shopkeepers hosted petitions to commute the death sentence for a dangerous dog or to keep Hilda Ogden in Coronation Street.

Just as importantly, as a form of participatory democracy often presenting claims to elected representatives and public bodies, petitioning reveals the practical conflicts and tensions between different forms and conceptions of democracy. By recovering the experiences of those who signed, organised, and received petitions, we gain new insights, for instance, into the blurred experiences of participatory, direct, and representative democracy. That is, petitioning reveals overlapping expectations concerning how modern Britain should practice rule by ‘the people’, which defy the neat distinctions of political theorists and problematise attempts to allot political action to such seemingly well bounded and mutually exclusive categories. Exploring those blurred lines at different historical moments emphasises how appeals to ‘public opinion’ and ‘people power’ are created and manifested in petitions and other forms of representation, rather than reflecting prior, naturalized attitudes. Our work considers when petitions aided the representation of minority voices and when they served to amplify majoritarian community reactions. By investigating the reinventions of an ancient medium over a century, we can therefore capture the ways in which changing contexts reshaped behaviours and attitudes, as well as the political community constituting ‘the people’.

Within this we also consider how new media technologies such as photography, newsreel, and television have influenced the visual culture of petitioning, since petitioners may have seen publicity to be as powerful as the force of signature lists. Moreover, the computerised exploitation and, subsequently, regulation of personal data has reshaped older traditions of harvesting information about petitioners from their signatures. Investigating petitioning’s modulating historical and political forms casts light on how far web and e-mail petitions in the 1990s replicated or fractured the analogue practices of petitioning honed on trestle tables at street stalls and on

clipboards on neighbouring doorsteps. Gaining an understanding of these practices therefore permits us to evaluate continuity and disjuncture in the technologies of democracy but also to enhance the understanding of signatories, campaigners, and officials who are supporting, launching, or receiving e-petitions today.

Research Context

Our research draws on disciplines and approaches from distinct research contexts. Our team unites expertise in historical research into petitioning as a tool of popular contention in pre-democratic societies; techniques and models analysing e-petitioning systems in political studies and the social sciences; and the evolution of voluntary action, social movements, and democratic cultures in twentieth-century Britain. The project gestated in conversations facilitated by a comparative AHRC Research Network on Petitions and Petitioning from the medieval period to the present, which highlighted questions about the transformations in Great Britain between universal suffrage and the emergence of e-petitioning.

This is an area of research where interdisciplinarity and scope of expertise are key to investigative rigour. Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller bring, for instance, an interest in comparative studies of petitioning before – and, in the proposed project, after – universal suffrage. As they have argued in prior collaborations, historians can use petitions as prisms to understand wider changes in power and society (Miller 2019; Huzzey and Miller 2021). Their previous research on nineteenth-century petitioning to the House of Commons was able to create a long-run dataset, which suggested a declining variety and, eventually, number of petitions after the turn of the twentieth century. The new collaboration tests their hypothesis that this decline reflected the growing devolution of power to local and plural authorities, as well as the centralisation of government control in Downing Street and the whips’ office (Huzzey and Miller 2020). Researching the forms of petitioning helps de-centre the ballot box as the crucible of political representation, enabling us to rethink how the relationship between representative institutions and active citizenship is shaped by other channels of participation and communication. ‘The politics of association’, identified by Helen McCarthy and Pat Thane as a defining feature of mass democracy in twentieth-century Britain, can be explored in new chronologies of voluntary associationism by testing pessimistic interpretations of post-war civil society (McCarthy 2007, McCarthy and Thane 2011). For social scientists seeking to gain a better understanding of pressure groups, our project restores the agency of ordinary citizens, subjects, and signatories to frameworks focused on co-evolution with policy evolutions in the state (Grant 2004).

Our research also historicises the growth and evaluation of e-petitions in the twenty-first century and adapts to historical evidence the methods used by Cristina Leston-Bandeira and other social scientists to study them (Leston-Bandeira 2019). Our terminal date of 2000 saw the launch of digital petitioning by the Scottish Parliament, which revived institutional petition systems in Britain, alongside the remarkable Jubilee 2000 debt campaign and the consolidation of early internet experiments in e-petitioning. When it comes to developments of these kinds, we can draw on qualitative research approaches developed by scholars examining both comparative international and national contexts (Bochel 2020, Linder and Riehm 2012, Wright 2016), but also provide evidence to evaluate the ways in which a digital medium disrupted analogue habits. This is a key question for providers of e-petitions systems today, such as national legislatures and local councils, but also campaigners deploying e-petitions, including NGOs and charities.

For historians of twentieth-century Great Britain, we pursue the overlapping local, national, and international dimensions of politics, culture, and society, as Anna Bocking-Welch has explored in her historical research concerning civic society, globalisation, and decolonisation (Bocking-Welch

2016). The project's investigation of small-scale case studies is valuable for connecting investigations of locality and local government in twentieth-century Britain, hitherto neglected. This is a new approach to the 'politics of place', emphasised by recent political studies, examining the personal and local interface with wider movements and institutions (Lawrence 1998, McCarthy 2007, Readman 2009). That approach allows us to trace British petitioners' engagement with global campaigns, which marked a simultaneous decentralisation of international relations in citizen-to-citizen campaigns and a centralisation of political authority in supranational bodies (Bocking-Welch 2018, Pedersen 2012). Offering a long-term chronology, straddling the traditional fault lines of 1918 and 1945, enables us to offer broad interpretations of changes in democratic culture, political organisation, and social power through case studies of petitions, petitioning, and petitioners.

Research Methods

The diffuse nature of the topic of petitioning requires us to trace larger patterns through a mix of social-science and History methodologies, glimpsing the place of petitioning in a wider community, the subjective experience of an individual, and also the reception in receiving authorities or media coverage. On a practical level, the team use NVIVO Cloud to share and organise notes on multi-media sources across the participating institutions and assist mixed-methods analysis by imposing metadata on unstructured sources. Our code book is not complex, but associates particular evidence with research themes (such as those relating to NHS hospitals or examples of the visual spectacle of presentation), identities or groups (such as petitions signed by children or organised by particular charities), and audiences to whom petitions are directed (such as the BBC or a local council). But what are the sources and methods behind the project?

Thanks to the pandemic, the most accessible set of sources have been the digitised databases of local and national newspapers in twentieth-century Britain. As many historians have noted, these offer unparalleled opportunities to search and identify examples across thousands of pages of newsprint, but require careful use. Legal or commercial considerations may guide the digitized content of databases, with some major national titles preferring to sell access to their archives through separate products. Moreover, the quality of optical character recognition (OCR) for particular publications or styles of newsprint may make some titles or periods less sensitive to full-text searching. Searching across the whole of Great Britain with tools such as the [British Newspaper Archive](#), looking for the term "petition" with specific causes or social groups, may yield disproportionate numbers of results from certain places in certain parts of the century: For the 1990s, roughly 0.4% of people in Great Britain lived in Aberdeen, but 6,209 (19%) of 32,919 digitised issues are local to the city, while the database captures a more proportionate 2799 (2%) of 125,870 editions from the 1950s. In addition to being aware of the chronological-geographical coverage of digitised databases, we are also mindful that the quality of OCR for particular newspapers can distort any search strategies (Huistra and Mellink 2016). Preliminary explorations in the local press formed an important early phase of our research in charting the contours, varieties, and contexts of press coverage that we might explore more methodically, given that we could not inspect all 2.7 million hits (in the British Newspaper Archive alone); yet we are conscious of the vagaries of copyright licensing by publishers in determining what data we are searching for any given year or decade. At the same time, some general searching for specific terms (e.g. "petition + internet" in the 1990s) yielded not just examples of our target material (in this case, early e-petitioning) but also 'false positives' that could be interesting for a different reason: For example, amongst the false hits for these terms, we often discovered interesting paper petitions (such as those for handgun restrictions after the Dunblane massacre) thrown up by an unrelated use of the word "internet" (or an OCR confusion) elsewhere on the digitised page.

Though newspaper reports of national or local petitions provide empirical examples, perhaps for further research using different sources and methods, we are also interested in the media's agency in publicising and encouraging petitioners. This is especially important in cases where newspapers not just reported, but initiated petitions as part of their own campaigns, using pre-printed slips to engage readers and bolster their own representative claims. However, we are also cognisant of the ways that campaigners, including political parties and elected representatives, used petitions to create a visually and materially dramatic 'newsworthiness' to a cause. This, in turn, has helped direct our attention, when investigating other sources, to the place of marches and presentation in creating spectacle: Hence, just as the Jarrow marchers walked to Westminster with their petition against unemployment in 1936, so the wives of fishermen from North Shields carried a petition to Downing Street in 1975 complaining of 'cheap imports of frozen fish'. While we are aware of the journalistic mediation in these reports, they can also yield interesting insights about what activists wished to communicate to the press. Emphasising community solidarity and a focus on dependents, not the fishing industry workers themselves, Mrs. Mary Morse explained that, as chairman of the newly-founded North Shields Fishermen's Wives Association, 'we have all come together because of this dispute but we plan to stick together' (*Newcastle Journal*, 11 Apr. 1975, p. 7; *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 10 Apr. 1975, p. 17).

We are able to access some newsreel and television footage of filmed news coverage, examining how it framed or narrated scenes, but also recovering the spatial and material place of petitions in wider repertoires of protest. For example, [Reuters' footage](#) of a 1971 rally against UK membership of the European common market showed the prominence on the rostrum of posters advertising a petition to the Queen for a referendum, as one of the actions attendees could take in support of the speakers. There is also potential to examine the attitudes to petitioning depicted in written or dramatized fiction, with the cultural analysis familiar to literary and film studies. For example, readers and viewers of the comic misadventures of Reginald Iolanthe Perrin must have recognised the stereotype of his upper-middle-class neighbour collecting a thousand signatures against actions 'inconsistent with the character of this predominantly residential area', sending 'photostats' to the council, her MP, and the local newspaper (Nobbs 1978). A memorable scene in the 1981 BBC sitcom '[Yes, Minister](#)', where the secretary of state rejects a petition he started when in opposition, was based on the real-life experience of Home Secretary Frank Soskice, linking popular cynicism about government responsivity to documented evidence of political history (Dyson 2019: 74).

We are also exploiting and assembling existing quantitative data where sources permit meaningful analysis or systematic samples. An obvious challenge is to collate statistics on the numbers of petitions and signatures, compared to earlier periods or other polities. However, the growing attractions of presenting petitions to offices that did not publish records of them, such as 10 Downing Street and Government Departments, or did not compile systematic data, such as local authorities, means that it is often impossible to quantify the numbers of petitions systematically, as might be possible for earlier centuries. Although parliamentary clerks recorded petitions presented to the House of Commons, the abolition of the Petitions Committee in 1974 ended the practice of verifying signature numbers adopted since 1833 (Huzzey and Miller 2019). Moreover, as discussed below, many twentieth-century activists collected signatures for petitions that would never be – and were never intended to be – handed over to an authority, in contrast to the central role today of institutional websites hosting e-petitions systems for signature online (Leston-Bandeira 2019, Bochel 2020). So far as quantitative data exists for the role of petitioners, some later twentieth-century polling, such as the [British Social Attitudes](#) survey, included questions about petitioning, though the format of questions was inconsistent and often flawed, meaning these data are used contextually, with caution. We are also aware of overstatements introduced by social desirability bias in results recalling that 63.3% of Britons had signed a petition in the past five years and 8% that they had organised one (Parry et al., 1992, Persson and Solevid 2014).

Quantitative data on the attitudes of representatives or officials receiving petitions is even scarcer, though one social-science study of public policy in Kensington and Chelsea is a rare example surveyed councillors' (largely negative and hostile) attitudes to petitioners (Dearlove 1973). Statistics and surveys on the reception or signature of petitions represent an important, but incomplete, avenue of inquiry, therefore.

For historians, this absence of evidence and the need to 'read against the grain' of surviving sources compiled for other purposes is a familiar challenge. Work in a variety of personal and institutional archives can yield manuscripts and unpublished print sources which bring out the interior discussions of campaigners and those they petitioned. For example, declassified Security Service files on suspected 'subversives' might record their legal activities as part of petitioning campaigns in the course of reports on the movements and contacts that might yield evidence of illegal actions. Although the pandemic has disrupted this aspect of our research, we have identified material deposited by politicians, activists, and bodies that may reveal the tactics and deliberations of particular organisers. Preliminary research has identified that MPs' constituency casework often contained petitions (or photocopies) not formally addressed to Parliament, constituting an unstructured archive of local activism (though one that requires careful compliance with legal and ethical concerns). Where archives have been digitised, we have been able to find catalogued or searchable materials, such as constituency petitions presented to Winston Churchill or the institutional campaigns of the Anti-Apartheid movement. We are conscious of a chronological imbalance in our access to archival sources, as the UK's thirty-year rule, the closure of records due to GDPR, and the lead time for archivists to catalogue deposits means these sources are richer for earlier parts of our period.

Of course, archival deposits generally privilege the perspective of the originator of the documents, though it is possible to find and use manuscript evidence of private citizens' encounters with petitions. For this reason, the team have also used the digitised Mass Observation Archive for glimpses into respondents' private encounters with petitioning. Though critiqued at its foundation as 'scientifically, about as valuable as a chimpanzee's tea party at the zoo', the Mass Observation project of 1937-50s, revived since 1981, provides 'idiosyncratic historical materials' that mix anonymous respondents' unstructured diaries, questionnaire responses, and collated clippings from the press (Pollen 2013). For example, the Spring 1985 directive asked respondents about their opinions and actions arising from Enoch Powell's bill against embryological research; the data indicates that 4.3% of them signed a petition, while 3.3% wrote a letter to their MP (including 0.8% who did both). Given the self-selection and uncertain sampling of participants, their responses may be more revealing for individual comments appended to the (confusingly-phrased) questions: one woman, possibly interpreting the prompt in relation to abortion, recalled leaving her church in response to pressure to sign a petition circulating amongst the congregation (Mass Observation, Spring 1983 directive, T959).

These intimate, subjective experiences are also accessible through oral history interviews, and we have embarked on re-use of those recorded for previous projects from both petition organisers and the addressees of their petitions. The largest and most accessible collection is available through the British Library [BL] Sound Archive, with summaries capturing the discussion of petitions in such unlikely collections as those pertaining to British restaurants and restaurateurs. More typically, we have used interviews with campaigners, which allow us an insight into the rationalities and subjectivities behind petitioning. For example, Clydeside activist [Kay Carmichael](#) recalled travelling to London to present an anti-nuclear petition to the Conservative Defence Secretary in 1994, who refused to meet them:

We knew perfectly well it wouldn't help but it's very important to keep on trying, and to make requests even if they're going to be rejected. But we didn't expect quite such a brutal rejection— we thought we'd at least have courtesy. And we didn't even get that. I mean, obviously we didn't expect [Conservative Defence Secretary] Malcolm Rifkind to suddenly whip away all the nuclear weapons. But it was important for us to make the statement about going. ([Kay Carmichael interview](#), track 10, 08:50-10:28, C1155/12, National Life Stories, British Library)

Her reflections on the subjective experience, rather than instrumental 'success', of petitioning point to factors often missing from rational-choice studies of political participation. Her anger was roused by the snub, and perhaps consequent lack of publicity for her 'statement', in receiving the petition; she acknowledges that the minister's (and government's) view was settled, so persuasion of the addressee was not the principle aim but rather a means of publicising concerns to others or realising self-expectations of duty. Indeed, this provides evidence of 'the psychic and internalized costs that some people bear when they fail to take part in a protest' identified by political theorists as a solution to the 'costly participation' dilemma for elections and activism (Aytaç and Stokes 2019: 82). Since we are using these interviews to understand the meanings of experiences and recollections to the subjects, often revealed in intonation of the voice as well as the words spoken, their value is not compromised but found in their subjectivities, though we are alive to the post-hoc reconfigurations that mould recollections. Where an element of performance is involved, we can at least examine how an interviewee wished to frame their actions and motives (Summerfield 2019). Re-use of existing oral histories, recorded for very different projects, present challenges; whilst questioners may have ignored the detailed follow-ups that we might dream of asking, the very circumstances also mean that we can consider how interviewees thought or talked about petitioning when not invited to contribute to a project examining it and so avoid reifying it as something of mention (Gallwey 2013, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2016).

Besides our re-use of existing recordings, the project has also committed to creating our own through partnerships with National Life Stories, a charitable trust within the British Library's Oral History section. While the pandemic has required us to adapt to remote interviewing, we have begun to gather testimony from those organising and receiving petitions, which both inform our research and constitute a resource for future study of twentieth-century activism. Our research team completed joint training from the Oral History Society, given it is for us all a new methodology or a departure from past use of research interview methods favoured in the social sciences. For those familiar with background interviews for empirical political studies, the 'life story' approach to oral history differs in preferring open, biographical questions, guided with prompts such as 'can I take you back to when...', with follow-ups recommended to probe 'why did you think that?' or 'how did that make you feel?'. In fact, some of our subjects were veteran interviewees for political studies and also found it surprising to be asked more personal questions. While we would always wish to avoid leading interviewees or 'feeding' our hypotheses for them to verify, the 'life story' approach can create tensions with the focused, specific questions the project might wish to answer about petitioning in particular. However, we have embraced this as a possible benefit, since we wish to consider petitioning in the broadest possible context, alive to the fact that it was rarely the only or primary means exploited by any given campaign. By seeing how and when it relates to a wider career or experience, we may mitigate the eternal peril of over-stating the influence, exceptionality, or significance of the topic of intense study. This is a particular peril for historians, used to considering the context and representative merits of qualitative evidence, now creating and commissioning their own primary sources to answer their research questions directly. In identifying our interviewees, we focused both on officials and representatives of local government (poorly represented in existing collections) and campaigners (relatively well represented for larger organisations, but not community groups). While this could rely on existing

contacts, through the Study of Parliament Group that brings together parliamentary officials and academics, for example, it also relied on direct requests to people identified through our research in newspaper and archival sources.

A second partnership, with the History of Parliament Trust's Oral History Project, combines both re-use of existing material and the commission of additional recordings. This initiative, founded in 2011 in association with the BL Sound Archive, has completed more than 160 interviews with former MPs. An early phase of our project was to scour the deposited tracks and summaries for discussion of petitions; we were not surprised to find them mentioned relatively rarely, since the interviewees and interviewers – in answers, questions, and the summarised highlights – focused more on the topics and themes (such as women's rights, nuclear arms, or the poll tax) than particular campaign techniques. However, where possible for interviewees and interviewers (or a replacement interviewer), our partners at the History of Parliament have returned to record follow-up conversations with ex-MPs, asking questions about electioneering and campaigning, concluding with specific questions about the use of petitions they have started or received. Similar material can also be glimpsed from political memoirs, where parliamentarians or representatives may discuss their attitude to petitions – which was often sceptical of their organic popularity and dismissive of their effectiveness.

In some cases, our methods follow familiar ethical and legal guidelines. Where quantitative data or Mass Observation responses are anonymised, we do not risk sharing personal data on living people. When creating and commissioning oral history interviews, or using those conducted under guidance of the BL, we can follow best practice for participation and deposit agreements, making clear that interviewees can withdraw at any point up until archival deposit and that they may choose to close the recording or pseudo-anonymise our use of it. However, we are mindful that historical social-science studies rarely secured agreement to re-use of data, and we are conscious of the need to anonymise living (or potentially living) individuals where there is no justification for naming them (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2016). While many archives offer access to post-1920s materials subject to agreement to follow UK Data Protection Act 2018 (GDPR) restrictions, we are also likely to come across the names of individual citizens featured in published or broadcast media reports. Though not public figures in their own right, they may have been quoted as supporters of petitions on matters concerning sensitive topics, such as politics, religion, sexuality, race, or trade union membership, where there is no research need to publicise their names decades later. So, the team has a clear protocol to discuss whether and when to name individuals who have not signed a research participation agreement with our project, with a presumption against in the case of signatories to petitions rather than spokespeople for them.

The project, then, combines a wide variety of source types, each raising different methodological concerns. Taken together, a cynic might judge this to be magpie empiricism – collecting a wide variety of evidence and then analysing what exactly it adds up to – even if we remain careful of the perils and prejudices of different sources. However, we believe that the strength of historical research and mixed-methods research more generally lies precisely in the opportunities to combine and compare these different bodies of evidence. By cross-referencing themes and patterns between different sources, we can address the lacunae and frailties of each. So, for example, we will ideally identify an individual campaigner from a newspaper or TV news report; if they are alive, we will approach them for interview; if relevant authorities, receiving their petition, are alive, we can ask them too; we can explore institutional archives for the petitioner and the petitioned. This ideal type of case study will rarely be possible: For instance, episodes in the earlier twentieth century are likelier to yield access to deposited private or confidential archives, but are certain to test the longevity and vitality of the most healthy oral history interviewee – whilst in the later decades the inverse is true.

Whether working with catalogued archives, digitised OCR-searchable databases, or our own oral history interviews, we are conscious of the fact that our topic – the activity of petitioning – was usually subsumed as a practical detail in the subjects, concerns, and experiences that structured catalogues and dominated recollections. In the first instance, this means our discovery of evidence and sources is often dependent on the use of the word ‘petition’ (or its derivatives) by contemporaries or those cataloguing or summarising materials for researchers to discover. The methodological problems of digital search strategies – in databases or catalogues – only refresh the old dilemmas of discerning where relevant material might be found and when its rarity is due to accidents of survival rather than indications of typicality. Bocking-Welch, who was familiar with the Oxfam archive at the Bodleian Library from her previous research, warned the team of its unusual scale, organisation, and reach, compared to other NGOs or charities who may have deposited more haphazard records of their activities. Historical researchers owe deep debts of gratitude to archivists whose catalogue descriptions generate unanticipated “discoveries”, but also an awareness of how such practices shape their “fishing” in collections (Dunley and Pugh, 2021). Where the summary of an oral history interview or the description of an archival folder uses a synonym (“pledge”, “protest”, “campaign”) or refers to activism on a particular issue (“unemployment”, “milk prices”, “Cambodia”), we are less likely to catch it. A question then arises, as to whether our discoveries are typical – the visible tips of submerged icebergs – or reflective of the organisational capacity of groups to mount petitioning campaigns and organise their own records. Though attracted to case studies with a rich mix of available sources, we have deliberately used them comparatively with a wider body of evidence. This requires us to consider where petitioning accompanied far higher-profile activities (in the case of the poll tax riots) or to explain why a group or cause did not petition (in the case of the British Union of Fascists). It also means that we have used press coverage of well-known campaigns to test whether they eschewed petitioning as a medium or merely evade our search strategies. In these ways, we hope to avoid the methodological perils of a capacious subject, which falls outside the usual topics of cataloguing and research.

Conclusions and Contributions

Given the thematic and chronological breath of the research we have discussed here, we limited our geographic scope to petitions from or directed to Great Britain, though we hope future work will extend our approach to the island of Ireland. Even then, we are conscious that the attraction of examining a changing practice over a *longue durée* is fraught with risks: It is impossible to be comprehensive and while we can survey a range of different movements and agents, we may not fully appreciate their significance or, indeed, marginality to wider concerns as the case may be. Hopefully, though, our investigative approach adds and enhances the institutional and thematic research into twentieth-century Britain, casting new light even as depends on others’ approaches and findings to avoid stumbling in well-mapped territory through its concern for linking and drawing out the networks of associations between heterogeneous examples and ‘trace’ data of many kinds.

As well as its academic contributions, our work also aspires to inform and historicise the use of petitions as part of British democracy today. We are keen to share our insights with campaigners and those administering petitions systems, as well as interested members of the wider public and work with parliamentary officials and NGO campaigners, as well as fellow academics. This allows us to consider and address their questions in the course of our research. It also presents perils given that historical research seeks to understand the past on its own terms, in ways that may complicate, rather than direct, present beliefs and actions. Far from encouraging an uncritical approach to the past, our aim in all of this is to recover uncomfortable or alien worlds that may

not neatly or instructively align with current dilemmas or circumstances. Hence, we are conscious that a desire to share our findings must not lead us to adopting the modes of thinking familiar to civil servants or charity workers today, when we are recovering and assessing the impressions of the predecessors against a variety of grassroots, community involvement too.

So, while the project will help us think more carefully about e-petitions, in their continuities and discontinuities from earlier petitioning technologies, it is important to emphasise the wider historical contexts of campaigns. Our project cannot produce a set of lessons for petitioners or petition-mongers, but it can make both aware of the choices and assumptions they have inherited – or eluded. Moreover, its value also lies in producing an unusual glimpse at how the social, cultural, and political changes of mass democracy could be reflected – and harnessed – in a cheap, simple, familiar, but versatile genre: the humble petition.

Acknowledgements

Our contribution details the methods for our AHRC-ESRC Research Project (AH/T003847/1).

References

Aytaç, S. Erdem, and Susan C. Stokes (2019) *Why Bother? Rethinking participation in elections and protests*, Cambridge University Press.

Bochel, C. 2020. ‘Petitions Systems: Outcomes, “Success” and “Failure”’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73 (2), pp. 233-52.

Bocking-Welch, A. 2018. *British Civic Society at the End of Empire: Decolonisation, Globalisation and International Responsibility*, Manchester University Press.

Bocking-Welch, A. 2016. ‘Youth against hunger: service, activism and the mobilisation of young humanitarians in 1960s Britain’, *European Review of History / Revue européenne d'histoire*, 23(1-2), pp. 154-170.

Dearlove, J. 1973. *The Politics of Policy in Local Government: The Making and Maintenance of Public Policy in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea*, Cambridge University Press.

Dunley, R., and Pugh, J. 2021. ‘Do Archive Catalogues Make History?: Exploring Interactions between Historians and Archives’, *Twentieth-Century British History*, advance access, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwab021> [accessed 30 Sep. 2021]

Dyson, S. 2019. *Imagining Politics: Interpretations in Political Science and Political Television*, University of Michigan Press.

Gallwey, A. 2013. ‘The rewards of using archived oral histories in research: the case of the Millennium Memory Bank’, *Oral History*, 41 (2013), pp. 37-50.

Grant, W. 2004. ‘Pressure Politics: The Changing World of Pressure Groups’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 57 (2), pp. 408-419.

Hilton, M., Crowson, N., Mouhot, J-F. and McKay, J. 2012. *A Historical Guide to NGOs in Britain: Charities, Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector since 1945*, Palgrave Macmillan.

- Huistra, H. and Mellink, B. 2016. 'Phrasing history: Selecting sources in digital repositories', *Historical Methods*, 49 (4), pp. 220-29.
- Huzzey, R. and Miller, H. 2020. 'Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780–1918', *Past and Present*, 248, pp. 123-64.
- Huzzey, R. and Miller, H. 2021. 'The Politics of Petitioning: Parliament, Government, and Subscriptional Cultures in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918', *History*, 106, pp. 221-43.
- Lawrence, J. 1998. *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914*, Cambridge University Press.
- Leston-Bandeira, C. 2019. 'Parliamentary petitions and public engagement: an empirical analysis of the role of e-petitions', *Policy & Politics*, 47 (3), pp. 415-36.
- Lindner, R. and Riehm, U. 2012. 'Broadening Participation Through E-Petitions? An Empirical Study of Petitions to the German Parliament', *Policy & Internet*, 3 (1), pp. 1-23.
- McCarthy, H. 2007. 'Parties, voluntary associations, and democratic politics in Interwar Britain', *Historical Journal*, 55 (1), pp. 221-38.
- McCarthy, H., and Thane, P. 2011. 'The Politics of Association in Industrial Society', *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2), pp. 217-229.
- Miller, H. 2019. 'Introduction: The transformation of petitioning in the long nineteenth century (1780-1914)', *Social Science History*, 43 (3), pp. 409-429.
- Parry, G., Moyser, G. and Day, N. 1992. *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*, Cambridge University Press.
- Pedersen, S. 2012. 'Samoa on the World Stage: Petitions and Peoples before the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40 (2), pp. 231-61.
- Persson, M. and Solevid, M. 2014. 'Measuring Political Participation: Testing social desirability bias in a web-survey experiment', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 26 (1), pp. 98–112.
- Pollen, A. 2013. 'Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: "Scientifically, about as valuable as a chimpanzee's tea party at the zoo"?'', *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (2013), pp. 213-35.
- Readman, P. 2009. 'The State of Twentieth-Century British Political History', *Journal of Policy History*, 21 (3), pp. 219-238.
- Summerfield, P. 2019. *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice*, Routledge.
- Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, F. 2016. 'New Perspectives From Unstructured Interviews: Young Women, Gender, and Sexuality on the Isle of Sheppey in 1980', *SAGE Open*, DOI: 10.1177/2158244016679474.

Wright, S. 2016. "Success" and online political participation: The case of Downing Street E-petitions', *Information, Communication & Society*, 19 (6), pp. 843-57.