

What is the point of petitions in British politics?

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Just under 2 million people signed a petition opposing Donald Trump's state visit to the UK – half the number of those who signed one asking for a second EU referendum. With the role of petitions taking centre stage as a result, [Cristina Leston-Bandeira](#) situates the process within a broader policy-making context. She explains that petitions are an effective way of raising awareness or showing discontent, and that the adoption of public demands into policy remains subject to the usual political process.



This past week has seen a flurry of talk about petitions, mostly wondering about their point. Is there actually any point to petitions? Do they achieve anything? To ask this is the same as asking if there is any point in politics, or if there is any point in parliament (which I can see some may say no, there is no point in those neither...). The question makes three assumptions: that changing policy is a straight-forward, quick, linear process; that Parliament (as in opposition and backbenchers) changes policy all the time; and that the only point of political institutions is to change policy. None of these is true.

Instead, changing policy is a messy process; and achieving change often requires long and convoluted processes of campaigning combined with moments of exerting pressure at the right time. Likewise, there is more to politics than achieving change – other functions such as the safety valve are as important. This indicates the point of petitions: they are simply another political campaign tool. And as many other things in politics, reducing petitions to one stereotype is far too simplistic.

We can summarise the different types of petitions to two: protest petitions and substantive petitions.



Protest petitions aim mainly to show discontent; they play the same role as demonstrations: safety valve, expression of dissatisfaction in relation to an act, decision or policy. In an age of internet and social media, protest petitions can gain traction very quickly. The latest Trump petitions are but one example of this type, as was the one that received over [4 million signatures](#) asking for a second EU referendum. Like [Pink Martini's butterfly](#), a protest petition can fly very high and die very quickly too – as soon as the safety valve role has taken effect. Or, it can mutate itself into new repeated protest petitions. Protest petitions thus serve a role of safety valve (key for any

political system).

Substantive petitions aim primarily to change a situation. This tends to relate to issues that people feel very strongly about, either because they are personal and affect them directly, or because they are part of a very strong set of convictions held over a period of time. So these are very different to protest petitions. Recent examples include the petitions on [Meningitis B](#), the one(s) on [Grouse shooting](#), and the one asking that [stillborn babies are given a birth certificate](#) – the latter one with far fewer signatures. Ultimately, this type of petition aims to change a situation, but in the process of doing so it aims first and foremost to raise awareness.

As we know, it is very rare for policy change to happen quickly; if not originated by the government, it is usually the result of sustained campaigning through a variety of means. Whether a substantive petition achieves a change in policy is often not the main question. The key starting point is whether it raises awareness of the issue, and whether it raises the profile of a specific issue enough to lead government to eventually agree for change. After all, one of the most famous cases of petitioning – [votes for women](#) (if you prefer a more grown-up account [then try here](#)) – took a few years and more than one petition before it actually led to any change. So, different petitions have different purposes and perform different roles. Petitions also enable what is known as the “fire-alarm” role: an opportunity to raise issues bottom-up, outside the political agenda.

A different question is: do processes in place enable petitions to achieve their aims? There are of course many e-petitions systems out there – most of which are not actually integrated into the political process. The integration between petition and formal political decision-making is a key factor in determining a petition’s likelihood to lead to any change or to demonstrate protest effectively. The introduction of the House of Commons’ new [e-petitions system](#) in 2015 facilitates this integration. Contrary to many of other online petitions sites, Parliament’s is actually linked to a formal process, bolting in both parliament and government.

Importantly, the system is managed by a Select Committee, the Petitions Committee, which can call for written and oral evidence through a variety of formats – see for instance the [evidence submitted](#) for the grouse shooting inquiry, in traditional select committee evidence format; but also initiatives such as the [online forum](#) on the petition calling for retail to be closed on Boxing day, which received more than 8,000 responses. Or the ongoing petition asking for a [max of £1200 on car insurance for 18-25 year olds](#), for which the Committee held a survey of the public (see [here for an overview of the engagement work](#) developed by the Committee in its first year).

Oral evidence sessions are particularly valuable in raising the profile of a petition to political representatives, potentially leading to solutions to the issue raised. See for instance the oral evidence sessions for the [high heels and dress code petition](#) or the ones for better [funding for research into brain tumour](#). Importantly, as any other Select Committee, the Petitions Committee can hold inquiries, which besides written and oral evidence submitted, can result into a final report. Research by [Russell and Benton](#) has shown that select committees’ reports have great capacity to impact on government policy; if not always at the level of direct influence, often at the level of agenda setting. Since its inauguration in 2015, the Petitions Committee has led [five inquiries](#), two of which have resulted in reports. So, the Petitions Committee can achieve a great deal; and we haven’t touched on the much talked about debates yet.

The Westminster Hall debates on petitions are often seen as the jewel in the crown of Parliament’s petitions process. This is clearly the parliamentary procedure that gets the most attention from the public and media. If a petition achieves 100,000 signatures, the Committee considers whether it should hold a debate about it. As of 6 February 2017, the Petitions Committee had held [30 such debates](#), with three more scheduled to take place.

Besides the visibility a debate gains, it is an opportunity for constituents to lobby their MPs to attend the debate and therefore become more aware of the issues raised – see the [packed room for the petition debate on WASPI](#), for example. Importantly, it is also a way of putting the matter on the official record – not just the issues raised by the petition, but also the views of MPs, parties, and government. Regardless of their visibility, all petitions debates include an intervention from the relevant Minister (and Shadow Minister), which can be key to developing the

success of a campaign. For protest petitions, a debate is part of their safety valve role. For substantive petitions, a debate together with the opportunity to submit evidence, can help progress a specific issue's campaign.

So, coming back to our starting question about the point of petitions, this is an easy question to answer. Parliament's petitions are about demonstrating discontent and developing campaigns to address specific issues, as many other political tools are – from Early Day Motions, to letters to MPs, to questions to the government. They emanate from the public, but they are bolted into political process. And the government's policy change on the sugar tax, its recognition that funding levels for brain tumour research are low, and the agreement to review how decisions about the cost-effectiveness of vaccines are made (Meningitis) are tangent examples of substantive petitions that have already led to specific outcomes (see [the committee's report, p.7-8](#)). But all petitions have the potential to develop into wider campaigns and/or to express discontent on specific issues; particularly if bolted into a formal political process, such as Parliament's new e-petitions system.

The more difficult question is the extent to which this tool is used by the usual suspects rather than those who would not usually get involved in politics. But that's a different question (though, again, not one for a simplistic answer).

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