

Civic Engagement and Policy Setting Before the Age of Social Media: How Citizens Used Petitions to Influence Government*

Benjamin Schneer[†]

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Abstract

What are social media's prospects for meaningfully influencing public policy in the future? This paper draws on my (and co-authors') research on petitioning—one form of direct contact between citizens and government officials—to provide context for the efforts unfolding online today. I examine petitioning during several critical moments—in the first Congress, during the Bank War of 1833–1834, and during the Progressive Era—to characterize the conditions under which direct contact is most likely to influence policy.

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[†]Ph.D. Candidate, Harvard University, Department of Government, bschneer@fas.harvard.edu.

1 Introduction

Social media facilitates communication between citizens and lawmakers; it makes feasible the transmission of information between thousands of people, from widely dispersed geographic areas, in real-time. This technological advance in communication presents the tantalizing possibility of a new level of responsiveness of government to citizens. But, as Katz, Barris, and Jain (2013) outlines, in many ways the promise of social media as a mechanism for incorporating the public into policy-making has gone unfulfilled. In the Obama White House, attempts at social media engagement such as administration officials holding “office hours” on Twitter, or soliciting petitions through *We the People*, have amounted to exercises in public relations. Rather than providing a platform for government actors to “co-determine” policy with the public, these forms of communication have largely been used to distribute talking points or to give the public the sense of being heard without taking substantive action (Katz, Barris, and Jain, 2013).

What are social media’s prospects for meaningfully influencing public policy in the future? Making this forecast requires understanding the historical pattern of attempts to communicate with lawmakers to effect policy change. This paper draws on my (and co-authors’) research on petitioning—one form of direct contact between citizens and government officials—to provide context for the efforts unfolding online today.

The history of petitioning illustrates that communication with government can influence public policy, though often in indirect and even unforeseen ways. I examine petitioning during several critical moments—in the first Congress, during the Bank War of 1833–1834, and during the Progressive Era—to determine who is likely to engage in petitioning and to characterize the conditions under which this form of direct contact between citizens and officials is most likely to influence policy. Petitioners have faced a range of obstacles, including: (1) Politicians who may not agree with petitioners’ requests or who do not have incentives to take them into account; (2) Limits on organizational/administrative capacity to process petitions, which may make it easy for them to be overlooked or tabled indefinitely; and, (3) Politicians who may seek to co-opt petitioning for their own political ends.

My assessment is that petitions have not been hugely successful at provoking direct policy change

in the cases I examine. If, following Katz, Barris, and Jain (2013), we can categorize communication with government into either gathering (1) input from the public, (2) pushing information to the public, or (3) co-determining policy with the public, then the bulk of off-line petitioning activity falls into categories (1) and (2). However, even if government officials have tended not to make legitimate attempts to respond to petitions, the cases I examine show that citizen participation through acts like petitioning can help lead to the development of political movements that ultimately cause significant policy change. This is my central claim: Despite the numerous and varied obstacles to using direct contact successfully (whether it be petitioning in the 19th Century or online social media in the 21st Century), it can still be a meaningful catalyst for policy change—not because politicians listen to any single request, but rather because petitioning campaigns can help facilitate political mobilization that eventually has an impact.

2 Petitioning During the First Congress

Calling to order March 4, 1789 in New York City, the First Congress met for two sessions of approximately 220 days. A third 88-day session was held in Philadelphia from December 1790 through February 1791. In addition to setting forth a blueprint for the organization of the executive, judicial and legislative branches along with a plan for public finance, the First Congress also received and considered more than 600 petitions.

A petition is defined as an organized request for policy or for political redress. It contains two key elements: First, a “prayer” that states the request or grievance; Second, a signatory list in which persons sign their name to their request (Carpenter and Moore, 2014). It is a non-binding request, as opposed to the more formal instructions that were sometimes sent (for example, by state legislatures) to representatives. Some lawmakers proposed that the First Amendment give citizens the right to formally instruct representatives (Manin, 1997). Ultimately, however, the Founders opted not to place a doctrine of instructions in the First Amendment and instead settled on granting citizens the right “to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

The circumstances of the First Congress were quite amenable for consideration of petitions. There was little existing precedent set (both in terms of procedure for how petitions would be

handled and in terms of broader public policy); the scale and scope of government was also small enough that members of Congress had time to consider most petitioners' requests. When Congress received petitions on an issue of public policy, they formed a grand committee, which included a member from each state, to consider the issue raised. Examining the process for antislavery petitions sent during the First Congress sheds some light on the prospects of co-determining policy using petitions.

Abolitionists sent three antislavery petitions during the course of the First Congress: one each from the Philadelphia and New York meetings of the Society of Friends (i.e., Quakers), and one from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. The petition from the Philadelphia meeting referred to the "abominable commerce" of slavery, asking for Congress to examine the topic so that "a sincere and impartial enquiry may take place" (Bowling, DiGiacomantonio, and Bickford, 1998). In the House, the memorials were presented February 11–12, 1790; in the Senate, they arrived, accompanied by a letter from Benjamin Franklin on February 15th. According to accounts, "the Senate spent almost the entire day in intense debate before deciding to do nothing with the petitions" (Bowling, DiGiacomantonio, and Bickford, 1998, p. 316).

In the House, the process was considerably more involved. A committee formed to examine the issues raised by the petition, specifically with regard to the powers vested in Congress concerning slavery. Delivery of the petition also provided a reason for several Quaker leaders to come to Congress, where they engaged in something resembling lobbying. They watched the debates engendered by their petitions in the gallery of the House, checked on the process of the committee, and even testified formally before the committee. In this manner, the formal mechanism of the petition facilitated additional involvement in the policy-making process.

On March 5th, the committee submitted a report back to the House. Their response highlighted the ways in which Congress was constrained based on the Constitution: Congress could not prohibit the importation of persons until 1808 or interfere in the emancipation of slaves already in the states; on the other hand, Congress did have the authority to place a tax or duty on any future slaves imported in the future as well as to ensure humane treatment of slaves in their passage to the United States, among other things. Thus, Congress would use its authority "for the humane objects of

memorialists, so far as they can be promoted” (Bowling, DiGiacomantonio, and Bickford, 1998, p. 337).

The petitioners’ efforts led to considerable debate but yielded no immediate returns. Southern members of Congress succeeded in having the committee report tabled on March 23rd, which ended the debate on slavery in the First Congress. In some sense, the petitioning campaign of the Quakers had its intended effect: they placed their issue squarely on the congressional agenda. The House spent considerable time wrestling with the issue of slavery before eventually doing nothing. Yet, in the years that followed, sustained petitioning of Congress by Quakers eventually achieved a direct success. In 1794, Congress responded to another Quaker petition by banning the export of slaves from the United States.

The case of anti-slavery petitioning in the first Congress illustrates several stylized facts about the promise, and limits, of petitioning. First, co-determination of policy does not necessarily mean immediate or noticeable policy change. Depending on the issue, the best a group can hope for is genuine engagement and debate of a policy issue by policy-makers. Second, communication can be part of a portfolio of techniques employed to bring pressure to bear on policy-makers. The Quakers also had their petition re-printed in a newspaper, and they travelled to Congress themselves. The formal mechanism of the petition may have served as a pre-text for more direct engagement. It gave an outside group formal standing (as petitioners) where otherwise they would have had none. Finally, petitioning efforts themselves may take years to yield results; external political conditions have as much to do with policy change as the efforts of a group exerting political pressure. This is a pattern borne out again and again when it comes to petitioning; for example, women began petitioning for suffrage at least as early as the 1870s; it took close to fifty years before Congress responded to their requests. Since policy change often occurs very slowly, even sustained petitioning drives may not appear to yield results for many years.

3 Petitioning in Response to the Bank War

The second historical case illustrates another obstacle to co-determination of policy through direct contact: elites may manipulate grassroots efforts to influence lawmakers. The petitioning campaign

responding to President Andrew Jackson's removal of the deposits from the Bank of the United States (BUS) serves as an excellent example. When Jackson removed the public deposits, he touched off a political and economic crisis. In this section, I trace out how elites harnessed popular outrage against Jackson using a petitioning campaign; however, this campaign grew take on a life of its own, and ultimately helped lay the groundwork for the development of the Whig Party.

The petitioning campaign responding to Jackson's removal of the deposits originated from the top down. Senator Henry Clay, who with his allies controlled the Senate, hoped to officially censure Jackson for his actions against the BUS. While Clay and his allies held an eight person advantage over the Jacksonians in the Senate, they found themselves outnumbered substantially in the House. The shortfall in votes in the House prevented passage of the proposed censures as well as any attempt to address removal of the deposits. Clay conceived an idea to pressure undecided House members and Jackson himself. He would encourage supporters to petition Congress, outlining their distress at the removal of the deposits. A forceful show of public opinion might break the gridlock preventing a meaningful response to Jackson's removal (Holt, 2003, p. 26).

Clay's letters reveal that he had an early hand in the organization of public meetings and the submission of resolutions and memorials. In a December 1833 letter to Bank President Nicholas Biddle, Clay hinted that "...it would be well to have a general meeting of the people to memorialize Congress in favor of a restoration of the deposits. Such an example might be followed elsewhere; and it would be more influential as it might be more general." Biddle responded affirmatively to Clay's request and immediately set to work organizing meetings in Philadelphia. Several weeks later, in a letter to his son, Clay remarked that "Popular meetings are taking place everywhere, and our success in [the House] will depend upon the extent of the re-action among the people. Do you intend at Lexington to have a meeting? It might do good" (Clay, 1984, p. 681, 692).

In the early months of 1834, Clay came to see public outcry expressed through petitions as an increasingly important lever for swaying members of Congress sympathetic to Jackson. After the state legislatures in New Jersey and Ohio passed resolutions instructing their representatives to oppose restoration of the deposits, Clay remarked that "unless the popular demonstration should be very powerful and general the Administration will maintain its majority in the House" (Clay, 1984,

p. 691). While Clay and his allies clearly encouraged and orchestrated the early public meetings, the wave of petitioning also quickly gained a momentum of its own, giving an outlet to citizen concerns about the crisis. The volume of meetings and petitions submitted to Congress quickly expanded beyond Clay's immediate network of contacts. In fact, the leaders of public meetings—often a committee whose members' names were published—had few formal links to state or national politics. Rather, most meeting organizers appear to have been local notables, leaders of guilds or unions, and occasionally even military officers.¹

Memorialists sent in a variety of different resolutions, though most shared some version of the common themes of decrying executive tyranny and deploring the “pecuniary embarrassment” following removal of the deposits. One example petition from Philadelphia calls attention both to the “Distress... everywhere prevailing” caused by the threat of deposit removal and to a set of themes anchored in republican political discourse. Most of the petition's prayer is devoted not to currency and financial issues, but to the actions of the Jackson administration. “There is no warrant in the Constitution and Laws for the act of the Executive,” the memorialists complain, and they pray that Congress remove the deposits from “the arbitrary and uncontrollable disposition” of Treasury Secretary Roger Taney. The signatory list suggests that, in fact and in self-presentation, the petitioners described themselves as laborers—painters and glazers, hardware merchants, piano makers, bricklayers, smiths. Clay would seize upon this point to note that the petitions were coming from a wide range of social interests and that it was not merely the deposits issue, but the inflammatory actions of “Jackson men,” that were sowing such broad discontent.

Petitions of this sort both reflected and attracted the action of a broad range of antebellum elites. Key allies such as Virginia's Littleton Tazewell joined in the action. As the *Spectator* of

¹For an example of a meeting presided over by military officers, see *Scioto Gazette*, March 19, 1834: “...Gen. Duncan McArthur was called to the Chair, Col. Abraham Hagler, George Will, Esq. and Gen. James Manary chosen Vice Presidents...” Clay's allies agreed with his strategic emphasis on mobilizing public opinion, though the concept of public opinion and public sentiment was being transformed even as they wrote by developments in the electorate, pamphleteering, the aftermath the Second Great Awakening and the testimonial energies to which it gave rise. Peter B. Porter (writing from Black Rock, N.Y.) to Clay, January 5, 1834 Clay (1984, p. 686): “I am glad to see the question of the deposits progress so *moderately* in both houses; for I think you will constantly gain by delay, if not continued too long. Every day's discussion aided by manifestations of public sentiment, and evidences of public distress, cannot, I think, fail to produce some effect on the Jackson men in Congress who have not abjured every sentiment of patriotism” (emphasis in original). On some of the transformations of political discourse in these years, see Howe (2009); Gustafson (2011, esp. Chapter 4).

Norfolk reported in January 1834, Tazewell's leadership at a Norfolk meeting was centered upon the issue of executive usurpation: "Mr. Tazewell's gigantic mind was elicited on this important occasion—the flood of light which he shed upon all the topics connected with it, and the strong illustration which his facts and his arguments afforded of a dangerous assumption of power by the Executive—carried conviction to every mind present."² Some went further and expressed a lack of confidence in the state banks (now holding the deposits removed from the BUS), defended borrowing practices, warned against the risks of a metallic currency, thanked members of Congress for their actions against removal of the deposits, or even asked for a recharter of the BUS. Resolutions asking for a recharter provide additional evidence that the petitioning campaign expanded beyond the hands of members of Congress. Communicating with allies and taking stock of the situation in Congress and state electorates, Clay came to realize early on that a recharter of the BUS would be impracticable and a strategic misstep. In early February, he wrote to Biddle that "the Bank ought to be kept in the rear; the usurpation in front. If we take up the Bank, we play into the adversary's hands [sic]... we may and probably would divide about the terms of the charter, and finally do nothing leaving things as they are."³

Although comforted and energized by the wave of petitions, Clay began to express doubts over the prospect of success for the petitioning campaign in Congress by the end of March 1834. In a letter to his son, he noted that while no direct vote in either the House or the Senate had occurred, it was "well understood that a majority in the H. of R. still exists in favor of the measure of the Executive" (Clay, 1984, p. 705). Furthermore, he began mentioning upcoming elections in Kentucky, New York and Virginia as alternative demonstrations of public opinion that might influence members of Congress. That is, it appeared to Clay that the petitions had not done enough, at least in the House. On March 27th, Clay gave a closing speech on the removal of the deposits and his resolutions for censure. His measure for censure against Jackson passed in the Senate by a vote of 26–20. But with no movement in the House, he confided in Tazewell that there was "no prospect of Congress regaining its lawful custody of the Treasury, unless the President shall voluntarily

²On Tazewell's leadership of the Norfolk meeting, consult *Spectator*, January 16, 1834.

³On the Second Bank as a regulator of state financial institutions, consult Lomazoff (2012). Clay to Biddle, February 2, 1834, Clay (1984, p. 694); pressing the Bank recharter issue, Clay believed, would only have supplied fresh energy and evidence to Jackson's "assertions that the only question is a renewal of the Charter."

loosen his grasp of it” (Clay, 1984, p. 710). Even as Clay had expressed reservations, petitions continued to stream into Congress through April, May and June. Considering that prospects for restoration of the deposits had likely dimmed at this point, the fact that petitions continued to come in provides additional evidence of mobilization that went beyond manipulations from elites in Congress.

Yet throughout the spring of 1834, Clay and his allies began to detect that the petitioning campaign was helpful in shaping and even measuring public opinion even as the House was a lost cause. At the dawn of a new year, New York ally Peter B. Porter could write to Clay that the state of public opinion looked hopeless: “The people of this country appear to be perfectly spellbound. Lulling at their ease, in wealth and luxury, they seem to be entirely unconscious of the causes of their prosperity, and insensible to the dangers which threaten it; and if they are not awakened to a sense of their true situation by the bold and prophetic expostulations of yourself and copatriots, nothing short of the actual adversity which must soon follow (and which, if not the best, is always the most infallible instructor) can teach them practical wisdom.” Yet just six weeks later, Porter wrote of his sense that the tide was turning against Jackson, and that the debate had exposed weaknesses in the Administration. Clay himself began to focus less upon restoration of deposits and more on the immediate aim of shaping the “will” of the public, an entity that could be shaped, expressed, produced, displayed and even enumerated. As he wrote to his ally James Brown of Philadelphia, restoration of the Bank’s deposits “depends upon the People, and demonstrations of their will. They can produce it.” And to Littleton Tazewell, now on his way to taking office as governor of Virginia, Clay could write that “We are gaining ground, and I am not without hopes of final success in the H. of R. It will depend on the amount of public opinion brought to act upon it. And in that respect the movements in Virginia have been of inestimable service.”⁴

While expressing mixed opinions of his prospects for restoration in the House, Clay expressed his growing sense that the petitioning momentum was expanding, that anti-Jackson energies were

⁴Porter to Clay (quotation), January 5, 1834, Clay (1984, pp. 685–686) and Porter to Clay (expressing judgment that the longer the deposits debate goes, the stronger Clay’s position will become), February 15, 1834, Clay (1984, p. 698). Clay to Littleton W. Tazewell, February 1, 1834, Clay (1984, p. 693); see also Clay to Clay, Jr., February 19, 1834, Clay (1984, p. 699). On Virginia’s resolutions against removal of the deposits, consult *Niles’ Weekly Register*: V. 45 1834 (2009, January 4, 1834; p. 309) and *Niles’ Weekly Register*: V. 45 1834 (2009, February 1, 1834; p. 388).

appearing in several states, and that support for the petitioning campaign extended well beyond the anti-Jackson vote of 1832. In March, April and May, Clay took repeatedly to the Senate floor to draw attention to the size of the individual petitions, the diversity of towns and states that were producing them, and to the breadth of support. Even “Jackson men” and committed “Administration men” were petitioning and remonstrating Congress against deposit removal, and many of the petitions mentioned the theme of executive usurpation. In late March and early April, Clay’s focus turned more numerical, even statistical. After being alerted to an Erie county petition with between 4,000 and 5,000 signatures, Clay formally proposed that the Senate collect and summarize all of the petitions that had been received on the deposits issue. In April and in June, he took the Senate floor to draw attention to the Senate’s tally (150,000) of signers of petitions and memorials critical of Jackson’s fiscal policies and praying Congress for economic relief. He even chided the opposition for not seeing this as “one of the best tests of public opinion, next to the evidence which the ballot-boxes afford.”⁵

Though the efforts to censure Jackson in Congress ultimately failed, the process of gathering signatures and communicating dissatisfaction to Congress had a considerable effect in the long-run. Even if it originated with elites, the petitioning campaign itself played a key role in developing capacity for what would later become Whig party organization at the state and local level. It was common for local leaders of meetings on removal of the deposits to travel to Washington DC and hand-deliver their petitions. In some cases, local meetings can even be directly linked to attempts

⁵Clay offered remarks on petitions from Troy, New York, and Berks County, Pennsylvania and noted that the support went well beyond the anti-Jackson vote the in 1832 election, *The Register of Debates; being a Report of the Speeches delivered in the Two Houses of Congress reported for the United States Telegraph ... 23rd Congress - 1st Session. Vol. I.* (1834, p. 681, 718). For similar remarks on a petition from Louisville, Kentucky, consult *The Register of Debates; being a Report of the Speeches delivered in the Two Houses of Congress reported for the United States Telegraph ... 23rd Congress - 1st Session. Vol. I.* (1834, pp. 719–724). For remarks on 400 signers of a petition being “Administration men,” and “Jackson men,” see *The Register of Debates; being a Report of the Speeches delivered in the Two Houses of Congress reported for the United States Telegraph ... 23rd Congress - 1st Session. Vol. I.* (1834, March 4, 1834; pp. 802–803, 860–862). On the Erie County petition with 4,000–5,000 signatures, see Porter to Clay, March 30, 1834, Clay (1984, p. 709). For Clay’s suggestion that the Senate compile and analyze all petitions and memorials presented to the Congress on the issue, see *The Register of Debates; being a Report of the Speeches delivered in the Two Houses of Congress reported for the United States Telegraph ... 23rd Congress - 1st Session. Vol. I.* (1834, pp. 1302–1305, 1310–1315); Clay (1984, pp. 713–715, 733). For remarks on petition totals and their representation and measurement of public opinion, see Clay’s Comment in Senate, April 11, 1834 and Remark in Senate, June 9, 1834, *The Register of Debates; being a Report of the Speeches delivered in the Two Houses of Congress reported for the United States Telegraph ... 23rd Congress - 1st Session. Vol. I.* (1834, pp. 2036–2037); *The Congressional Globe: 23rd Congress* (1834, p. 464).

to organize for local elections and to develop the beginnings of a state party infrastructure. For example, the resolutions from one meeting in Ohio explicitly stated that they would be appointing delegates to travel to an upcoming convention where a candidate would be chosen to run in the upcoming race for Governor.⁶

The meetings where petitions were drawn up and signed provided an opportunity to develop additional organizational expertise. Invariably, newspaper accounts of such meetings described the appointment of a committee or board to lead the event. For example, the Alexandria Gazette recounted: “On motion of R.H. Henderson, Esq. Col. William Ellsey was called to the chair and F. Hixon, Esq. appointed Secretary. Cuthbert Powell, Esq. addressed the Meeting, going into a general examination of the subject; and moved that a committee [...] be appointed to report resolutions.”⁷ Committees drafted points of order, resolutions, and were also responsible for the submission of the agreed upon memorial to Congress. The committees also sought coverage of their activities in local newspapers, which represented a concerted effort to gain publicity and spread their message. Resolutions drafted at the meetings often contained explicit instructions to distribute the meeting minutes for publication to nearby newspapers.

Occasionally, meeting attendees appear to have subsequently served as Whig Party politicians. Examining who was on leadership committees for just a handful of meetings (recorded in local newspapers) allowed for identification of several people who held office as Whigs, sometimes many years later. The Alexandria Gazette reported that one Cuthbert Powell, Esq. served on the leadership committee at a January 13, 1834 public meeting in Loudon County, VA.⁸ Powell later served as a Whig in the 27th Congress.⁹ David Crooker Magoun led a March 8, 1834 meeting in Bath, ME;¹⁰ he later served as the town’s Whig mayor.¹¹

All told, the wave of petitioning that occurred during the Bank War illustrates many different

⁶The full text of the memorial, along with meeting minutes and a list of citizens attending, was printed. *Scioto Gazette*, March 19, 1834.

⁷This passage came from an account of a public meeting of the people of Loudoun County. The report remarked that it was a “very numerous Meeting.” *Alexandria Gazette*, January 21, 1834.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹See the biographical summary available from the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=P000479>.

¹⁰Portland Advertiser, March 18, 1834

¹¹Records on Magoun are scarce; however, his “Political Graveyard” entry notes that he served as Mayor of Bath, Sagadahoc County, ME. See <http://politicalgraveyard.com/bio/magician-magruder.html>.

facets related to co-determination of policy through petitioning. While the petitioning drive started with a series of manipulations by elites, its origins did not preclude it from representing the authentic views of a number of citizens. Elites may have helped channel the communication of citizens outraged by Jackson's action against the BUS, but these sentiments had to exist in the first place. This case also illustrates a core contention of this paper: the process of engaging in a petitioning campaign can have spill-over effects that indirectly contribute to policy changes. In this instance, petitioning planted the seeds that ultimately grew into more substantial party organizations. It mobilized citizens, facilitated the development of political skills, and allowed like-minded citizens to identify each other. Thus, even though the petitions did not yield a direct policy change—and in fact, were perhaps most successful as a (very biased) illustration of public opinion to Congress—they ultimately had an important indirect effect.

4 Petitioning During the Progressive Era

The two previous case studies make clear both advantages and limits of petitioning (and, perhaps, of direct contact in general) as a mechanism for influencing policy. A broader question, that requires a more sweeping view of the history of petitioning, is: Who is likely to petition and under what circumstances? Any assessment of how direct contact influences policy should try to consider these questions, as they speak to what groups are advantaged by a system that incorporates these or similar forms of political influence.

To provide the beginnings of an answer to these questions, I examined petitions sent to Congress between 1880 and 1950. Using the Congressional Record, I assembled data tracking all petitions submitted to Congress in this time—over half a million petitions in all. While this data can lead to a number of insights and follow-up questions, here I focus on two themes. First, the people that organize petitioning campaigns were likely not to be representative of the population as a whole. Second, in moments such as the Progressive Era, the sheer volume of petitioning rendered it difficult for any single petition to have noticeable influence on public policy.

Table 1: Characteristics of Petition Organizers

	Estimate	LCI	UCI
Demographic Characteristics			
Age (Mean)	50.721	47.948	53.493
Female	0.125	0.073	0.177
Black	0.009	0	0.02
White	0.991	0.98	1
Petition Characteristics			
Signatures (Mean)	244.309	36.362	452.256
Industry/Employment Characteristics			
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	0.136	0.068	0.204
Business and Professional Services	0.391	0.288	0.495
Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate	0.089	0.022	0.157
Manufacturing	0.061	0.031	0.091
Mining or Construction	0.106	0.04	0.173
Personal Services	0.039	0.017	0.06
Public Administration	0.035	0.015	0.055
Transportation, Communication, and Other	0.01	0	0.02
Wholesale and Retail Trade	0.133	0.065	0.201

Notes: This table presents estimates of the characteristics of petitioners, including age, sex and occupation. Estimates refer to shares unless otherwise noted. To estimate these numbers, I drew a random sample of just under 350 Senate petitions (from Congresses aligned with census years) and searched through these petitions to identify the names of the organizers. Then, I used names and geographic information to find census information on each person. Estimates were then calculated using post-stratification weights by Congress.

Like most other political activities, direct contact with a representative requires political resources along with some existing level of political engagement. I took a random sample of names of petition organizers for census years between 1880 and 1940 (the last year for which individual census records have been made public) and, where possible, matched them to census data so that I could provide a snapshot of who was petitioning in this time frame. Table 1 displays the results. The averages illustrate that petitions tended to originate with individuals who had a somewhat skewed set of characteristics. First, at an age of over fifty years old, the average petition organizer was probably slightly older than the average in the population. Second, despite petitioning's reputation as an outlet for those who are potentially disenfranchised or who have no other recourse, women and minorities were far less likely to petition during this time. Under fifteen percent of all petitions came from women, despite considerable involvement by women in petitioning efforts

that sought to gain the franchise and to implement prohibition. Racial minorities, at least in the sample data that I collected, petitioned Congress extremely rarely. The few examples I did find tended to be on issues related to voting rights and disenfranchisement. The industry/employment characteristics are perhaps less informative. A large share of petitioners came from employment groups categorized as Business and Professional Services; however, this is slightly misleading as a substantial share of this group is comprised of members of the clergy.

Other organized membership groups and associations also made considerable use of petitioning. In order to estimate a lower bound on petitioning by these organizations, I used a list compiled in Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson (2000) of organizations that had memberships comprising 1% of the population or greater at some point in their history. These include groups such as the “Ancient and Accepted Free Masons”, “Independent Order of Odd Fellows”, “Knights of Pythias”, “Patrons of Husbandry” and “Woman’s Christian Temperance Union”—close to fifty groups in all. On average, these groups appear to have submitted between 5% and 10% of all petitions in the time frame under consideration.

When was petitioning most prevalent? During the Progressive Era in particular, the total number of petitions submitted to Congress was considerable. Petitioners advocating for a range of issues—moral questions such as prohibition, women’s suffrage, sabbatarianism, and others along with political and economic issues such as tariffs, for example—all made great use of petitioning. Figure 1 illustrates my estimates of the extent of petitioning from 1880–1950. Petitions submitted to Congress reached their peak around 1910 before eventually declining.

The sheer volume of petitions raises questions about how policy-makers could possibly have the organizational capacity to meaningfully respond to them. In practice, upon arrival in the House or the Senate, petitions were referred to committees depending on their subject. It appears members of Congress used petitions in the aggregate, but it was rare for an individual petition to effect change on its own. Examining petitions in the aggregate may have allowed members of Congress to read the tea leaves of public opinion, but it did not serve as a crucial tool in day-to-day lawmaking.

Figure 1: Petitioning Congress Over Time



Notes: From 1880–1950, there has been considerable variation in the total number of petitions sent to Congress. From peaks at the turn of the century, petitioning steadily declined towards the end of the time period.

5 Conclusion

If we view social media’s use in politics as a modern form of traditional direct contact, then the long history of direct contact between citizens and representatives should inform our expectations for the future. This paper has given a brief tour of research on one type of direct contact, i.e., petitioning, in an effort to illustrate both the promise and potential pitfalls for social media as it evolves as a political tool. While I hesitate to draw too direct a line between 19th century petitions and 21st century Twitter conversations, my analysis suggests that age-old forms of political communication faced many of the same challenges as social media does today. In some areas, technological advances may present potential solutions to old problems. For example, issues of administrative capacity such as processing thousands of petitions probably no longer present much difficulty. Technology has also drastically reduced the costs of communication; petitioners no longer have to walk miles canvassing for signatures. Perhaps reduced costs allow new groups to grow more involved in politics

online. However, for the most part, all of the old barriers to giving citizens meaningful voices as co-determiners of public policy still remain. Politicians still do not have strong incentives to respond to policy requests; even meaningful policy change often occurs at a glacial pace; and, seemingly authentic citizen participation is still subject to manipulation by elites. Despite these obstacles, the history of petitioning would nonetheless suggest that using social media as a political tool is not a fruitless endeavor. Just as with off-line petitioning in previous centuries, online social media offers individuals the ability to express their views to government and, as a result, the possibility of growing politically involved in other ways. In the long run, this can lead to meaningful policy change.

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