


SYMPOSIUM

## Daniel Carpenter's *Democracy by Petition*: A Symposium Introduction

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*Democracy by Petition*, the recent book by political scientist Daniel Carpenter, explores in voluminous and revelatory detail the largely forgotten role of petitions as a core element of the building of American democracy in the nineteenth century. The book is based on a remarkable data set of thousands of petitions, comprising millions of signatories, painstakingly assembled from archives spanning North America, including Canada and Mexico as well as the United States. While many of us associate petitions principally with the antislavery movement in the United States, Carpenter shows that the petition was a much more widely used political tool in nineteenth-century North America, especially in the hands of people who were at the margins of emerging electoral democracy: women, Indigenous people, workers, and farmers who remained subject to what amounted to feudal lordship, along with both enslaved people and free Black Americans. The book chronicles the rise (and eventual decline) of the petition as a core element of representation, the essential democratic connection between governors and governed, and shows how petitions continually helped build and reshape American democracy through the nineteenth century.

In this symposium, based on panels convened at the annual meetings of the Social Science History Association and the American Political Science Association in 2021, four scholars representing a range of disciplinary approaches react to Carpenter's book: legal scholar Maggie Blackhawk, historian Allan Greer, political scientist Frances Lee, and political theorist Nadia Urbinati. Their conversation—and Carpenter's response—reveal just a bit of the depth and range of Carpenter's achievement and begin to raise some critical questions about power, democracy, and American political development.

*Democracy by Petition* is not just about petitions as a tool that allowed people collectively to articulate claims and press the powerful to respond but also about *petitioning* as an activity. As John Lewis (2020) wrote in the valedictory essay published on the day of his funeral: "Democracy is not a state. It is an act." In a similar vein, Carpenter invites us to consider the role the act of petitioning played in the development of American democracy. Its significance went beyond the substantive aims that petitions articulated, some of which were met but many of which were not. Petitioning as an activity was available to many whose access to power was

otherwise blocked (although not all, as Lee points out in this symposium; petitioning depended on resources that were not uniformly distributed among the population). It expanded the scope of democratic politics beyond its customary institutional venues, polling places, and parliaments, to encompass a wider range of popular activity. It forced new issues onto public agendas, seeded new forms of popular organization, and helped build a foundation for emerging norms of citizenship and democratic accountability (although Urbinati rightly cautions us against a teleological reading of this history, and both Blackhawk and Greer correctly note that the powerful as well as the powerless engaged in petitioning).

Above all, Carpenter moves well beyond both purely procedural conceptions of democracy that revolve around voting and elections and more capacious definitions that also embrace notions of equality and rights. For obvious reasons, the deficiencies of American democracy have been a central object of attention in recent years (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mettler and Lieberman 2020). Much of that analysis has focused on how the limitations and exclusions that were built into the country's founding have continued to hamper the country's democratic aspirations (McCoy and Somer 2022; Weaver and Prowse 2020). Carpenter sheds valuable light on how, in the shadow of these deep and persistent constraints, the peoples of North America were able to acquire and deploy a democratic voice even as the architecture and mechanics of electoral democracy were still evolving.

But as each of the symposium authors points out in different ways, the effects of the flourishing petitioning culture of the nineteenth century did not always impel North American politics toward greater democracy; the threat of democratic backsliding continually loomed. Much of the petitioning data that Carpenter has assembled and the action he describes come from the period between the two great democratic crises of the United States' first century: the near breakdown of the 1790s and the Civil War. This was a period when forces of democratic expansion (the advent of universal white male suffrage) and contraction (the removal of voting rights for Black men) were both at work simultaneously, as Lee notes here. Did the flourishing of petitioning in this era on balance enhance democracy? Or might it have in some ways inflamed the very threats that eventually imperiled the American democratic experiment: a sense of grievance against the powerful; the construction of separate political communities at odds with each other; the perennial conflict over who is properly considered a full and equal member of the political community; and disagreement over the legitimate institutional venues through which the people's representatives should properly respond? These questions, about petitioning's democratic valence, run through the conversation here between Carpenter and his interlocutors.

Similarly, the question of the decline of petitioning recurs. Petitioning activity as Carpenter measures it reached its peak before the Civil War, as the abolitionist movement gathered steam. By the late nineteenth century petitioning had been more or less sidelined as a democratic activity as the channels of communication between the public and their representatives, between the powerless and the powerful, were institutionalized and domesticated, first by mass political parties and then by the political reforms of the Progressive Era—primaries, referendums, recall elections, and the like. But these reforms, intended to advance democratic aims, were also suffused with darker impulses, to quiet the voices of those at the margins of the political community, especially immigrants and Black Americans. It seems a

cruel reversal that these tools that, as Carpenter shows, were pioneered by diverse communities throughout North America were then deployed by political elites to silence these very voices and reverse the impulse toward the ever-elusive goal of a truly diverse democracy.

*Democracy by Petition* represents social science history at its very best. It draws on and contributes to multiple disciplinary traditions, and scholars in many fields will learn from it, add to its findings—and argue with it in constructive ways, as this symposium demonstrates. In its shadow, none of us who are concerned about the travails of American democracy and the course of democratization in American political development will be able to go about our work in quite the same way.

## References

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## Petitioning, Democracy, and American Empire

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In *Democracy by Petition*, political scientist Daniel Carpenter builds a monumental case for the centrality of the petition to the shape and reach of the North American democratic experiment. Often cast off as an artifact of empire, Carpenter describes how the peoples of North America seized and repurposed the political technology of the petition to build, reform, and spread democracy across the continent. Rather than a vestige of colonial rule, the “reinvented petition” as Carpenter describes it was forced into centrality by petitioners intent on fashioning a democracy that “embed[ded] the voices of its people directly and regularly—not just at the time of election” (22). Representative democracy did not simply require an election every few years. It required the ability to set the agenda of government between elections.