

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.

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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.

In describing this reinvention, the book identifies its pivotal contribution: American democracy owes its central features, at least in part, to the work of people at the margins who harnessed the petition to reshape the democratic experiment.

As Carpenter describes in incredible detail, drawing upon a range of original archival resources, petitioning campaigns were the central organizing feature of political reforms headed by women, Native peoples, Black Americans, labor, and urban movements; reshaped the government of French Canada toward greater separation of powers and accountability; supported the extension of suffrage; supported the development of the party system and, integrally, the development of opposition parties; fostered the demise of American feudalism; and helped usher in emancipation and the Reconstruction Amendments. As only the most skilled empiricist can demonstrate, a petition system that was harnessed by a political culture that demanded representation for all in the lawmaking process—even by the unenfranchised—impacted these other areas of American democracy. It also bears noting that the vote, the technology often identified as central to democracy, is largely stagnant during the same period: the demographics of the enfranchised changed very little during the long nineteenth century, while American democracy was built, broken, and remade.

Given the exhaustive empirical support for the causal claims, one cannot help to be convinced of petitioning's centrality to a wide range of transformations of nineteenth century democratic institutions. *Democracy by Petition* offers skeptics a clear answer to the impact of petitioning upon the reach and shape of American democracy. By contrast to the paper tigers that modern petitions have become, petitions were taken seriously by petitioners and petitioned alike and should take their rightful place in the study of American democracy beside the study of elections, parties, pamphlets, and the press. Carpenter further lays bare the wealth of archival resources that petitions offer to better study the political action, agency, and voice of marginalized peoples. *Democracy by Petition* draws on these rich archives to conjure up the political visions of marginalized peoples and give them voice, allowing their political philosophies and aspirations to lead. The book relies on original primary materials, drawn from archives across North America and original databases of aggregate petitions submitted to the Congress, the Virginia House of Delegates, and to the *Chambre d'Assemblée du Bas-Canada*. Yet, Carpenter himself would admit that this comprehensive sweep barely scratches the surface of petition archives.

It is a rare review of a nearly five-hundred-page text that praises all that a book has accomplished while calling on it to do more. But rather than asking Carpenter to do more in a single text, *Democracy by Petition* should serve as a call to all scholars to join the conversation that Carpenter has begun, to take the voices and visions codified in petition archives as seriously as the petitioners themselves took them, and to excavate the political agency and philosophies of the marginalized that are currently buried in the thousands upon thousands of petitions they crafted. Often erased from the study of political science and political history, it appears as though the perspectives of the powerless were there in the archives all along—almost too ubiquitous to be seen. *Democracy by Petition* should serve as a lodestar in these fields as to how to identify, invoke, and centralize those perspectives.

In the interest of further drawing scholars to the conversation, I'd like to highlight some additional questions that *Democracy by Petition* raises: The first being whether

petitions are central to American democracy not simply because of their historical impact, but because they are normatively necessary for a healthy and functional democracy. Next, if we presume that petitions are necessary to American democracy, can we also assume that the other democratic features that Carpenter identifies as supplanting the petition—that is, universal suffrage, party machinery, the administrative state, and interest groups—are a sufficient replacement?

In a certain sense, *Democracy by Petition* aims to make both a descriptive and normative case for the centrality of the petition to American democracy. As the introduction tantalizingly suggests: the agenda setting that petitions facilitated is central to the political equality at the heart of American democracy. Importantly, envisioning democracy as requiring equality of representation, not simply of substantive outcomes—that is, equal power in governing and not just equal treatment under the governing laws—and requiring representation beyond the thinnest Schumpeterian sense of the vote offers us a vision of a democracy that we don't currently have. It provides us with a thicker sense of democracy to which we can aspire.

Democracy by Petition begins to make the case for this broader view of democracy and political equality by scrutinizing a period in American history that witnessed an explosion of petitioning activity and a corresponding growth in government infrastructure. The argument for equal representation in agenda setting that the book offers is consequentialist: equality of this kind facilitated better development of democratic institutions writ large. But the leap from those descriptive claims of petitioning's impact to the book's normative claim regarding the centrality of agenda setting to political equality will require additional support. Moreover, any effort to make a consequentialist case that, on balance, petitioning did more good things for democracy will need to do more than offer a descriptive account of democratic progress that begins with slavery and ends with Reconstruction. This form of argument leans too heavily on an overly simplistic and outdated black-white binary paradigm of American progress that the history of petitioning unsettles entirely.

An argument that relies too heavily on the progress narrative from the Founding to Reconstruction fails to tussle with other democratic and constitutional failures—like that of American colonialism and the violent dispossession of Native people. As *Democracy by Petition* squarely demonstrates, petitions were at the heart of the democratic failure of American colonialism. Carpenter describes the role of petitioning in colonialism quite powerfully, “[i]n the years after the epic pivots of 1787 to 1791[] there was no more common subject of petitioning in North America than . . . land” (89). Taking this statement further, there was no more common subject of petitioning in North America than the infrastructure that spread the “empire of liberty” westward toward its Manifest Destiny through claims not simply for land grants in fee simple, but also claims for post offices and roads, canals, ports, territorial and state governments, and the military pensions and depredations claims that funded the violence of dispossession.

But these petitions are excluded from the overall accounting of benefits and burdens that petitioning has wrought upon democracy. Carpenter simply discounts these petitions as part of the “older, colonial model” of petitioning because they “remained a world of insider advocacy, of networked claims” (116). It is unclear, however, why the majority of petitions submitted from this period should be

excluded from the determination of whether petitioning—democratized or not—has been beneficial to the development of American democracy. Although it is beyond dispute that these petitions facilitated American empire, it is unclear by what measure these petitions would be any less central to American democratic development than petitions that facilitated the spread of the franchise or the development of the party system. As the franchise and parties are still with us today, so too is American empire.

In many ways, the answer to the first question carries over into the answer of the second. It is likely the case that a consequentialist argument rooted in nineteenth century transformations fails to make the normative case that petitions are necessary for democracy, because the struggle for equal representation is still ongoing. The gap between representative and represented will always exist and the nineteenth century created as many gaps as it filled. Although the petition campaigns of this period likely facilitated other forms of equal representation, like a universal franchise and a robust party system, these tools do little to protect entrenched minorities at the margins—especially colonized peoples who fight fiercely to remain outside of the political community of the imperial government. *Democracy by Petition* closes with the statement that “only a fool would surrender the right to vote for the right to petition” (481). But refusal to further the American colonial project with electoral participation is far from foolish. Nor would this refusal seem at all foolish if the United States finally offered the full-throated right to petition enshrined in the Constitution—a right that, as Carpenter persuades, gave birth to the democracy we now cherish.

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Democracy, Petitions, and Legitimation

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Democracy by Petition takes a big topic and examines it from a novel angle, showing us how much more there is to democracy than electoral politics. Daniel Carpenter’s subject is not so much petitions as petitioning, a dynamic process of political