



Mateus Meeting, 15th -16th October

**Social Capital & Trust,
mobilization and demobilization in modern democracies**

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“Mass petitioning and political citizenship”

During the golden years of the bourgeois public sphere (c1750-c1850) the collection of signatures supporting a petition was a powerful political tool. In Britain, the history of collective petitioning almost coincided with the constitutional history of the country, while the emergence of the social movement as a political form (Tilly/Tarrow) also draw on the right to petition as a means for mobilization. After this climax, petitioning became an old fashioned and undervalued political right, as most of the XXth Century texts on political and constitutional law underscored. In an interesting historic turn, the collective petition is living a second golden age since the emergence of the World Wide Web.

Some historical evidence suggests that petitions are consistently ignored by the legislatures and executives who receive them, while the credibility and authority of some petitions is often minimal, raising the question of why petitioning is flourishing. What if collective petitioning –by means of the *door-to-door* and *e-mail-to-e-mail* collection of signatures– was less a form of influencing government and more a way of developing political networks, making political information circulate and activating potential social movement participants?

Drawing in some evidence from Portuguese history, in this presentation I will trace some historical changes in the forms and consequences of the exercise of the right to petition, trying to disclose when the most important readers of a petition are the authorities to which petitions are addressed, and when the most important readers are its signatories. This reading raises the possibility, as Daniel Carpenter suggested for the US, that the petition could be politically consequential even when it is known to be ignored by its intended recipient.