

Embodying public opinion: from petitions to mass meetings in nineteenth-century Portugal¹

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Abstract

The establishment of representative government in Portugal implied the free participation of the citizenry in the formation of public opinion. The right to petition was initially understood as an individual form of participation, but soon it would be practiced through public gatherings, marches and other displays of the collective will of a multitude. Initially, most of those forms of popular participation were identified with riots and insurrections, but during the second half of the nineteenth century, the public meeting became institutionalized. This paper explores the process whereby political campaigns based on drafting petitions, collecting signatures, and holding public meetings became a legitimate political form.

Keywords

Portugal; nineteenth century; social movements; citizenship; repertoires of contention

Resumo

O estabelecimento do governo representativo em Portugal implicou a participação livre dos cidadãos na formação da opinião pública. O direito de petição foi inicialmente entendido como uma forma individual de participação, mas rapidamente passou a ser praticado através de reuniões públicas, marchas e outras manifestações através das quais as multidões expressavam o seu sentir. Inicialmente, a maior parte destas manifestações populares eram dificilmente distinguíveis dos motins ou dos movimentos insurreccionais mas, durante a segunda metade do século XIX o meeting ou comício ficou institucionalizado. Neste artigo estuda-se o processo que permitiu que as campanhas políticas baseadas no uso do direito de petição, a recolha de assinaturas e a organização de comícios se tornassem uma forma política legítima.

Palavras-chave

Portugal; Século XIX; movimentos sociais; cidadania; repertório de confronto

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“Please, tell me what a *public meeting* is, there is one next Sunday, everybody is talking about *meetings*,” said the wife of a Lisbon shoemaker in an 1867 joke (Costa 1867: 270). Political action was taking new forms in Portugal and the then divided elites were seeking popular participation in rallies, marches and petitions. If *meetings* [the Portuguese then used the English word] were still a novelty in the 1860s, then fifteen years later they had become an institutionalized form of political participation.

Portugal was a latecomer to the contemporary forms of non-revolutionary mass politics. As social historians and historical sociologists have fully documented, collective petitions and public meetings shaped both British and American politics in the late eighteenth century (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 2004). In continental Europe, during the “age of revolution,” gathering together to discuss political issues was a cherished but controversial political right (Goldstein 1983; Hobsbawm 1962). European liberals admired the British way of participating in politics through social campaigns against slavery or the Corn Law, or in favor of the extension of voting rights. From Russia to Portugal, political entrepreneurs imitated the British (necessarily with dissimilar outcomes as these were repressive contexts), and these assemblies had to be disguised as other practices, such as the political dinners of 1847 held in France or the political funerals of post-1848 Germany (Goldstein 1984).

In Portugal, the standard use of the English word *meeting* during the nineteenth century, with derivations such as *meetingueiro* [meeting-goer], documents the imported character of this political form—a foreign origin that contemporary Portuguese commentators never failed to highlight.³ But a gradual dissemination cannot fully explain the history of a political practice. The concrete analysis of the development and articulation of public meetings in Portugal may tell us a great deal about the workings of the constitutional monarchy (1820-1910).

Representing the common will (1820-1833)

In liberal Portugal, free speech and petition were the main communicative devices that linked the people with representative institutions, a common feature in nineteenth-century constitutionalism (Habermas 1989; Portugal-Cortes 1822; Praça 1878). The elusive idea of public opinion was supposed to guide the action of the legislative and executive

³ The same could be said for Spain, where the word *meeting* derived to form *mitin*. In Portuguese, the word *meeting* was replaced by *comício* around 1890.

powers. The workings of government should be open to citizens' scrutiny and the free circulation of ideas should enable public opinion to take shape. Petitions were often presented as just the individual right to ask the authorities for a redress, but a more public and political interpretation, inspired upon the British practice and Blackstone's and Constant's praise of petition as the cornerstone of civil and political liberties had already made its way into the Portuguese public debate by means of the publications smuggled into the country from Britain during the 1810s (*Correio Braziliense* XIII 1814: 183-4; Alves 2000). Since the first liberal experience in the 1820s, the debates about the forms of exercising the right to petition and their meaning framed the possibility of the future institutionalization of meetings and demonstrations (*A Restauração...* 1833; Carvalho 1832: 34n).

Nonetheless, it is worth stressing that petitions had existed before constitutionalism. Political relations in the Portugal of the Ancien Régime included acts that were often called "representations" [*representações*], although most of those were not public political acts, but private communications between constituted corporative bodies. There was even an important traditional figure in urban Portugal, the people's tribune [*juíz do povo*] who acted and petitioned on behalf of the artisans belonging to guilds, namely in Lisbon (Bernstein 1989; Fernandes 1999). Affixing signatures to a petition was also a traditional practice, but usually restricted to the members of the collective body presenting the petition, such as a municipal council or the university senate. These Portuguese petitions didn't resemble those which framed the popular politics of eighteenth-century Britain or fueled the American Revolution. Nevertheless, around 1780, collective petitioning also underwent an expansion in Portugal, when it was widely used by communities of farmers who struggled to reduce their seigniorial obligations. They collected the signatures of the subjects involved—sometimes indicating with an X that illiterates also backed the petition—but those petitions remained private affairs, signed by the concerned parties in the case of concrete jurisdictional disputes. They were then channeled to the Crown magistrates by the local authorities or by well-connected lawyers (Tengarrinha 2006: 87).

After the 1820 liberal revolution, petitions became public political acts and the first national assembly received hundreds of collectively signed requests, which some historians have compared with the French *Cahiers de Doléances* of 1789 (Silbert 1968). Both the short-lived 1822 Constitution and the 1826 Charter—a constitutional text granted by the Crown that enshrined the "moderating power" of the king—guaranteed the citizen's right to petition, even if, as we shall see, its meaning, implementation and scope would be hotly debated. The constituency of the petitions addressed in the 1820s used to be circumscribed

to local affiliations and particular interests, but the municipal councils, which usually led the petitions, asked the general population of their locality to affix their names. Signature collection began to convey the idea that the backing of the general public represented an important source of legitimacy, the will of the majority. Despite the local nature of those initial public petitions, the Portuguese political imaginary, like that of the rest of the Atlantic world, was shattered by the idea of the nation as a continuous whole, composed of equal citizens (Sewell 2004). This convulsion left room for the search for new techniques for representing the common will, while the notion of “public opinion” became central to the discourse of politicians and journalists.

Collecting a lot of signatures was one of the possible ways of showing that “the people” backed a petition; an alternative method could be the gathering together of a multitude. In 1821, for example, 120 citizens from the island of Madeira—where the authorities had not yet responded to the revolutionary plea of Lisbon—signed a petition asking the governor to back the future constitution. As their initial number was not large enough to make them representatives of “the people of Madeira,” the deputation of five men delivering the petition was accompanied by a larger crowd of people who waited in the square, a multitude that was supposed to better embody “the people” (Botelho 1821). The trouble was that such gatherings could be interpreted as a form of intimidation, as a threat against the authorities who had to decide. They resembled the rallies of the *sans-culottes* in 1793 when they surrounded the French National Convention, or the unruly mobs of 1808 that had stormed Portuguese local councils, forcing them to declare war on the invading French (Neves 1983; Valente 2007). These memories made every gathering appear as a potential riot. The history of the institutionalization of meetings, and later demonstrations, in nineteenth-century Portugal, is also the history of the social inscription of the difference between a popular riot, a revolutionary imposition and a lawful collective petition backed by a display of mass support.

Portuguese liberals often talked about public opinion and the will of “the people” (Castro 1827). Yet, they were just an urban and literate minority who restricted citizenship rights to the middle classes, so that their interpretation of the general preferences of the people could be easily contested by more conservative reformers and absolutists alike. Therefore, one of the central disputes between political contenders became a matter of interpretation: in the absence of any demoscopic tool for inferring general preferences, the heuristics of collective behavior during politically significant moments served to ascertain the “national will.” Popular participation or indifference in commemorations and festivities,

such as the anniversary of the 1820 revolution, the feedback from the public during parliamentary debates, street reactions to the news, or the response of the audience to the political hoorays heard in a theatre, all of those moments were recorded and interpreted, and political contenders presented these instances of collective behavior as a kind of plebiscite. Using an interested rationale, every party drew on ready-made interpretive frames to either increase or diminish the political significance of each and every one of those occasions. In a survey of contemporary letters, news and memoirs, almost every description of events makes a claim about the number of participants, their social status, the reason for their presence and actions, and whether their participation was spontaneous, organized, or even venal or obtained out of fear (Browne 1827; Camara Coutinho 1820; Daun 1823; Estrela 1820; Gorjão 1833; Neves 1822; Pina Manique 1872; Xavier de Araujo 1846; Young 1828). Writers depicted the people who backed their favorite party as being numerous, spontaneous, wholehearted and well behaved—as enlightened citizens truly concerned with political affairs. In contrast, the adversary’s crowds were portrayed as fanatical, ignorant and bloodthirsty. Each faction presented different versions of the significance of each case of popular participation, revealing the importance they attributed to popular preferences and acquiescence.

The allegedly “subversive” and “tumultuous” action of crowds backing some petitions also provoked disputed interpretations of the nature and object of the constitutionally endorsed right to petition. For several days in July 1827, large crowds marched through Lisbon shouting in protest against the removal of the liberal hero Saldanha from the cabinet. The supporters of the demonstration—soon christened *the Archotada*—argued that it was a legitimate collective petition, but the government sent the army to disband it and prosecuted its supposed promoters (Carvalho 1827: 317). In the ensuing Official Journal [*Gazeta de Lisboa*], an unsigned text denied that the right to petition could be used to suggest who should or should not be appointed to serve in the cabinet, as this violated the free choice of the king. This same writer also alleged that the position of the right to petition within the constitutional framework meant that the only kind of petition endorsed by the 1826 Charter was that designed to control the misdemeanor of public servants, and therefore this right could not be “used to ask for changes [...] in the name of the public good or for the safety of political institutions, because the vigilance of the constitution and the promotion of the public good belongs to the Legislature.” Finally, the anonymous spokesperson of the government also denied the demonstrators’ claim to represent public opinion, “because in Portugal you need at least the agreement of 1,500,000

inhabitants in order to allege that you represent the majority” (Gazeta de Lisboa 1827: 1041).

The display of support provided by multitudes played an important but controversial part in political disputes. Furthermore, crowds were ephemeral, and the various accounts of their social composition, behavior and enthusiasm could not be verified. Signatures to a petition, on the other hand, could be counted, and the names in a petition used to be accompanied by an indication of both occupation and residence, making it possible to verify the identity of the petitioners and making the expression of their will appear as a longstanding commitment. As a widely read translation of the Spanish constitutionalist Ramón Salas said, “when a lot of citizens sign petitions that express the same opinion, nobody can have doubts about what they think, and the number of signatories helps to calculate where the majority stands” (Salas 1822). In addition, the door-to-door collection of signatures for a petition was also an important device for connecting political entrepreneurs to the general public. For many non-enfranchised people, moreover, being asked to sign a petition could represent the first time they were treated as politically relevant individuals (Lipp and Krempel 2001). If the idea of a majority was one of the mechanisms of legitimacy, the collection of a large number of signatures could be presented as an embodiment of public opinion, sometimes complementing parliamentary representation and sometimes competing with it.

Most of the collectively signed petitions presented in Portugal in the 1820s were local in scope. Ironically, the absolutist party, fighting for the restoration of the traditional monarchy and the rights of the Church, pioneered the expansion of this scope. In 1828, they used their political and religious networks to simultaneously gather signatures in dozens of municipalities, asking their champion, the Regent Miguel, to proclaim himself absolutist king of Portugal, rejecting the 1826 Charter. The absolutists, who in theory discarded the people’s will as the source of legitimacy, were convinced of the popularity of their cause among the lower classes and they collected signatures indiscriminately, even encouraging women to sign, which they did in great numbers (Carnarvon 1861; Gouveia 1835; Young 1828). This operation, combined with the violent actions of “Church and King mobs” directed against alleged freemasons, allowed them to claim that the Nation was asking Miguel to restore absolute rule, which he finally did (1828-1834) (Lousada and Sá e Melo Ferreira 2006: 111-3).

Revolutionary petitions and the right to resistance

After the 1832-1834 civil war, which restored constitutionalism, the public petition became a common feature, even if the scope and limits of petitions were still debated. Further research is clearly needed, but it seems that most of the petitions to Parliament addressed issues of either individual or local interest, and even those which dealt with political issues were usually grounded in local constituencies (Marques et al 2000: 139-233). Petitions to Parliament were often duly presented by a local member of parliament and were cited during debates, later being channeled to the appropriate committees. They were sometimes even taken into account during the making of legislation.

But petitions and displays of widespread support could also be made outside the constitutional boundaries, especially if the petitions were addressed to the Crown or were accompanied by street action. The headless revolution of September 1836 was enacted as a petition of the Nation, addressed to the Queen. Thousands of people packed the streets of Lisbon, supported by the National Guard—a citizens' militia created in 1834 to sustain the liberal institutions. As the Army refused to disperse them, it became necessary to find a solution that resulted in a change of government and the opening of a process for drawing up a new constitution (Bonifácio 1982, Pata 2004).

The subsequent 1838 Constitution granted the rights to assembly, petition and association. Expanding on the wording of the 1822 and 1826 constitutional texts—after a rich debate in the Constitutional Convention—the 1838 Constitution openly endorsed the idea that petitions could deal with any object of “public interest,” thus preventing the restrictive understanding of the right to petition put forward by the authorities during the *Archotada* of 1827 (*DCC*, 19/05/1837: 364-368). The lecturer in public law at Coimbra University at that time presented public petitions as “the form of exercising the natural right to resistance in a free country,” which avoided recourse to violence and rebellion (Pinto 1838). The champions of the right to petition saw it as a universal democratic right, but it is worth noting that the social status of petitioners also counted: the hundreds of signatures of Lisbon's artisans against the census law of 1839, which excluded most of them from active citizenship, were compared unfavorably with those of “property owners, college graduates and parish judges,” who petitioned for the opposite solution (*DCD*, 13-02-1840: 140). In addition, the constitutionalization of the petition as a political right did not prevent the occurrence of renewed interpretive disputes about its lawful exercise. Most liberals agreed that petitions should not be impositions, so petitions could never be backed by armed or menacing displays. In keeping with this spirit, petitions made by the army were

banned by the constitution, as this would amount to a coup d'état or *pronunciamiento* (insurrection). But there were also supporters of a vigilante form of citizenship, such as some sections of Lisbon's National Guard, who did not accept that this prohibition included them. The patriotic "citizen soldiers" often spoke on behalf of the Nation, depicting themselves as a check on the governments' supposed despotic inclinations. The National Guard intervened in all the political disputes of 1836-1838 and finally, in March 1838, they paraded with arms in Lisbon and addressed a petition to the Queen asking for a change in the cabinet. The government understood the procedure as a rebellion, the army bloodily suppressed it, and the militia was disbanded for good (Pata 2004).

The dissolution of the National Guard disarmed the liberal left, which in turn made it easier for Costa Cabral—Portugal's chief *doctrinaire*—to push for the restoration of the 1826 Charter, which he achieved in 1842. This conservative revolution had a strong military backing, but some of its episodes took the form of a collective petition orchestrated by the well to do, which first proclaimed the restoration of the Charter in Porto at a kind of festival. Some days later, a public gathering in one of Lisbon's central squares called upon the municipal council to back the restoration of the Charter, and then they marched to the royal palace, where the queen received them and granted their petition (Lacerda 1844: 169; Loureiro, 1986: 87-88; Marques 1989).

Despite the petition being instrumental to its restoration, the 1826 Charter favored a restrictive understanding of the right to petition, akin to the one promoted by the government in 1827, during the *Archotada*. Some still presented petitions as a political valve for the expression of public opinion, which favored political reform, preventing revolution (Castro 1843: 87), but the official stance maintained that petitions against the government addressed to the Crown were seditious, and those municipal councils which acted in this way in 1843 were punished. For the liberal opposition, the monopolization of power by Costa Cabral and the lack of effective channels for controlling and checking government justified the recurring insurrectionary attempts of 1842-1845, the rural popular rebellion of 1846, and the 1847 civil war (*O Espectro* 1847: 1-2). On the other hand, petitions addressed to Parliament were accepted as lawful procedures, even if their political significance was low, as Parliament was seen as a servile chamber fabricated by Cabral's control of public administration. In 1850, a text signed by 60 of the better-known Portuguese writers against a new press law was commented on by all the newspapers. Even if this did not have immediate results, it shaped public opinion and afterwards, in 1851, the derogation of this law was one of the first measures implemented by Saldanha after ousting Costa Cabral by

means of a *pronunciamento*, in order to convey the idea that the harsh times of doctrinaire liberalism were over.

The stabilization of 1851 and the normalization of public meetings

Saldanha's triumph in 1851 brought political stability to Portugal, ending the civil strife of the previous years (Cabral 1975; Sardica 2001). Most of the liberal elite agreed to a progressive reform of the 1826 Charter, which was published in 1852, while the rights to assembly and association were regulated in the penal code of 1852, establishing that in order to exercise them citizens required previous governmental authorization. Putting aside the restrictive reading of the 1826 Charter, a more liberal understanding of the wording prevailed, allowing petition to become the universal political right par excellence. A lot of voices defended that every Portuguese, "wise or ignorant, or even of the female sex" could exercise it. As one member of parliament said in 1856, it was a democratic right: "Because the Charter did not enshrine universal suffrage for the elections, but established it for petition" (*DCD*, 13/05/1856, 114-9). Some conservative politicians, such as the former premier Costa Cabral, would still defend during the 1860s that only enfranchised male citizens could meaningfully petition (*DCP*, 11/03/1861, 752), but the more general acceptance of the universality of this right also served the regime's purposes in denying the existence of any deficit of representation. When there was social distress and open revolt, typically against taxes and high prices, the local authorities tried to channel the discontentment from rebellion to petition (*MR* L13 n° 1092, 1862, *passim*). From the viewpoint of the people who contested the taxes, it is not clear which strategy had greater probabilities of success, but very often petitions and riots coincided in time, forming a common front that time and again succeeded in halting the collection of new taxes and enabled short-term price controls.

As physical displays of collective support were seen as potential riots, signatures were more easily accepted as legitimate embodiments of collective opinion than multitudes. The leading constitutional commentators agreed that "public petitions [were] one kind of intervention in the country's government, not for private interest, but for the general interest" (Praça 1878). Furthermore, petitions were always "to be presented in written form, and never by a multitude of more than 10 people." Besides, as the petition was "an intervention in the rational debate that shapes public opinion," the number of signatures was not as important as the quality of the arguments (Praça 1878). Despite this claim, the

number and the quality of the signatories remained a central issue in the debates about controversial petitions.

In 1855, the different groups of the political opposition organized what may be the first fully lawful collective petition of a genuinely national scope that was open to the signature of most citizens. This petition was addressed to Parliament, requesting the rejection of some new recently proposed taxes. The signatures came from very different regions of Portugal and their proponents presented them as the expression of public opinion, which was supposed to inspire the decisions taken by the members of parliament, as Basílio Alberto said: “the legal force of the members of parliament come from the elections, but their moral force depends on public opinion, and for this reason public petitions cannot be looked down upon, because the acts of parliament are nothing without moral force” (*DCD*, 15-05-1856: 148-49). In turn, the government tried to undermine the importance of the petition. The argument of one member of parliament, Casal Ribeiro is interesting because he compared the organization of the petition in Portugal with that of British political campaigns, lamenting the absence in Portugal of political debate. Thousands of people had signed the petition against the taxes, but there had only been one public meeting in Lisbon to discuss fiscal matters, so he doubted that the signatories all over the country had a clear notion of what their petition implied. Furthermore, he doubted the existence of public opinion in Portugal. According to him, a lot of citizens cast their votes according to matters of personal ties and economic dependence, so the same could be said of the signature of petitions—“True public opinion, he concluded, will only exist in Portugal when the meeting becomes a common practice” (*DCD*, 13/05/1856, 114-9). All the same, the petition, which collected around 35,000 signatures, signaled that the government’s plans did not enjoy sufficient general agreement. This being the case, the king withdrew his support to the cabinet and it was forced to step down.

From petitions to meetings

Despite Casal Ribeiro’s claim that there was no public opinion in Portugal, some meetings for the public discussion of political issues were held in the 1850s, dealing with such themes as taxation policy, the free trade of cereals, the wine trade, and the need to educate women in order to diminish the influence of the Church. The 1826 Charter did not recognize the right to assembly, but as it endorsed the right to the free communication of ideas, the usual argument was that the communication of ideas required someone to

communicate with, and thus implied the right to assembly (cf. *DCP*, 26/03/1867: 928; *idem* 01/05/1867: 1370-71). As stated above, the penal code established that public meetings could not be held without the government's previous authorization.

The idealized British example made some Portuguese think that meetings could favor the maturation of a virtuous public opinion. On the other hand, meetings were not only public arenas where ideas were disseminated and discussed—they could also result in a display of force, of mass numbers and of unity in support of a petition, becoming an act of collective participation that demonstrated certain preferences and commitments. Meetings, like petitions, intervened in the formation of public opinion, but were also a strategic move in the interaction between the different factions of the polity.

Some radical political clubs sought to break the political consensus that had reigned since 1851 (Bonifácio 1999). As in other countries, in addition to their substantive concerns, these radicals championed the extension of the rights to assembly, petition and demonstration, advancing popular interpretations of the constitutional prerogatives. As the threat of clerical reaction was one of their favorite themes, in 1858, they embarked on a campaign against several French Sisters of Charity, who were accused of teaching without authorization. The campaign began in the press, and was followed by a collection of signatures asking the government to expel the nuns. 7,403 people signed, most of them male urban artisans, but the defenders of the Sisters also wrote their own petition and collected 30,226 signatures from all around the country, including those of a lot of women (Cristovão 1970). The numbers war was won by the pro-nuns, but the presence of women among the signatories, reminiscent of the situation in 1828, was dismissed by opponents because “they don't know what they are signing” (*Question...* 1863; Um liberal 1858).

The next episode in the campaign against the nuns came in 1860, when the clubs organized the first defiant public meeting: the government was then in the hands of the centre-left, and the militants called for bold action. They assembled around 500 people in a central square of Lisbon, in support of a petition. The government promised to take action, but did nothing, and a new meeting was held in March 1861, “to demonstrate, through unambiguous numbers, where the people's choice stood” (Sardica 2001: 286). This second meeting became a different kind of action when, at the end, a large section of the crowd followed a deputation through the streets of Lisbon to present the petition to Marshal Saldanha, asking him to represent them, and raising fears that he could be organizing a new coup d'état.

These assemblies and street demonstrations became an important issue in parliamentary debates. Some conservatives were alarmed: “this meeting did not represent the people, the true people despise those who usurp their representation,” said a conservative member of parliament. “The Portuguese people are not just the people of Lisbon, and the people who attended the meeting did not even represent the people of Lisbon,” (*DCD*, 06/03/1861: 652-53). The leader of the moderate centre, Fontes Pereira de Melo, called the meeting “a political body alien to the constitution.”

Left liberal members of parliament, such as Lobo de Ávila, agreed that public meetings should not impose their will on Parliament, but they also argued that this was not their aim. Meetings were supposed to foster general awareness about a public issue, or to present petitions, but they were not supposed to claim to act as the representatives of the people or to impose their will by force. The government was free to accept or reject the proposals decided upon at a meeting, and lawful assemblies were welcomed as a school of citizenship. Banning them in order to prevent possible deviations that might, or might not, occur, was rejected as an illiberal measure (*DCD*, 06/03/1861: 655).

The head of government, the Duke of Loulé, accepted the right to hold meetings, but a march of the multitude through the streets was not to be admitted, so he duly sent the police and the military to control it. To many eyes, the formation of a cortège that traversed the streets of Lisbon was disturbingly reminiscent of some revolutionary episodes of September 1836, March 1838 or January 1842. Those fears were revived in December 1861, following the sudden death of the young king Pedro V, when Lisbon experienced three days of street actions against the government, with the crowd accusing several ministers of poisoning the king.

Despite the worries expressed by many, the idea of the meeting as a school of citizenship, only paralleled by the jury, found a positive echo in the political culture of the liberal elites. They often attributed the “superiority” of Britain to “the citizens’ jealous vigilance over the most important issues of public administration, made possible by the primary schools, the free press and the public meetings” (*Annuário do Arquivo Pittoresco*, II/1866, p. 203). Meetings could become the setting where the lower classes could gain some knowledge of public affairs and convert to liberal patriotism.

This latter idealization of meetings would resurface in 1867, during the long campaign in opposition to the administrative reforms and new taxes that the government was proposing. Petitions were written, signatures were collected and defiant public meetings were held—most of them in places where this kind of action had never taken

place before (Cunha 2003). The meeting thus became popular, as the joke quoted at the beginning of this article illustrates. The government, with the strong support of Parliament, resisted the campaign during the spring of 1867, generally respecting the right to assembly under the terms of the law, but using a heavy hand to deal with street demonstrations and to obstruct the organization of political associations.

In January 1868, when the new measures were set to be enforced, shopkeepers in Porto and other northern cities closed their establishments in order to boycott the collection of the new taxes, while a large meeting was held in Lisbon, at which a committee was mandated to present a new petition, this time addressed to the King. A crowd accompanied the petitioners, despite a government ban, and the police tried to prevent their advance, provoking clashes in different parts of the city. In the light of the prevailing tension, the King asked the government to reconsider its measures, and the cabinet resigned. “The meetings allowed for victory,” wrote one of the activists. “They guarantee the constitution, are an indispensable element of freedom, a sacred right of the citizen and the most genuine expression of public opinion” (Lobo 1868: 43).

The institutionalization of the political campaign

In January 1868, the new government hastened to undo the previous year's legislation after a popular demonstration had gathered in front of the ministerial buildings (Sardica 2004: 435). For the next two years, collective mobilization in the streets acquired a new and enhanced political role. Sometimes, it took the form of a rally in a public place, like the one held by the artisans who gathered in a central square in Setúbal after a meeting, lighting fireworks and proclaiming against taxes (3/13/1868, MR L18n 272). But some petitioners circulated through the streets, usually beginning at a rallying point, such as the organizers' headquarters, and marching to the institution they were petitioning. In Lisbon, they went to Parliament to support or discredit legislation in the name of public opinion, to the ministry of public works asking for jobs for the unemployed, or to the royal palace to request the King to either support or disband a cabinet. In Porto and other cities, the petitioners marched, on such occasions, to the civil government, the town hall or the home of a local member of parliament.

These petitions enjoyed partial success, alarming conservative commentators, who claimed that government was now in the hands of street demagogues (Doria 2004; *DCD*, 11-05-1868: 977). In contrast, Alfred Smith—a British citizen who had lived through the

popular uprisings of Zurich in 1838, Lyons in 1851, and Egypt in 1865—praised the Lisbon “revolution” that he witnessed: a crowd surrounded a public building “with loud voices and angry faces, gesticulating fiercely,” but a small detachment of guards was enough to prevent them from storming the building. It was a “very well ordered and gentle émeute” (Smith 1870: 20-1). The cycle of disturbances culminated in the 1870 coup of the old Marshal Saldanha, which resulted in a three-month reformist dictatorship that was to decree a series of liberal measures designed to enshrine the rights to petition and assembly. Those rights were no longer to be dependent on the government's authorization: every citizen with his full political rights could now organize a meeting, as long as he previously announced it to the police. Street demonstrations, however, were seen as a source of potential clashes between citizens, so that the police were successfully used to restrict them.

Regular constitutional life was reestablished during the fall of 1870, and, despite some well-known curtailments of the freedom of speech (such as the closure of the Casino Conferences), for the following two decades the Portuguese were able to meet freely, discuss policy, and protest against the government (Mónica 2001; Sardica, 2000). Sometimes the police disbanded meetings that had not been communicated to them, as well as meetings designed to implement still illegal actions, such as labor strikes, but, in general, the authorities respected the right to assembly. During those years, there were public meetings held to discuss international relations, trade agreements, taxation and railway policy, or the police's repressive behavior, meetings which mobilized the citizenry to examine public affairs, impose checks on the government and exert pressure on the members of parliament and the Crown. Some meetings were even more defiant and criticized the King for favoring some politicians, such as those of 1877-1879 organized by the Progressist Party, or even proposed the republican ideal (Tengarrinha 1983). The more militant Portuguese complained about some curtailments of citizens' freedoms when the police prevented them from shouting against the government in the streets, but foreign observers generally tended to admire the liberal disposition of the authorities. A US diplomat wrote that “the freedom of the Portuguese subject [could] be compared favorably with that of the American citizen” (Loring 1891), and envious remarks were commonly found among liberal Spanish writers (Fernández de los Ríos 1871; Labra 1888).

The public meeting as a device for public participation became such a central feature of political life that, in 1885, when the 1826 Charter was amended by Parliament, “assembly” was added to the list of citizens' rights, enshrining it in the same paragraph that

granted the right to petition. For now on, what had previously been implicit was made explicit—the public meeting was now fully institutionalized.

The mass social movement, consisting of a combination of drafting petitions, collecting signatures and displaying large-scale support at public meetings, became a form of political campaign available to any group wishing to discuss any issue in the Portuguese political arena, such as nationalism, protectionism, secularization or working men's rights. In January 1888, the workers' movement, which opposed a new taxation scheme for professional activities, coordinated a victorious national campaign for the first time (Fonseca s.d.). The Catholic movement also adopted the techniques of mass politics. They used traditional festivities and pilgrimages for political purposes, but they also organized meetings and collected signatures, as they did in 1884 and 1896 in favor of the re-establishment of the monastic orders (Neto 1998). Non-revolutionary mass politics had become institutionalized.

Conclusion

The establishment of representative government in Portugal was accompanied by the institution of the free participation of the citizenry in the formation of public opinion and the open discussion of the proceedings of government and parliament. Initially, this participation was to be channeled through the freedom of the press and the right to petition, but the political arena was soon to be invaded by other practices such as public gatherings, the collection of signatures, marches and other displays of the collective will of a multitude seeking to extend the boundaries of the recognized political rights. Some of these actions laid claim to represent a majority—considered to be one of the sources of legitimacy—while others resorted to the mobilization of shared values, such as “justice,” “patriotic pride” or “the public interest.”

Meetings and petitions had several antecedents and models, which produced contrasting images of what these practices were. From the viewpoint of classical liberalism, they were understood as opportunities for discussion, at which the general will could emerge, and also as schools of participative citizenship, the cornerstone of a virtuous polity. On the other hand, as long as the Crown retained the “moderating power” and was supposed to interpret the political situation in order to replace governments or call for new parliamentary elections, mass petitions addressed to the King could always play a central role in political life, highlighting a government's unpopularity or identifying potential

threats to stability that had to be pre-empted. For the incumbent government, however, petitions and meetings were frequently seen as dishonest mechanisms of false political representation, which were therefore illegitimate and subject to repression. Consequently, the different interpretations of the meaning of these events led to discussions that were central in shaping their outcome.

During the first three decades of constitutionalism, the limits imposed on petitions and meetings remained somewhat unclear, while ideologues often referred to the notions of public opinion and sovereignty. Petitions addressed by military bodies amounted to a kind of *pronunciamiento*, while those backed by a multitude that surrounded the royal palace or Parliament were a popular revolution. All of these actions were performed in the name of “the nation” or “the people,” and were embedded in an understanding of politics and representation that it was difficult to institutionalize. These subversive petitions were addressed to the Crown or to Parliament, recognizing their pre-eminent role, but, as petitioners demanded an immediate response, and menaced with force, incumbents had no option other than to either repress them or give in to their demands.

The normalization of political campaigns based on petitions, the collection of signatures and the holding of meetings required changes in protesters’ expectations regarding the timing and procedure of constitutional political decision-making, while the institutionalization of one sphere of social activity for legitimate protest required a more general institutionalization of the Portuguese polity. Those two processes advanced by trial and error, and their meaning was negotiated in successive interpretive conflicts, in which past experiences, ideological commitments and foreign models were all taken into account.

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