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‘We the People’: Five Years of Online Petitions

Americans are most likely to petition the White House on health care, veterans’ issues, illnesses, immigration, animal rights, holidays and criminal investigations, but the actual impact of petitions was modest and varied

BY Paul Hitlin

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‘We the People’: Five Years of Online Petitions

Americans are most likely to petition the White House on health care, veterans’ issues, illnesses, immigration, animal rights, holidays and criminal investigations, but the actual impact of petitions was modest and varied

During President Obama’s first full day in office on Jan. 21, 2009, he issued a [statement](#) committing his administration to pursue “an unprecedented level of openness in Government.” His goal was to make the federal government more transparent, participatory and collaborative through the use of new technologies.

The broader effort was called the [Open Government Initiative](#), and a key part of it took effect more than two years later when the administration created an online petitioning system called “[We the People](#)” in September 2011. The White House promised to use the site to engage with the public and to issue responses to all petitions that reached a given number of signatures within 30 days of creation. The original threshold was set at 5,000 signatures but was increased to 100,000 in later years. As Obama prepares to leave office in early 2017, the site has been active for more than five years and is one of the most prominent legacies of the open government initiative.

Health care and military issues make up the most common topics for petitions

Leading subjects of ‘We the People’ petitions

RANK	SUBJECTS	NUMBER OF PETITIONS	% OF TOTAL
1	Health care system	371	8%
2	Military and veterans’ issues	288	6
3	All specific illnesses combined	266	6
4	Immigration	244	5
5	Requests to honor individuals or create holidays	239	5
6	Requests to investigate specific criminal cases	235	5
7	Animal rights	223	5
8	Education policy	214	4
9	Gun control/gun rights	204	4
10	Requests to punish public officials (other than Obama)	185	4

Note: Petitions can appear in up to two categories.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of petitions from the “We the People” website.

Analysis includes all petitions with a minimum of 150 signatures created between Sept. 22, 2011, and July 3, 2016.

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In order to understand how citizens used the opportunity to directly seek redress from the White House, and how the administration responded, Pew Research Center conducted a detailed content analysis of “We the People” petitions. The “We the People” archive includes all petitions that received at least 150 signatures within the first 30 days of when they were posted on the site.¹ The Center downloaded and examined these petitions covering the period from the site’s 2011 inception through July 3, 2016. The analysis is based on a combination of [publicly available data](#) provided by the site’s API and human coding of all 4,799 publicly available petitions and 227 White House responses.

This analysis shows that no one type of request dominated the online petition system, with users of the site instead addressing a wide range of topics. The topmost subjects included petitions pertaining to the health care system (8%); disease awareness and related issues (6%); veterans’ and military issues (6%); immigration (5%); requests to honor individuals or create holidays (5%); requests to investigate criminal cases (5%); and animal rights (5%).

In terms of whether these petitions had any impact, the study suggests there were a variety of outcomes:

- At the most meaningful level, one petition [was instrumental](#) in creating a significant piece of legislation: A [January 2013 petition](#) regarding the unlocking of cellphones led to a bill that Obama signed into law in August 2014. The petition called for making it illegal for telephone companies to “lock” their phones by preventing a phone purchased from one telephone carrier to be used on another carrier’s system.
- Another petition was important in changing President Obama’s [position on state laws](#) banning “conversion therapy.” After a [2015 petition](#) sought to encourage states to bar the controversial therapies that try to “convert” lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer Americans (LGBTQ+) to heterosexual, the White House says that the president decided to support state laws banning these therapies.
- A [January 2016](#) petition requesting the president make an appearance on a previously unvisited late night talk show – the fourth most signed petition on the site – was a major reason Obama appeared on HBO’s “[Real Time with Bill Maher](#)” a few days before the 2016 presidential election.

¹ Petitions that receive fewer than 150 signatures are not archived on the site’s feed of open petitions or the API. Therefore, these petitions are not available for analysis.

- One petition helped convince Obama to give the Medal of Freedom to baseball Hall of Famer [Yogi Berra](#). And the president met with some active users of the site in July 2015. He and Michelle Obama also hosted a special meeting for 106-year-old petitioner [Virginia McLaurin](#).

Beyond that, it is difficult to calculate the impact of the site, as not all the inner workings of the White House are made public. It is certainly possible that other petitions may have raised awareness about some issues and over the five year time period some petitions drew press coverage to their subjects or petitioners.

Some other notable trends in the data about “We the People”:

Several of the most popular petitions focused on small groups or international issues that did not necessarily gain much media attention or fall in the purview of the federal government. The single-most popular petition – with 367,180 signatures – was a [request to recognize](#) the Westboro Baptist Church as a hate group. Church members regularly picket the burial services for U.S. service personnel and confront people with anti-gay slogans. The second-most popular involved a [conflict](#) over disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The first days of the site were among the most active periods in its history. Only one other time period – beginning in

Wide array of subjects have been covered on ‘We the People’: A petition opposing the Westboro Baptist Church received the most signatures

Most popular ‘We the People’ petitions by number of signatures

Rank	Date posted	# of signatures	Petition title/subject matter
1	12/14/12	367,180	“Legally recognize the Westboro Baptist Church as a hate group.”
2	4/6/16	331,914	“Establish justice and prevent a great catastrophe” (Armenia/Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh territory)
3	3/9/15	322,117	“File charges against the 47 U.S. senators in violation of the Logan Act in attempting to undermine a nuclear agreement.” (Nuclear agreement with the Iranian government)
4	1/15/16	314,226	“Ask President Obama to appear on HBO’s ‘Real Time with Bill Maher’”
5	1/23/14	273,968	“Deport Justin Bieber and revoke his green card”
6	5/18/16	248,860	“Plea for justice for Ven. Dhammajayo, denied reasonable accommodation as a defendant” (Investigation of Buddhist monk in Thailand)
7	7/28/15	236,961	“Extradite Minnesotan Walter James Palmer to face justice in Zimbabwe.” (Accused of killing Cecil the lion)
8	5/4/13	223,913	“Democracy crisis in Malaysia: foreign workers were employed for fraud voting in Malaysian General Election”
9	3/22/16	219,715	“Investigate the voter fraud and voter suppression in Arizona 3/22/2016 Democratic Party” (Presidential primary)
10	7/7/13	213,146	“Declare Muslim Brotherhood organization as a terrorist group”

Source: Pew Research analysis of petitions from the “We the People” website created between Sept. 22, 2011 and July 3, 2016.

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late 2012 – featured more activity than the opening days. During the site’s first eight days, users created 174 petitions that received enough attention to be archived. Some 31 petitions created on the site’s first day reached the original signature threshold to receive a White House response, including a request to remove “[In God We Trust](#)” from all currency. Throughout the rest of the site’s existence, there were only three calendar months that had more petitions than those first eight days: the three consecutive months starting in November 2012, during which the site averaged 268 petitions per month in the wake of Obama’s reelection.

Increases in signature thresholds led to a major decline in the share of petitions meeting the requirement to receive a formal response. In the first 12 days of the site’s existence in 2011, any petition receiving 5,000 signatures from the public was guaranteed a White House response – and 44% of archived petitions submitted during that time met this requirement. The White House quickly raised the threshold to 25,000 signatures and at that level just 9% of petitions met the condition. In mid-January 2013, the threshold was raised once more to 100,000 signatures and only 2% of petitions from that time onward have met the threshold.

Requests to honor individuals or investigate criminal cases were common. In total, 239 petitions requested the White House honor a person or create a holiday (5%), while 235 petitions asked to investigate criminal cases (also 5%). Among the most popular requests for holiday commemorations included the [Muslim holidays](#) of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, the [Lunar New Year](#) and [Halloween](#).

Users saw the site as a chance to defend the rights of American citizens. One of the features of the site was that it allowed petition creators to use up to three “tags” (out of a list of about 20 options) to categorize their requests. Nearly half of petitions (48%) were tagged as pertaining to “human rights” or “civil rights” by the authors, far and away the most prevalent labels applied by petitioners. Other common tags included those tied to criminal justice reform (listed on 16% of the petitions), foreign policy (14%), family (12%), health care (12%), economy and jobs (12%), and government reform (12%).

While most of the early responses were written by relatively prominent members of the government, over time, the White House increasingly relied on anonymous authorship. In 2012, 95% of the White House responses had a named author. By 2015, that figure had fallen to 8% – and many official responses were simply credited to the “The ‘We the People’ Team.”

The White House’s response time grew longer during the site’s first two years. However, wait times began to shrink in 2014. For petitions created in 2011 that reached

the signature threshold, the average time to receive a White House response was 133 days. By 2013, the average was up to 271 days. In the first half of 2016, however, the average response time was down to 34 days.

Users of the site created a number of petitions focused on off-beat topics not likely to be taken seriously by the White House or the public. Some of the unusual requests included a petition to recognize [International Talk Like a Pirate Day](#) and an effort to [change the national anthem](#) to the My Little Pony theme song called “Friendship is Magic.”

1. The background of the ‘We the People’ website

In September 2011, the Obama administration announced the creation of an electronic petitioning system called “We the People.” According to the [original statement](#), the platform was meant to give “all Americans a way to create and sign petitions on a range of issues affecting our nation.” “Throughout our history,” the announcement continued, “Americans have used petitions as a way to join together around issues they care about. ‘We the People’ brings that uniquely American tradition into the 21st century.”

The site was part of Obama’s larger “Transparency and Open Government” initiative. In a [memo issued](#) on his first full day in office, Obama ordered federal agencies to use technology to make the government more transparent, participatory and collaborative. A previous Pew Research Center survey found that the administration’s effort to try to make available many kinds of data collected by federal agencies has been [greeted with only modest attention by the public](#), though a notable share of people hope that data sharing might improve things by improving journalists’ capacities to cover government and make officials more accountable.



Source: A screenshot of the “We the People” homepage located at <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov>. Retrieved August 22, 2016. “‘We the People’: Five Years of Online Petitions”

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Independent online petition sites have existed for years. The liberal site [Moveon.org](#) began using digital petitions as an organizing technique in 1998. [Change.org](#), perhaps the best-known petitioning site, was founded in 2007 and claims more than 150 million users.

Several other countries (including Australia, Great Britain and Germany) had already established similar electronic petitioning systems by the time “We the People” launched. But this government-created site represented the first time a U.S. administration had established an electronic link between the public and policy makers without any intermediaries.

The requirements for using the site are simple

The process for participating has remained relatively unchanged in the five years of the site’s existence. Anyone 13 years of age or older can create a free WhiteHouse.gov account, which allows them to create new petitions and sign existing ones. Users must verify their email addresses but

are not required to live in the United States. According to the White House, the site uses extensive monitoring to detect bots.

To create a new petition, a user creates a title and provides a description of 800 characters or less. Users can then choose among approximately 20 tags to categorize their petitions. These tags have been determined by the creators of the site and include options such as “human rights,” “firearms” and “criminal justice reform.” Petitioners can choose up to three tags.

Once a petition is created, supporters must find their own methods to gain support and encourage signatures. Petitioners often use social media platforms or their existing networks of friends and co-workers.

If a petition reaches a certain number of signatures within 30 days, the White House promises to review the petition and offer an official response. The original threshold was 5,000 signatures. However, the White House increased the threshold on two subsequent occasions. The first was on Oct. 3, 2011 – less than two weeks after the site was created – when the White House increased the threshold to 25,000 signatures. The White House indicated the increase was necessary due to the large demand during the site’s first week. According to their [statement](#), more than 7,800 petitions had been posted and more than 375,000 people had created accounts.² The White House referred to this as “a good problem to have.”

The second time the threshold was raised occurred on [Jan. 15, 2013](#). The new requirement was that petitions had to have 100,000 signatures in order to get an official response. That threshold has remained the same ever since.

According to data provided by the White House, the site has hosted more than 28 million registered users (12.5 million of whom had verified their email addresses) as of November 2016. In total, 38.5 million signatures have appeared on more than 473,000 distinct petitions.³

² This includes all petitions created on the site, regardless of how many signatures were collected. Most of those initial petitions received few signatures. Data throughout most of this report include only petitions that are archived on the site because they collected at least 150 signatures.

³ This total includes all petitions on the site, even those that were not archived and included in this study.

2. Use of the site over time

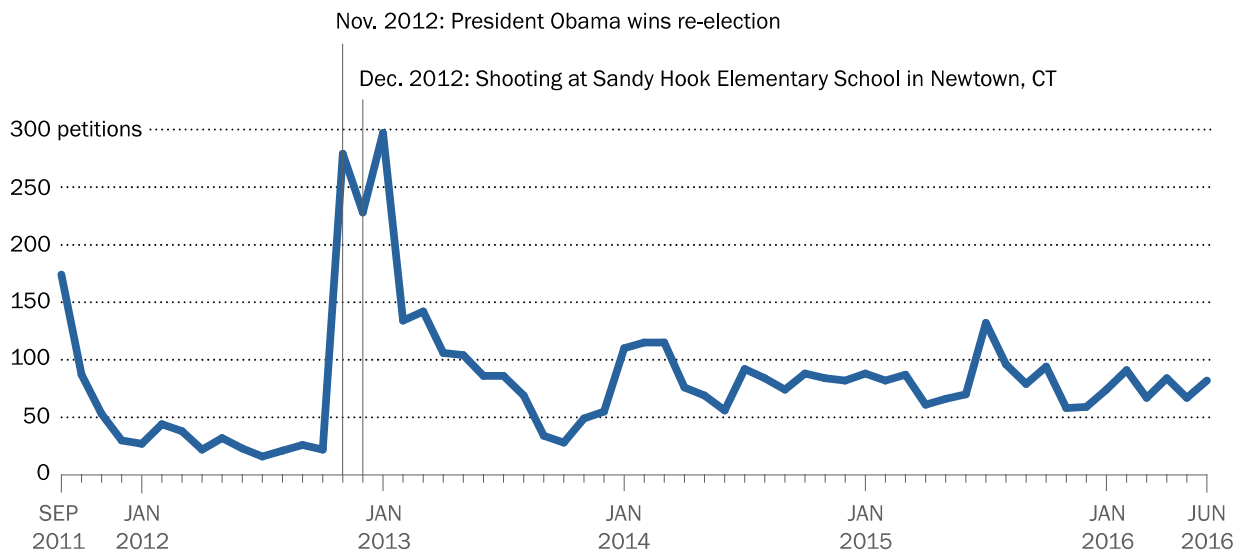
From the site's beginning through the end of this study period – September 2011 to July 3, 2016 – there have been a total of 4,799 petitions submitted by the public that received at least 150 signatures and are included in the site's archive. That works out to an average of about 83 petitions per month. However, public interest and engagement has waxed and waned over that period, with upticks in interest around particular events. Here is a look at different phases of the effort:

2011 through mid-2012: A flurry of initial interest followed by a significant cooling-off period

The launch of the site generated a significant amount of early attention. During the site's first eight days (Sept. 22-30, 2011) 174 petitions collected the minimum number of signatures to be archived on the site. Of those first petitions, 16 were about immigration, while 13 involved requests to [legalize marijuana](#).

Petitions on 'We the People' spiked in late 2012 in response to major events

Number of 'We the People' petitions created by month



Source: Pew Research analysis of petitions from the "We the People" website. Analysis includes all petitions with a minimum of 150 signatures created between Sept. 22, 2011 and June 30, 2016.

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However, the number of petitions slowed quickly after this initial surge. By December 2011, the number of petitions per month had fallen to 30 – and the site would not exceed 50 petitions in any calendar month until nearly a year later.

Late 2012 through early 2013: A surge in petitions following Obama’s re-election

Interest in the site increased dramatically starting in late 2012. From November 2012 through January 2013, there were a total of 804 petitions – an average of 268 per month. This increase was driven in large part by reactions to two major events.

First, just days after President Obama won re-election in November 2012, a [petition was created](#) to request the White House allow the state of Texas to “peacefully” secede from the United States and form its own government. Similar petitions were soon created calling for each of the 50 states in the U.S. to either secede from the Union or have a vote on secession. On the week of Nov. 7-14 alone, there were 74 different petitions about secession. A few states, such as [Ohio](#) and [Virginia](#), had as many as three separate petitions with similar aims. Several of these pro-secession petitions reached the signature threshold for a White House response, which was [issued](#) on Jan. 11, 2013.

The matter of secession gained so much attention that it sparked a backlash on the site: Eight different petitions were created to [oppose](#) the secession movement, with three of those calling on the White House to either strip the citizenship of, or [deport](#), all signatories of the original secession petitions.

The second major event that contributed to this increase in activity was the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School on Dec. 14, 2012. That event led to a flurry of petitions regarding gun control and gun rights. In the two weeks following the shooting, there were 53 separate petitions on gun-related issues. The majority of those were in favor of more gun control, such as one created on [Dec. 14](#) that called the White House to “immediately address the issue of gun control through the introduction of legislation in Congress.”

2013 and beyond: Petition filings settle into a consistent level

Following the rush of petitions that ended in early 2013, the number of petitions per month has generally remained stable. From February 2013 through June 2016, the site has averaged 82 petitions a month with relatively small fluctuations. During that time, only three months have exceeded 115 petitions and only three months have had less than 55.

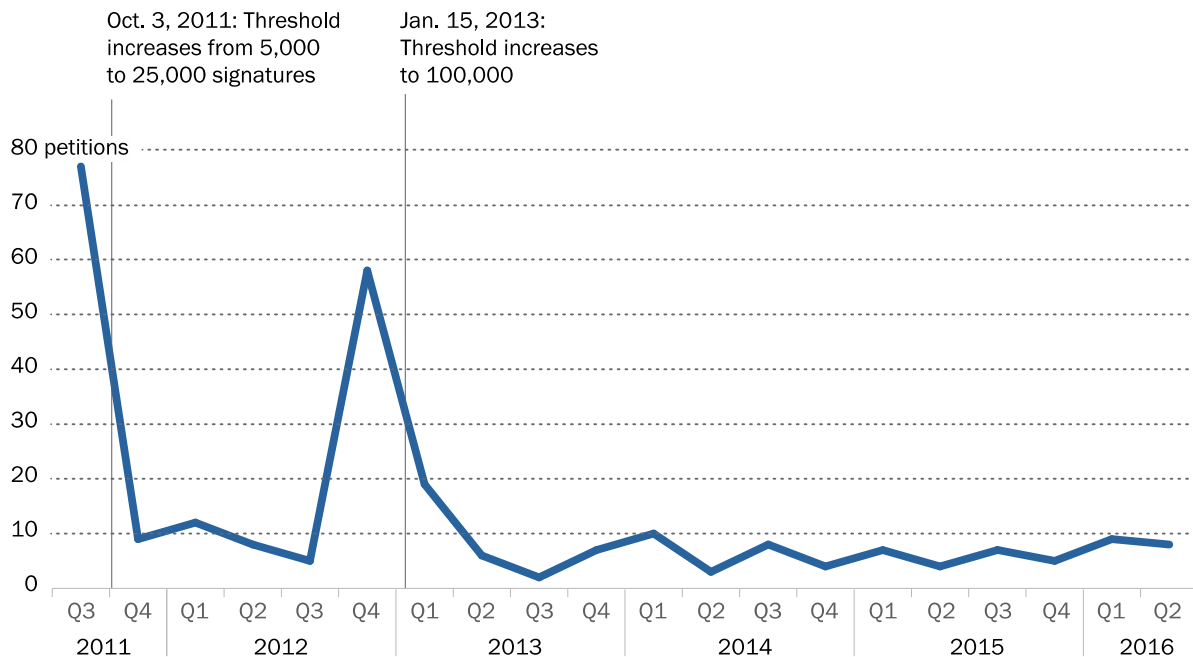
Unlike the earlier periods, the level of activity has not spiked dramatically following major events, suggesting the public has become less likely to view the site as a meaningful way to be heard in regards to breaking news.

Over time, fewer petitions have met the threshold for receiving a formal White House response – in large part due to increases in the number of signatures required

In the nearly five years the site has existed, the share of petitions receiving the signatures needed to receive an official White House response has decreased dramatically. However, most of those decreases can be attributed to the two occasions when the White House increased the signature thresholds.

Number of petitions meeting the threshold for official White House response has declined over time as the threshold increased

of ‘We the People’ petitions by quarter meeting the signature threshold for a White House response



Source: Pew Research analysis of petitions from “We the People” website. Analysis includes all petitions with a minimum of 150 signatures created between Sept. 22, 2011 and June 30, 2016. Five petitions created from July 1-3, 2016, are not included.

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During the first 12 days of the site’s existence – when “We the People” was receiving significant media attention and the signature threshold was just 5,000 signatures many petitions met that

threshold. Out of the 186 archived petitions posted between Sept. 22 and Oct. 3, 2011, 81 of them (44%) reached the 5,000 signature goal.

On Oct. 3, the White House increased the signature threshold to 25,000, and the share of petitions meeting that total decreased significantly. From that day through January 15, 2013, some 1,098 petitions were posted on the site that were included in the archive. Of those, just 9% – 100 in total – reached the 25,000 signature threshold.

The White House's final increase in the signature threshold (to 100,000) took effect on Jan. 15, 2013. From that point through July 3, 2016, just 2% of petitions reached the signature threshold (87 out of 3,515).

Put somewhat differently, in the nearly five years analyzed by Pew Research Center, a total of 268 petitions reached the signature threshold needed to receive an official White House response – and 30% of those cases occurred during the first 12 days of the site's existence when the threshold was set at 5,000 signatures.

3. Most common petition subjects

In addition to measuring the overall volume of petitions on “We the People,” Pew Research Center also conducted a content analysis to determine which issues resonated with users of the site.⁴ This analysis finds that a few broad issues – such as health, foreign policy, or requests pertaining to a specific person or action – are relatively common. At the same time, users chose a wide variety of topics to address.

Petitions pertaining to the health care system and disease awareness accounted for two of the three most-popular categories

The most popular subject involved improving the U.S. health care system. A total of 371 petitions (representing 8% of the archived total over the period of this study) focused on this topic.

Many of those were broad in nature, such as the 2012 [petition](#) asking to repeal Obamacare because it had

Health care and military issues make up the most common issues for ‘We the People’ petitions

Leading subjects of petitions

RANK	SUBJECTS	NUMBER OF PETITIONS	% OF TOTAL
1	Health care system	371	8%
2	Military and veterans' issues	288	6
3	All specific illnesses combined	266	6
4	Immigration	244	5
5	Requests to honor individuals or create holidays	239	5
6	Requests to investigate specific criminal cases	235	5
7	Animal rights	223	5
8	Education policy	214	4
9	Gun control/gun rights	204	4
10	Requests to punish public officials (other than Obama)	185	4
11	Police and justice system	182	4
12	Middle East issues combined	169	4
13	Religious issues	142	3
14	Technology	140	3
15	Requests to issue pardons	134	3
16	LGBT issues	133	3
17	Marijuana/war on drugs	132	3
18	Russia and Ukraine	129	3
19	Obama administration	127	3
20	White nationalism	125	3
21	Terrorism (domestic or international)	107	2
22	Energy and climate change	103	2
23	China	97	2
24	2016 presidential campaign	93	2
25	Taxes	88	2

Note: Petitions can appear in up to two categories.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of petitions from *We the People* web site. Analysis includes all petitions with a minimum of 150 signatures created between Sept. 22, 2011, and July 3, 2016.

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⁴ In this analysis, researchers coded up to two different topics for each petition. See the [methodology](#) for details.

been “killing jobs.” That petition received more than 64,000 signatures and received a White House [response](#) entitled, “Obamacare isn’t going anywhere, and that’s a good thing.”

Others focused on more specific issues, such as a March 2013 [petition](#) asking to allow advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) to practice medicine without the supervision of a physician.

In addition, 6% of petitions dealt with specific illnesses. Many of these aimed at increasing awareness or funding for research for a wide variety of diseases, such as cancer (38 petitions), autism (20), Ebola (19) and obesity (16).

Many petitions focused on a single individual or proposed a specific action by the government

A total of 239 petitions (5%) involved authors asking the White House to honor an individual or create a national holiday. Examples include a [request](#) to award baseball Hall of Famer Yogi Berra the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his military service and educational activism and [requests](#) to make the Lunar New Year or the [Muslim holidays](#) of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha national holidays.

A slightly smaller number of petitions (235) asked the White House to investigate criminal cases. For example, one of the earliest petitions asked to [investigate](#) allegations of prosecutorial misconduct in the case against Sholom Rubashkin, a former CEO of an Iowa meat plant convicted of bank fraud in 2009. And more than 39,000 people signed a petition to [investigate](#) the government of Honduras for potential embezzlement of public funds.

Other common types of petitions included requests for the dismissal or punishment of public officials (185), appeals for presidential pardons (134) and requests for changes to national symbols such as the U.S. currency or flag (75). There were also 36 petitions that called for the [impeachment](#) or [investigation](#) of Barack Obama for his actions related to issues such as Libya and immigration.

Petitioners often made requests to honor individuals or create national holidays

of ‘We the People’ petitions that included ...

Type of request	# of petitions
Requests to honor individuals or create holidays	239
Requests to investigate criminal cases	235
Requests to dismiss or punish public officials (other than Obama)	185
Requests to issue pardons	134
Requests to change U.S. symbols such as money, flags or anthems	75
Requests to impeach or investigate Obama	36

Note: Petitions can appear in up to two categories.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of petitions from “We the People” website. Analysis includes all petitions with a minimum of 150 signatures created between Sept. 22, 2011 and July 3, 2016. “We the People: Five Years of Online Petitions”

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Middle East, Russia/Ukraine top list of foreign policy petitions

International subjects made up a sizable portion of all the petitions created: Nearly one-quarter of involved U.S. foreign policy in some manner (24%, or 1,171 petitions), while the remaining 76% of petitions were solely focused on domestic matters.

Three particular issues stand out in these foreign policy petitions. Taken collectively, 169 petitions focused on the Middle East. These petitions ranged from calls to freeze all [aid to Israel](#) to a request for the president to pledge there will be [no military intervention](#) in Syria.

Russia and Ukraine accounted for 129 total petitions, making it the second-most common international policy area. China followed with 97 individual petitions, more than three times the number that mentioned next largest subject (Japan, mentioned in 31 petitions).

Other topics of interest were wide-ranging

The remainder of the leading topics contained a wide mix of domestic and foreign subjects. Some focused on popular, high-profile issues such as education, taxes and terrorism. Others, however, were subjects that demonstrate the ability of small, yet focused, groups of engaged citizens to use the site to create a dialogue about shared interests. A selection of some of the more popular or unique topics includes:

Military and veterans' issues

The second-most popular subject overall involved issues related to the armed forces (6%). Many of these petitions focused on benefits for current and former military personnel. For example, several aimed at [reinstating Military Tuition Assistance programs](#), which faced cuts during the 2013 budget sequestration. Others included requests to allow military personnel to carry [concealed](#) weapons on military bases.

Petitioners address Middle East and Russia more than any other foreign policy subjects

% of 'We the People' petitions that pertain to ...

Rank	Foreign policy subject	# of petitions
1	Middle East issues combined	169
	Israeli/Palestinian conflict	43
	Syria	40
	Iran	29
	Iraq	20
	Other	37
2	Russia and Ukraine	129
3	China	97
4	Japan	31
5	South Korea	26
6	Venezuela	23
7	1915 Armenian genocide	18
8	India	17
9 tie	Afghanistan	16
9 tie	Vietnam	16

Note: Petitions can appear in up to two categories.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of petitions from "We the People" website. Analysis includes all petitions with a minimum of 150 signatures created between Sept. 22, 2011 and July 3, 2016. "We the People": Five Years of Online Petitions"

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Religious issues

Religious controversies accounted for 142 petitions (3% of the total). Several petitions aimed at revoking the [tax exempt status](#) of religious institutions, while a [2012 petition](#) asked the White House to “Stand up for the rights of endangered Christian minorities around the world this Christmas season.”

Technology and the internet

Issues related to regulating the internet and other forms of technology also made up 3% of all petitions. For example, two [separate 2011 petitions](#) objected to legislation dealing with online piracy known as SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and PIPA (the PROTECT IP Act). Both petitions met the signature threshold, and the White House issued a single response arguing that, “Any effort to combat online piracy must guard against the risk of online censorship of lawful activity and must not inhibit innovation by our dynamic businesses large and small.”

Other petitions aimed at [limiting pornography](#) on the web and preventing device makers from making a “[backdoor](#)” [method](#) for the government to access citizens’ data.

LBGTQ+ issues

Some 3% of the petitions dealt with issues related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LBGTQ+) Americans. Most aimed at expanding rights for members of that community. For example, a [January 2015 petition](#) requested the ban of all LBGTQ+ conversion therapies, and multiple petitions requested the government legally recognize [nonbinary genders](#).

Offbeat requests

Since there are no restrictions on the subjects that users of the site can voice their opinions about, a number of petitions were on off-beat topics that were not likely to be taken too seriously by the White House.

Here are examples of some of the unusual requests:

- [Recognize International Talk Like a Pirate Day](#)
- [Put President Obama in the 2017 NBA All-Star Celebrity Game](#)
- [Mandate states to have state pokemon](#)
- [Release the recipe for the Honey Ale home brewed at the White House](#)
- [Nationalize the Twinkie industry](#)
- [Change this fine nation's anthem to the theme of “My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic”](#)
- [Have Obama write a book report on “1984”](#)
- [Ban Dick Vitale from ever again broadcasting another University of Louisville basketball game effective immediately](#)

Marijuana and the war on drugs

Petitions about marijuana and the war on drugs in general were the focus of 132 petitions (3%). More than 100 of those involved requests to either [legalize marijuana](#) or [grant clemency](#) for individuals arrested for breaking marijuana laws.

White nationalism

Another 3% of petitions focused on opposition to racial diversity and often referred to what the authors called “white genocide” or “pro-white” issues. None of these petitions reached the signature threshold to generate a White House response. Most of them featured similar language, suggesting that many were written by a small group of individuals. For example, a [December 2012 petition](#) asked to “stop white genocide, by halting massive third world immigration and forced assimilation in white countries,” while a separate petition created the same month asked the president to [establish](#) a “national white genocide day.”

2016 presidential campaign

The 2016 presidential campaign was the subject of 2% of petitions. During the first six months of 2016, there were 14 aimed at the controversy surrounding Hillary Clinton’s emails during her time as Secretary of State. One such [petition](#) was entitled “Complete and release the criminal investigation of Hillary Clinton before the Democratic National Convention.” [Others](#) called on President Obama to refrain from ever pardoning Clinton for criminal activity.

Pop culture and celebrities

Although not among the 25 largest subjects covered, entertainment issues were the subjects of 63 petitions (1%). Some of these petitions involved areas that were in the purview of the White House, such as the request to [revoke](#) the Presidential Medal of Freedom from comedian Bill Cosby following allegations of sexual assault.

Many others, however, were focused on topics that were far afield from issues the White House generally focuses on. In 2013, for example, more than 4,000 signatures appeared on a [petition](#) requesting to “Give Nicolas Cage the Declaration of Independence” – a reference to the actor’s role in the 2004 movie “National Treasure.” In 2015, 2,430 people signed a [petition](#) asking to formally declare the birthday of singer Beyoncé a national holiday.

Petitioners perceive ‘We the People’ as a place to defend civil rights

As users create petitions on the “We the People” site, they have the opportunity to choose up to three tags to categorize their petitions. The list of approximately 20 labels was created by the “We the People” staff and has changed over time.⁵

Each petitioner can choose his or her own tags, and the site does not provide definitions for these labels and categories. However, these tags offer an insight into how the petitioners perceived the goals of their efforts.

In particular, petitioners were much more likely to choose tags pertaining to civil rights or human rights than any other categories: Nearly half of all petitions (48%) were assigned tags pertaining to these issues by the authors.⁶ By comparison, criminal justice reform (the second-most popular tag) was used on 16% of all petitions, while foreign policy (the third-most popular) appeared on 14% of petitions.

Authors viewed a wide range of subjects as relating to civil or human rights. For example, the tag “civil rights & equality” was used on a request to [abolish standardize testing](#) in schools but also on a petition to give trained [service cats](#) the same status as service dogs or horses.

The 10 most-popular individual petitions focused on a mix of small groups, pop culture and international affairs

An examination of the ten individual petitions with the largest number of signatures reveals that several focused on local issues or small groups rather than large organizations or issues of obvious national impact.

Authors perceive their petitions are aimed at defending civil or human rights

Leading subjects of ‘We the People’ petitions as determined by the authors

Rank	Subject	# of petitions	%
1	Civil rights or human rights	2319	48
2	Criminal justice reform	790	16
3	Foreign policy	683	14
4	Family	581	12
5	Health care	580	12
6	Economy and jobs	562	12
7	Government reform	557	12
8	Education	457	10
9	Defense	368	8
10	Immigration	344	7
11	Environment	304	6
12	Veterans and military	291	6
13	Firearms or gun violence	261	5
14	Regulatory reform	255	5
15	Budget and taxes	250	5

Note: Petitions can appear in up to three categories as selected by the authors of the petition. The precise wording and options changed over time, so Pew Research Center combined similar categories.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of petitions from “We the People” website. Analysis includes all petitions with a minimum of 150 signatures created between Sept. 22, 2011 and July 3, 2016. “We the People”: Five Years of Online Petitions”

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⁵ Pew Research Center combined similar tags to simplify the final list. For example, the tags “Economy,” “Economy & Jobs” and “Job creation” were combined into a single category called “Economy and jobs.”

⁶ “Civil rights” appeared as a tag on 33% of the petitions, while “human rights” appeared as a tag on 29%. There were 664 petitions (14%) that included both labels.

For instance, A [March 2016 petition](#) asking the government to investigate accusations of voter fraud in the Arizona Democratic primary was the ninth-most signed petition in the history of the site. And the single most popular petition in the site’s history sought to “[Legally recognize Westboro Baptist Church as a hate group.](#)” The church, based in Kansas, had drawn national attention for its public protests and opposition to homosexuality. The White House’s [response](#) to this petition was unique. Their statement began by affirming their right to choose not to comment on issues of law enforcement – as they had done in a number of statements. But the response continued to state a general opposition to protests at funerals of veterans and included a [graphic](#) that showed where the signatures for this particular petition originated.

Other highly popular petitions involved the fate of a single individual who had gained notoriety in popular culture. The fourth-most signed petition was actively promoted by comedian Bill Maher as he [encouraged](#) Obama to appear on his television talk show. Canadian pop star Justin Bieber was the focus of the fifth-ranked petition, an effort to [revoke his green card](#) due to his “dangerous, reckless, destructive, and drug abusing” behavior. And the seventh-most signed petition was a request to [extradite](#) a Minnesotan dentist named Walter James Palmer for the killing of Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe.

Several top petitions focused on international subjects or U.S. foreign affairs, such as a [March 2015 petition](#) (the third-most popular) requesting that 47 senators be charged “in violation of the Logan Act in attempting to undermine a nuclear agreement” with the Iranian government.

Petition opposing the Westboro Baptist Church received the most signatures

Most popular We the People petitions by number of signatures

Rank	Date posted	# of signatures	Petition title/subject matter
1	12/14/12	367,180	“Legally recognize the Westboro Baptist Church as a hate group.”
2	4/6/16	331,914	“Establish justice and prevent a great catastrophe” (Armenia/Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh territory)
3	3/9/15	322,117	“File charges against the 47 U.S. senators in violation of the Logan Act in attempting to undermine a nuclear agreement.” (Nuclear agreement with the Iranian government)
4	1/15/16	314,226	“Ask President Obama to appear on HBO’s ‘Real Time with Bill Maher’”
5	1/23/14	273,968	“Deport Justin Bieber and revoke his green card”
6	5/18/16	248,860	“Plea for justice for Ven. Dhammajayo, denied reasonable accommodation as a defendant” (Investigation of Buddhist monk in Thailand)
7	7/28/15	236,961	“Extradite Minnesotan Walter James Palmer to face justice in Zimbabwe.” (Accused of killing Cecil the lion)
8	5/4/13	223,913	“Democracy crisis in Malaysia: foreign workers were employed for fraud voting in Malaysian General Election”
9	3/22/16	219,715	“Investigate the voter fraud and voter suppression in Arizona 3/22/2016 Democratic Party” (Presidential primary)
10	7/7/13	213,146	“Declare Muslim Brotherhood organization as a terrorist group”

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of petitions from “We the People” website created between Sept. 22, 2011 and July 3, 2016.

“We the People”: Five Years of Online Petitions”

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In some instances, the foreign subjects discussed were ones that had not received much attention within the U.S. The second-most signed petition pertained to a territorial [conflict](#) between Armenia and Azerbaijan over a region known as the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. The sixth-most signed petition involved [Phra Dhammajayo](#), a Buddhist monk in Thailand accused of money laundering. And the eighth-highest petition involved accusations of [election fraud in Malaysia](#).

Although it generated little initial attention, one petition helped lead to a meeting with the president and a viral video

Virginia McLaurin, a 106-year-old black woman living in Washington, D.C., [created a petition](#) on “We the People” in December 2014. In it, she stated that she did not expect to live to see a “colored president” and requested a meeting with Obama.

“I know you are a busy man, but I wish I could meet you,” McLaurin wrote. “I could come to your house to make things easier.”

The petition was part of a small social media campaign to get McLaurin to the White House that also included a [YouTube video](#).

At the time, the petition received virtually no attention and only registered 19 signatures in its 30 days on the site. However, the campaign eventually achieved success through a different method.

According to the [White House blog](#), “A friend of Mrs. McLaurin’s reached out to the White House and shared that Mrs. McLaurin has been doing stellar work as a volunteer throughout the D.C. area for decades and would like to visit the White House.”

Finally, on Feb. 18, 2016, McLaurin’s request was granted as she made a trip to the White House’s Blue Room where she met the president and first lady. The [video of the meeting](#) shows a joyous McLaurin meeting and even dancing with the Obamas. The clip was posted on the White House’s Facebook page and became a viral hit. In the first six months the video existed online, it was viewed more than 67 million times. The meeting was covered in numerous media outlets including [The New York Times](#) and [CNN](#).

4. White House responses and policy impact of petitions

In the nearly five years that “We the People” has existed, 268 petitions have reached the signature threshold to require a response from the White House. The White House has written 227 different responses, although three more were pending as of the time data for this report were collected.⁷ These numbers are not equal because the White House will occasionally issue a single statement in response to multiple petitions dealing with similar subject matters. For instance, the White House used a [single message](#) regarding gun violence as a response to more than 30 different petitions requesting action on gun control.

The nature and length of the White House response tends to vary significantly. The average response was about 400 words. Some were much longer – such as a 1,200 word response in 2011 about the Obama administration’s [immigration plan](#). Others were quite short, such as a 54 word response in 2012 saying the White House [could not comment](#) on an investigation of former Sen. Chris Dodd for allegedly bribing politicians.

In fact, the White House’s refusal to comment on specific cases was common. This occurred in 15% of all responses. In each instance, the White House pointed to the website’s [terms of participation](#), which include a passage saying, “To avoid the appearance of improper influence, the White House may decline to address certain procurement, law enforcement, adjudicatory, or similar matters properly within the jurisdiction of federal departments or agencies, federal courts, or state and local government in its response to a petition.”

The length of time for the White House to respond to petitions has varied greatly over time

Critics of the site have charged that the White House often takes a significant length of time to answer some of the petitions that have met the signature threshold. The Pew Research Center analysis finds that the average length of time from when a petition has reached the signature threshold to the time the White House has issued their response is 163 days, or more than five months.⁸ But response times have fluctuated substantially in the five years the site has been operational.

For the 72 petitions created in 2011 that met the signature threshold, the average response time was 133 days. The average response time increased in the following years: to an average of 214 days for petitions posted in 2012 and to 271 days for those created in 2013.

⁷ Since that time, the White House has written responses for all three.

⁸ The average is based on the average time for 222 responses. Out of the 227 total responses written by the White House during this period, three were for petitions that did not meet the signature threshold and two were related to petitions about gun control. For those two petitions, the White House did not issue new responses, but rather used a [response](#) that had been published previously as a reply to earlier petitions.

During this time, a number of observers publicly criticized the White House for their slow responses. In August 2013, a technology research fellow at George Mason University named Eli Dourado created a [site](#) that tracked response times and aimed at “helping the White House keep its promise.” In June 2014, Professor Dave Karpf of George Washington University declared the site a “[virtual ghost-town](#).” Two months later, Time magazine published an [article](#) focusing on 19 petitions that were still awaiting replies.

Starting in 2014, average response times began to decline: Petitions created that year received a response in an average of 148 days. And on July 28, 2015, the White House made a public effort to further improve response times by issuing responses to [20 petitions](#) that had gone unanswered. Some of those petitions, such as the [request](#) for Obama to meet with conservative talk show host Neal Boortz to discuss tax policy, had met the signature threshold more than two and a half years earlier.

That same day, the White House [announced a change](#) to the way they would be responding to petitions. Chief Digital Officer Jason Goldman wrote that the White House promised to respond to new petitions within 60 days of meeting the signature threshold and that the White House had assembled a “new team” to monitor and respond to petitions.

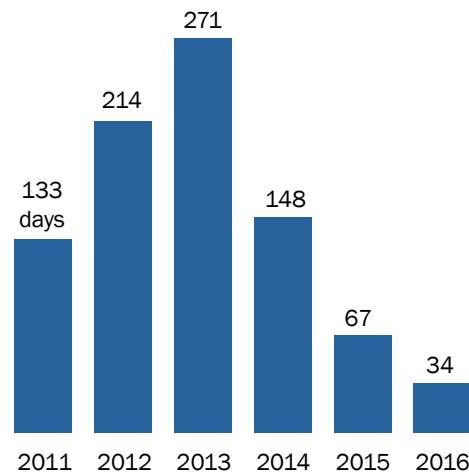
From that point on, the response time did decrease significantly. For petitions created from that day through the end of 2015, the average time was down to 45 days. And for petitions created during the first half of 2016, the average response time was 34 days.

The use of named authors and officials in the Obama administration decreases

At the same time the White House was taking these steps to improve response times, other data suggest there has also been a change in the way these responses are written.

Average wait times for White House responses peaks in 2013

Average # of days before the White House response to ‘We the People’ petitions meeting the signature threshold



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of petitions from “We the People” website created between Sept. 22, 2011 and July 3, 2016. “We the People’: Five Years of Online Petitions”

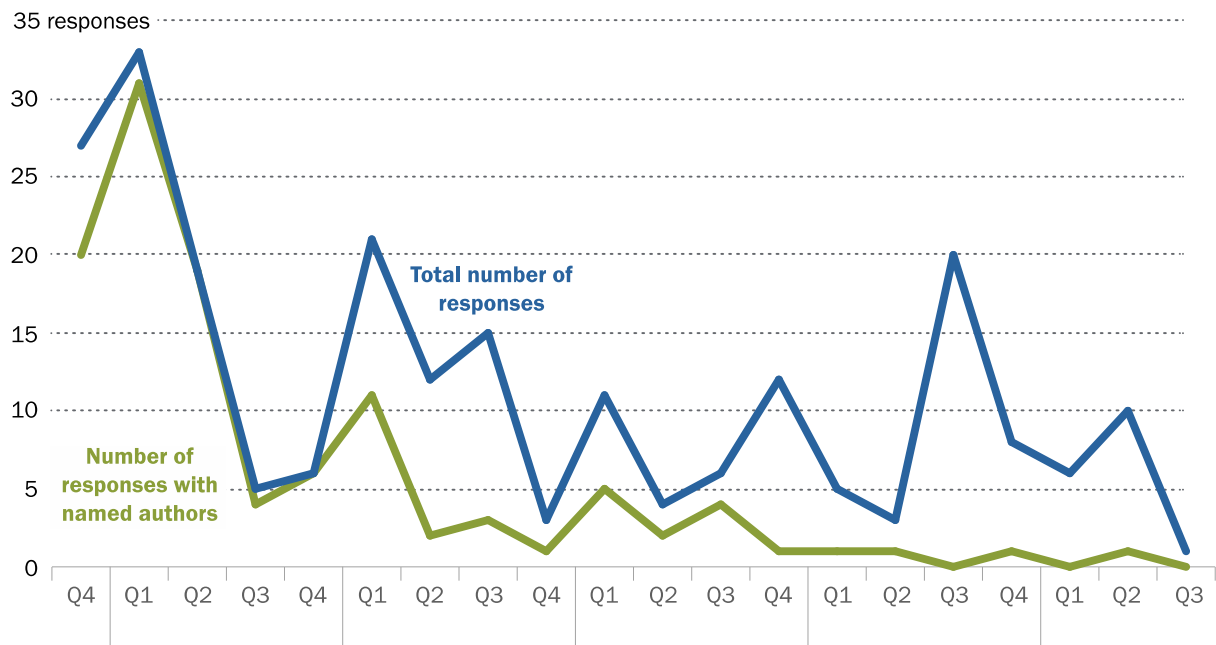
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In the early years of the site, the vast majority of responses were written by specific members of the White House staff who were experts in their fields. These authors included people such as [Joshua DuBois](#), the executive director of the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and [Felicia Escobar](#), the senior policy director for immigration. For responses written in 2011, 20 of the 27 (74%) included a named author as opposed to being unsigned or simply listed as “The ‘We the People’ Team.” In 2012, 95% of responses had a named author.

In 2013, however, there was a significant decline in the amount of responses that were attributed to specific individuals. Just 33% of responses written that year had a specific name attached, and generic authorships became much more common. Indeed, this trend has grown even more pronounced over time: For responses written in 2015, only 8% of the petitions had a named author. And for the first 17 responses written by the White House in 2016, only one had a named author – a [statement](#) regarding the ownership of AR-15 guns written by Vice President Joe Biden.

Number of petitions with named authors decreased over time

of White House responses to ‘We the People’ petitions by quarter



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of petitions from the “We the People” website created between Sept. 22, 2011 and July 3, 2016. “‘We the People’: Five Years of Online Petitions”

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Petitions have limited legislative impact

While several petitions have received media attention, including the request to build a Star Wars-inspired [Death Star](#) and a [2016 petition](#) asking for the arrest of Donald Trump for “incitement to violence” amongst his supporters, few have had clear policy impact.

The White House website points to [three instances](#) where a petition led to concrete legislative outcomes.

The most direct link between “We the People” and legislation was a [January 2013 petition](#) regarding consumers’ ability to “unlock” their cellphones in order to use them on different wireless carriers. In 2012, the [Library of Congress decided](#) the act of unlocking one’s cellphone would be removed from a special exemption and therefore become illegal. The petition, which received 114,322 signatures, asked for the decision to be reversed. Congress passed legislation that allowed consumers to unlock their cellphones and Obama signed the bill into law in August 2014.

The White House also credits a [2015 petition](#) for changing the president’s position on conversion therapy efforts on minors in the LGBTQ+ community. Obama decided to support state laws that would ban the practice. And the White House also says a decision to give baseball Hall of Famer Yogi Berra the Medal of Freedom was largely the result of a [May 2015 petition](#).

In an additional instance, one of the most popular petitions had a direct influence on Obama’s media appearances. The fourth-most signed petition on the site was a [January 2016](#) request for Obama to appear on HBO’s television program “Real Time with Bill Maher.” While the White

The Death Star petition

Perhaps the most famous [petition](#) was one created in November 2012 requesting the U.S. government to begin construction on a Death Star – a large weapon appearing in the Star Wars science-fiction movies. Since it was posted while the site was new, the petition generated notable [media interest](#) and served as an example of citizens using the site for petitions without a realistic goal.

The petition received 34,435 signatures – enough to surpass the threshold at the time – and received a response in the same tone as the original request. Entitled, “[This Isn’t the Petition Response You’re Looking For](#),” White House advisor Paul Shawcross gave creative justifications for the negative reply. “The Administration does not support blowing up planets,” Shawcross explained. “Why would we spend countless taxpayer dollars on a Death Star with a fundamental flaw that can be exploited by a one-man starship?”

House originally declined the request, Obama later accepted the invitation and [appeared on the show](#) on Nov. 4, 2016.

The White House has made several other attempts to highlight the site and its place within the larger Open Government Initiative. In July 2015, the administration posted a [video](#) of a meeting of several active users who were given the opportunity to spend a day at the White House. And as early as 2013, the White House made the programming [code](#) for the site open-source and freely available to the public, thus encouraging the programming community to create their own software that connects with or copies elements of the petitioning system.

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Methodology

Data in this study came almost entirely from content analysis performed by Pew Research Center staff of petitions and responses downloaded from the White House’s “[We the People](#)” website.

Content Analysis

In total, 4,799 archived petitions were downloaded from the [API](#) of “We the People” on Aug. 2, 2016, covering the period from Sept. 22, 2011, the day the site was created, through July 3, 2016. The website only archived petitions that received at least 150 signatures. Therefore, petitions that were posted on the site but did not get at least 150 signatures in 30 days were excluded. Along with the text of the petitions, the downloads included metadata such as the number of signatures, the date created, the URL of the White House response (if any) and the tags used by the petitions’ authors.

Human coding of the petitions

Each petition was coded by an experienced researcher for two variables: whether the petition dealt with U.S. foreign policy and the subject matter. Because there were so many petitions that crossed over in subject matter, each petition could be assigned one or two unique subject categories.

Researchers created a list of 135 subject categories, although many of those categories were combined for the sake of analysis. To choose the categories that best fit each petition, researchers referred to the title along with the text written by the authors. The tags chosen by the authors were not used to influence the Center’s coding because those tags were not consistent and because different authors may interpret the tags in different ways.

Intercoder Testing

To test the validity of the coding scheme, two researchers each coded the same 325 petitions. The percent of agreement for the two variables were as follows:

Foreign policy: 95%
Subject matter: 85%

Human coding of the White House responses

The responses written by White House staff were also downloaded using the site’s [API](#) and covered the same time period as the petitions. There were 227 responses during the time period studied. Of those, three were responses to petitions that did not meet the signature threshold.

Some responses written by the White House were connected as answers to multiple petitions, so there was not a one-to-one correlation between petitions that reached the signature threshold and responses.

In addition to the text of the responses and the accompanying metadata, researchers categorized each response to see if the text of the responses referred to specific policies and if the responses included a declaration by the White House that it was unable to comment on that specific issue.