

*Public Meetings, Respectable Requisitions, and Popular Politics in Great Britain and Ireland, c.1769–1850**

In 1817, William Arundell Harris ‘damned himself to everlasting shame’, at least in the eyes of political reformers and the radical press. As High Sheriff of Cornwall, he received a requisition for ‘a meeting of the freeholders *and inhabitants* of the county; which meeting he refused to call, because he was required to summon the inhabitants as well as the freeholders’. In his official reply to the requisition, Harris expressed disgust at the notion that ‘the freeholders and “*inhabitants*” would ‘question, under my presidency, the wisdom of Parliament, and the propriety of imposing restraint on the seditious’ in proposed legislation. Rather, he declared melodramatically that ‘I cannot comply with the request of the requisitionists—or give the slightest sanction to proceedings, of which the probable result will be the overthrow of the existing Government of this Kingdom, and the total subversion of our inestimable Constitution’. Yet the meeting went ahead, and, notwithstanding such fears, no historian has yet traced Britain’s first modern revolution to the subsequent gathering in Bodmin. Addressing that meeting, one of the ‘requisitionists’, the county magistrate John Colman Rashleigh, responded that if ‘we have no right to question what takes place in Parliament, the term PETITION should be obliterated from our statute books; as we can only assemble to vote adulatory addresses to the Throne’. Rashleigh whipped up the crowd with a series of rhetorical questions, asking what had ended the American war, banned the slave trade, and defended the Toleration Act? The answer, in each case, was ‘the Petitions of the People’, which had been ‘productive of more salutary effects to the Constitution, than any other’ liberty they possessed. The general inhabitants could not otherwise ‘from their cots and hamlets, state either their wishes or their grievances’, and they lost the opportunity for ‘their judgements to be informed, or their ideas enlarged, if they are not allowed to attend public meetings’. For this reason, Rashleigh mocked the idea ‘that the right of Petition should not be allowed to large assemblies of the People, but be committed to a

* Research for this article was funded by a Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant on ‘Re-thinking Petitions, Parliament and People in the Long Nineteenth Century’ (RPG-2016-097) and enriched by the Arts and Humanities Research Council research network on ‘Petitions and Petitioning from the Medieval Period to the Present’ (AH/Roo8868/1). The author is also grateful to the anonymous reviewers, John Belchem, Kathryn Gleadle, Neil Harrison, Joanna Innes, Maartje Janse, Mark Knights, Naomi Lloyd-Jones, Michael Lobban, Philip Loft, Irene Middleton, Henry J. Miller, Katrina Navickas, Mary O’Connor, Sarah Richardson, Louise Ryland-Epton, Stephen Taylor, James Vernon, and members of the Chicago workshop on British and Imperial History. Any errors naturally remain his responsibility.

chosen few, who shall exercise it almost like conspirators', as Harris and the Tory government proposed.

Chronicling these events, the radical editor William Hone concluded that '[m]ayors and sheriffs sometimes exercise their *power* as if it conferred on them a *right* to do wrong'.¹ But how did they exercise such power, and what was this 'requisition' that they might deny? The answers lie scattered among local government records and private papers in archives across Great Britain and Ireland. Requisitions to an office-holder asked him to convene a meeting, which Harris refused, though the signatories might still try to proceed and publicise a signed advertisement on their own initiative, as Rashleigh did. Being formal, written requests to an authority, bearing signatures or authorised names, requisitions are best considered as a species of petition, though they often sought meetings that would in turn generate a more numerous signed petition to another authority.² Considering the 'form, function, and meanings' of political activities such as petitioning and meeting allows us to trace their 'hybridisation', as Joanna Innes argues, identifying 'cross-fertilization between existing types' of political participation as much as their popularisation.³ Requisitions raised two intertwined dilemmas over the 'representative claim' of speaking for a community: who could call and who should participate in such a meeting?⁴

Tracing the emergence and adaptation of requisitions in the British Isles illuminates a number of mature historiographical themes, not least how 'the press, the platform, and the petition' came to be so firmly identified as constituting 'public opinion' in Victorian Britain.⁵ This historicises the 'public sphere', or the emergence of a 'counter-public sphere', by contextualising 'vigorous print arguments about public opinion' that materialised in 'concrete assemblies' such as public

1. *Hone's Reformist Register*, 29 Mar. 1817, cols 297–306. On Rashleigh, see E. Jaggard, *Cornwall Politics in the Age of Reform, 1790–1885* (Woodbridge, 1999), pp. 30–34.

2. For definitions, see L. Heerma van Voss, 'Introduction', in L. Heerma van Voss, ed., *Petitions in Social History* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 1–10; H. Miller, 'The Transformation of Petitioning in the Long Nineteenth Century (1780–1914)', *Social Science History*, xliii (2019), pp. 409–29; M. Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 109–62.

3. J. Innes, 'People and Power in British Politics to 1850', in J. Innes and M. Philp, eds, *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750–1850* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 130–46.

4. M. Saward, 'The Representative Claim', *Contemporary Political Theory*, v (2006), pp. 297–318.

5. J. Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of 'Public Opinion'* (Cambridge, 2013), at p. 61; K. Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 3, 127–9; J.A.W. Gunn, 'Public Opinion', in T. Ball, J. Farr and R.L. Hanson, eds, *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 247–65; J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993); P. Hollis, ed., *Pressure from Without in Early Victorian England* (London, 1974); J. Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 57–65.

meetings.⁶ Disputes over requisitions reveal practices surrounding the languages of the ‘constitutional idiom’ and those rationalities too easily dismissed as ‘a general addiction to the forms and proprieties of organized constitutionalism’.⁷ While Charles Tilly’s social movement studies have located expanding repertoires of contentious politics in the ‘parliamentarisation’ of political demands in this period, a study of requisitions highlights how any ‘rise of the public meeting’ rested on local conflicts involving what Katrina Navickas terms ‘the politics of space and place’.⁸ Moreover, comparison between Ireland and Great Britain highlights not only the exceptional legislation against popular assembly in the former, but also the extent of ministers’ reliance on local elites for political repression within the latter. This points to another interplay between local contexts and national patterns in enforcing ‘the law’ in reality.⁹ Focusing on practices, which materialised who the ‘public should be’ in the public meetings of a locale, may allow us to sidestep abstract ‘phases’ of democratisation centred on expansions of the parliamentary franchise for irregular elections.¹⁰

The first section of this article considers the definition, origin, and function of requisitions in Ireland and Great Britain, before reviewing their adaptation in relation to the changing nature of ‘public meetings’. Since this identifies their rise and decline in the context of legislative and judicial innovations, a second section considers these changes more fully by disentangling the roles of parliamentarians, officials, justices,

6. C. Calhoun, ‘The Public Sphere in the Field of Power’, *Social Science History*, xxxiv (2010), pp. 301–35; D. della Porta, ‘Social Movements and the Public Sphere’, in A. Salvatore, O. Schmidtke and H.J. Trenz, eds, *Rethinking the Public Sphere Through Transnationalizing Processes* (London, 2013), pp. 107–33; Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, pp. 4–6; C. Parolin, *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London, 1790–c.1845* (Canberra, 2010), pp. 7–10; G. Eley, ‘Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century’, in C. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), pp. 289–329; M. Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 288–90, 309.

7. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), p. 738; J. Epstein, ‘The Constitutional Idiom: Radical Reasoning, Rhetoric and Action in Early Nineteenth-century England’, *Journal of Social History*, xxiii (1990), pp. 553–74; J. Belchem, ‘Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in Early Nineteenth-century England’, *Social History*, vi (1981), pp. 1–32; J. Fulcher, ‘The English People and Their Constitution after Waterloo: Parliamentary Reform, 1815–1817’, in J. Vernon, ed., *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England’s Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 52–82; J. Martin, ‘Oratory, Itinerant Lecturing and Victorian Popular Politics: A Case Study of James Acland (1799–1876)’, *Historical Research*, lxxxvi (2013), pp. 30–52.

8. C. Tilly, ‘The Rise of the Public Meeting in Great Britain, 1758–1834’, *Social Science History*, xxxiv (2010), pp. 291–9; C. Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), pp. 11–15, 357–60, 364–5; K. Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848* (Manchester, 2017).

9. M. Lobban, ‘From Seditious Libel to Unlawful Assembly: Peterloo and the Changing Face of Political Crime, c.1770–1820’, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, x (1990), pp. 307–52, at 342; F.W. Munger, ‘Suppression of Popular Gatherings in England, 1800–1830’, *American Journal of Legal History*, xxv (1981), pp. 111–40.

10. M. Janse and H. te Velde, ‘Perspectives on Political Organizing’, in H. te Velde and M. Janse, eds, *Organizing Democracy: Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2017), pp. 1–18, at 1–2; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 159.

and agitators, evaluating how far requisitions ultimately constrained or assisted the proliferation of public meetings. Finally, a third section focuses on the functions of requisitions as material assertions of who should meet to decide what questions. As the conclusion emphasises, the cumulative choices of local officials, organisers, and audiences ultimately weakened the privileges of organising public meetings by mid-century, even if ministers and judges succeeded in branding truly massive assemblies as 'seditious'. A study of the requisition as a legal and cultural practice points towards the social creativity that repurposed formal structures intended to restrict new forms of political organisation. From this perspective, the spread of ticketed or non-deliberative 'public meetings' from the 1830s onwards marked the surrender, as much as the assertion, of a monopoly over who might call and attend meetings that spoke for a locality.

I

Signed requests to call public meetings speaking for a locality acquired the name 'requisition' slowly and haphazardly. Clearly, requisitions formed part of a group of related rituals for advertising a meeting publicly, asserting its legality, and claiming to represent a community.¹¹ When approved, requisitions could be reprinted for publicity in broadsides or newspapers; when declined, organisers might proceed regardless under their own initiative, as John Colman Rashleigh did, often repurposing the requisition as their own signed announcement.¹² Requisitions for public meetings hybridised formal eighteenth-century requests for meetings of closed bodies, such as corporations, common halls, or burghs, with the advertised summons of 'general meetings' for a county's freeholders or, in Scotland, heritors.¹³ Rather than convening a body to administer a county, town, or parish, requisitions for deliberative 'public meetings' sought to pronounce on resolutions, addresses, or petitions.¹⁴ A distinct form of electoral requisition, used to demonstrate and marshal support for

11. Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 50–51; D.J. Knott, 'The Little Circle and Manchester Politics, 1812–46' (Univ. of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 2018), pp. 129–52; K. McComas, J.C. Besley and L.W. Black, 'The Rituals of Public Meetings', *Public Administration Review*, lxx (2010), pp. 122–30.

12. M. Rickards, *The Public Notice: An Illustrated History* (Newton Abbot, 1973), pp. 26–7, 30, 37, 50; *The Sun*, 6 Oct. 1830, p. 3.

13. *Caledonian Mercury*, 22 Mar. 1760, p. 1; *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 24 Nov. 1760, p. 4; *Derby Mercury*, 20 Nov. 1772, p. 2; *Scots Magazine*, xxi, 6 Aug. 1759, p. 52; *Chester Courant*, 6 Jan. 1761, p. 2; *Hibernian Journal*, 27 Mar. 1778, p. 1; Henry Jephson, *The Platform: Its Rise and Progress* (2 vols, London, 1892), i, pp. 8–12, 25–7; P. Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 211–33, 270–72.

14. S. Webb and B. Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act* (9 vols, London, 1906–27), i, pp. 91–110, 107–8, 533–4 n. 3, note the distinctions, though open vestries might blur them. See Mary O'Connor's forthcoming University of Oxford D.Phil. research on parish and vestry meetings.

parliamentary candidates, falls outside the scope of this article but clearly shared some characteristics with the requisitions considered here.¹⁵ The noun ‘requisition’, following Latin usage, had a plethora of other meanings in legal, diplomatic, and military terminology, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the transitive verb ‘to requisition’ to a county meeting in Ireland in 1800.¹⁶ Occasional specification of a ‘written requisition’ or ‘public requisition’ distinguished these documents from an oral and private tradition of asking office-holders to call and chair meetings.¹⁷

While it is difficult to identify their origins precisely, signed requests for public meetings of a county or settlement appeared with increasing frequency in the final decades of the eighteenth century. As early as 1775 ‘Some freeholders’, unnamed, inserted in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* the text of their request to the sheriff.¹⁸ In 1778 *Saunders’s News-letter* of Dublin sometimes reprinted the signatories of requests to the city or county sheriffs to call meetings, listing names as it did for subscriptions or declarations.¹⁹ The Irish Volunteer movement, which emerged in 1778 to police agrarian protest and demand their parliament’s independence from Westminster, occasionally used signed requisitions.²⁰ One Dubliner condemned ‘the daring and unprecedented measure of freemen and freeholders summoning a meeting of themselves’, rather than relying on the sheriffs and justices to do so, as ‘an outrage on the constitution’.²¹ Written requests for public meetings to express a community’s judgement, rather than to elect extra-parliamentary representatives, would remain commonplace throughout Ireland’s constitutional and economic controversies of 1785.²²

15. *Derby Mercury*, 26 May 1796, p. 4; *York Herald*, 1 Nov. 1806, p. 2; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 80.

16. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘requisition, v.’, available online at <https://oed.com/view/Entry/163270> (accessed 24 Aug. 2019). The dictionary mistakenly distinguishes this initial example of sense 1a from those specific to requisitioning a meeting in 1d; the cited correspondence makes it clear that the earlier usage did relate to a signed request to a sheriff to call a meeting: *The Correspondence of the Right Hon. John Beresford, Illustrative of the Last Thirty Years of the Irish Parliament*, ed. William Beresford (2 vols, London, 1854), ii, pp. 245–7 (Castlereagh to Beresford, 10 Apr. 1800; Castlereagh to Beresford, 22 Apr. 1800).

17. *Hampshire Chronicle*, 27 May 1805, p. 1; *Reading Mercury*, 25 June 1792, p. 3; *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 24 Feb. 1812, p. 2.

18. *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 28 Oct. 1775, p. 3.

19. *Saunders’s News-letter*, for named requisitionists: 31 Jan. 1778, p. 2, and 13 June 1778, p. 2; for requested meetings: 6 Feb. 1778, p. 2, 30 Mar. 1778, p. 2, 11 Apr. 1778, p. 2, and 3 Nov. 1778, p. 2. *Dublin Evening Post*, 24 Aug. 1779, p. 1.

20. *Saunders’s News-letter*, 26 Apr. 1780, p. 2; *Dublin Evening Post*, 4 Nov. 1779, p. 2, and 4 Jan. 1783, p. 4; S. Pincus, ‘Ideological Origins of the Irish Revolution’, *New England Quarterly*, xci (2018), pp. 240–74.

21. ‘Extract of a letter from Dublin, Oct. 9’, *Essex Journal and Massachusetts and New-Hampshire General Advertiser*, 29 Dec. 1784, p. 1.

22. *Dublin Evening News*, 20 Jan. 1785, p. 3, 18 Aug. 1785, p. 1, and 17 Nov. 1785, p. 1. W.H. Crawford, ‘The Belfast Middle Classes in the Late Eighteenth Century’, in D. Dickson, D. Keogh and K. Whelan, eds, *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism and Rebellion* (Dublin, 1993), pp. 62–73, at 64–5.

Although newspaper reporting confirms the use of requisitions across Ireland and Great Britain by 1780, it is hard to know whether the practice proliferated or press coverage of it increased. Certainly, an expanding provincial press in the later eighteenth century encouraged a positive feedback loop, with newspapers printing signed requisitions and other advertisements for public meetings, covering controversies about them, and establishing a ‘civic Hansard’ of local deliberations.²³ Many of Christopher Wyvill’s allies, seeking political and economic reform, publicly requisitioned officials in 1780 for English county meeting to launch their petitions.²⁴ The duke of Richmond shared with the press the correspondence surrounding the rejection of his requisition for a Sussex reform meeting in 1780. The magnate’s insistence that ‘any gentleman of property and character is of equal authority’ to a sheriff in summoning the county demonstrates how public requisitions might contest, rather than concede, official control over whether ‘the people have a right to assemble themselves and deliberate on public affairs whenever they think proper’.²⁵ Such rhetoric echoed the New Englanders’ defence of the statutory rights of propertied New Englanders to request notices and warrants for general meetings of their township, even where select-men refused to do so.²⁶ After nearly 200 inhabitants signed petitions requesting a Boston town meeting, the Massachusetts Government Act of 1774 complained that ‘a great abuse has been made of the power of calling’ such meetings on ‘matters of general concern’, and required Crown permission for any ‘called by the select men, or at the request of any number of freeholders’.²⁷ The American defence of community self-government against Crown control probably offered a further source

23. J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 142–60; K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–85* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 37–44; H. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 110–17, 159–71; R. Sweet, *The English Town, 1680–1840: Government, Society and Culture* (London, 1999), pp. 147–8; D. Eastwood, ‘Parliament and Locality’, in D. Dean and C. Jones, eds, *Parliament and Locality, 1660–1939* (Edinburgh, 1998), pp. 76–7. Quotation adopted from C. O’Reilly, ‘Creating a Critical Civic Consciousness: Reporting Local Government in the Nineteenth-century Provincial Press’, *Media History*, xxvi (2020), pp. 249–62, at 249.

24. *Caledonian Mercury*, 12 Jan. 1780, p. 2; *Norfolk Chronicle*, 29 Jan. 1780, p. 2, and 5 Feb. 1780, p. 2; *Ipswich Journal*, 11 Mar. 1780, p. 3, and 1 Apr. 1780, p. 3; E.C. Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization, 1769–1793* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), pp. 37–41.

25. As quoted by Jephson, *Platform*, i, pp. 132–3; see also *Norfolk Chronicle*, 15 Jan. 1780, p. 2.

26. Edward Channing, *Town and County Government in the English Colonies of North America* (Baltimore, MD, 1884), p. 37; *Acts and Laws of His Majesty’s Province of New-Hampshire, in New-England* (Portsmouth, NH, 1759), p. 34; R.H. Akagi, *The Town Proprietors of the New England Colonies: A Study of Their Development, Organization, Activities and Controversies, 1620–1770* (Philadelphia, PA, 1924), pp. 59–60, 288–92; J.F. Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action* (Westport, CT, 1999), chs 1–2.

27. *Massachusetts Sun*, 25 Mar. 1773, p. 3; 14 Geo. III, c. 54 (Westminster); *Essex Journal and Massachusetts and New-Hampshire General Advertiser*, 13 May 1775, p. 1; *South Carolina Gazette*, 1 Dec. 1772, pp. 1–2; D.L. Robinson, *Town Meeting: Practicing Democracy in Rural New England* (Amherst, MA, 2011), pp. 55–71.

of inspiration for written, signed requests to convene public meetings of a county or town in the British Isles.²⁸

Meetings claiming to represent a locality had far older origins, of course. Gatherings of the gentry and nobility to deliberate and petition on behalf of a 'county community' stretched back to at least the thirteenth century in England and played an important part in the crises of the seventeenth century, when they were often tied to county meetings of the quarter sessions and to grand juries.²⁹ In episodes of popular contention, notably in the 'Covenanted public politics' of Scotland, popular meetings of women and unpropertied men spoke for their communities outside the control and sanction of authorities.³⁰ Both of Charles II's parliaments subsequently acted against 'Tumults and Disorders, upon Pretence of preparing or presenting publick Petitions, or other Addresses', as the English Act of 1661 characterised them; it demanded the approval of three justices or the majority of a grand jury for organising any petition with more than twenty signatories.³¹ The king in 1679 could dismiss a petition that lacked official approval as representing merely 'a Company of loose disaffected People', rather than the deliberations of a community.³² While the Bill of Rights of 1689 guaranteed the right to petition the Crown and implied freedoms to assemble and deliberate on such petitions, it left unclear the standing of the 1661 Act.³³ Seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century chroniclers

28. K. Owen, *Political Community in Revolutionary Pennsylvania, 1774–1800* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 20–28, 51–5; R.A. Ryerson, *The Revolution is Now Begun: The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765–1776* (Philadelphia, PA, 1978), pp. 46–51; R.D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772–1774* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), p. 162; E.H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), pp. 176–91; R.D. Brown, 'The Massachusetts Convention of Towns, 1768', *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxvi (1969), pp. 94–104.

29. C. Carpenter, 'Gentry and Community in Medieval England', *Journal of British Studies*, xxxiii (1994), pp. 340–80; S. Walker, 'Communities of the County in Later Medieval England' in M. Braddick, ed., *Political Culture in Later Medieval England* (Manchester, 2006), pp. 68–80; G. Dodd, 'County and Community in Medieval England', *English Historical Review*, cxxxiv (2019), pp. 777–820; A. Hughes, 'The King, the Parliament, and the Localities during the English Civil War', *Journal of British Studies*, xxiv (1985), pp. 236–63; E. Vallance, *Loyalty, Memory and Public Opinion in England, 1658–1727* (Manchester, 2019).

30. L. Stewart, *Rethinking the Scottish Revolution: Covenanted Scotland, 1637–1651* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 31–3, 62–70, 281–3, 320–25; K. Bowie and A. Raffe, 'Politics, the People, and Extra-institutional Participation in Scotland, c.1603–1712', *Journal of British Studies*, lvi (2017), pp. 797–815; D. Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

31. 13 Car. II, c. 5; M. Knights, "'The Lowest Degree of Freedom': The Right to Petition Parliament, 1640–1800", in R. Huzzey, ed., *Pressure and Parliament: From Civil War to Civil Society* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 18–34, at 21–3; M. Knights, *Politics and Opinion in Crisis, 1678–81* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 330–36; K. Bowie, 'From Customary to Constitutional Right: The Right to Petition in Scotland before the 1707 Act of Union', *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, xxxviii (2018), pp. 279–92.

32. [John] Oldmixon, *The History of Addresses* (2 vols, London, 1709–11), i, p. 20.

33. 36 Geo. III, c. 8; Knights, "'Lowest Degree'", pp. 24–7; R. Handley, 'Public Order, Petitioning and Freedom of Assembly', *Journal of Legal History*, vii (1986), pp. 123–55; K. Wilson, 'Inventing Revolution: 1688 and Eighteenth-Century Popular Politics', *Journal of British Studies*, xxviii (1989), pp. 349–86.

mocked petitions or declarations as ‘surreptitiously obtain’d’ by the pretence that ‘the Sense of a County lies in a High Sheriff and a Grand Jury’ since ‘the Court makes the one and the Sheriff the other’.³⁴ By 1769, the endorsement of an ‘address agreed to and signed, in the name of the Freeholders’ of Surrey as part of the thinly attended ‘business of the Assize’ evoked complaints that ‘public notice should have been given’ for a separate meeting to consider this.³⁵

Contests over how to authorise the declarations of a county or settlement only intensified during a distinct series of disputes between government loyalists and their critics in the decade or so after 1769.³⁶ During the controversy over John Wilkes’s election for Middlesex, the sheriffs of Derbyshire and Yorkshire advertised county meetings at the instigation—apparently private, rather than published—of ‘Many Gentlemen’, while the foreman of the Buckinghamshire grand jury organised one despite his request being refused by the sheriff of that county.³⁷ Both Wilkesites and loyalists accused each other’s meetings of ‘Spurious and Mock Addresses’, pointing to the presence or absence of officials and leading families in a town’s deliberations.³⁸ During the crisis over the American colonies, both sides seized upon any evidence of a ‘surreptitiously introduced’ address³⁹ purporting to represent a community ‘without any previous Notice being given by Public Advertisement, or Public Meeting convened for such Purpose’.⁴⁰ Closed meetings, such as those of corporations or grand juries, could be challenged as unrepresentative of the ‘sense of society’ by public meetings,⁴¹ whether these were called by officials in response to ‘the Request of many respectable gentlemen’ or ‘by public advertisement’ from partisans themselves.⁴² In 1775, loyalists in Lancashire suggested that the circulation of an anti-ministerial petition represented ‘the most impudent Usurpation that ever was attempted in Contradiction to the Sense of the County, almost unanimously declared at a publick

34. Oldmixon, *History of Addresses*, ii, p. 33; *The Memoirs of Sir John Reresby of Thrybergh, Bart., M.P. for York, &c., 1634–1689*, ed. James J. Cartwright (London, 1875), p. 377; J.A.W. Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property: The Process of Self-Recognition in Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Kingston, ON, 1983), pp. 77–8.

35. *Kentish Gazette*, 18 Mar. 1769, p. 2.

36. J. Innes and N. Rodgers, ‘Politics and Government, 1700–1840’ in P. Clark, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, II: 1540–1840 (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 529–74, at 562–8; Innes, ‘People and Power’, pp. 138–9; Wilson, *Sense of the People*, pp. 238–40, 357–9, 417–21.

37. *Leeds Intelligencer*, 19 Sept. 1769, p. 2; *Derby Mercury*, 10 Nov. 1769, p. 1, and 3 Nov. 1769, p. 2; *Chester Courant*, 18 July 1769, p. 1.

38. John Free, *Common Safety the Cause and Foundation of Human Society* (3rd edn, London, 1769), p. iii; Joseph Grego, *History of Parliamentary Elections and Electioneering* (London, 1892), p. 192.

39. *Hibernian Journal*, 27 Oct. 1775, p. 4.

40. *Leeds Intelligencer*, 24 Oct. 1775, p. 3.

41. As quoted by J. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Non-conformity in Eighteenth-century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 345.

42. *Reading Mercury*, 6 Nov. 1775, p. 1; *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 14 Oct. 1775, p. 3. See also *Hampshire Chronicle*, 6 Nov. 1775, p. 3; *Norfolk Chronicle*, 24 Jan. 1778, p. 3; *Kentish Gazette*, 7 Oct. 1775, p. 5; *Newcastle Chronicle*, 21 Oct. 1775, p. 2; *Reading Mercury*, 13 Nov. 1775, p. 3.

Meeting' they had convened in Lancaster.⁴³ Squabbles over the status of so many addresses, petitions, and resolutions emerging from growing numbers of rival meetings explain why written requests for official sanction multiplied in the later eighteenth century.⁴⁴

Of course, at no point did meetings called by requisitions to office-holders, or after their refusal, provide the only means of political expression under the law. Men and women of all ranks represented their private interests in meetings, lobbies, and parliamentary petitions concerning their property or trade or role in local improvement schemes.⁴⁵ Philip Loft identifies 'multiple layers to the political nation' throughout the eighteenth century, as 'the legitimate participants differed from issue to issue', and these issues were raised in petitions responding to particular legislation and interests. The same could apply to private meetings of interested parties, but did not customarily translate into county meetings, where active participation was reserved for freeholders, or town meetings, which were restricted to 'leading citizens', whose wealth qualified them to claim to speak for their community.⁴⁶ However, where an area was deeply entangled in a particular trade, representation of an industry's interests might be blurred with claims to speak for a territorial community. Indeed, Henry Jephson's Victorian study of popular assemblies located his 'earliest example' in petitioning over the Cider Tax in 1763, which involved not just the owners of orchards or taverns, but also mass meetings that spread across counties with strong traditions of brewing—and imbibing—the beverage.⁴⁷ Throughout the eighteenth century, growing numbers of private societies, clubs, and associations, including those specifically for women, could establish their own membership, speakers, and procedures in meetings that might reflect the populace more faithfully than the property-owners voting at the general meetings of a county or town.⁴⁸

However, local officials and magistrates applied their own prejudices to judging the number, class, and purpose of people whose assembly

43. *Manchester Mercury*, 14 Nov. 1775, p. 4; Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism*, pp. 338–45.

44. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism*, p. 333.

45. *Newcastle Courant*, 6 May 1749, p. 3; *Hibernian Journal*, 2 Mar. 1778, p. 4; *Leeds Intelligencer*, 18 Aug. 1778, p. 1; H.T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 67–80; J.P. Reid, *The Concept of Representation in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chicago, IL, 1989), pp. 31–2; J. Hoppit, *Britain's Political Economies: Parliament and Economic Life, 1660–1800* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 150–62; Langford, *Public Life*, pp. 170–71.

46. P. Loft, 'Petitioning and Petitioners to the Westminster Parliament, 1660–1788', *Parliamentary History*, xxxviii (2019), pp. 342–61, at 350; B. Keith-Lucas, 'County Meetings', *Law Quarterly Review*, lxx (1954), pp. 109–14.

47. Jephson, *Platform*, i, p. 25.

48. P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 198–201, 450–51; L. Davidoff, 'Gender and "the Great Divide": Public and Private in British Gender History', *Journal of Women's History*, xv (2003), pp. 11–27.

might warrant threats of prosecution or violent dispersal. Scholars have long studied the politics of ‘the mob’, as it might be pejoratively dismissed, and how the Riot Act might be invoked or threatened against disorderly crowds.⁴⁹ After a Fakenham farmer informally agreed to meet some of his struggling employees on market day in 1778, he denounced as ‘contrary to law’ the appearance of three or four hundred other labourers joining to discuss the affordability of food on their wages.⁵⁰ Even when headed by the noble Lord George Gordon, the anti-Catholic petitioning campaign of 1780 led to a riotous march on Westminster, which Lord Mansfield judged as violating ‘principles more ancient and more important than any regulations upon the subject of petitioning’ in menacing Parliament.⁵¹ Meanwhile, where radicals aspired to preside over societies or associations with ‘members unlimited’, private gatherings remained open to accusations of treasonous conspiracy.⁵² By contrast, proceedings undertaken as—or modelled on—county or town general meetings offered agitators a form of orderly assembly not necessarily judged to be riotous.

Therefore, the spread of written requisitions for meetings signalled the evasion, as well as a new exertion, of elite control over public meetings. The second and third sections of this article will trace the dynamics of regulation and exploitation, but it is instructive to assess how requisitioning adapted to the changing forms of public meetings and ultimately faded from the front line of local conflicts. If written requisitions reflected greater pressure on officials to call public meetings, debates continued from the 1780s to the 1830s over when a town meeting could be ‘regularly convened’ by ‘the requisition of private individuals’.⁵³ In counties, disputes proliferated over whether a ‘meeting is not less a County Meeting because not called by a person appointed by the Crown’.⁵⁴ Moreover, requisitions took on new functions and purposes in changing legal and political environments, with the term extended to any signed announcement of a meeting. In Ireland, requisitions to Catholic leaders from their own propertied

49. G. Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study of 1764 to 1774* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 51, 62–5, 106–48; Brewer, *Party Ideology*, pp. 164–80; N. Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 158–9; M. Harrison, *Crowds and History: Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790–1835* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 3–6; Munger, ‘Suppression of Popular Gatherings’, p. 133.

50. *Norfolk Chronicle*, 14 Mar. 1778, p. 2.

51. Herbert Broom and George L. Denman, *Constitutional Law Viewed in Relation to Common Law: And Exemplified by Cases* (2nd edn, London, 1885), pp. 515–17; Lobban, ‘From Seditious Libel’, pp. 344–9; M. Knights, ‘The 1780s Protestant Petitions and the Culture of Petitioning’, in I. Haywood and J. Seeds, eds, *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 46–8.

52. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 14, 144–50.

53. *Hibernian Journal*, 25 Oct. 1782, p. 4; Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates* [hereafter Hansard], 3rd ser., Commons, 16 Feb. 1836, vol. 31, col. 439.

54. *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Pamphlet*, 15 Feb. 1817, cols 193–210.

supporters provided public notice of 'aggregate meetings'.⁵⁵ This probably emerged from Dubliners' earlier practice of requisitioning civic aggregate meetings of both city freemen and county freeholders.⁵⁶ After the Napoleonic Wars, English radicals used rejections of their requisitions as evidence of establishment corruption and as publicity for their own invitations to mass platform meetings.⁵⁷ More than two decades later, Radicals and Chartists might submit requisitions to office-holders even as they fused the deliberative procedures of county and town meetings with the scale and openness of Methodist camp meetings.⁵⁸ In 1838, George Mart pointed to an advertising placard as 'the requisition which called you together' for his open-air meeting in the Potteries.⁵⁹ By this period, organisations might seek public meetings to consecrate the foundation of 'a mere private club', and the term 'public meeting' extended to events with no pretence of deliberation.⁶⁰

Multiplying forms of community organisation and the growing use of door-to-door canvassing for petitions diluted the primacy of public meetings in deliberating on behalf of a locality by the 1840s.⁶¹ Signed requisitions consequently faded from the front line of battles over the authority of particular assemblies. A requisition for an aggregate meeting of Irish Catholics in 1851 collated hundreds of names, more as a declaration of support for Rome's restoration of episcopates than as a prompt for the event itself.⁶² Requisitions could still prove attractive when office-holders themselves wished to claim local support for a cause, as when the mayor of Liverpool organised 'one of the longest and most influential requisitions ever got up' to call a public meeting

55. *Saunders's News-Letter*, 28 Nov. 1814, p. 2, and 2 July 1819, p. 1; *Dublin Weekly Register*, 27 Feb. 1819, p. 1; *Southern Reporter*, 28 May 1825, p. 3, and 23 Dec. 1826, p. 4; *Dublin Evening Post*, 5 Aug. 1826, p. 1, and 28 June 1827, p. 2; *Dublin Morning Register*, 26 March 1827, p. 1, and 4 June 1828, p. 2; Thomas Wyse, *Historical Sketch of the Late Catholic Association of Ireland* (2 vols, London, 1829), i, pp. 141–3, and ii, pp. xxxix, cxlvi–cliv.

56. *Sussex Advertiser*, 24 Feb. 1800, p. 2; *Public Ledger*, 6 Mar. 1805, p. 2; J. Smyth, *The Men of No Property: Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century* (London, 1992), pp. 136–8.

57. *Morning Post*, 14 June 1815, p. 2; *The Addresser Addressed, Or A Reply to the Townsman of Bolton* (n.p., 1816), p. 19; J. Belchem, *Orator Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-class Radicalism* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 65–6; Hansard, 1st ser., Lords, 24 Feb. 1817, vol. 35, cols 546–51. See also Knott, 'Little Circle', p. 139.

58. R. Key, 'An Assessment of the Chartist Movement in Derby, 1839–1842', *Derbyshire Miscellany*, xvi (2002), pp. 62–78, at 63. *Northern Star*, 6 Jan. 1838, p. 5, 18 Oct. 1845, p. 5, 13 Feb. 1847, p. 1, and 29 Apr. 1848, p. 6.

59. *Northern Star*, 17 Nov. 1838, p. 5.

60. F.A. Montgomery, 'Glasgow and the Struggle for Parliamentary Reform, 1830–1832', *Scottish Historical Review*, lxi (1982), pp. 130–45, quotation at 131; *The Scotsman*, 1 Dec. 1830, p. 5.

61. P. Pickering, "'And Your Petitioners &c': Chartist Petitioning in Popular Politics, 1838–48", *English Historical Review*, cxvi (2001), pp. 368–88; P. Pickering and A. Tyrell, *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 2000), pp. 124–6.

62. *Dublin Mercantile Advertiser*, 25 July 1851, pp. 1–2.

to protest the same ‘papal outrages’.⁶³ The value of official meetings to local elites, then, outlasted the rise and fall of signed requisitioning as a front-line tactic in contests over who might claim to represent their community. Indeed, requisitioning survived in the internal rulebooks of local government as a means for elected representatives to call meetings of a council absent the chair’s initiative, and it was reborn in permissive legislation empowering rate-payer democracy for public services.⁶⁴ However, as the next section demonstrates, struggles over requisitioning left imprints on the legal and political culture of the United Kingdom that outlasted the practice itself.

II

This section compares the political and legislative developments in Ireland and Great Britain that gave new meanings to requisitioning; then, it considers the distinct elements of local discretion in officials accepting a request and magistrates acting against a meeting; and, lastly, considers how far requisitions succeeded in controlling—or legitimising—the expansion of popular politics. Crucially, parliamentary legislation and government repression depended on local interpretation and enforcement. The Riot Act, passed in 1714 for Great Britain and adopted by the Irish Parliament in 1787, indemnified magisterial force for actions taken to suppress disorder, even if it provided no powers for preventing peaceful assembly.⁶⁵ Ministers relied on the local landowning elite to read the Riot Act and prosecute treason, at least in Great Britain. Before and after the Act of Union, Dublin Castle exercised greater central control over public meetings in Ireland.⁶⁶ For example, in October 1784, James Napper Tandy organised ‘requisitions to Ireland’s sheriffs, calling on them to summon their bailiwicks for the purpose of electing representatives’ to a convention. The Attorney

63. As quoted by C. Scott, ‘A Comparative Re-examination of Anglo-Irish Relations in Nineteenth-century Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle-upon-Tyne’ (Univ. of Durham Ph.D. thesis, 1998), p. 102; D. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford, CA, 1992), pp. 40, 201.

64. John Lithby, *The Law of District and Parish Councils* (London, 1894), pp. 195, 238, 253, 321, 387; R. Huzzey and H. Miller, ‘The Politics of Petitioning: Parliament, Government, and Subscripational Cultures in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918’, *History*, cvii (2021), pp. 221–43, at 238–9; 1 & 2 Will. IV, c. 60 (Westminster).

65. J.S. Donnelly, ‘Irish Agrarian Rebellion: The Whiteboys of 1769–76’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, lxxxiii (1983), pp. 293–331; N. Garnham, ‘Police and Public Order in Eighteenth-Century Dublin’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, cviii (2001), pp. 81–91; N. Garnham, ‘Riot Acts, Popular Protest, and Protestant Mentalities in Eighteenth-Century Ireland’, *Historical Journal*, xlix (2006), pp. 403–23; J.R. Roszman, ‘The Curious History of Irish “Outrages”: Irish Agrarian Violence and Collective Insecurity, 1761–1852’, *Historical Research*, xci (2018), pp. 481–504; 15 & 16 Geo. III, c. 21 (Ireland).

66. K.T. Hoppen, *Governing Hibernia: British Politicians and Ireland, 1800–1921* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 41–59; E. Brynn, *Crown and Castle: British Rule in Ireland, 1800–1830* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 118–26; G. Broeker, *Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812–36* (London, 1970), pp. 39–45; K. Boyle, ‘Police in Ireland before the Union: II’, *Irish Jurist*, viii (1973), pp. 90–116.

General of Ireland swiftly warned office-holders that ‘summoning the freeholders and freemen to meet for such a purpose’ would be ‘highly criminal’, and turned up personally to browbeat the sole compliant sheriff into cancelling the meeting as it assembled.⁶⁷ When, in 1797, an English newspaper criticised the Lord Lieutenant’s warning to requisitionists in Cork against ‘meeting in unusual numbers, *under any pretence whatsoever*’ as ‘military coercion’ and a violation of the ‘inherent right of the subject, allowed by the constitution, and ratified at the revolution in 1688’, it demonstrated ignorance of the uncertain status of the Bill of Rights in Ireland.⁶⁸

The Dublin and, later, Westminster parliaments readily passed legislation with specific restrictions on public assembly in Ireland. In 1793, a Convention Act against ‘the Election or Appointment of unlawful Assemblies, under Pretence of preparing or presenting public Petitions, or other Addresses’ attempted to address the Catholic Committee’s or United Irishmen’s emulation of the Volunteer tradition.⁶⁹ After magistrates disrupted the 1811 meeting of the Catholic Committee in Dublin, it took all of Daniel O’Connell’s lawyerly skill to ensure that ‘the wording of the requisition be strictly warrantable under the provisions of the Convention Act’ for ‘an aggregate Meeting’ advertised with 300 signatories. Such gatherings of Catholics and, later, nationalists explicitly disavowed the ‘private invitation’ of select audiences in order to demonstrate their lawfulness publicly; the term ‘aggregate’ became closely associated with Irish meetings of this kind.⁷⁰ A series of emergency laws, from 1814 onwards, gave the Lords Lieutenant of Ireland further discretion to suspend public assembly in disturbed areas. From 1823, the Catholic Association’s use of rent-paying membership and church

67. *London Magazine*, Oct. 1784, pp. 320–21; Henry Grattan, *Memoirs of the Life and Times of the Rt. Hon. Henry Grattan* (3 vols, London, 1839–49) iii, pp. 205–10; Thomas MacNevin, *The History of the Volunteers of 1782* (1845; Dublin, 1848), pp. 160–61, 200; Smyth, *Men of No Property*, pp. 54, 135–9; J. Kelly, ‘Parliamentary Reform in Irish Politics, 1760–90’, in Dickson, Keogh and Whelan, eds, *United Irishmen*, pp. 74–87; S. Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 230–31. On Tandy’s prior experience, see *Saunders’s News-Letter*, 31 Jan. 1778, p. 2.

68. *Chester Chronicle*, 16 June 1797, p. 2; W.N. Osborough, ‘Constitutionally Constructing a Sense of Oneness: Facets of Law in Ireland after the Union’, *Irish Jurist*, xxxvii (2002), at pp. 237–8.

69. N.J. Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791–1798* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 58–63, 90–99; Smyth, *Men of No Property*, pp. 65–6, 96–8; E. O’Flaherty, ‘The Catholic Convention and Anglo-Irish Politics, 1791–93’, *Archivium Hibernicum*, xl (1985), pp. 14–34; Convention Act 1793, 33 Geo. III, c. 29 (Ireland); *Irish Parliamentary Register*, xiii, 18 July 1793, pp. 540–50; J. Bew, *The Glory of Being Britons: Civic Unionism in Nineteenth-century Belfast* (Dublin, 2009), p. 65; C.N.J. Roberts, ‘From the State of Emergency to the Rule of Law: The Evolution of Repressive Legality in the Nineteenth Century British Empire’, *Chicago Journal of International Law*, xx, no. 1 (2019), article 1, at pp. 11–12, available at <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cjil/vol20/iss1/1> (accessed 7 Nov. 2020).

70. *The O’Connell Portfolio* (London, 1840), pp. 9–10; S. Andrews, *Irish Rebellion: Protestant Polemic, 1798–1900* (London, 2006), pp. 111–13; C.M. O’Keeffe, *Life and Times of Daniel O’Connell* (2 vols, Dublin, 1864), i, pp. 113–15, 197; *Speech of Counsellor O’Connell, Delivered at the Aggregate Meeting ... in the City of Dublin, Thursday 5th March 1816* (Dublin, 1816), pp. 29–30.

structures evaded the existing laws on public meetings and led to a specific statute against 'unlawful societies in Ireland' in 1825. This proscribed Irish associations that sought to change the law and so renewed requisitioning of meetings as separate from charitable fundraising.⁷¹ Following Catholic Emancipation and the emergence of the Union repeal movement, the Acts of 1831 and 1833 against Tumultuous Risings and Disturbances provided further power to forbid meetings, including those convened to petition Parliament. The creation of a national constabulary in 1836 and the appointment of resident magistrates in place of local elites further distanced the situation in Ireland from the voluntarist, common-law approach to public meetings in Great Britain.⁷² These emergency measures and exceptions from localist practices subsequently offered a precedent for policing public assembly in the Empire.⁷³

The Irish legislation, beginning with the 1793 Act, did not augur a parallel approach for the rest of the United Kingdom, contrary to British radicals' expectations.⁷⁴ While Pitt's ministers encouraged prosecutions against seditious speech and suspended *habeas corpus*, they also sought to strengthen local control over those 'public meetings' held 'in the open air' and to license indoor venues.⁷⁵ The Seditious Meetings Act of 1795 confirmed the privileges of all official meetings, placing new importance on whether and when an office-holder might agree to call one. Any other meetings of more than fifty people required a requisition signed by at least seven householders, in the form of a public advertisement or notice no less than five days in advance. This permitted local

71. F. O'Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation: Daniel O'Connell and the Birth of Irish Democracy, 1820–30* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 33–4, 49–50; B. Jenkins, *Era of Emancipation: British Government of Ireland, 1812–1830* (Kingston, ON, 1988), pp. 75, 90–92, 117–25, 217–22, 234–5, 256; G.I.T. Machin, 'The Catholic Emancipation Crisis of 1825', *English Historical Review*, lxxviii (1963), pp. 458–62; *Dublin Evening Post*, 19 Jan. 1828, p. 4. See also Hansard, 2nd ser., Commons, 5 Mar. 1829, vol. 20, cols 741–4; Thomas Wyse, *The Political Catechism, Explanatory of the Constitutional Rights and Civil Disabilities of the Catholics of Ireland* (London, 1829), pp. 24, 53–4, 107–16.

72. V. Crossman, *Local Government in Nineteenth-century Ireland* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 7–23; C. Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 52–7; Roberts, 'From State of Emergency', pp. 14–20; P. Bonsall, *The Irish RMs: The Resident Magistrates in the British Administration of Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 12–16; D. Sheills, 'The Resident Magistracy in Ireland, 1860–1922', *IAHCCJ Bulletin*, xv (1992), pp. 39–52; Bew, *Glory of Being Britons*, pp. 106–7.

73. Roberts, 'From State of Emergency', pp. 38–40.

74. A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), pp. 275–306, quotation at 302; K.R. Johnston, 'The First and Last British Convention', *Romanticism*, xiii (2007), pp. 99–132, at 122–4; J. Brims, 'Scottish Radicalism and the United Irishmen', in Dickson, Keogh and Whelan, eds, *United Irishmen*, pp. 151–66.

75. Joseph Gurney, *The Trial of Thomas Hardy for High Treason* (4 vols, London, 1794), i, pp. 413–14, and iv, pp. 202–3; C. Emsley, 'The Home Office and its Sources of Information and Investigation, 1791–1801', *English Historical Review*, xciv (1979), pp. 532–61, at 559; Rodgers, *Crowds*, pp. 210–13; P. Weindling, 'Science and Sedition: How Effective Were the Acts Licensing Lectures and Meetings, 1795–1819?', *British Journal for the History of Science*, xiii (1980), pp. 139–53; P. Harling, 'The Law of Libel and the Limits of Repression, 1790–1832', *Historical Journal*, xlv (2001), pp. 107–34; K. Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism in Lancashire, 1798–1815* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 26–8, 36–42; Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 142–5.

justices to forbid, reschedule, or even disperse meetings with a new proclamation and indemnity to enforce it violently.⁷⁶ Although distinct, these two elements of local control could often become intermingled in controversial cases. The same individual might serve both as an office-holder deciding whether to agree the requisition for an official meeting and as one of those magistrates who could interpose if it proceeded by independent advertisement. The term ‘requisition’ was colloquially applied to both subscriptional forms—of requests to office-holders and signed advertisements—even if it was never mentioned in the Act. The Tories promoted the law, paradoxically, as both mere restatement of the *status quo ante* and emergency powers essential to avert revolution. Lord Thurlow defended ‘the glory of English law that there was no previous restraint on the people in the exercise of the important privilege of meeting to discuss grievances and petition Parliament’, adding the sophistry that freedom was ‘unrestrained, but its abuse was open to punishment’.⁷⁷ The practical intent and effect was to encourage local repression of perceived ‘abuse’ and deter mass audiences throughout the wars with France. The initial law expired in 1799, with short revivals and other repressive measures from Westminster used to encourage provincial vigilance.⁷⁸ Local elites generally acted on ministerial prompts to interpret their powers more repressively in periods of revolutionary fear. Radicals and reformers did convene some public meetings in the later years of the war, including one supported by a requisition signed by 2,000 or more Mancunians in 1808.⁷⁹

Building on these precedents, growing numbers of radical meetings ‘combined demonstrations of strength with a commitment to order’ after 1815. The Tories responded with a new Seditious Meetings Act in 1817 for Great Britain and in 1819 for the United Kingdom.⁸⁰ Both laws again sought to reinforce local office-holders’ confidence in forbidding and dispersing subversive gatherings, without trespassing on respectable meetings of local communities. The first bill revived until July 1818 the strict controls on how legal meetings could be called, adding provisions about adjourning meetings. The second revival was broader in scope, abandoning efforts to define matters of ‘church or state’ as distinct from others, and seeking to prevent non-residents from attending local meetings.⁸¹ In the period between the operation of either

76. 36 Geo. III, c. 8 (Westminster); *Cobbett’s Parliamentary History*, xxxii, pp. 432–4 (27 Nov. 1795); Knights, “Lowest Degree”, pp. 24–7.

77. Jephson, *Platform*, i, pp. 135–6.

78. Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 53–4; Jephson, *Platform*, i, p. 282; R. Wells, ‘English Society and Revolutionary Politics in the 1790s: The Case for Insurrection’, in M. Philp, ed., *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 188–226, at 219.

79. Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp. 215–19, 226–40; Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 57–8; Belchem, ‘Orator Hunt’, pp. 53–66; *Morning Chronicle*, 18 Jan. 1808, p. 2; *York Herald*, 5 Mar. 1808, p. 3; *Hibernian Journal*, 11 Mar. 1808, p. 4; *Leicester Journal*, 4 Dec. 1812, p. 3.

80. R. Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford, 2019), p. 253.

81. 57 Geo. III, c. 19; 60 Geo. III & 1 Geo. IV, c. 6.

act, however, the Peterloo massacre provided sober proof of the legal and military powers available to magistrates regardless. Manchester radicals sought to demonstrate the legality of their rally, scrapping their original requisition because it suggested that they might trespass on parliamentary privileges. The staff of the *Manchester Observer* prepared a fresh requisition, and a thousand householders swiftly 'placed on record their honourable Names' for a public meeting. The newspaper eagerly contrasted the 'honest hands' of these requisitionists with those 'pimps of authority' who had been 'begging for Signatures' for their requisitions from 'the dependent and alarmed minions of Power' and 'servile Publicans'. While officials, predictably, declined the request to convene the radical meeting, the careful framing of the requisition posed a legal challenge to any magistrates wishing to prevent it from proceeding, not least as it far exceeded the requirements of the lapsed Seditious Meetings Act.⁸² Magistrates requested Home Office advice in advance on how and when they could declare the meeting riotous; when their actions killed eighteen and injured hundreds more of the gathered crowd, national debate and criminal prosecutions focused on the lawfulness of the magistrates reading the Riot Act.⁸³ Indeed, *post hoc* justifications of the Peterloo Massacre culminated in the judicial and ministerial fabrication of 'seditious assembly' as a novel concept in common law; as Michael Lobban has shown, this held that the character of a meeting, not what was said or done at it, could be sufficient to make it unlawful and its violent dispersal lawful.⁸⁴ This further strengthened the discretionary power of Britain's magistrates against meetings, regardless of any statute in operation.

The 1819 Act, passed after Peterloo and in force until 1825, revived controversies over how officials ought to judge requisitions for official meetings that would enjoy particular protections. The Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, insisted that full discretion 'undoubtedly belonged' to officials as to when to grant requests.⁸⁵ By contrast, Lord Ossulton theorised that traditionally 'the sanction of the Sheriff was only necessary to give an authentic character to the meeting, as a meeting of the county'. Under a Seditious Meetings Act, he thought, 'private opinions' should be set aside and officials simply assess if 'the requisitions are of sufficient weight and respectability' or 'whether such a meeting, under circumstances possible no doubt, but it is to be presumed rare, may be calculated to produce direct and manifest danger to the public peace'.⁸⁶ Such logic demonstrates how Whig criticism of

82. Poole, *Peterloo*, pp. 254–5.

83. *Ibid.*, pp. 246–59, 293–8.

84. Broom and Denman, *Constitutional Law*, pp. 515–17; Lobban, 'From Seditious Libel', pp. 344–9; F.C. Mather, *Public Order in the Age of the Chartists* (Manchester, 1959), p. 32.

85. Hansard, 2nd ser., Lords, 25 Jan. 1821, vol. 4, cols 105–16.

86. *A Report of the Speeches and Proceedings at the Meeting of the County of Northumberland, Held at Morpeth, January 10, 1821* (Newcastle, 1821), pp. 1–7. See also Hansard, 1st ser., Commons, 7 Dec. 1819, vol. 40, cols 832–4.

the Tories often conflated the refusal to call a meeting officially with the outright prohibition of one.⁸⁷ Objections to Crown influence over local decisions obscured how far opposition politicians broadly agreed with the Tories that while ‘the right of meeting was a valuable part of the constitution’ there were ‘limits within which it should be confined’.⁸⁸ When Castlereagh dismissed Earl Fitzwilliam as the Lord Lieutenant of Yorkshire’s West Riding, George Lamb seized on this as an example of reprisal against those officials who acted ‘against the wishes of his majesty’s ministers at public meetings’.⁸⁹ While a clever partisan attack, this overstated the power, rather than influence, ministers wielded. Fitzwilliam was dismissed from his Crown appointment for signing a requisition for a county meeting to discuss the Peterloo massacre. The High Sheriff of Yorkshire, who agreed to the requisition and presided at ‘the first county meeting which had been disgraced with all the emblems of flags and drums’, remained in post after telling thousands gathered at York Castle that he had ‘called the meeting readily as he was a friend to popular meetings’. Even if the infamous dismissal demonstrated Crown influence over the Lords Lieutenant, then, numerous sheriffs, mayors, and magistrates could not be so easily replaced.⁹⁰

Widespread agitation over George IV’s efforts to divorce Queen Caroline tested the local application of the 1819 Seditious Meetings Act. In Cheshire, a ‘pocket sheriff’ faced claims that his refusal of a requisition placed him in contempt of Parliament for impairing the liberty of petitioning under the Bills of Rights.⁹¹ On the basis that he had already procured 9,000 signatures for a declaration favouring the king, the loyalist deputy sheriff of Hampshire rejected a requisition.⁹² In Northumberland, Sir Charles Monck published his correspondence with the sheriff, objecting to the lack of ‘some constitutional ground for such refusal’ of a requisition for a meeting. Yet, even under the provisions of the 1819 Act, office-holders were unable to impose ‘conformity to the wishes of the Ministers of the day’ by applying their own prejudices to requests. Monck’s fellow Whigs in the county subsequently repurposed their requisition as a signed advertisement for their own ‘meeting of the independent freeholders, and inhabitants’. They could safely proceed on their own authority since the requisition included an array of local

87. *Cobbett’s Parliamentary History*, xxxii, cols 432–4 (27 Nov. 1795).

88. Hansard, 1st ser., Commons, 7 Dec. 1819, vol. 41, cols 824–5; Hansard, 1st ser., Lords, 24 Feb. 1817, vol. 35, cols 579–81.

89. M. Chase, *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom* (Manchester, 2013), p. 22; Hansard, 1st ser., Commons, 7 Dec. 1819, vol. 41, cols 820–21.

90. Jephson, *Platform*, i, pp. 383–5; Chase, *1820*, p. 22; Webb and Webb, *English Local Government*, i, pp. 309–10, 380–86; Langford, *Public Life*, pp. 408–10.

91. Hansard, 2nd ser., Commons, 9 Feb. 1821, vol. 4, cols 554–7; see also D.R. Fisher, ‘Survey’, in D.R. Fisher, ed., *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820–1832* (Cambridge, 2009), available online at <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/survey/i-england> (accessed 4 June 2021).

92. Hansard, 2nd ser., Lords, 25 Jan. 1821, vol. 4, cols 105–16.

magnates and gentry, not just seven householders, and a number were themselves magistrates tasked with monitoring such notices.⁹³

For those not so elevated as to be justices of the peace themselves, the discretion of officials had long provided obstructions and sometimes opportunities. The overlapping jurisdiction of officials allowed some requisitionists to choose the most receptive recipient. In 1810, the grand jury of Dublin and a group of 124 freemen and freeholders sent requisitions to both the High Sheriffs of the county and the city, asking them to convene a meeting to consider repeal of the Act of Union. The dual strategy was astute, since one sheriff ignored them, but the other agreed.⁹⁴ Similarly, in 1839, the deputy constable of Clifford, in West Yorkshire, agreed to convene a meeting to remonstrate against the high level of postal charges even though the head constable had declined a requisition from local tradesmen.⁹⁵ In some cases, requisitions and counter-requisitions engaged in a contest of signature-gathering to persuade an official to agree or to refuse to call a public meeting, as in 1809, when accusations of wartime corruption prompted Prestonians to sign rival demands to the mayor.⁹⁶ Officials' sympathies might influence how they assayed the weight of signatures. In 1830, the sheriff of Cornwall refused to call a meeting about reform, claiming a lack of clergy or wealthy men among the 300 freeholders signing the requisition.⁹⁷ In 1838, the bailiff of Darlington refused to call a public meeting about the repeal of the Corn Laws, arguing that 'the requisition was not respectably signed' as 'several of the requisitionists rent shops and premises in the central part of the town' but few were freeholders.⁹⁸ By contrast, the constable of Brighton insisted that he was obliged to agree a requisition from rate-payers, regardless of whether they included 'the poorest or the richest men'.⁹⁹ Given the prevalence of absentee landownership in Ireland, any test of requisitionists' 'great property' became an excuse to refuse county meetings.¹⁰⁰ As late 1839, the High Sheriff of Queens County rejected a requisition from 'Popish priests' on the grounds that it lacked 'resident landed proprietors' among the signatories.¹⁰¹ The decisions of officials, then, reflected different national and local contexts, ranging from counties down to parishes, and reflecting grander and humbler office-holders' connections to their communities.

Where a meeting proceeded without an official convening it, it was subject to magisterial veto during the operation of the Seditious

93. *A Report of ... the Meeting of the County of Northumberland*, pp. 1–7.

94. *The O'Connell Portfolio* (London, 1840), p. 7.

95. *Northern Star*, 26 Jan. 1839, p. 5.

96. Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp. 227–8.

97. Jaggard, *Cornwall Politics*, p. 81.

98. *Northern Star*, 6 Oct. 1838, p. 5.

99. *Champion*, 27 Jan. 1839, p. 3.

100. *Gentleman's Magazine*, Mar. 1787, pp. 153–4.

101. *Dublin Evening Packet*, 8 June 1839, p. 3.

Meetings Act and common-law threat of violent dispersal and criminal prosecution at all times. Immediately after Peterloo, Sir Codrington Carrington, a past Chief Justice of Ceylon and the current chairman of the Buckinghamshire Quarter Sessions, published a tract denying 'the birth-right of the subjects of Great Britain to assemble at the requisition of any private individual'. He distinguished 'the regulated privilege of petition' in the Bill of Rights from unlawful assemblies '*publicly convened* for the purpose of deliberating upon any alleged grievance in Church or State, unsanctioned by the concurrence or summons of the appropriate public authority, but originating in the will of any number of mere private persons'.¹⁰² Many Tory politicians may have agreed, but legislation always permitted householders to requisition public meetings through signed advertisements, subject to the oversight of magistrates—whether those like Codrington or more permissive individuals. When, in Leeds and Plymouth, the mayor refused a requisition from householders for a meeting to petition in support of Queen Caroline, it became their own signed advertisement for a meeting unmolested by the magistrates.¹⁰³ In 1817, Lord Grenville presciently worried whether magistrates could now 'legalize notices, which would otherwise be illegal' by exercising their discretion not to act against a signed advertisement.¹⁰⁴ The 1819 law included a clause attempting to guard against this, but formalising the notification of magistrates could sometimes assure those organising and attending meetings of their lawfulness—even if a requisition had not protected the Peterloo crowd from the Riot Act.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, long after the expiry of the final Seditious Meetings Act in 1825, its procedures for requisitioning shaped popular views of the constitutional standing of public assembly. In 1839, the *Northern Star* counselled readers that to 'make any public meeting legal it is only necessary that a requisition, signed by seven householders, be presented to the Mayor or Chief Constable of a Town or Borough, or to the Lord Lieutenant for a County Meeting', but then 'if he decline, the requisitionists may call the meeting themselves'.¹⁰⁶ In York, Chartists sent 'a numerously signed requisition of respectable tradesmen' to the Mansion House, but since the Lord Mayor was out of town—perhaps not coincidentally—the requisitionists were compelled to call the meeting' outside the Albion Hotel themselves.¹⁰⁷ If this trick played on

102. Sir Codrington Carrington, *An Inquiry into the Law Relative to Public Assemblies of the People* (2nd edn, London, 1819), pp. 22–3, 34–7, emphasis original; Jephson, *Platform*, i, pp. 392–3; D.R. Fisher, 'Sir Codrington Edmund Carrington', in Fisher, ed., *History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820–1832*.

103. *Public Ledger*, 12 Sept. 1820, p. 1; *York Herald*, 9 Dec. 1820, p. 2; Munger, 'Suppression of Popular Gatherings', p. 121.

104. Hansard, 1st ser., Lords, 21 Mar. 1817, vol. 35, cols 1210–17.

105. 57 Geo. III, c. 19 § 8.

106. *Northern Star*, 11 May 1839, p. 4.

107. *Northern Star*, 6 July 1839, p. 5.

the Government's 'scrupulous anxiety to keep within the Law in dealing with Chartism', it should not be mistaken as 'a misunderstanding' of that law, as F.C. Mather suggests.¹⁰⁸ Rather, Chartists identified ways to tame the threat of repression by local magistrates, whether by assuaging anxieties or delegitimising any reaction.¹⁰⁹ The formula permitted some meetings to proceed even after the royal proclamation of 1839 encouraged magistrates to prevent revolutionary threats.¹¹⁰ In Northallerton, one justice declined a requisition to convene a meeting himself but gave the Chartists his blessing to proceed, 'wishing the speakers only not to use inflammatory language'.¹¹¹ Where local magistrates did forbid an advertised public meeting from proceeding, organisers could evade their jurisdiction in remote moors and open fields, even if this involved serious hikes for the audience and scheduling for weekends or holidays rather than workday evenings.¹¹² Hence, in 1840, the Chartists of Stockton-upon-Tees assembled at Thornaby Green, two miles outside the bounds of their town, after the mayor not only refused to call a meeting in compliance with a requisition 'signed by the number of inhabitant householders specified by Act of Parliament' but also threatened to set the special constables upon them.¹¹³

In emphasising the contingency of local repression and subversive uses for the law, we should not ignore the physical peril for attendees of more radical public meetings. Inconsistent or tardy responses from local officials could create rather than remove physical and legal jeopardy, as two examples from Newcastle-upon-Tyne demonstrate. In 1819, the mayor declined a requisition from 300 inhabitants to convene a meeting about Peterloo, but 'gave permission to proceed with the meeting, which he promised not to molest' as he trusted 'the good sense and prudence of the people'. The reformers subsequently offered him a vote of thanks, but the mayor 'caught the contagion of fear' in the following days and turned against a brewing 'rebellion', resulting in violent clashes.¹¹⁴ Twenty years later, the town's magistrates responded to a riot by forbidding all public meetings. The town's Chartists therefore

108. F.C. Mather, 'The Government and the Chartists', in A. Briggs, ed., *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), pp. 372–405, at 384.

109. On the need to historicise 'arguments' not 'descriptions' of the constitution, see Brewer, *Party Ideology*, pp. 33–5; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 333; Belchem, 'Republicanism', pp. 10–12.

110. *Northern Star*, 27 July 1839, p. 7.

111. *Northern Star*, 27 July 1839, p. 8.

112. K. Navickas, 'Moors, Fields, and Popular Protest in South Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, 1800–1848', *Northern History*, xlv (2009), pp. 93–111; Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 236–46.

113. *Northern Star*, 15 Feb. 1840, p. 8.

114. Eneas Mackenzie, *A Description and Historical Account of the Town and County of Newcastle Upon Tyne* (2 vols, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1827), i, p. 81. Notably, requisitions are not discussed in three prior histories: Henry Bourne, *The History of Newcastle Upon Tyne* (Newcastle, 1731); John Brand, *The History and Antiquities of the Town and Country of the Town of Newcastle Upon Tyne* (2 vols, London, 1789); John Baillie, *An Impartial History of the Town and County of Newcastle Upon Tyne* (Newcastle, 1801), pp. 205–9.

submitted a requisition to the mayor for permission to meet at the end of the month to deliberate over sending an address to the Queen against a standing army and the proposed rural police bill. John Fife, the mayor and an active member of the Northern Political Union just a few years earlier, did not respond until the last moment—and then with his refusal. Attendees gathered at the public grounds known as the Forth, but local officials read the Riot Act and deployed armed troops and constables to disperse the outraged crowd. While no one died, a generation would remember that the 1839 ‘Battle of the Forth was the Peterloo of Newcastle’ and R.C. Gammage quickly accused Fife of trying ‘to strike a blow at the right of public meeting’.¹¹⁵ As both these examples demonstrate—in periods outside any Seditious Meetings Act—indecision and bad faith by local officials remained a threat to, as well as an opportunity for, those requisitioning and attending public meetings.¹¹⁶

Since magistrates retained arbitrary discretion in declaring assemblies riotous or seditious, they could threaten violence or prosecution obliquely with well-timed reminders in response to the open advertisement of public meetings. William Cobbett suspected many attendees chose not to attend his petition meeting at Portsdown Hill, Hampshire, after this happened in February 1817.¹¹⁷ Huddersfield’s magistrates, ‘not content with throwing every legal and constitutional obstacle in the way of the requisitions’ for public meetings in 1839, offered ‘a little intimidation’ in vague but menacing posters around the town.¹¹⁸ The authorities could also use the names on a requisition or signed advertisement to persecute organisers and supporters.¹¹⁹ In Yorkshire, ‘the Court party’ formed a ‘Gag Committee’ that scuppered an 1817 meeting on reform by persuading sufficient of the eighty signatories to withdraw their names from a requisition to the sheriff.¹²⁰ The constables of Barnsley accepted a Chartist requisition for consideration but then retained it, apparently with an eye to arresting the signatories or at least threatening to do so.¹²¹ At a Halifax public meeting to condemn the Peterloo massacre, the reported crowd of 40,000 stampeded in panic at false rumours that the constables—whose refusal had led to the gathering being convened by

115. As quoted by W.H. Maehl, Jr, ‘Chartist Disturbances in Northeastern England, 1839’, *International Review of Social History*, viii (1963), pp. 389–414, at 402–3; W.H. Maehl, Jr, ‘The Dynamics of Violence in Chartism: A Case Study in Northeastern England’, *Albion*, vii (1975), pp. 101–19, at 112–13; *Allan’s Illustrated Edition of Tyneside Songs and Readings* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1891), pp. 389, 395.

116. Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 89–91.

117. *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Pamphlet*, 15 Feb. 1817, cols 193–210. See also *Hone’s Reformist Register*, 1 Mar. 1817, col. 167; *The Addresser Addressed, or, A Reply to the Townsman of Bolton* (n.p., 1816), p. 19; Belchem, ‘Orator’ Hunt, pp. 65–6.

118. *Northern Star*, 17 Aug. 1839, p. 7.

119. *Northampton Mercury*, 2 Oct. 1775, p. 1.

120. *Hone’s Reformist Register*, 29 Mar. 1817, cols 288–92.

121. *Northern Star*, 17 Aug. 1839, p. 3.

the requisitionists—had come to attack it; only assurance of the presence of a sympathetic magistrate allayed the panic.¹²² Where audiences risked their own personal safety, however, their sheer numbers created a material challenge to dispersal. As a speaker told Rochdale's Chartists in the summer of 1839, '[t]he Government cannot commit a million and a half men to prison, but they can pick them out here and there, and thus terrify the whole'.¹²³ For this reason, the cumulative choices of meeting attendees constrained the limits of repression, in practice.

Ultimately, the protective value of requisitions faded in the face of the common law doctrine of 'seditious assembly', as judges pointed to the scale and perception of meetings, rather than the likely or actual conduct, as determining their legality. In Ireland, Daniel O'Connell faced prosecution in 1842 for the 'intimidation intended to be excited' by the sheer numbers his repeal meetings attracted. Prosecuting Chartists at the Lancashire assizes in 1842, Lord Abinger told the grand jury that meetings attended by 'such multitudes as to render all notion of serious debate impossible' must be intrinsically riotous. Judged against the traditions of deliberative town and county meetings, 'assemblies of such magnitude, without a president, or any one empowered and able to restrain and dissolve them, must lead, as every one will see, to alarm and terror, and to the disturbance of the peace'.¹²⁴ The shift away from official procedure to elite anxiety as a determinant of legality took time to disseminate; later that year, the magistrate's periodical *Justice of the Peace* answered a reader's query about Chartist meetings with the advice that 'as long as they conduct themselves peacefully, and use no seditious or inflammatory language, they cannot be legally molested'.¹²⁵ However, the Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, supported the Metropolitan Police in judging that the procession of the Chartists' great petition from Kennington Common to Westminster in 1848 was 'calculated to inspire just terror and alarm'.¹²⁶ An 1848 guide for magistrates disseminated this principle of seditious assembly even more widely, shifting further away from the earlier Acts' emphasis on due notification and advertisement.¹²⁷ In these ways, the magisterial right of veto gained a more expansive application, since the procedure of requisition had ceased to provide elite control over public meetings. When the threshold for seditious assembly

122. *Morning Chronicle*, 7 Oct. 1819, p. 3.

123. As quoted by C. Godfrey, 'The Chartist Prisoners, 1839–41', *International Review of Social History*, xxiv (1979), pp. 189–236, at 210.

124. *Charges delivered by Lord Abinger to the Grand Jury of Leicester in 1839; and to the Grand Juries of Cheshire and Lancashire, upon the Special Commissions in those Counties, in 1842* (London, 1842), p. 29; Lobban, 'From Seditious Libel', p. 351.

125. *Justice of the Peace*, vi, 17 Sept. 1842, p. 570.

126. As quoted by I. Channing, *The Police and the Expansion of Public Order Law in Britain, 1829–2014* (Abingdon, 2015), p. 57.

127. *Unlawful and Riotous Meetings* (London, 1848), p. 8; Navickas, *Protest*, p. 299.

receded along with fears of revolution after 1848 in Great Britain, access to public space became a new frontier for struggles over popular assembly.¹²⁸

Did the spread of requisitioning strengthen popular claims or state repression, then? Opportunism led political elites to welcome ‘a general run of addresses’ from their grass-roots supporters when these might be ‘of great service’ to their cause, fuelling conflicts over the authority of local meetings and so stimulating written requisitions to validate them.¹²⁹ In 1784, Edmund Burke loftily warned against ‘a double House of Commons’, with the executive playing off expressions of opinion ‘in corporation and county meetings dispersed’ against the lawful deliberations of elected members ‘in Parliament assembled’. While he and other Rockingham Whigs now condemned an outpouring of Tory addresses, they had helped requisition meetings for Wyvill’s reform petitions just a few years earlier.¹³⁰ In the 1790s, Pittite office-holders might issue or grant requisitions for county or town meetings as part of the ‘vulgar’ loyalism of defending the king and the constitution.¹³¹ When in 1821 the duke of Wellington condemned ‘the farce of a county meeting’, he recognised the *faux pas* and clarified that his remark referred only to a specific rejection of a requisition in Hampshire, where he was Lord Lieutenant, and that public meetings ‘if properly regulated, were a fair constitutional mode of taking the sense of the county’.¹³²

Successive special laws for Ireland, a reliance on outsider stipendiary magistrates, and the central military authority commanded from Dublin Castle contrasted with a greater respect for local initiative in Great Britain. There, ministers relied on laws or proclamations to embolden local office-holders’ discretion and magistrates’ enforcement.¹³³ The development of new police forces and stipendiary magistrates did not displace this reliance on the amateur administration of justice, largely

128. See Thompson, *British Political Culture*, p. 62; J. Martin, ‘Popular Political Oratory and Itinerant Lecturing in Yorkshire and the North East in the Age of Chartism, 1837–6’ (Univ. of York Ph.D. thesis, 2010), pp. 85–8; A. Taylor, ‘“Commons-Stealers”, “Land-Grabbers” and “Jerry-Builders”: Space, Popular Radicalism and the Politics of Public Access in London, 1848–1880’, *International Review of Social History*, xl (1995), pp. 383–407; N. McMaster, ‘The Battle for Mousehold Heath, 1857–1884: “Popular Politics” and the Victorian Public Park’, *Past and Present*, no. 127 (1990), pp. 117–54; J. Field, ‘“When the Riot Act was Read: A Pub Mural of the Battle of Southsea, 1874”, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 10 (1980), pp. 152–61; R. Allen, ‘The Battle for the Common: Politics and Populism in Mid-Victorian Kentish London’, *Social History*, xxii (1997), pp. 61–77.

129. P. Marshall, ‘Manchester and the American Revolution’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, lxii (1979), pp. 168–86, at 169–73; Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism*, p. 319.

130. *Parliamentary Register*, xv (1787), p. 153; Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property*, p. 282.

131. *Hampshire Chronicle*, 18 June 1792, p. 2; *Stamford Mercury*, 29 June 1792, p. 2; *Chester Chronicle*, 1 Feb. 1793, p. 3; *Chester Chronicle*, 20 Nov. 1795, p. 3; *Northampton Mercury*, 22 Dec. 1792, p. 3; Philp, *Reforming Ideas*, pp. 53–96; M. Duffy, ‘William Pitt and the Loyalist Association Movement of 1792’, *Historical Journal*, xxxix (1996), pp. 943–62; A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), pp. 273–4; Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp. 42, 247–8; Rodgers, *Crowds*, pp. 198–204, 213.

132. Hansard, 2nd ser., Lords, 25 Jan. 1821, vol. 4, cols 105–16.

133. Hansard, 2nd ser., Commons, 7 Dec. 1819, vol. 40, cols 832–4; J. Mori, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution, 1785–1820* (London, 2000), pp. 102–4.

thanks to the parsimony of rate-payers.¹³⁴ While repressive legislation had sought to control novel waves of mass meetings that had left peace officers uncertain, it also codified specific practices that could be adapted and subverted. During the fevered crisis of 1831–32, freeholders and liberal magistrates requisitioned the sheriff of Warwickshire to call a county meeting that subsequently condemned the reactionary magistrates and mayor of Warwick, who were responsible for heavy-handed policing.¹³⁵ The political sympathies and transient fears of local elites shaped how they applied the law to people and events, establishing new traditions. During the Queen Caroline agitation, Birmingham's Tories had circumvented George Muntz, the High Bailiff, in order to requisition their own town meeting in favour of the king's divorce. More than a decade later, Muntz enjoyed reading aloud the same names from a protest denigrating a reform meeting not convened by the current office-holders.¹³⁶ If the liberality and tyranny of particular justices and officials might ebb and flow across Great Britain, new precedents provided high-water marks in subsequent disputes with office-holders.¹³⁷ The next section shows why so many skirmishes would be fought over the signatures on requisitions.

III

Organising, submitting, and contesting requisitions was just one of the ways in which local 'political entrepreneurs' turned high political issues into truly nation-wide controversies. Like petitions, protests, and other representations of popular opinion, meetings constructed expressions of support as much as revealing some pre-existing balance of sentiments.¹³⁸ This section considers how requisitioning shaped the organisation, advertisement, attendance, and conduct of meetings, revealing rival claims to represent a community. The representative claim of a meeting began with the signatures on a requisition, which was likely to be reproduced and publicised in an advertisement for a meeting, whether approved by an official or proceeding on the initiative of the

134. C. Emsley, 'The English Magistracy, 1700–1850', *LAHCCJ Bulletin*, xv (1992), pp. 28–38, at 37–8; J. Fellague Ariouat, 'Rethinking Partisanship in the Conduct of the Chartist Trials, 1839–1848', *Albion*, xxix (1997), pp. 596–621; R.E. Swift, 'Policing Chartism, 1839–1848: The Role of the "Specials" Reconsidered', *English Historical Review*, cxxii (2007), pp. 669–99; D. Goodway, *London Chartism, 1838–1848* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 146–7, 222–4; H. Weisser, 'Chartism in 1848: Reflections on a Non-revolution', *Albion*, xiii (1981), pp. 12–26.

135. *The Sun*, 9 Nov. 1831, p. 1; *London Courier*, 9 Nov. 1831, p. 1.

136. *Proceedings of the Important Town's Meeting, convened by the Birmingham Political Union and held at the Birmingham Town Hall on Monday, Jan. 18, 1838* (Birmingham, 1836), p. 5.

137. D. Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces, 1700–1870* (Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 120–21, 131; Munger, 'Suppression of Popular Gatherings', pp. 133–40.

138. Tilly, *Popular Contention*, pp. 278–9; D. Read, *The English Provinces, c.1760–1960: A Study in Influence* (London, 1964), pp. 35–7.

requisitionists alone.¹³⁹ Appealing to both the quantity and quality of support they enjoyed, requisitions often employed a stock boast, also common for petitions, of being ‘numerously and respectably signed’.¹⁴⁰ In fact, over time, inflationary expectations or organisational incentives boosted the number of names attached to requisitions.¹⁴¹ Some grew so large that they became preliminary drafts of a mass petition; in 1820, 100 ‘respectable citizens’ in Edinburgh and 300 Glaswegians each signed requisitions for anti-ministerial meetings.¹⁴²

Like other sorts of subscriptional address, the initial audience for each signature on a requisition would be the next person invited to add their name.¹⁴³ Then, whatever officials and magistrates made of the signatories, their names—often printed on advertisements or read aloud at meetings—might repel or attract the potential audience.¹⁴⁴ When Wyvill sought more than 200 Yorkshire freeholders to sign his 1779 requisition for a county meeting on reform, he exercised care to exclude parliamentarians whose support might indicate partisanship. He did, however, secure the support of York’s Dean, whose name could signal to clergy that they too might defy their archbishop’s disapproval of reform.¹⁴⁵ By contrast, critics could point out a narrow base of support. During the Reform bill crisis, Lord Wharncliffe recognised that the ‘gentlemen who had put their names to this requisition were old Parliamentary Reformers’ and hence cast doubt on whether a Yorkshire county meeting and its petition really spoke for ‘the great body of the freeholders’.¹⁴⁶ Canny organisers, in this way, might search for unexpected signatories and aim for a broad church of support in order to prove the significance of their meeting and any resolutions or petitions it might produce.¹⁴⁷ Hence, in 1839, the Whig parliamentary agent for Fife recruited local Chartists to join the requisition for a meeting in Markinch’s Apron Society Hall, signalling a popular front to praise Victoria’s defiance of the Tories during the bedchamber crisis.¹⁴⁸

Those designing and signing a requisition often assumed a wider set of responsibilities for the meeting too.¹⁴⁹ A letter of 1825 from one

139. R. Huzzey, ‘A Microhistory of British Antislavery Petitioning’, *Social Science History*, xliii (2019), pp. 599–623; Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp. 219, 230–32.

140. *Northern Star*, 3 Feb. 1838, p. 8.

141. *Report of the Speeches Delivered at the Lincoln County Meeting, on Friday, March 15, 1816* (Stamford, 1816), p. 15.

142. *Champion*, 16 Dec. 1820, p. 12; *Glasgow Herald*, 25 Dec. 1820, p. 1.

143. D. Carpenter, ‘Recruitment by Petition: American Antislavery, French Protestantism, English Suppression’, *Perspectives on Politics*, xiv (2016), pp. 700–723.

144. *Yorkshire Gazette*, 1 July 1820, p. 2; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, p. 248.

145. Christopher Wyvill, *Political Papers, Chiefly Respecting the Attempt of the County of York and other Considerable Districts, Commenced in 1779* (6 vols, 1794–1808), i, pp. xi–xiv; Jephson, *Platform*, i, p. 78; Black, *Association*, pp. 37–41; I.R. Christie, ‘The Yorkshire Association, 1780–4: A Study in Political Organization’, *Historical Journal*, iii (1960), pp. 144–61, at 147.

146. Hansard, 3rd ser., Lords, 3 Oct. 1831, vol. 7, col. 981.

147. Hansard, 2nd ser., Commons, 7 Feb. 1822, vol. 6, col. 97.

148. *Northern Star*, 15 June 1839, p. 6.

149. *Monthly Register*, Sept. 1808, p. 171; *Southern Reporter*, 28 May 1825, p. 3.

anti-slavery veteran to a new local committee explained how they should meet privately ‘for the purpose of drawing up a requisition, framing resolutions of a petition, & arranging the business & settling the part each individual shall take, in a public meeting’.¹⁵⁰ Beyond choreography for resultant gatherings, requisitionists might also function as delegated organisers; the resolutions of a meeting commonly delegated the signatories of the requisition to form a committee to co-ordinate the collection of signatures for a petition or address. In 1815 William Cobbett found 581 other freeholders to support his requisition to the High Sheriff of Hampshire for a county meeting, and he hinted at one reason for assembling so many names when he encouraged ‘one Gentleman from every town, and every considerable village’ to attend, so that ‘the work of signing Petitions might be very easily and speedily accomplished’ afterwards.¹⁵¹ On a similar model, the Catholic Association treated the requisitionists of local meetings in 1829 as the delegated organisers of the petitioning effort in each part of Ireland.¹⁵² Peel’s ministry expressed particular concern over the role that Catholic priests played in requisitioning the meeting of 1843 in Clontarf, as it signalled a wider role for clerical organising in the repeal agitation.¹⁵³

Whether they signed an original document or approved the use of their name on the advertisement, requisitionists would generally be expected to attend and perhaps to speak at a subsequent public meeting. If absent, well-known figures might send letters to be read on their behalf, excusing their indisposition and endorsing an outcome for the meeting.¹⁵⁴ Mass absenteeism could be embarrassing, however. Some organisers resented that ‘people seemed to fancy they had only to give their names to a public measure, and then all their duty was done’, while critics pointed to poor turnouts as proof that a requisition’s ‘signatures were obtained of tradesmen and others’ obliged to ‘their patrons’ but not committed to the cause.¹⁵⁵ In 1839, the Provost of Maxwelltown tried to delay starting a meeting on the Corn Laws until the requisitionists had all arrived. While he may have hoped to alter the balance of forces attending the meeting, he drew complaints that working men could not waste time waiting, with the Chartist Thomas Johnston asking: ‘[a]re the men of Maxwelltown dogs, that they should come crouching when you and your brother rulers choose to whistle on

150. Plymouth, The Box, Plymouth Archives, 147, John Prideaux to W.P. Blackmore, 10 Feb. 1825.

151. *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*, 18 Mar. 1815, cols 321–2.

152. O’Keefe, *Life and Times of Daniel O’Connell*, i, pp. 623–4.

153. D.A. Kerr, *Peel, Priests and Politics: Sir Robert Peel’s Administration and the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 66, 91, 108.

154. *A Report of the Speeches Delivered at the County Meeting, Held at Stowmarket, On Friday, the 16th of March, 1821* (Ipswich, [1821]), p. 9; *Report of the Speeches Delivered at the Lincoln County Meeting, on Friday, March 15, 1816* (Stamford, 1816), p. 16.

155. *Manchester Guardian*, 11 Jan. 1823, p. 3; *Durham County Advertiser*, 7 Oct. 1831, p. 4.

them?’¹⁵⁶ In such cases, poor turnout on the part of the requisitionists undermined any advantage from securing a friendly official in the chair.

A male householder adding his name to a requisition made a public claim on the time and attention of his peers and associated himself with its purpose; like the polling of votes in elections, this was a public act. When, in 1833, an anonymous ‘Rate Payer’ in Morley signed placards calling a public meeting on church rates, fellow inhabitants assembled instead to denounce ‘so cowardly a system’ in this ‘unusual manner adopted of calling public meetings’.¹⁵⁷ However, those ‘more humble in their origins’ who wished to initiate meetings could openly challenge propertyed signatories’ aloofness in not requisitioning meetings of concern to their community.¹⁵⁸ At an 1837 meeting against the new poor law in Dewsbury, one speaker was ‘angry that the shopkeepers have shrunk from this meeting’ and ‘that a sufficient number of them could not be found to sign a requisition’ for official sanction. In the wake of the Reform Act, this was a further example of privileges that ‘they appear desirous of keeping them to themselves’.¹⁵⁹ By contrast, the following year, when Earl Fitzwilliam claimed that the workers of the West Riding had come to embrace the benefits of the poor law, Richard Oastler theatrically suggested that he sign a requisition to the Lord Lieutenant for a county meeting on the question. This was not just a pointed allusion to Fitzwilliam’s dismissal from that office twenty years earlier; it was a clever subversion of leading property-holders’ traditional prerogatives, challenging his reluctance to test workers’ opinions openly.¹⁶⁰

Traditionally, organisers had limited powers to procure predetermined decisions as the very authority of a town or county meeting depended on its claim to open deliberation of the matters identified in a requisition.¹⁶¹ This often allowed enemies to hijack an official meeting, subverting the intended outcome. In 1800, Viscount Castlereagh and John Beresford conspired to demonstrate popular support for the proposed Anglo-Irish Union, hoping for ‘counter-petitions’ in the face of ‘a great run of petitions against’. They expected the opposition to request a meeting in Donegal, and Castlereagh judged that ‘the sheriffs calling it at their instance would be most for our advantage’ as he hoped to send allies to ‘turn the tables upon them and vote an address in favour’. This ‘would have an excellent effect—as we don’t call the meeting, we lose nothing if it fails’, Castlereagh observed, providing a glimpse of the private

156. *Northern Star*, 2 Feb. 1839, p. 5.

157. *Leeds Intelligencer*, 21 Sept. 1833, p. 3.

158. *Northern Star*, 16 Dec. 1837, p. 1.

159. *Northern Star*, 16 Dec. 1837, p. 5.

160. *Northern Star*, 28 July 1838, p. 6; see also *Champion*, 20 Sept. 1819, p. 2.

161. *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Pamphlet*, 15 Mar. 1817, cols 321–34; William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (London, 1830), pp. 39–40, 74, 121, 266, 282–3; Belchem, ‘*Orator*’ *Hunt*, p. 73.

calculations behind requisitioning and ambushes of this kind.¹⁶² When Dewsbury's constable refused to permit amendments during a meeting called to celebrate the Queen's coronation, radicals on the parish vestry challenged his claims for expenses in publicising the meeting; his conduct converted 'a "public meeting" into a "private one"', they argued, meaning that he should carry the advertising costs himself.¹⁶³

At the same time, chairs and organisers could deflect hostile audiences by insisting that a meeting stuck to its requisitioned purpose, beyond which it stretched its mandate or even its legality.¹⁶⁴ Hence, in 1797, the sheriff of County Antrim prevented any debate on Catholic Emancipation and parliamentary reform, 'not because he personally objected to it, but because it did not make part of the business mentioned in the requisition' to convene the meeting.¹⁶⁵ Meetings convened for constitutional purposes as cover for subversive ones had been a target of legislation from the old law against Tumultuous Petitioning down to the Seditious Meetings Acts. Southwark's High Bailiff elicited 'loud hissing' when he reminded a meeting of Queen Caroline's sympathisers of this, alluding to 'many severe restrictions against digressing from the particular subject of a requisition'.¹⁶⁶ Of course, what constituted digression from the substance of a requisition was itself a question of political judgement. In both 1821 and 1822 partisans requisitioned county meetings in Devon to petition about agricultural distress; on each occasion, the intentional inclusion or exclusion of 'the "old Bugbear, Parliamentary reform"' became a point of discord, as partisans differed on its relevance or irrelevance to their economic situation.¹⁶⁷ For decades to come, reformers could connect parliamentary representation to myriad other complaints. In January 1839, the mayor of Leeds agreed to a requisition from the great and the good for an anti-Corn Law meeting at the Court House. Feargus O'Connor successfully amended the resolutions to favour universal male suffrage.¹⁶⁸

Perhaps the most skilful manipulation of a meeting embellished, rather than reversed, the requisition's stated purpose. At a County Dublin meeting in January 1823 in Kilmainham, Daniel O'Connell gleefully

162. *Correspondence of the Right Hon. John Beresford*, ed. Beresford, ii, pp. 245–7 (Castlereagh to Beresford, 10 and 22 Apr. 1800). See also Bew, *Glory of Being Britons*, pp. 55–6.

163. *Northern Star*, 17 Nov. 1838, p. 4.

164. *Monthly Register*, Nov. 1808, p. 292.

165. *Annual Register ... for the Year 1797* (London, 1798), pp. 239–40 ('British and Foreign History', 26 May 1797).

166. Jephson, *Platform*, i, p. 435.

167. *Proceedings of a County Meeting, Convened by the High Sheriff; Held at the Castle of Exeter, on Thursday, the 5th Day of April, 1821* (Exeter, [1821]), pp. 9–10; T. Jenkins, 'Devon', in Fisher, ed., *History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820–1832*, available online at <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/constituencies/devon> (accessed 1 Dec. 2020).

168. *Northern Star*, 19 Jan. 1839, pp. 3 and 6, 12 Jan. 1839, p. 1, and 2 Feb. 1839, p. 5. See also Martin, 'Popular Political Oratory', pp. 94–5; A.C. Messner, 'Chartist Political Culture in Britain and Colonial Australia, c.1835–1860' (Univ. of New England Ph.D. thesis, 2000), p. 169.

adopted loyalist garb in condemning the Orange Order's 'conspiracy' against the Lord Lieutenant. Since the requisition suggested a loyal address wishing for the viceroy's recovery from an assassination attempt, he argued that condemnation of protestant violence was wholly within the purview of the meeting.¹⁶⁹ Derby's Chartists, at a town meeting to launch a congratulatory address to the Queen on the birth of her first child in 1842, sought to amend the loyal address to highlight the sufferings of working-class women in childbirth.¹⁷⁰ Local supporters of larger causes, then, exploited the practices designed to limit, control, and direct the organisation of public meetings, whether by submitting their own requisitions, by recruiting signatories to expand support, or by ambushing opponents, either physically or procedurally.

The representative claims of a public meeting would also be tested against the timely and open notice of it. When the tame sheriff of County Down refused a requisition from critics of the Anglo-Irish Union in 1800, the lack of 'public meetings of which due and legal notice had been given' provided easy ammunition to mock 'surreptitious addresses', such as that emerging from a grand jury he had stacked.¹⁷¹ Equally, those 'quietly' circulating requisitions for a public meeting would be hoping to select the audience too.¹⁷² In 1822, Henry Hunt mocked the sheriff of Somerset for printing the requisition for a county meeting only 'in an *obscure* corner of an *obscure Local Paper*', identifying a deliberate Whig plan to gather for a 'nice, snug humbug of their own'.¹⁷³ In 1839 Gateshead's radicals mocked this sort of 'hole and corner meeting', which might not be announced 'til the afternoon' when only 'a few placards' conveyed that the mayor had accepted 'a requisition got up by the Whigs' in favour of impressment of seamen and tax cuts for shipowners.¹⁷⁴ In some cases, critics could help advertise a requisitioned meeting they suspected of deliberately limited publicity. After the mayor of Newcastle granted a 'most numerous and respectably signed' requisition from advocates of Catholic emancipation in 1829, those fearing 'the utter subversion of the Constitution of 1688' printed notices warning protestants to 'attend and by your votes preserve the blessings so dearly purchased by your Ancestors'.¹⁷⁵ Most spectacularly, Manchester's borough reeve went so far as to cancel a 1812 public meeting in the Exchange Hall

169. *Life and Speeches of Daniel O'Connell, M.P.*, ed. John O'Connell (2 vols, Dublin, 1846), ii, pp. 390–92; *New Monthly Magazine*, 1 Jan. 1823, p. 1.

170. Key, 'An Assessment of the Chartist Movement', p. 68.

171. *Correspondence of the Right Hon. John Beresford*, ed. Beresford, ii, pp. 245–7 (Castlereagh to Beresford, 10 and 22 Apr. 1800); *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 26 Apr. 1800, p. 4.

172. Hansard, 2nd ser., Commons, 7 Mar. 1822, vol. 6, col. 983.

173. Henry Hunt, *Correspondence: Consisting Chiefly of Letters and Addresses on the Subject of Radical Reform* (London, 1822), pp. 6–7 ('To the Radical Reformers, Male and Female ... July 8, 1823').

174. *Northern Star*, 2 Feb. 1839, p. 3.

175. Quoted by Scott, 'A Comparative Re-examination', p. 97.

after unauthorised advertisements promoted mass attendance in order to prevent any misrepresentation of the town's views by the loyalists requisitioning the meeting; crowds assembled outside anyway, leading to a riot in which the building was ransacked.¹⁷⁶

Where meetings proceeded on private initiative rather than accepted requisition, organisers 'were thrown upon their own resources' in organising a venue and advertising.¹⁷⁷ Local printers and bellmen might refuse commissions to publicise meetings where they feared magisterial or social repercussions for doing so.¹⁷⁸ In the decades after the Napoleonic Wars, a proliferation of civic buildings offered the chance to requisition a symbol of community authority as well as cover from inclement weather.¹⁷⁹ For this reason, as much as office-holders' presidency and the official status it provided, requisitions increasingly sought permission to use these spaces. Bath's Council refused the use of the town hall for a Chartist women's meeting in 1838, despite protests that 'the Requisition requesting the use of the Hall was more numerously and respectably signed than any former requisition to the same'.¹⁸⁰ By contrast, Chartists in Nottingham secured the use of their town hall, even if the mayor declined to chair their meetings.¹⁸¹ Just as the largest mass meetings assembled on moors and fields beyond the jurisdiction of hostile authorities, the refusal of access to local buildings might lead organisers to advertise their meeting in an urban open space, such as a marketplace, furthering the association of radicalism with the open air.¹⁸²

That association also rested on the fact that such meetings, 'by being held in the open air, would naturally contain loose and suspicious individuals'. Even before rioting began, the Spa Fields meetings of 1816 appeared transgressive since, as one whiggish detractor noted, the radicals' placards summoned 'exclusively' the 'lower order of the people' from adjacent London parishes. The resolutions addressed 'our fellow-countrymen' of 'every City, Town, and populous place in the United Kingdom', who were—in the style of a requisition—'hereby invited, and requested by this Meeting to assemble and meet on the *same* day, at the same hour, and for the SAME PURPOSE' of petitioning for reform themselves.¹⁸³ As a conservative essayist complained in 1820, 'the

176. Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp. 241–6.

177. *Westmorland Gazette*, 16 Oct. 1819, p. 1; *Carlisle Journal*, 5 Feb. 1820, p. 3; *Manchester Courier*, 21 Aug. 1830, p. 1.

178. *Northern Star*, 15 Feb. 1840, p. 8, 17 Aug. 1839, p. 3, and 15 June 1839, p. 6. See also K. Judge, 'Early Chartist Organization and the Convention of 1839', *International Review of Social History*, xx (1975), pp. 370–97, at 386.

179. Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 1–8; Key, 'An Assessment of the Chartist Movement', p. 67; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, pp. 99, 157.

180. *Northern Star*, 6 Oct. 1838, p. 3.

181. J. Epstein, 'Some Organisational and Cultural Aspects of the Chartist Movement in Nottingham', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson, eds, *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830–1860* (London, 1982), pp. 232, 240, 246–7; Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 189–99.

182. *Northern Star*, 6 Jan. 1838, p. 5; Taylor, "'Commons-Stealers'", p. 390.

183. Belchem, 'Orator Hunt', pp. 59–61, 69.

modern method of calling together large deliberative crowds, as a sort of *outer parliaments*, producing resolutions ‘as authorized expressions of popular opinion’, would, ‘to our ancestors, have been unintelligible’. While the Seditious Meetings Act could encourage magisterial reaction against mass meetings of this kind, limiting ‘in some degree the right of voluntary meetings’,¹⁸⁴ it did little to arrest a tremulous transition across our period from county communities of magnates and gentry, or urban oligarchies, to public meetings of inhabitants more generally.¹⁸⁵

This can be seen in the shifting expectations of who might participate in public meetings called by requisition. The increasingly frequent calls for general meetings of a county assembled large numbers of freeholders, whose property also qualified them to vote in elections of shire MPs.¹⁸⁶ While they were denied speaking and voting rights, women and unpropertied men certainly attended county meetings in the 1790s and might be acknowledged as subscribers to funds launched there.¹⁸⁷ Since presence did not permit full participation, however, some requisitionists sought to broaden the invitation to a meeting.¹⁸⁸ In 1795, the sheriff of Bedfordshire accepted a requisition organised by the duke of Bedford for a county meeting about the proposed Gagging Acts, but in his consequent advertisement replaced the word ‘inhabitants’ with the more traditional ‘freeholders’. When the sheriff tried to restrict participation on the day, the gathering split into rival county meetings, denounced by each other as ‘certain of the inhabitants’ and a ‘promiscuous assembly’ that ‘took possession of the town-hall’. The duke defended his broader invitation on the basis that the meeting resolved to send a petition to which ‘the signature of the poorest individual, who was capable of forming a judgement on the measure, was as respectable as that of the proudest merchant, or the richest banker’.¹⁸⁹ Since, for centuries, petitions had sometimes included ‘inhabitants’, growing numbers of initiatory petitions from public meetings might justify broader invitations.¹⁹⁰ Yet the sheriff of Staffordshire, when faced with a similar challenge in 1797, offered the traditional view ‘that a voice at a County Meeting belongs exclusively

184. *Quarterly Review*, xlv (1820), pp. 536–9; Read, *English Provinces*, p. 74.

185. Eastwood, *Government and Community*, pp. 110–11; Y. Aoki, ‘To Be a Member of the Leading Gentry: The Suffolk Voluntary Subscriptions of 1782’, *Historical Research*, lxxvi (2003), pp. 78–92.

186. J. Brooke, ‘The Constituencies’, in L. Namier and J. Brooke, eds, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1754–1790* (London, 1964), available at <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/survey/i-constituencies> (accessed 27 Dec. 2022).

187. L. Ryland-Epton, ‘Parliament and the English Magistrate, 1780–1820’, forthcoming; *Manchester Mercury*, 7 Oct. 1794, p. 3, 25 Nov. 1794, p. 4, 24 Feb. 1795, p. 1, and 3 Mar. 1795, p. 1.

188. Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 30–31.

189. *Parliamentary Register*, xlv, 10 Dec. 1795 (Lords), pp. 164–5.

190. P. Loft, ‘Involving the Public: Parliament, Petitioning, and the Language of Interest, 1688–1720’, *Journal of British Studies*, lv (2016), pp. 1–23, at 20–21; *Journal of the House of Commons*, XXXVII: 1778–1780 (1780), pp. 590, 619, 716, 731, 761; Jephson, *Platform*, i, p. 13.

to Freeholders, and that to summon the Manufacturers and Inhabitants would be an encroachment on the privileges of the Freeholders'.¹⁹¹

After the Napoleonic Wars, T.B.H. Oldfield complained that 'it has been customary for the Sheriff to summon only the freeholders' to county meetings, 'as if every other description of persons, because they are deprived of the right of voting, should be deprived of the right of petitioning also'. As a leading polemicist for parliamentary reform, he recognised a parallel challenge to the representative claims of property.¹⁹² Indeed, after the Napoleonic Wars, one editor warned that 'including in the Requisitions for County Meetings the mass of the inhabitants was pregnant with dangerous consequences' precisely because 'the Freeholders must be a minority' and so the sober judgement of property overwhelmed.¹⁹³ By 1821, official meetings faced challenge as 'unjustifiably exclusive' if they were not open to all inhabitants rather than just freeholders or, in towns, householders. However, the success of challenges turned on local tests of strength, and we should be cautious in affirming 'the participation of all inhabitants of the community, irrespective of their gender, or their status'.¹⁹⁴ Regardless of how a requisition framed the invitation, one radical in 1808 noted 'the inconvenience, trouble, and loss of time to which the middle classes of the people are subject in their attendance'.¹⁹⁵ This was as nothing to Thomas Cooper's recollections that the working pressures of 'employment that I might have bread, prevented me from feeling much curiosity about public meetings' in his early life before the 1840s.¹⁹⁶

Where wider numbers of inhabitants did attend, officials struggled to enforce any restrictions of rank and geography they wished to impose. The geographical limits of residence could be tricky to delineate, especially where urban communities abutted. Hence, the mayor of Dudley was challenged 'Is not this a Public Meeting?' when he tried to insist in 1819 that the requisition's invitation to inhabitants of 'the Town and Neighbourhood' did not extend so far as Birmingham.¹⁹⁷ To defend local control, the 1817 and 1819 Seditious Meetings Acts penalised illicit attendance at official meetings and restricted any meeting called on the initiative of householders to the locals of a single parish; however, it did not restrict the classes of property and people invited, even if this

191. *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 15 July 1797, p. 1.

192. Oldfield, *Representative History*, iii, p. 135, cited by Jephson, *Platform*, i, pp. 131–2. See also *Cobbett's Weekly Political Pamphlet*, 15 Mar. 1817, col. 326. Many thanks to Mary O'Connor for her advice on Oldfield.

193. As quoted by Fulcher, 'English People and their Constitution', p. 74.

194. Hansard, 2nd ser., Commons, 9 Feb. 1821, vol. 4, cols 554–5; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 68–9.

195. *Political Review*, xxiii, Nov. 1808, p. 69.

196. *The Life of Thomas Cooper: Written by Himself* (London, 1872), p. 135; Harrison, *Crowds and History*, pp. 102–39.

197. *A Reply to the Faithful Unvarnished Narrative, Concerning the Late Dudley Meeting* (Dudley, 1819), pp. 3–5.

presumably informed magisterial prejudices in exercising their powers of veto.¹⁹⁸ In practice, growing numbers of propertied men might not recognise each other, and meetings presented few opportunities to validate a man's qualifications of property or residence. When more than 2,000 men attended a Devon County meeting about reform in 1821, it did not allow for the sorts of scrutiny common to contested elections polled over multiple days.¹⁹⁹ This left the audiences for any meeting—who was invited and who actually attended—contingent on local debates over where the boundaries should be drawn and trespassers detected.²⁰⁰

As for female participation in official meetings, Kathryn Gleadle's characterisation of women as 'borderline citizens' captures participation that remained contingent on context and open to challenge.²⁰¹ Meetings convened on the requisitionists' own initiative could invite women to speak or at least have their words read by male orators.²⁰² When, in 1832, Eliza Macauley 'deprecated the custom which prevented women from taking part in the public proceedings', she did so from the platform of a gathering of stakeholders in Robert Owen's new labour exchange, which resembled a commercial as much as political meeting.²⁰³ Women enjoyed greater opportunities to speak and vote in the meetings of parish vestries than in county or town meetings.²⁰⁴ The Queen Caroline controversy, where women's gender established their interest in her plight, provides evidence of 'Ladies' not only signing their own petitions and addresses but also attending public meetings.²⁰⁵ However, the descriptions of the detached, seated areas for 'Married Ladies' at various London parish gatherings suggest that they would have observed, rather than participated in, any deliberations. It was an exceptional moment when, in Leeds, 'the ladies were called to hold up their hands' to approve the text of a female address after men had affirmed the main resolutions of a meeting.²⁰⁶ The presence of women in the audience of a Norfolk county meeting regarding slavery, in 1825,

198. 60 Geo. III & 1 Geo. IV, c. 6; Hansard, 1st ser., Commons, 6 Dec. 1819, vol. 51, cols 757–8, and 7 Dec. 1819, vol. 51, col. 839.

199. *Proceedings of a County Meeting, Convened by the High Sheriff, held at the Castle of Exeter, on Thursday, the 5th day of April, 1821, Pursuant to a Requisition* (Exeter, [1821]) pp. 3, 9.

200. J. Garrard, *Leadership and Power in Victorian Industrial Towns, 1830–80* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 115–17; R.J. Olney, *Rural Society and County Government in Nineteenth-Century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1979), p. 160.

201. Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, pp. 59–60, 154–62.

202. *Evening Mail*, 8 Oct. 1819, p. 1.

203. Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, pp. 63–4, 72–4; *Mayo Constitution*, 3 Sept. 1832, p. 2; Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, pp. 267–8.

204. S. Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2013), pp. 83–90.

205. *Morning Chronicle*, 7 Aug. 1820, p. 3; *Bath Chronicle*, 14 Sept. 1820, p. 1; Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, pp. 67–72, 80–81.

206. *Morning Chronicle*, 30 Aug. 1820, p. 3; *Imperial Weekly Gazette*, 16 Sept. 1820, p. 4; *British Press*, 22 Sept. 1820, p. 1; *Freeman's Journal*, 24 Oct. 1820, p. 4; *Sussex Advertiser*, 2 Oct. 1820, p. 4; *Leeds Intelligencer*, 11 Sept. 1820, p. 3.

is only recorded because controversy erupted over whether the speeches provided too much detail of the abuse of the enslaved.²⁰⁷ In 1830, the mayor of York agreed a requisition for an anti-slavery meeting where women vastly outnumbered men in the audience but did not speak.²⁰⁸ The monster meetings of the post-war mass platform and Chartism might have allowed women to take part in votes on resolutions in ways official meetings did not.²⁰⁹ By the 1830s, the campaigns against the New Poor Law and for the Charter did organise ‘public meetings’ of women as separate events with female chairs and speakers, perhaps following requisitions seeking access to a public building.²¹⁰ However, ‘public meetings of ladies’, specifically, remained rare and often confined to specific charitable causes into the 1840s. This reflected the extension of the term ‘public meeting’ as much as women’s entry into the traditional assemblies of propertied men.²¹¹

Expectations of broader participation gradually blended the declarative and deliberative gatherings of a locality with the rallies, lectures, and ‘public meetings’ of interested stakeholders and voluntary associations.²¹² Thomas Attwood tried to launch his Political Union for parliamentary reform with a requisition signed by hundreds of Birmingham’s inhabitants in 1830; when the High Bailiff refused on the grounds of the impropriety of calling a municipal meeting to form a pressure group, the requisitionists convened one in their own names.²¹³ If this sought to add civic authority to a membership organisation, not all associations welcomed the deliberative procedures expected for community gathering. An 1827 Liverpool ‘public meeting’ of ‘friends’ of the Irish Sunday School Society was ‘public’ in accessibility and advertisement while denying critics the right to speak or amend its resolutions.²¹⁴ In 1832, Mancunians argued over the alleged ‘pretence of a public meeting’ by protestant critics of the Irish National Schools, given that the event was ‘publicly convened, with the boroughreeve announced as the chairman’ and yet

207. *Norwich Mercury*, 29 Oct. 1825, p. 1.

208. *Yorkshire Gazette*, 23 Oct. 1830, p. 4; C. Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London, 1992), pp. 59–60.

209. Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 75–81; A. Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British working class* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), pp. 159–63; Rodgers, *Crowds*, pp. 235–46.

210. *Kendal Mercury*, 3 Mar. 1838, p. 4; *Northern Star*, 6 Oct. 1838, p. 3; M.I. Thomis and J. Grimmett, *Women in Protest, 1800–1850* (London, 1982), pp. 124–8.

211. Richardson, *Political Worlds of Women*, pp. 116, 191–4; S. Morgan, ‘“A Sort of Land Debatable”: Female Influence, Civic Virtue and Middle-class Identity, c.1830–1860’, *Women’s History Review*, xiii (2004), pp. 183–209; *Cork Constitution*, 10 Nov. 1831, p. 3; *Southern Reporter*, 29 Sept. 1832, p. 3; *Liverpool Mail*, 21 Sept. 1844, p. 2; Pickering and Tyrell, *People’s Bread*, pp. 118, 123.

212. *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 26 Aug. 1820, p. 1; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 64–6; Tilly, *Popular Contentions*, pp. 272–8.

213. N. LoPatin, *Political Unions, Popular Politics and the Great Reform Act of 1832* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 28–9; *Birmingham Journal*, 2 Jan. 1830, p. 2, and 16 Jan. 1830, p. 2; H. Smith, ‘Propertied Society and Public Life: The Social History of Birmingham, 1780–1832’ (Univ. of Oxford D. Phil. thesis, 2013), p. 123.

214. *Dublin Evening Mail*, 2 Nov. 1827, p. 4; *Gore’s Liverpool General Advertiser*, 11 Oct. 1827, p. 3.

sold tickets to control a 'packed meeting'.²¹⁵ The introduction of ticketing in these cases reflected the hybridisation of 'public meetings', asserting representative claims for an association that might have previously met privately. The growing use of partisan meetings in the 1830s, with pre-determined resolutions even when open to popular attendance, was more an admission of defeat in defending the propertied privileges of official meetings than the 'closure' of a genuinely democratic tradition. The many local incidents where one group quit a meeting they proved unable to carry were writ large in the diminished salience of official meetings and requisitions. A profusion and fragmentation of public meetings saw more gatherings claim to represent a community, with hybrid forms of 'public meetings' providing different but not necessarily greater constraints on popular politics.²¹⁶

IV

This article has revealed the strange career of requisitioning for public meetings, emphasising in particular the role of local officials and magistrates in controlling public meetings; the hybridisation of the types of meetings assembled; and the initiative and skill of organisers in appropriating and subverting practices governed by requisitioning. As regards the first of these, conflicts over who could call public meetings, for whom, and about what, reveal the potentially porous boundaries of the political nation. Legal or violent reactions by local office-holders and magistrates could assist government repression, as Peterloo bloodily demonstrated. However, this reliance on local elites was combined with a deference to householders' privileges in the successive Seditious Meetings Acts; while emboldening the suppression of each new wave of mass gatherings in periods of revolutionary fear, the legislation paved a route to requisitioning public meetings where magisterial discretion relaxed. In Great Britain, state repression relied on local officials applying their powers to particular meetings according to their own personal prejudices and current anxieties; in Ireland, emergency legislation and central control from Dublin Castle created a very different political culture.²¹⁷ In both cases, the judicial fabrication in the 1840s of 'seditious assembly' was the logical conclusion of discretionary judgement. If this arrested the increase in the scale of mass meetings, as well as discrediting requisitions as any measure of a meeting's legality, it could not reverse the variegated pattern of public

215. *Manchester Courier*, 17 Mar. 1832, pp. 1–2; *Manchester Times*, 24 Mar. 1832, p. 3, and 31 Mar. 1832, p. 3; Hansard, 3rd ser., Lords, 3 Apr. 1832, vol. 12, cols 496–9.

216. Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 64–70, 191.

217. Eastwood, *Government and Community*, pp. 110–11; Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 94–7; D. Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton, NJ, 1998), pp. 536–8; Munger, 'Suppression of Popular Gatherings', pp. 139–40.

meetings, now called in greater numbers by and for a broader range of people. By contrast, in the colonies of the British Empire, officials, judges, and laws discriminated among territories and peoples to provide even starker distinctions between legitimate gatherings and ‘seditious’ meetings.²¹⁸

Although just one among a wide range of practices, requisitioning also illuminates some shifting patterns in the mobilisation of ‘public’ opinion over the *longue durée*. From 1780, written public requisitions seem to have spread as a means to demand or authenticate meetings that would offer resolutions or petitions on behalf of a place. If this initiated more discussion, resolutions, and petitions on public controversies, the requisition of official meetings still privileged the authority of propertied men. Craig Calhoun and James Vernon have argued, respectively, that ‘[t]he bourgeois public sphere of the early nineteenth century marked a continued opening of aristocratic politics to members of the middle classes, but also a new exclusion of more plebeian and radical voices’ constituting ‘the closure of democratic political forms’.²¹⁹ In the case of public meetings, the exclusion and closure was only as novel as the innovative patterns of popular assembly that claimed constitutional traditions for new audiences and new purposes. As we have seen, efforts to exclude ‘inhabitants’ from county meetings sought to defend the ‘demos’ of freeholders as the numbers of general meetings proliferated. At other meetings, the closing down of unticketed admission and open deliberation reflected the proliferation, extension, and adaptation of what purported to be ‘public meetings’. These restrictions to meetings largely sought to defend traditional exclusions in novel contexts and amid claims for lawful, orderly public assembly, even if radicals cannily cast them as subversions of tradition.

Finally, the practice of requisitioning public meetings elucidates the relationship between local and national initiatives. The meaning of the law and the constitution rested on creative argument and practical applications by local officials, agitators, and audiences; skirmishes over the local borderlines of political communities slowly accumulated into visions of a political nation. Rather than await parliamentary authorisation of expansion of the franchise, local initiatives helped dispel certain qualifications of property and assemble a broader community of inhabitants.²²⁰ As Benjamin Flowers noted in 1808, ‘[e]very one in

218. See R. Sanyal, *Voluntary Associations and the Urban Public Life in Bengal (1815–1876): An Aspect of Social History* (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 117, 171; C. Wilton, *Popular Politics and Political Culture in Upper Canada, 1800–1850* (Montreal, ON, 2000), pp. 64, 68, 104, 196–7, 211–12; T. Irving, *The Southern Tree of Liberty: The Democratic Movement in New South Wales before 1856* (Sydney, 2006), pp. 79, 103; Roberts, ‘From State of Emergency’.

219. Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 7; C. Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism: Tradition, the Public Sphere, and Early Nineteenth-Century Social Movements* (Chicago, IL, 2012), p. 159.

220. See R. Huzzey and H. Miller, ‘Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780–1918’, *Past and Present*, no. 248 (2020), pp. 123–64, at 151–2.

the least acquainted with the nature of popular meetings, convened for the consideration of public grievances, must be sensible of the exertions necessary to procure such meetings'.²²¹ The skills of local leaders fabricated and materialised 'public opinion' in the numbers assembled at meetings or in signatures to requisitions and petitions. Even if encouraged by co-ordinated national campaigns, their cumulative energies and the responsiveness of grass-roots audiences determined the fate of national mobilisations. As requisitions rose and declined as part of broader transformations in popular politics, they demonstrated the ways in which formalised structures could provide a framework for, as much as a barricade against, local challenges as to who represented a community.

Durham University

RICHARD HUZZEY^{ORCID}

221. *Political Review*, xxiii, Nov. 1808, p. 69.