# Colonial Petitions, Colonial Petitioners, and the Imperial Parliament, *c.* 1780-1918*

**Abstract**

Petitioning was a common form of protest, request, or expression across the British Empire, and historians of colonial rule and resistance have often drawn on petitions as sources to investigate particular controversies. This paper assesses the significance, variety, and context of petitioning to the Imperial Parliament, both from the British Isles and the colonies. To do so, we present new data drawn from more than 1 million petitions sent to the House of Commons in the period *c*. 1780-1918 alongside qualitative research into a wider range of petitions to other metropolitan sources of authority. This permits us to assess how colonial subjects across the empire demanded attention from Westminster and what the practice of petitioning reveals about the British self-image of parliamentary scrutiny and equality before the law.

In his 1906 address to the Indian National Congress, Dadabhai Naoroji argued that "petitions are not begging for any favours any more than the conventional "Your obedient servant" in letters makes a man an obedient servant. It is the conventional way of approaching higher authorities." He insisted that "[f]or every movement in England – hundreds, local and national – the chief weapons are agitation by meetings, demonstrations and petitions to Parliament." Naoroji, MP for Finsbury from 1892-95 and now chairman of the Congress, drew comparisons with women's suffrage campaigners and non-conformist resistance to educational reforms in the United Kingdom as models for their movement.[1] He made the case passionately because a new generation was challenging the constitutionalist approach of older nationalists; in fact,

* This research is kindly funded by the Leverhulme Trust's Research Project Grant RPG-2016-097. The authors are grateful to Christian Goeschel, Anne Heffernan, Skye Montgomery, Dinyar Patel, Jake Subryan Richards, Adam Waddington, Kevin Waite, Justin Willis and other colleagues in the departments of History in Durham University and the University of Manchester for discussing the ideas developed in this article; the usual disclaimers apply to responsibility for any errors, however.

[1] Dadabhai Naoroji, "Congress Presidential Address, Calcutta, 1906," in *Speeches and Writings of Dadabhai Naoroji* (Madras, 1917), 87-90.

Naoroji insisted that "the fact that we have more or less failed hitherto, is not because we have petitioned too much but petitioned too little."[2]

From 1780 to 1918, British and colonial subjects sent more than 1 million public petitions to the House of Commons, which contained millions of signatures from the empire. Although other authorities did not keep systematic records of this kind, this data can be contextualized with qualitative evidence from other sources and the rich specialist historiographies of different regions. Examining the diverse range of petitioning on colonial issues and by colonial subjects serves two purposes. Firstly, this article addresses major historiographical questions about the nature and extent of Britons' interest in the empire. Our chronology, 1780 to 1918, is determined by the emergence and maturation of popular petitioning to Parliament, but encompasses the expansion and development of the British Empire after the loss of the American colonies. Late eighteenth-century debates on Irish and American affairs forged the claim and self-image of Westminster as an "Imperial Parliament."[3] Scholars have demonstrated, in recent years, how the constitutional, historical, and cultural authorities imagined and reproduced the separation of a national "island story" from the business of empire in the long nineteenth century. In particular, historians have debated the degree - or, rather, the kinds - of imperial consciousness in the British Isles.[4] This article,

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[2] Dinyar Patel, "The Grand Old Man: Dadabhai Naoroji and the Evolution of the Demand for Indian Self-Government" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015), 373.

[3] Henry Grattan is quoted using the phrase pejoratively in Patrick O'Flattery, *The beauties of Mr. Orde's bill* (Dublin, 1785), 26; Edmund Burke is quoted in *Parliamentary Register*, xxi, House of Commons, 19 February 1787, 261. Press reports of George III's 8 Nov. 1800 proclamation included the phrase "imperial parliament," but it did not feature in the proclamation read to MPs: *Journals of the House of Commons*, lv, 31 December 1800, col. 931; Miles Taylor, "Colonial representation at Westminster, c. 1600-65," in *Parliaments, nations and identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660-1850*, ed. Julian Hoppit (Manchester, 2003), 206-19, at 216. The parliamentary usage peaked during the controversies over Irish home rule in 1886, 1893, and 1912-13, according to search results for 1803-1930 from hansard.parliament.uk/, accessed 13 August 2019.

[4] John MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1984); Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004); Andrew S. Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow, 2005); Bernard Porter, "Further Thoughts on Imperial Absent-Mindedness," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, no. 1 (March 2008): 101–17; John MacKenzie, "'Comfort' and Conviction: A Response to Bernard Porter," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, no. 4 (December 2008): 659–68.

drawing together a transimperial body of evidence, shows how parliamentarians and their British constituents encountered colonial issues and the ways in which these were marginalized in the imperial Parliament. Far from being absent, colonial issues were instead reconceptualized, or raised episodically around particular flashpoints, revealing the extent to which Britons' political engagement with empire was structured by arbitrary procedure, bureaucratic ordering, and choices that served to underplay the overall importance of empire in the everyday business of the imperial Parliament.

Secondly, examining colonial subjects' petitioning to Parliament and other authorities provides a new perspective on contestation within the nineteenth-century empire, recently highlighted by Antoinette Burton and Priyamvada Gopal.[5] On the one hand, as De and Travers have written of South Asia, "petitioning was a mechanism for state-centralization, institution-building and the bureaucratization of state-power" through incorporating subjects as supplicants; at the same time, petitioning could be "a potent vehicle for unpredictably creative forms of protest, dissent and political agency, and for the forging of new political communities."[6] This article highlights how a universal right of British subjects held vastly different opportunities, given the constraints and contexts of material resources, legal contexts, and other political rights enjoyed by those pursuing collective action in different colonies. The openness of petitioning exposed the convoluted ways in which colonial constitutionalism, supposedly variegated by territory and tradition, was the product of arbitrary intermediaries and racist partiality. At a time when white subjects in Britain and settler colonies increasingly deployed petitioning as an expressive form of political representation, imperial authorities were

[5] Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford, 2015); Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London, 2019).
[6] R. De and R. Travers, "Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia: Introduction," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, special issue 1 (January 2019): 1-20, at 9-10.

more likely to assume that colonized peoples of colour should confine their petitions to transactional requests.[7]

Historians of colonialism have already made creative use of petition sources to illuminate conflict, negotiation, and resistance in a range of settings. Santhosh Abraham has explored how the East India Company's early imposition of governance by formal writing also created avenues for the "argumentative subject" to petition, while Majid Siddiqi has traced the growth of petitioning in the years before the 1857-58 rising and their continuing role in "despotism tempered by petition" as a crown colony.[8] Advocates of the "gentlemanly capitalism" thesis have used rival petitions from manufacturers and agents to demonstrate government responsiveness to London financiers, while scholars have studied the petitioning campaigns of metropolitan humanitarians.[9] Colonial subjects adapted and adopted a diverse spectrum of petitioning practices, ranging from artisans in eighteenth-century Andhra, Chinese miners in South Africa, and slave-holders in the Gold Coast, to missionaries in Basutoland, rich West India merchants, and "People of Colour" from Halifax, Nova Scotia, who in 1847 appealed to the House of Assembly for relief after the failure of their potato crop.[10] Colonial

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[7] Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller, "Petitions, Parliament, and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780-1918," *Past & Present*, 248 (August 2020): 123-64.

[8] Santhosh Abraham, "Formal Writing, Questionnaires and Petitions: Colonial Governance and Law in Early British Malabar, 1792–1810," *Indian Historical Review*, 40, no. 2 (December 2013): 285-305; Majid Siddiqi, *The British Historical Context and Petitioning in Colonial India* (Delhi, 2005), 21, 29-31.

[9] Anthony Webster, G*entleman Capitalists: British Imperialism in Southeast Asia, 1770-1890* (London, 1998), 90-91; J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade 1787-1807* (London, 1995); Richard Huzzey, "A Microhistory of British Antislavery Petitioning," *Social Science History*, 43, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 599-623; Kinga Markovi, "The Signatures of Social Structure: Petitioning for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Manchester," *Social Science History*, 43, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 625-52; Sami Pinarbasi, "Manchester Antislavery, 1792-1807," *Slavery & Abolition*, 41, no. 2 (May 2020): 349-76.

[10] Potukuchi Swarnalatha, "Revolt, Testimony, Petition: Artisanal Protests in Colonial Andhra," *International Review of Social History* 46, supplement 9 (December 2001): 107-29; Gary Kynoch, "'Your Petitioners are in Mortal Terror': The Violent World of Chinese Mineworkers in South Africa, 1904–1910," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31, no. 3 (September 2005): 531-46; Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry, "'A Smattering of Education' and Petitions as Sources: A Study of African Slaveholders' Responses to Abolition in the Gold Coast Colony, 1874-1875," *History in Africa* 27, no. 1 (January 2000): 39-60; "Memorial addressed to Her Majesty's Ministers by the Committee of the Paris Evangelical Alliance," *Parliamentary Papers* [*PP*] 1881 (14), XII, 579-85; Perry Gauci, "Learning the Ropes of Sand: The West India Lobby, 1714-60," in *Regulating the British Economy, 1660-1850*, ed. Perry Gauci (Farnham, 2011), 107-22; "Petition of People of Colour of Halifax, Nova Scotia, House of Assembly, 27 March 1847," Houghton Library, Harvard University, petition files, MS. Can 93, I.

societies adopted hybrid forms of petitioning, fusing customary modes and imported legal and political frameworks. For example, the governance of early colonial India included petitions to local legal tribunals, or "panchayats", to deal with disputes, as well as the establishment of royal courts in the presidency towns of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta.[11]

The ecosystem of petitioning within the British Empire was highly variegated, depending on a complex web of overlapping authorities that was often specific to the context of the particular colony, which might include governors or institutions "on the spot." Petitioning was a product of – and a means for prosecuting – "the project of reordering the empire through law," as Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford characterise "systemic, but not systematic" imperial reform in the first half of the nineteenth century. Just as, they note, "Law was everywhere," so were petitions.[12] The East India Company was at the centre of a complex institutional matrix to which petitioners could appeal; and in the five years before its abolition in 1857, the Court of Directors received over 18,500 petitions.[13] The Company of course, was an active petitioner to the imperial Parliament and government in defence of its own privileges.[14] As Julia Stephens argues, officials' efforts to regulate petitioning under the Raj and rationalise the routine rejection of requests did not undermine the "emotive, as opposed to functional, needs" of petitioners to "confront the Raj's rule-bound rhetoric with the lived realities of day-to-day interactions with the government, in which officials' discretionary

[11] James Jaffe, "The Languages of Petitioning in Early Colonial India," *Social Science History* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 581-97; Rosalind O'Hanlon, "In the Presence of Witnesses: Petitioning and Judicial 'Publics' in India, circa 1600-1820," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, special issue 1 (January 2019): 52-88.
[12] Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800-1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 1-2.
[13] "Return of Memorials, Representations and Appeals received by the Court of Directors of the East India Company," *PP* 1857-58 (322), XLIII, 167.
[14] Robert Travers, "Indian Petitioning and Colonial State-Formation in Eighteenth-Century Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, special issue 1 (January 2019): 89-122; Bhavani Raman, "Civil Address and the Early Colonial Petition in Madras," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, special issue 1 (January 2019): 123-49; Aparna Balachandran, "Petitions, the City and the Early Colonial State in South India," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, special issue 1 (January 2019): 150-76; Jaffe, "Languages of Petitioning"; O'Hanlon, "In the Presence of Witnesses".

judgement, and arbitrary whims, determined outcomes."[15] Other colonies, such as Jamaica (until 1865) or Nova Scotia, had assemblies founded during the expansion of the Atlantic empire that accepted petitions. In 1852-53, the granting of "representative government" to colonies such as Cape Colony, New Zealand, and New South Wales provided a further outlet for petitioners, especially settlers concerned with racial and ethnic supremacy.[16] To give another example, in her recent study of shifting imperial identities in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, Hannah Weiss Muller has shown that subjecthood provided a means to incorporate inhabitants of formerly French territories into the British empire, particularly as petitioners to the Crown.[17] A focus on the role of petitions from and about the colonies may therefore trace the distinctions drawn between subjects of the crown.

Indeed, a fragmented array of subscriptional practices and institutional contexts encompassed both *de jure* and *de facto* differences across colonies, distinguishing between the crown's subjects by race, culture, and location, as well as between those of metropole and the empire.[18] A distinctive dynamic of petitioning within colonial societies was that petitioners could appeal to the central imperial state - monarch, Parliament, and government - for redress and call on it to assert supremacy over governors, colonial assemblies, or local officials. Maori and aboriginal petitioners in New Zealand and Australia, for example, successively appealed to governors and, ultimately, the crown in an attempt to protect their rights against

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[15] Julia Stephens, "A Bureaucracy of Rejection: Petitioning and the Impoverished Paternalism of the British-Indian Raj," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, special issue no. 1 (2019): 177-202, at 199-200.
[16] Nova Scotia, House of Assembly, Houghton Library, Harvard University, petition files, MS. Can 93, I. See also https://novascotia.ca/archives/assembly/, accessed 4 Sept. 2019; Aaron Graham, "Power, Policy and Petitions in Jamaica, 1664-1834," (forthcoming); Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell, *Taking Liberty: Indigenous Rights and Settler Self-Government in Colonial Australia, 1830-1890* (Cambridge, 2018) 215-19.
[17] Hannah Weiss Muller, "Bonds of Belonging: Subjecthood and the British Empire," *Journal of British Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2014): 29-59, at 48, 54. See also J. Johnson, "'Claims of Equity and Justice': Petitions and Petitioners in Upper Canada 1815-1840," *Histoire Social / Social History*, 28, no. 55 (May 1995): 219-40.
[18] Josep Fradera, *The Imperial Nation: Subjects and Citizens in the British, French, American and Spanish Empires* (Princeton, NJ, 2018), 16-18, 103-5; Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship, Inequality, and Difference: Historical Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ, 2018), 5-6, 23-4, 55-7, 88-92, 96-100; Alan Lester, "Race and citizenship: colonial inclusions and exclusions," in *The Victorian World*, ed. Martin Hewitt (Abingdon, Oxon., 2012), 391-97.

encroachment by self-governing settlers.[19] After 1918, Susan Pedersen and Ravi de Costa have argued, indigenous peoples increasingly directed their higher appeals to international public opinion and global bodies, rather than imperial authorities, as a way to exert pressure on their governments.[20] In our period, petitioners' strategic judgement might identify the crown and the Colonial Office, as much as the Imperial Parliament, for appeals against colonial authorities.[21]

This article is based on research undertaken as part of a project analysing the more than a million "public petitions" to the Commons during the long nineteenth century.[22] In the first section, we analyse this data to reveal the extent of petitions on colonial topics to the "Imperial Parliament" and to evaluate how such petitions were categorized and recorded. Second, the article explores how far petitions from the British Isles, on imperial questions, reveal the contours and chronology of popular interest in colonial affairs. Lastly, we examine petitions from colonial subjects to Parliament and other metropolitan centres of authority - the crown and the government - in three related sections. These focus, in turn, on petitions from white

[19] Eramiha Taikea's petition to Sir Arthur Gordon, 23 June 1881 (translation), and Hoani Meihana Te Rangiotu, petition to Gordon, 13 July 1881, BL Add. MSS. 49239, fols 71-5, 76-9; Karen O'Brien, *Petitioning for Land: The Petitions of First Peoples of Modern British Colonies* (London, 2018); Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell, "'Bring this Paper to the Good Governor': Aboriginal Petitioning in Britain's Australian Colonies," in *Native Claims: Indigenous Law Against Empire, 1500-1920*, ed. S. Belmessous (Oxford, 2012), 183-203; Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines Across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge, 2014), 123, 179.

[20] Ravi de Costa, "Identity, Authority and the Moral Worlds of Indigenous Petitions," *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, 48, no. 3 (July 2006): 669-98; Susan Pedersen, "Samoa on the World Stage: Petitioning and Peoples before the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 2 (August 2012): 231-61.

[21] Frederick Madden, "Some origins and purposes in the formation of British colonial government," in *Essays in Imperial Government*, ed. Kenneth Robinson and Frederick Madden (Oxford, 1963), 1-22; Zoë Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815-45: Patronage, the information revolution and colonial government* (Manchester, 2005), 4-7, 77, 155-9, 200-205; Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, PA, 1998), 74; Matthew Smith, *Liberty, Fraternity, Exile: Haiti and Jamaica after Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014), 19-21.

[22] For the period 1833-1918, data has been collated from the *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions* (SCPP), which details the numbers of petitions and numbers of signatures per petition, but also categorises the petitions received. We have extended the contemporary categorization of the House of Commons clerks to split the "miscellaneous" category into existing categories, plus new categories. We then collated data on petitions in the period 1780-1832 from the *House of Commons Journals* (*CJ*), which records only the petitions and not the number of signatories; we have attempted to record those meeting the criterion of "public petition", formalised after 1833, and we have imposed the post-1833 categorization on these earlier petitions. For a detailed account of sources and method, see Huzzey and Miller, "Petitions, Parliament, and Political Culture", 132-5.

settlers, colonized peoples as petitioners, and a case study of the single largest petitioning drive by colonized peoples to the Commons, orchestrated by Dadabhai Naoroji and the Indian National Congress. We then conclude by suggesting how a study of petitioning as a trans-imperial form of pressure can illuminate our understanding of the British Empire and provide a comparative framework that can enable further specialist research into particular colonies, colonized peoples, and episodes within the history of colonialism.

## Petitions on colonial issues

The institutional framework or, to borrow the terminology of contemporary political scientists, the "petitions system" in which colonial subjects operated, was at once formally open and accessible in terms of their constitutional rights, yet also ultimately underrepresented and marginalized colonial issues at Westminster.[23] The right of British subjects to petition the monarch and Parliament was contested during the revolutions of the seventeenth century, but had come to be widely acknowledged by politicians, petitioners and public by the early nineteenth century.[24] The 1689 Bill of Rights, which granted subjects the right to petition the crown, could be, and was, cited by colonial petitioners as, in the UK, permitting an absolute right to petition the crown-in-Parliament.[25] Colonial subjects formally enjoyed the right to petition Parliament, and, in theory, this was not restricted by race or language. Parliament accepted petitions from subjects in any language, providing that they were accompanied by an English translation that was vouchsafed by an MP.[26] However, while the right of subjects to petition Parliament seemed absolute and unlimited in terms of who could petition, in practice

[23] Catherine Bochel, "Petitions Systems: Contributing to Representative Democracy?" *Parliamentary Affairs* 66, no. 4 (October 2013): 798-815.
[24] Huzzey and Miller, "Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture", 148-51.
[25] Naoroji, "Congress Presidential Address, Calcutta, 1906," 89. On the expansion of the right to petition the Crown to include Parliament see Mark Knights, "'The Lowest Degree of Freedom': The Right to Petition Parliament, 1640-1800," in *Pressure and Parliament: From Civil War to Civil Society*, ed. Richard Huzzey (Oxford, 2018), 18-34.
[26] *Commons Journals* [*CJ*], c, 9 June 1845, 560-2.

it amounted to a right of presentation.[27] The nineteenth-century petitions system of Parliament was "descriptive" not "substantive", since it represented the petitioners' views but did not guarantee action, satisfaction, or even a response.[28]

Between 1780 and 1918, the Commons received almost 32,000 public petitions (3% of the total) relating to issues categorized as "colonial". These fall very unevenly between the pre-1833 period, when we imposed categories retrospectively on data that was never categorised by the parliamentary clerks, and the post-1832 period, where we only reassigned the contemporary categories to eliminate the "miscellaneous" classification. Our count of more than 10,000 petitions on colonial issues in between 1780 and 1832 (nearly 22% of the total for this period) may reflect our greater willingness to use the "colonial" category than parliamentary clerks, whose classifications are overwhelmingly responsible for the count of just 21,776 in the period between 1833 and 1918 (just over 2% of the total for that period). However, it appears that the imbalance really does reflect a greater predominance of petitioning on "colonial" issues before 1832 and a secular growth in petitions relating to other categories thereafter.

A review of peaks in the recorded numbers of petitions on colonial issues clarifies this point (Figure 1). Early spikes almost exclusively reflect petitions for the abolition of the slave trade (1788, 1792, and 1814) and the agitation for West Indian emancipation in the 1820s and 1830s. Surges of petitioning for emancipation in 1833 and an end to the subsequent system of apprenticeship in 1838 are similarly reflected in the clerks' categorizations for post-1832 reports. The only other significant agitation in the earlier period concerned the renewal of the East India Company's Charter in 1813, which as the next section will show, was also an

[27] Huzzey and Miller, "Petitions, Parliament, and Political Culture," 150-51.
[28] Bochel, "Petitions Systems," 811-12.

example of how episodic British mass petitioning on colonial issues were closely tied to questions that mobilized religious communities.

Parliamentary records enable us to recover the number of signatures on petitions for particular issues for the period from 1833 to 1918. Based on these sources, "colonial" issues attracted a total of 4.8 million signatures, which is just under 3% of the total recorded for this period (Fig. 2). The two significant spikes in 1833 and 1838 were the product of the agitation over slavery and apprenticeship in the West Indies. After the latter date, the principal spikes in petitions about "colonies" all related to India: they included a series of annual grievances from East Indian Army Officers in the later 1850s and mid-1860s, returning in significant numbers in 1901, which attracted only a few hundred signatures in total. The third spike is especially notable as an example of petitioning from colonial subjects, rather than metropolitan Britons. In 1890, petitions bearing nearly 400,000 signatures supported the early Indian National Congress's demand for the representation of South Asians on the governing bodies of the Raj, which will be examined in the final section of this article.

As the foregoing analysis suggests, petitions to the Commons on colonial issues were largely dominated, in terms of geography, by controversies about the Caribbean and India. Indeed, after 1833, between them these two regions accounted for 85% of petitions and signatures within the colonies category. The number of petitions and signatures relating to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and southern Africa waned once responsible or representative government was granted, although Newfoundland petitioners periodically raised the question of fishing rights.[29] A guide to Canadian parliamentary procedure observed in 1884 that while the "right of petitioning the House of Commons was very frequently exercised by the people ... there are now in these days of self-government very few occasions when it is necessary to

[29] SCPP, *Reports* (1890), 746, (1890-1), 785, (1907), 158.

make these appeals to the Imperial Parliament."[30] Instead, local matters were directed to legislative councils, assemblies, and subnational bodies that developed petitions systems in the mould of the Westminster Parliament.[31] The petition procedure of newly federated Canada closely followed that of the UK model, while in the words of a law scholar, New Zealand "incorporated petitioning the national parliament as part of its received British legal heritage."[32] In other cases, British practice was drawn upon informally by colonial officials, including those from Newfoundland and Ceylon, who corresponded with Erskine May, the clerk and doyen of parliamentary procedure, to ask for guidance.[33] Notably, the Commons clerks categorised petitions from and about Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom after the 1800 legislative union, by theme and not as separate to those from Great Britain, even as governments increasingly applied exceptional laws to Irish subjects.[34]

The petitions data presented here underrepresents the extent and salience of colonial issues as it does not capture petitions directed to other metropolitan authorities, including the monarch, government departments, or the House of Lords.[35] Even more importantly, the "colonies" category underrepresented and marginalized the scale of colonial issues due to the system of classification used by officials. For example, petitions concerning the differential duties on West and East Indian sugar were classified by clerks as a "colonial" issue in the 1830s due to their connection with debates over enslaved and free labour, but in the following decade these issues were placed under "taxes" as they became part of the battle between free traders

[30] J.G. Bourinot, *Parliamentary Procedure and Practice* (Montréal, 1884), 271.
[31] For example, Mary Stokes, "Petitions to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario from Local Governments, 1867-1877: A Case Study in Legislative Participation," *Law and History Review*, 11, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 145-80.
[32] Bourinot, *Parliamentary Procedure*, pp. 259-72; R.J. Krotoszynski, *Reclaiming the Petition Clause: Seditious Libel, 'Offensive' Protest and the Right to Petition the Government for a Redress of Grievances* (New Haven, CT, 2012), 139.
[33] W.V. Whitway to Erskine May, 3, 31 August 1885; Sir W. Gregory to E. May, 20 February 1873, 7 June 1875, Parliamentary Archives, ERM/6/70, ff. 79, 110, 112.

[35] On petitions and subscriptions to these other authorities, see Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller, "The Politics of Petitioning: Parliament, Government, and Subscriptional Cultures in the United Kingdom, 1780-1918", *History* (forthcoming).

and protectionists.[36] The political context of colonial protection influenced how the question was categorized, therefore. To give another example, the clerks filed questions relating to church establishments in colonial contexts as "ecclesiastical" rather than "colonial" matters; this includes, for example, 149 petitions and over 10,000 signatures regarding the Canadian clergy reserves bill in 1853.[37] Once contextualized in this way, the data reveals that the parliamentary petitions system compartmentalized, obscured, and marginalized colonial issues through its system of classification.

## UK petitioners and colonial issues

While the clerks' classification of petitions to the Commons reveals where they did - and did not - see "the colonies", their data should not be taken as a clear barometer of British public opinion on imperial issues. Taken at face value, the petitions data within the "colonies" category might lead one to conclude that imperial issues were of negligible interest to petitioners and parliamentarians alike. Such a view that would lend credence to Bernard Porter's contention that, for the vast majority of nineteenth-century Britons, if not British elites and officials, empire was a politically peripheral concern.[38] However, petitioning did not represent the unmediated and spontaneous voice of the people, and the financial and organizational effort involved in mass petition drives was better suited to strategies influencing legislative deliberation rather than short-term emergencies. Peaks in the number of petitions and signatures in particular sessions typically reflected the activity of organized mass campaigns. If the records compiled by the parliamentary clerks cannot stand for public opinion, then, they can be used to reveal the structure and profile of particular agitations regarding the empire.

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[36] Huzzey and Miller, "Petitions, Parliament, and Political Culture," 158.
[37] SCPP, *Reports* (1852-53), 1614.
[38] Porter, *Absent-Minded Imperialists*; Porter, 'Further Thoughts.'

Religious communities remained critical to the mass mobilization of British petitioners throughout our period.[39] Those "colonial" issues that attracted the greatest numbers of petitions and signatures, such as the slave trade, slavery, or the promotion of Christianity in India, drew on religious networks and local congregations. For example, anti-slave-trade petitions of the 1780s and 1790s sought to represent the inhabitants of a county, town, or district, but clergy and zealous laypeople clearly took a vital coordinating role.[40] In terms of numbers, religious communities played a dominant role in parliamentary petitioning on colonial affairs. When the East India Company's charter came up for renewal in 1813, around six times as many petitions carried religious pleas to mandate evangelization as those pressing for commercial changes to the monopoly. Although more than 40% of the petitions regarding Christianity came from declared supporters of missionary societies, over half of the total represented civic communities, often "inhabitants", suggesting that church networks also mobilized lay meetings. More than two-thirds of those petitions representing a spiritual rather than temporal identity came from Baptists, with the ecumenical Mission Society contributing many of the remainder.[41]

Thereafter, Wesleyans appear to have contributed the lion's share of petitions and signatures on colonial questions that aroused religious fervour. Protestant Dissenters identified themselves in 2,821 (56%) of the petitions for the immediate abolition of colonial slavery in the 1833 and comprised 352,071 (27%) of the total signatures. Of these, Wesleyan Methodists contributed 1,952 abolitionist petitions containing 229,426 signatures.[42] In 1838, when 50,000 Britons petitioned the Commons to end state support for "idolatry" in India, over a third of signatories identified themselves as Wesleyans.[43] The Lords did not collect petitions data

[39] Joanna Innes, "Legislation and Public Participation," in *The British and their Laws*, ed. D. Lemmings (Woodbridge, 2005), 102-32, at 120; Huzzey and Miller, "Petitions, Parliament, and Political Culture," 152-53.
[40] Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh, 2006), 74, 79, 83, 101.
[41] *CJ*, lxviii, 1812-13.
[42] SCPP, *Reports*, 2 vols (1833), 2, lix.
[43] SCPP, *Reports* (1837-38), 660.

routinely, but a report for 1860 reveals that Wesleyan congregations accounted for 61% of the 2,029 petitions, and 54% of the 163,000 signatures in favour of providing bibles in government colleges and schools in India. Other religious bodies contributed 17% and 16% of the total petitions and signatures respectively.[44] By contrast, the 1859 agitation against the exclusion of the Bible from schools in India, was notable for the significant contribution of Scottish religious communities, with United Presbyterians and Free Church congregations representing over a third of petitions.[45]

Following emancipation in the West Indies, the mass mobilization of UK petitioners on imperial matters generally focused on missionary complaints or expansionist demands for a forward policy. In the late nineteenth century, missionary organizations continued to stimulate petitions either demanding the extension of imperial rule or criticizing colonial governance, depending on their judgement of rivalries on the ground. In January and February 1893 the Commons received 37 petitions, bearing 4,427 signatures, demanding that the Liberal government cancel its plans to evacuate Uganda (actually, the kingdom of Buganda), following the failure of the Imperial British East Africa Company. All the petitions, apparently, had similar texts, stressing the "destruction of British influence" would create "imminent danger" to "British missionaries and native converts," revive the east African slave trade, undermine local trust in British authority, and damage "the commerce and material interests of the English nation."[46]

Anglican networks took the lead in promoting these petitions on Uganda, as the collective self-descriptions of the petitioners suggests. More than 23 came from congregations and parishioners, while a further 4 came from religious bodies, including a missionary group.[47]

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[44] "Return of the total number of petitions to the House of Lords for the admission of the Bible in India in Government Schools and Colleges," *PP* 1861 (89), XII, 1-33.
[45] SCPP, *Reports* (1859).
[46] SCPP, *Reports* (1893), appendix 4.
[47] SCPP, *Reports* (1893), 10-12 and appendix 4.

Just over a quarter of the remaining petitions professed a civic identity as "inhabitants," yet the overlap in locations with petitions from congregations suggests that religious campaigners sought to mobilize further support from the same community or present existing support in a new guise. All of the petitions came from England, with around two-thirds from the southern counties. Henry Cadman Jones, an active member of the Religious Tract Society and the Victoria Institute, was the leading signatory of the Uganda petition recorded by the clerks as a sample of the genre, from the churchwardens and parishioners of St. Matthew, Paddington. His affiliations suggest that Anglican mission networks shared the call for congregational petitions between sympathetic clergy and lay members.[48]

The Uganda petition quoted above shows how petitioners could interweave moral and religious motifs with a concern for upholding Britain's economic interests and imperial power. While religious causes and communities fuelled a sustained expansion of parliamentary petitioning from the 1820s, they built upon - and, sometimes, overlapped with - an older tradition of discrete communities of economic interest raising petitions in a trial of strength to decide national policy and shape specific legislation.[49] By the 1780s, particular colonies and colonial interests, especially the West Indians, had honed petitioning as part of a broader lobbying strategy.[50] Across our period, multiplying numbers of Chambers of Commerce combined parliamentary petitioning with extensive use of ministerial deputations, not systematically counted in official statistics, on questions of international trade, imperial

[48] Ibid.; C.E.A. Bedwell and Patrick Polden, 'Henry Cadman Jones' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004 – present), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34231 [accessed 3 May 2020].

[49] Philip Loft, "Involving the Public: Parliament, Petitioning, and the Language of Interest, 1688–1720," *Journal of British Studies* 55, no. 1 (January 2016): 1-23; Julian Hoppit, "Petitions, Interest Groups, and Economic Legislation in Britain" in *Pressure and Parliament*, ed. Huzzey, 52-71; Julian Hoppit, *Britain's Political Economies: Parliament and Economic Life, 1660-1800* (Cambridge, 2017), 139-79; Philip Loft, "Petitioning and Petitioners to the Westminster Parliament, 1660-1788," *Parliamentary History*, 38, no. 3 (October 2019): 342-61.

[50] Gauci, "Learning the Ropes of Sand," 107-21

expansion, and colonial government.[51] In many cases it is clear why petitioners expressed local interests in distant colonies. The Chamber of Commerce for Manchester, the heart of the textile trade, repeatedly memorialised the EIC and later the India Office about cotton supplies and duties upon them.[52] In 1884, the Barrow-in-Furness Chamber of Commerce petitioned in favour of the development of India's railways; the interest of the town and the Chamber's President, Sir James Ramsden, in iron, steel, and shipbuilding, perhaps pointed to the sorts of "development" they envisaged.[53] In such cases, petitioners placed their faith in their status and the sympathetic reception of MPs and ministers rather than numbers of signatures.

In the case of the Uganda agitation, petitioning by religious groups complemented a wider lobbying effort – orchestrated by Frederick Lugard and others with business and career interests in retaining the Imperial British East Africa Company's territory – to tip the scales of government decision-making. The pressure exerted by public petitioning, then, needs to be assessed in the context of rival forces contesting the desirability of particular imperial expansions.[54] The evidence of parliamentary petitioning, suggests that – as Andrew Thompson has argued – popular metropolitan engagement with imperial politics focused on flashpoints, such as the debates over Caribbean slavery. While this does not explain politicians' decision-making, which could often defy a vocal demonstration by petitioners or the press, records of petitioning can reveal which groups sought to mobilise such support for particular causes.[55]

Besides religious groups and commercial lobbies, political parties and their affiliates played a role in mobilizing petitions as part of attacks on their opponents, though they

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[51] Robert J. Bennett, *Local Business Voice: The History of Chambers of Commerce in Britain, Ireland and Revolutionary America, 1750-2011* (Oxford, 2011), 14, 162, 375-410, 681.
[52] Manchester Chamber of Commerce, *Annual Report for 183*6, 7-8, *Annual Report for 183*8, 11, *Annual Report for 1857*, 13; *Annual Report for 1873*, 15, Archives+, Manchester Central Library, MF 1287.
[53] SCPP *Reports* (1884) appendix 262; Aidan Jones, "Sir James Ramsden" in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004 – present), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/48136 (accessed 15 July 2019).
[54] John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009), 23-51.
[55] Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back?*

sometimes attempted to disguise their partisanship. Nominally neutral, but founded to support Disraeli's foreign policy in 1877, the Patriotic League manufactured imperialist outrage in meetings and petitions. Rather than petition as local members of the League, supporters often gathered signatures as a collection of private individuals; the group's founder, MP Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, presented almost half of the petitions, containing nearly a third of the 40,000 signatures, during the 1881 agitation for the retention of Kandahar.[56] Between late April and mid-July 1884, Conservative petitioners produced 117 petitions with more than 33,000 signatures demanding an expedition to Sudan to relieve General Charles Gordon.[57] Though some petitioners presented their calls as members of party organizations, the overwhelming bulk of signatures came from those thrown open to "inhabitants" of a local area. In a sign of the potential scale of petitioning, but also the dependence of signature numbers on the skills of local organizers, a monster petition from residents of Glasgow contributed 15,706, not far from half the total signature count nationally.[58]

In many cases, petitioning campaigns agitated for expansion or, as in the case of General Gordon, for action beyond the current borders of the empire. In these cases, imperialist causes would be classified, like most foreign policy matters, as "miscellaneous" by the clerks. In fact, much of that which interests historians of British imperial culture fell outside the clerks' original "colonies" category, pointing to the ways that international status and formal colonialism blended together in domestic politics and culture.[59] Furthermore, these examples emphasise that before imperial annexations or colonial boundaries were formalized and fixed, petitions were highly flexible mechanisms for different groups - religious, economic, and

[56] Hugh Cunningham, "The Conservative party and patriotism" in *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880-1920*, eds Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, 2nd edn. (London, 2014 [1986]), pp. 308-310; Berny Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa: The Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes, 1877-1939* (Manchester, 2013), ch. 4.
[57] SCPP, *Reports* (1881).
[58] SCPP, *Reports* (1884).
[59] Richard Huzzey, 'Minding Civilisation and Humanity in 1867: A Case Study in British Imperial Culture and Victorian Anti-Slavery'*, Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 5 (November 2012): 807-825.

political - to debate, contest and articulate what the policy of the British state should be towards these regions.

## Petitions from settlers and colonists

We now turn to evaluating how - and which - colonial subjects used petitions to address the Commons and how this related to wider strategies of protest or persuasion. Many "colonial" petitioners to the Commons were white settlers, or resident merchants, or – as in the case of officers of the East India Army – military personnel. In order to understand the wider context of colonial subjects' petitions to Westminster, the next two sections examine the respective experiences of white settlers and colonized peoples in the British Empire. As noted above, colonial issues are under-represented in petitions to the Imperial Parliament and these sections incorporate evidence of petitions to other sources of authority to explain why. As we shall see, many colonial subjects petitioned different authorities sequentially or simultaneously. However, petitioning also formed the principal constitutional means of embodying conflicts between the Imperial Parliament and these other authorities.

Before the establishment of responsible or representative government, settler colonists made use of petitions to the Imperial Parliament to complain about misgovernment by local officials or resist policies from the centre. The American Revolution, most famously, emerged from a transatlantic crisis over taxation and political authority, in which petitions were initially a weapon of choice.[60] The petition to the Commons for the recall of Governor Dalhousie in 1827 was signed by over 87,000 Francophone subjects in Lower Canada; this makes it one of the highest per capita rates of subscription across the Atlantic world during a period when mass petitioning was emerging in a number of different polities.[61] In the continuing crises of the

[60] Justin DuRivage, *Revolution Against Empire: Taxes, Politics, and the Origins of American Independence* (New Haven, CT, 2017), 108, 139-40.
[61] Daniel Carpenter and Doris Brossard, "*L'éruption patriote:* The Revolt against Dalhousie and the Petitioning Explosion in Nineteenth-Century French Canada," *Social Science History*, 43, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 453-85.

1830s, Anglophone and Francophone communities alike used mass petitions to mobilise and demonstrate their support for different institutions of imperial rule in the Canadas. In March 1834, the speaker of the legislative assembly of Lower Canada, Louis-Joseph Papineau, communicated 92 resolutions of *patriote* grievances by means of a petition to the Commons. In the following months, a series of mass meetings rallied support for the resolutions - and their criticism of the Legislative Council - by generating 78,503 signatures on petitions to the Commons.[62] While the total number of signatures did not compare with those generated by Daniel O'Connell's Irish nationalist petitions of the 1830s, they represented roughly 14% of the population (of all ages) of Lower Canada.[63] The *patriotes* warned menacingly in 1835 that inattention to their petition increased "to an alarming degree the discontents" and "will ultimately alienate the affections of the People even from the Government of England itself."[64] Moreover, as Carol Wilton has demonstrated, reformers in Upper Canada observed the methods of popular agitation in Great Britain and concluded that "numbers of signatures are the only means by which they have, in England, of judging the extent of public feeling and opinion." By 1829, Constitutional Committees organized the simultaneous signature of petitions each addressed to different authorities, in order to maximise the impact of their pressure on every level of imperial power.[65] The 1837-38 rebellions in Lower and Upper Canada were thus the culmination of popular agitation in which petitioning constituted and organized, and did not merely express, community resistance to established authority.[66]

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[62] SCPP, *Reports* (1834), 313, 590; J.I. Little, *Loyalties in Conflict: A Canadian Borderland in War and Rebellion, 1812-1840* (Toronto, 2008), 67-71.
[63] R. Montgomery Martin, *History, Statistics, and Geography of Upper and Lower Canada*, 2nd ed. (London, 1838), 207.
[64] *Petition from Lower Canada, with explanatory remarks* (London, 1835), 4.
[65] Carol Wilton, *Popular Politics and Political Culture in Upper Canada, 1800-1850* (Montréal, 2000), 44-53, at 50.
[66] Ibid., 67-82, 174; Allan Greer, *Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada* (Toronto, 2003 [1993]), 161-8; Michael Ducharme, *The Idea of Liberty in Canada during the Age of Atlantic Revolutions, 1776-1838*, trans. Peter Feldstein (Montréal, 2014), ch. 6; Allan Blackstock, "'Papineau-O'Connell instruments': Irish Loyalism and the Transnational Dimensions of the 1837 Rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada," in *The Loyal Atlantic: Remaking the British Atlantic in the Revolutionary Era*, ed. Jerry Bannister and Liam Riordan (Toronto, 2012), 252-76.

In many cases, discontent with the balance of colonial authority emerged from specific policy grievances. Separately, these might be overlooked in the larger volume of petitions to the Commons from residents of the British Isles. However, cumulatively, these concerns point to particular episodes of crisis across the colonies of the empire. Miles Taylor has suggested an imperial dimension to Britain's experience of the transnational revolutionary crisis of 1848-49.[67] Our data provides further evidence of the pressure brought to bear by discontented settlers in these years, with numerous petitions to provide economic aid to sugar estates in the West Indies; to abolish transportation to Van Diemen's Land; to abort plans to begin transportation to Cape Town; to extend the franchise in New South Wales; for representative institutions in New Zealand; to reform administration in Ceylon; to investigate malfeasance in the public finances of Newfoundland; and to address a variety of other concerns.[68] In some cases, the number of signatures represented a large proportion of colonists; around a quarter of white adults in Van Diemen's Land signed the 1848 protest to Westminster.[69] On occasion, these petitions were successful in having their requests granted, especially when backed by influential supporters. For example, Hilary Carey highlights how petitions against transportation benefited from the organizational aid of missionaries in the colonies and their supporters in the United Kingdom.[70] In 1850 the inhabitants of Cape Town objected to the scheme in eighteen petitions, bearing more than 6,000 signatures, equivalent to over a quarter of the total population of the city; as a result, the proposal was shelved.[71] These examples highlight that signatures from colonies could be highly significant in per capita terms and that

[67] Miles Taylor, "The 1848 Revolutions and the British Empire," *Past & Present*, 166, no. 1 (February 2000): 146-80.
[68] SCPP, *Reports* (1847-48), 1539; SCPP, *Reports* (1849), 1119, 1127; Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2012), 98-129.
[69] SCPP, *Reports* (1847-48), 847, and appendix 1077.
[70] Hilary M. Carey, *Empire of Hell: Religion and the Campaign to End Convict Transportation in the British Empire, 1788–1875* (Cambridge, 2019), 228-243.
[71] SCPP, *Reports* (1850), 1602 and appendix 2; Taylor, "The 1848 Revolutions," 168-70. Population figures from "Return of White and Coloured Population of the Cape of Good Hope and British Kaffiria," *PP* 1852 (124), xxxiii, 63. The figure is for the total Cape Town population, as the 1849 census did not disaggregate the population statistics by race.

white colonial petitioners could and did make use of "colonial connections" with influential supporters to boost the impact of their petitions. This pressure could coerce unwilling British governments, establishing demographic and representative privileges for white colonists.[72]

Besides disputing their own rights, settler colonists might petition as part of a broader "British World" in pan-imperial controversies. Hence, Catholic subjects in Natal and Rhodesia joined their co-religionists in the UK and other colonies to request a revision of the coronation oath in 1902; two of their petitions to the House of Lords survive, which contain over 2,000 and 500 signatures respectively.[73] However, far more subjects across the empire asked the Commons to reject any alteration of the protestant constitution and the act of settlement (fig. 3). Of nearly 620,000 of these signatures recorded in the 1902 session, 28% came from the colonies and dominions.[74] Australia and New Zealand jointly contributed more than a fifth of the total signatures recorded. Their petitions represented 2.8% of the non-aboriginal population of Australasia and 4.4% of those aged fifteen and older.[75] This was more than twice the signature rate of those aged fifteen or older in Scotland and not far off thrice the equivalent rate for England and Wales.[76] Canada, with a long history of responsible government by this point and a two-fifths Catholic population, provided a comparatively lower rate of signature.[77] While the statistics may simply measure divergent practices, on whether communities signed *en masse* or left clerics to subscribe on behalf of their congregation, this example shows how religious identities could be mobilized across the British Empire through petitions.

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[72] Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections*, 135-44, 155-9, 200-201; Philip Harling, "The Trouble with Convicts: From Transportation to Penal Servitude, 1840-67," *Journal of British Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2014): 80-110; Alan Lester, "British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire," *History Workshop Journal* 54, no. 1 (Autumn, 2002): 24-48, at 41.
[73] Roman Catholic British Subjects of Rhodesia, Petition, 24 June 1901; Roman Catholic British Subjects of Natal, Petition, 6 June 1902, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/6/14/21 and 26.
[74] SCPP, *Reports* (1902). Variance in itemised signature numbers and the clerks' totals produces an error rate of 0.1%, which does not affect the pattern reported here.
[75] T.A. Coghlan, *A Statistical Account of Australia and New Zealand, 1902-3* (Sydney, 1904), 165, 176-7. Disaggregating signature numbers is impossible, since some petitions came jointly from the two colonies.
[76] B.R. Mitchell and Phyllis Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962), 12-13.
[77] *Fourth Census of Canada, 1901*, 2 vols (Ottawa, 1902), i, 2, 144-5.

## Petitions, colonized peoples, and "the colour line"

To disaggregate the experiences of "colonial subjects," it is crucial to consider how the opportunity to petition and the reception petitioners received were both structured by race and wealth. The permissive rights of petitioners, to bring complaints in any language from any part of the empire, still rested on a political culture and broader set of liberties that was more accessible to white settlers. On the simplest level, parliamentary clerks mishandled or ignored proper nouns from unfamiliar cultures and languages, as when the lead signatory's surname was transcribed as "illegible" for a 1853 petition from 1,757 supporters of the Madras Native Association.[78] Yet petitions also offered opportunities for well-organized groups of "respectable Natives" or "principal Natives" to pursue their own interests, to seek redress, or to challenge colonial administration.[79] In the late eighteenth century, bankers Krishnachandra and Jaynarayan Ghoshal petitioned the East India Company to build a shelter for beggars, widows, and orphans in Kidderpore, which Indrani Chatterjee identifies as an attempt "to train Englishmen … in their obligation to govern according to well-established norms of the subcontinent".[80] In other cases, the leaders of the colonized peoples used petitions to warn against neglecting obligations owed to them. In 1853, the Grand Chiefs of the Iriquois, Hurons, Abenakis, and Nipissing petitioned the Commons to highlight a breach of their supplies guaranteed by treaty, reminding MPs of their service in suppressing the 1837-38 rebellion in their prayer.[81] Yet given the overall underrepresentation of colonial subjects as petitioners in the data, it would seem that petitioning a legislature in which colonies were not directly

[78] SCPP, *Reports* (1853), 215 and appendix 388.
[79] James Forbes to Sir Charles Forbes MP, reprinted in *Oriental Herald and Journal of General Literature*, 18 (1828): 46; inhabitants of Bombay, Petition to House of Commons, 20 Sept. 1837, Lord William Cavendish Bentinck papers, University of Nottingham, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Pw lg 420; see also SCPP, *Reports* (1861), appendix 607, (1886), appendix 64.
[80] Indrani Chatterjee, "Pastoral Care, the Reconstitution of Pastoral Power and the Creation of Disobedient Subjects under Colonialism," in *South Asian Governmentalities: Michael Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings*, ed. Stephen Legg and Deana Heath (Cambridge, 2018), 58-80, at 66.
[81] SCPP, *Reports* (1854), 531.

represented was less attractive to these groups than other forms of imperial authority; as we will see, those alternatives were also often resistant or obstructive to the demands of petitioners from other races.

When examining colonial petitioning it is not always easy to discern where the boundary of elite self-interest ends and anti-colonial resistance begins. In West Africa, Kwabena Akuarang-Parry has revealed how petitions from Gold Coast elites, including the "Native Ladies of the Cape Coast," opposed the swift, uncompensated abolition of slavery, following the 1873-74 Anglo-Ashanti war. Their efforts to win compensation or slow emancipation involved collaboration with James Hutton Brew, the editor of the *Gold Coast Times*, who penned a variety of petitions on behalf of the royal family of Wassa Fiase and disgruntled slave-owners. It also drew on the experience of the resident diasporic African "intelligentsia," some of whom had settled in the Gold Coast after service in the Caribbean and could attest that in "the West Indies… they at once petition the Home Government" to redress threatening initiatives.[82] In these cases, it is clear that social elites in colonized territories could adopt petitioning to lobby the crown, the government, or Parliament for their own rights. They were quite aware of transimperial precedents.

Given the imbalance of legal power and racial prejudice in many British colonies, however, we should recognize that petitioning allowed colonial officials and wealthy individuals to fabricate or exaggerate "native" opinion. As early as 1787, Warren Hastings's agent in India was mobilizing petitions as demonstrations of his support from Indian merchants

[82] Akurang-Parry, "'A Smattering of Education,'" 43, 45-6, 51, 56; Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry, "To Wass Fiase for Gold: Rethinking colonial rule, El Dorado, Antislavery, and Chieftancy in the Gold Coast (Ghana), 1874-95," *History in Africa*, 30 (2003): 11-36, at p. 31; Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry, "Aspects of Elite Women's Activism in the Gold Coast, 1874-1890," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 37, no. 3 (2004): 463-82, at 470-73.

and local elites.[83] Moreover, any popular mobilization of petitioning required privileged financial and political resources, not to mention social capital, to circulate and transmit the documents. In the colonies, as much as in the UK, petitioning campaigns were the products of disciplined organization, not spontaneous professions of popular support. Hence, Pratap Singh commissioned a demonstration of popular support after being deposed as the Maharaja of Kashmir on charges of treason in 1889 and Zalim Singh, Maharaja of Jhalawar, secured more than 28,000 signatures on petitions to the Commons after he was deposed in 1896.[84] Pratap Singh's paid agent, a newspaper editor, secretly briefed local organizers not to let "the Government connect the petitions with you" and to get each signatory "to sign his name twenty times on twenty pieces of paper" and then send the duplicate petitions to different MPs, in the hopes of producing a greater impact. The technique relied on clerks being less likely to notice or discern the duplication of unfamiliar Indian names across the signatory lists; the ignorance of parliamentary officials opened up opportunities to evade the usual surveillance against irregularities or fraud.[85]

In most cases, however, procedural norms impaired rather than assisted petitioning from colonized subjects. If financial resources circumscribed the exercise of a right formally possessed by all British subjects, then the prejudices and attitudes of authorities also determined how they interpreted petitions, or indeed, if they accepted the petitions at all. In 1904, the Select Committee on Public Petitions published a special report, telling Indian subjects that they were under a "misapprehension" in believing that "Parliament must take action" upon petitions relating to "judicial disputes." The Committee further speculated that "a class of legal practitioner" was profiting from "uninformed" petitioners, whose judicial appeals

[83] C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge, 1996), 213.
[84] SCPP, *Reports* (1896).
[85] Nicholas Owen, *The British Left and India: Metropolitan Anti-Imperialism, 1885-1947* (Oxford, 2007), 33.

were better directed to other authorities. In this case, then, the imperial Parliament went to considerable lengths to advertize the "limited result of petitioning" to Indian subjects.[86] When they did receive petitions, racial prejudices often determined the response of imperial authorities. In March 1899, a petition to Queen Victoria from almost 22,000 British subjects from Witwatersrand protested that their liberties (including the right to petition) had been infringed by the Afrikaner government of the South African Republic. Commending the petition, the British high commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner, observed that "at least three-fourths of the total signatures were those of men of pure European race," of which "a large number, to judge from the handwriting, are well educated." These appear to have impressed him more than the other signatures from women and "coloured people."[87]

In other cases, colonial authorities were quick to impede or rubbish petitions of which they disapproved. In 1860, Governor Gore Browne of New Zealand dismissed the authenticity of a petition to the Queen from 508 Otaki Māori requesting she remove him from his post. Suggesting that the influence of the missionary Octavius Hadfield in drafting the petition fatally undermined its legitimacy, Browne transmitted the documents back to London while pointing to white settlers' petitions of support.[88] In 1884, King Tāwhiao and Wiremu Te Wheoro, a MP for one of the New Zealand parliament's Māori constituencies, led a high-profile mission to present a petition on land rights and settler abuses to the Queen; the colony's government lobbied, in advance, that Tāwhiao's kingship was not widely recognized and his plea should carry no weight. The Colonial Secretary, Lord Derby, granted the king's delegation with an

[86] "Select Committee on Public Petitions, Special Report," *PP* 1904 (234), VI, 677.
[87] *British and Foreign State Papers* (London, 1898-99), xci, 650-58.
[88] Kenton Scott Storey, "Colonial Humanitarian? Thomas Gore Browne and the Taranaki War, 1860–61," *Journal of British Studies*, 53, no. 1 (January 2014): 111-135, at 124; Lyndsay Head, "Land, authority and the forgetting of being in early colonial Maori history" (PhD diss., University of Canterbury, 2006), 115.

audience, but insisted he would not overrule the responsible government of New Zealand and would send the petition back to the colony.[89]

The efforts of the South African Native National Congress faced similar opposition, illustrating the arbitrariness of the petitioning process for colonized peoples. Before the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, black subjects had petitioned the crown, Parliament, and the government to oppose their disenfranchisement.[90] These pleas were ignored, and thereafter disenfranchised South Africans found it hard to transmit petitions to Westminster or the King. In 1912, Sol Plaatje, a founder of the South African Native National Congress, entrusted a women's petition against pass laws to the Dominion's Department of Native Affairs, but never knew whether it actually reached its addressee, the wife of the Governor-General.[91] In 1913, he formed part of a delegation to Lord Gladstone, the Governor-General, against the colonial assembly's Native Land bill, having previously petitioned the legislature and the South African Prime Minister Louis Botha. Plaatje was disappointed to find that "the Governor-General only made it the opportunity to urge the deputation not to go to England" to deliver their petition to the King to veto the law. The representatives responded that "in native politics there was always an appeal from the action an induna to the native chief and from the latter to the ruler; that it was straining the loyalty of the black millions of South Africa to tell them that there was no appeal to His Majesty the King against the oppressive laws of a Parliament in which they had no representatives."[92] The delegates subsequently made the voyage to take the petition to London, though their appeal would be disappointed, not least

[89] Claudia Orange, *The Treaty of Waitangi* (Wellington, 1987), 179-90.
[90] A.J. Christopher, "South African petitions to the House of Commons, 1833-1914: Grievances, protests, advice and informatio," *Historia*, 63, no. 1 (May 2018): 1-23; Charles Reed, *Royal Tourists, Colonial Subjects and the Making of a British World, 1860-1911* (Manchester, 2016), 170-183; *Morning Post*, 10 February 1906, 8; SCPP, *Reports* (1906), 353; SCPP, *Reports* (1909), 97.
[91] Sol Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa, Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion* (New York, 1969 [1916]), 93-4.
[92] Ibid., 190; Heather Hughes, *First President: A Life of John Dube, Founding President of the ANC* (Auckland Park, South Africa, 2011), 180-89.

because the recently-merged Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society sided with the South African government and did not raise any supportive petitions from Great Britain.[93] In these cases, colonial authorities could frustrate and retard petitions for imperial redress; moreover, Parliament and the government proved less responsive to the demands of black South Africans, perhaps because they did not seriously fear the threat of rebellion contained in Plaatje's warning about "straining" loyalties.

Such arrogance is surprising because of the longstanding relationship between frustrated petitioners and active rebellion against colonial authority. The 1865 rising in Morant Bay, Jamaica, emerged after the dismissal of a petition from struggling freedpeople in St. Ann's parish. It had been supported by 108 "poor people," three quarters of whom signed with a mark.[94] The petition did not cause the uprising, but the reply, on behalf of the Queen, stoked tensions by advising black Jamaicans to alleviate their own problems by working harder. In July, Governor Eyre circulated 50,000 copies of the response, amidst a series of parish meetings, which he sanctioned as an opportunity for residents to discuss the economic and legal regime of the colonial assembly, dominated by former slave owners. These meetings generated petitions to Eyre with various demands and differing degrees of humility. But they also saw critics of the Assembly, such as the mixed-race assemblyman George Gordon, challenge the Queen's reply as "all trash," which could not possibly be authorized by her. The lack of faith in the Governor to communicate concerns to - and a reply from - the crown thus fuelled the tensions that triggered the October courthouse confrontation in Morant Bay and Eyre's campaign of terror against black Jamaicans, including the execution of Gordon under martial

[93] Brian Willan, "The Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society and the South African Natives' Land Act of 1913," *Journal of African History* 20, no. 1 (January 1979): 83-102.
[94] Edward Underhill, *The Tragedy of Morant Bay: A Narrative of the Disturbances in the Island of Jamaica in 1865* (London, 1895), 25-6.

law.[95] While petitions from white settlers might prompt metropolitan action to pre-empt rebellion - especially after the precedents of the American Revolution and the 1837-38 Canadian risings - complaints from subjects of other races could be met by a reliance on the colony's settlers to constrain resistance or a resort to imperial violence.

This did not make petitioning pointless, especially in cases where petitioners challenged individuals or particular policies rather than broader economic and political norms. In 1846, Aboriginal Australians on Flinders Island, off Van Diemen's Land, petitioned the Queen to protest their poor treatment. Having agreed to settle on this land more than a decade earlier, the petitioners found British promises unfulfilled and the commandant abusive; he proved this accusation by promptly imprisoning the Aborigines' leader, Walter Arthur. However, the appeal found favour in the Colonial Office, leading to the dismissal of the commandant and the removal of the petitioners to new land near Hobart.[96] As a series of recent studies suggest, nineteenth-century Aboriginal petitioning for land rights and other concerns continued from the knowledge that "higher authority figures could sometimes press lower and local ones into action, even when it was the latter who held primary responsibility."[97] The same tactics seem to have informed personal appeals to the Commons. While Parliament did not take any action on individual grievances, the presentation and printing of grievances allowed petitioners to alter the balance of power in disputes; hence, the unlikely result of the Oxfordshire provincial press carrying details of how "cultivators, puttals, and zamadars of the 50 villages" in Sikar petitioned the Commons for redress in the "severe oppressions" by local officials, after failing

[95] Gad Heuman, "1865: prologue to the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica," *New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 65, no. 3/4 (1991): 107-127, at 111-13; Jake Christopher Richards, "Political Culture in Jamaica Before Anticolonial Nationalism," *History Compass*, 15 (2017), e12332, 10.1111/hic3.1233 [accessed 2 Apr. 2018]; Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, 102-9; R.W. Kostal, *A Jurisprudence of Power: Victorian Empire and the Rule of Law* (Oxford, 2008), 485-7.
[96] Curthoys and Mitchell, "'Bring this Paper to the Good Governor,'" 186-7.
[97] Ibid., 198; O'Brien, *Petitioning for Land*.

to get satisfaction from their petition to the British Resident to the Jaipur Durbar, in 1893.[98] Khan Mohamed and 93 other "East Indian destitutes in Trinidad" petitioned the Commons in 1917 for repatriation to India, in a tactic that strengthened the bid they had, separately, raised with the Privy Council.[99] While reliant on the capricious intervention of imperial power and vulnerable to disruption by hostile intermediaries, petitioning offered a tactic for resistance to colonial policies or the pursuit of rights against settlers. The double-edged nature of petitioning ensured that it was potentially subversive of colonial rule. On the one hand, the petition was an institutionalized form acknowledged by imperial authorities as a tool of government. On the other hand, petitioning could metamorphosize into modes of collective action that could expose the fragile governability of the empire, as Burton has recently emphasized.[100]

## Anti-Colonial and Nationalist Petitioning

The most extensive and sustained petitioning campaigns from colonized people emerged within early Indian challenges to imperial rule, and they demonstrate the distinctions in how British politicians responded to metropolitan and colonial mobilization. The medium helped underscore a message of disenfranchisement; as an 1879 petition noted, Indians "have no voice in Parliament or in the administration of their revenues, but they enjoy the dearly-prized right of petition."[101] Indeed, as early as 1828, Rammohun Roy had petitioned the Commons over discrimination in jury service, and political petitions would multiply over subsequent decades, with expanding numbers of signatures and diverse requests.[102] In 1831, thousands of "respectable native inhabitants" of Bombay petitioned Parliament for the extension of habeas

[98] *Henley and South Oxford Standard*, 5 May 1893, 6.
[99] SCPP, *Reports* (1917), 4.
[100] Burton, *The Trouble with Empire*, 145-215.
[101] SCPP, *Reports* (1879), appendix 192.
[102] C.A. Bayly, "Rammohan Roy and the Advent of Constitutional Liberalism in India, 1800–30," *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 1 (2007): 18-34; Patel, "The Grand Old Man," 141.

corpus, British courts, and Indian witnesses.[103] From the 1850s, early nationalist groups in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras used petitions to represent concerns on diverse demands, from civil service reform to the need for secondary and higher education in India.[104] In 1856, the British Indian Association petitioned Parliament to provide for "native" representation on the Legislative Councils ruling British India.[105] In 1859, the Association used a petition to lay out a detailed, 5-page manifesto for the ways that direct government by the British state should improve on Company rule; again, they emphasised this need for representation of Indian subjects on the new legislative councils.[106] The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, focused on the need to elect such representatives and provide them with full powers to scrutinize rather than merely advise. Petitioning remained their obvious route for constitutional protest.[107] At this time, as Sandra den Otter has written, "most Victorian liberals asserted that representative government was not a gift that England could confer on India immediately" and indeed the prospect of it grew "more and more remote;" instead they emphasized the need for an "impartial and universal law" that would provide the basis for social progress that could enable a culture of political liberty.[108] Petitions from colonized subjects were thus a political as well as an ideological challenge to much of contemporary thinking about Indian government.

While early petitions on behalf of committees and members of nationalist groups provided information or proposed reforms for MPs to consider, petitioning also provided the opportunity for the mass demonstration of popular support, as imperial authorities had long

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[103] C.A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge, 2012), 33.
[104] Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1971), 200-201; Patel, "The Grand Old Man," 66-7.
[105] SCPP, *Reports* (1856), appendix 1269.
[106] SCPP, Reports (1859), appendix 178.
[107] R. J. Moore, "The Twilight of the Whigs and the Reform of the Indian Councils, 1886-1892," *Historical Journal* 10, no. 3 (1967): 400-414, at 414; Patel, "The Grand Old Man," 149-150.
[108] Sandra Den Otter, "'A Legislating Empire': Victorian Political Theorists, Codes of Law, and Empire," in *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth Century Political Thought*, ed. Duncan Bell (Cambridge, 2007), 89-112, at 95.

feared. In 1886, the Viceroy of India, Lord Dufferin, privately expressed his anxiety of "the importation … from Ireland of the perfected machinery of modern democratic agitation" to "obtain a less or greater measure of Home Rule."[109] Denigrating the Indian National Congress as a "microscopic minority", Dufferin came to the conclusion - endorsed by his successor Lord Lansdowne - that the Unionists should embrace the "legitimate and praiseworthy ambitions" of moderate opinion with new representation and powers, with a view to isolating the "extravagant and reprehensible" demands from the Congress.[110] In the same period, Naoroji emerged as a leading advocate for Congress to place pressure on Parliament by proposing an Indian petition "signed by hundreds of thousands" to help elicit popular support within the British Isles.[111] When Lord Salisbury's government delayed and deferred reform in India, for fear of dissent within their Unionist coalition, Congress placed the issue back on the parliamentary agenda through a mass petition drive. They had welcomed the Liberal MP Charles Bradlaugh to India in the winter of 1889-90, where he had blessed the Congress's efforts to eschew sedition. In accordance with his radical beliefs, Bradlaugh instead endorsed petitioning as "you have the constitutional right, not of going into the House and being heard yourselves, but of sending your petition there … from every town, from every division … so that India's people may kneel - and there is no shame in kneeling - on the threshold where the mother of Parliament[s] sits.'[112] In 1890 the campaign fulfilled Naoroji's hopes - and Dufferin's fears - with 394,946 signatures to 748 petitions that supported Indian representation on the legislative councils. This volume was significant: the names accounted for 21% of the

[109] As quoted by Moore, "The Twilight of the Whigs," 406-408; see also Howard Brasted, "Indian Nationalist Development and the Influence of Irish Home Rule, 1870-1886," *Modern Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1980): 37-63.
[110] Nihar Nandan Singh, "British Parliament on the Indian Councils Act of 1892," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 30 (1968): 280-4, at 281; *Hansard*, 4th series, Commons, 28 March 1892, cols 89-90; Briton Martin, Jr., "Lord Dufferin and the Indian National Congress, 1885-1888," *Journal of British Studies* 7, no. 1 (November 1967): 68-96.
[111] Seal, *Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, 283-6; Moore, "The Twilight of the Whigs," 404-5; Prabha Ravi Shankar, "British Committee of the Indian National Congress: A Critical Appraisal," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 65 (2004): 761-67.
[112] *Northampton Mercury*, 25 January 1890, 8.

total number of signatures on public petitions to the Commons in 1890, and the only issue to gain more petitions or signatures that session was a local taxation bill that was backed by a mass petition drive organized by the temperance movement.[113] The campaign represented the largest single attempt by colonial subjects to petition the "Imperial Parliament" during the long nineteenth century.

The petitioners styled themselves as "inhabitants" or "residents" of both the smallest villages and larger cities in India. In some cases petitions emerged from formally convened public meetings, following the pattern of English municipal politics, with 10,071 signatures resulting from a February meeting in Madras's Town Hall, for example.[114] In a letter to Bradlaugh accompanying the petition of 433 residents of Chhatak, a village in Assam, Shorat Chandra Purkcista testified to the range of support "whether a ragged peasant having half a meal a day or the biggest of the merchants."[115] While some British colonists may have signed as residents and inhabitants in urban areas, the majority of signatures came from those of South Asian descent. Only one petition came from the UK, and that was signed by Indians studying in Edinburgh.[116] Thousands of further signatures supported Indian petitions submitted under similar titles.[117] The British Committee of the Congress, founded in 1889, reported on the progress of the petitioning effort in its own new publication, *India*. Acidly, the December issue reprinted the list of petitions found in the parliamentary reports "as we receive it" and noted "Chenglepett, Chinglepet, Chingleput, and (probably) Chuglepat, refer to one and the same place."[118] While the numbers of signatures did not stretch to the 3 million electors claimed to

[113] SCPP, *Reports* (1890), 746.
[114] Ibid., 156.
[115] *India*, 6 June 1890, 163.
[116] SCPP, *Reports* (1890), p. 643; *India*, 4 July 1890, 189.
[117] SCPP, *Reports* (1890), p. 67.
[118] Quotation from *India*, 19 December 1890, 335. See also *India*, 6 June 1890, 153, 4 July 1890, 201-203, 29 August 1890, 231. See also Prabha Ravi, "Journal 'India' (1890-1921): Its role in educating English public opinion on India's struggle for freedom," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 57 (1996): 536-46.

have voted in elections of delegates to the National Congress, they materialized Indian opinion on a scale never before presented to the Commons.[119]

The petitions from India supported a broader strategy whereby, in the words of Surendra Nath Banerjee, "they brought their case before the high court of English public opinion." Public meetings in Britain served to launch petitions to the Commons expressing sympathy with the "constitutional means" used by the Indian petitioners. The twin colonial-metropolitan agitation therefore aimed to "Educate! Educate! Educate!" and ensure "constituents influence their representatives so that those representatives may vote right on Indian reform."[120] This approach was vital given that India was not directly represented in Parliament; petitioners thereby sought to exert pressure on MPs through their constituencies. The *Taunton Echo* got the message, asserting that it was "not enough to say that we passed the resolution at Monday's meeting and sent a petition to the House of Commons." Presciently, the editor suggested that this was "only the beginning" of the parliamentary pressure needed from Britons.[121]

The Congress's delegates struggled to balance the desire to present their cause on a non-party basis with the overwhelmingly Liberal audiences that greeted them. They remained reluctant to accept the contention, made by a Kennington radical, that "the volume of agitation would greatly increase if Indian Reform were made a Party Question."[122] The impression would only have been strengthened by the role of Liberal frontbenchers, including leader William Gladstone, joining Bradlaugh to present the Indian petitions. More surprisingly, the Tory rebel Lord Randolph Churchill and the arch imperialist Joseph Chamberlain also

[119] *India*, 25 April 1890, 88.
[120] Quotations in *India*, 21 June 1890, 171-2, and 23 May 1890, 135. See also *India*, Oct. 1890, 282; *Newcastle Chronicle*, 7 June 1890, 7; *Dundee Advertiser*, 6 June 1890, 3.
[121] *India*, 6 May 1890, 110-111.
[122] *India*, 25 April 1890, 86.

presented petitions.[123] Yet, as the reactionary *Homeward Mail* carped, "the presentation of a petition by a Member of Parliament does not necessarily imply any sympathy with its object."[124] The desire to use other MPs to present Congress's petitions might have been encouraged by Bradlaugh's demand, from June onwards, for financial donations in return for each petition he presented.[125]

While the Congress petitioning campaign was unprecedented in numbers of signatures from colonial subjects, it did not speak for India unchallenged. Some 45,896 "Mahomedans of India" subscribed to three petitions challenging the legitimacy of the National Congress and its demands. Petitioners from Islamic associations and Muslim communities dispersed across India insisted that "the demand for the introduction of an elective system into the Government of India proceeds from the class of English educated Hindus, a class that is exceptionally well able to make its voice heard both in England and in India, while the Mahomedans, being very backward in English education, have been unable to give equal prominence to their views." They beseeched MPs to heed the "quantity and quality" of "native opinion opposed" to elected representatives.[126] The opposition was quickly noted by critics of the Congress, who pointed to Muslim petitioners in "numbers extraordinary, considering that they are of an illiterate population."[127] Claims by petitioners to represent people, places or opinions, as shown in many British petition drives, always sparked rival representative claims and appeals to authority. Such contestation should be viewed as intrinsic to the process of petitioning and one of the ways in which it stimulated popular politics.

Seeking to contradict the rival account of petitioning against the bill put forward by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, the National Congress published

[123] SCPP, *Reports* (1890), 298; for Chamberlain's vacillation, see *India*, 5 December 1890, 293-8, at 302.
[124] *Homeward Mail from India, China and the East*, 8 April 1890, 437.
[125] Owen, *The British Left and India*, 35.
[126] SCPP, *Reports* (1890), appendix 144.
[127] *India*, 21 June 1890, 177.

testimonies as to the cross-community support for their own petitions. Dr. Lardli Mohan Ghose, the secretary of Bhagulpur's committee, testified that more than ten percent of the 90,000 signatures in his petitions were from Muslims and that the "howls and cries which you hear are from the side of the Anglo-Indians only."[128] In a parallel to accusations of clerical coercion or fraudulent canvassing made in countless British and Irish campaigns, Congress activists accused Imams of bullying worshippers with threats of God's displeasure and suggested that many Hindu signatories had been conned into signing what they were told was a petition *for* the reforms.[129] When the Unionists finally brought the 1892 Act to a vote, James Mackenzie Maclean, a Conservative former proprietor of the *Bombay Gazette*, insisted that the dissenting Muslim petitions proved that "Representative Government has nowhere succeeded where antipathies of race and religion have prevailed." In this conclusion, he echoed the rhetoric deployed in the petition from Lahore's Anjaman-i-Islamia (Islamic Society) he had presented two years earlier.[130] As in countless earlier petitioning drives addressed to the Commons, critics in and outside Westminster bitterly contested the representative quality of even the largest campaigns.[131]

Ultimately, this counter-petitioning fuelled metropolitan debate about Congress's support within India, but the demand for elected representation faltered for other reasons. When Parliament finally voted on the reform of legislative councils in 1892, Gladstone and other Liberal sponsors of the Indian petitions proved content to leave the "elective principle" ambiguous, after intimations that the Unionist prime minister Lord Salisbury would rather drop the bill entirely rather than accept such an amendment. Congress supporters were disappointed,

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[128] *India*, 4 July 1890, 186, 197.
[129] *India*, 4 July 1890, 197; ibid., 23 May 1890 138.
[130] SCPP, *Reports* (1890), appendix 169; *Hansard*, 4th series, Commons, 28 March 1892, col. 86; F.H. Brown and Chandrika Kaul, "James Mackenzie Maclean," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004 – present), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34782 [accessed 15 July 2019].
[131] Huzzey and Miller, "Petitions, Parliament, and Political Culture," 149-52.

though divided on how far to criticize the Liberals' cowardice.[132] More generally, their success in mobilizing a mass petition to Parliament proved to be an exceptional case that underscores the general rule that colonized peoples could not make the same use of a universal constitutional right. The absolute number of signatures produced in 1890 was sizeable, but by no means unprecedented, when set against petitions to the Commons from the British Isles. The large population of India obscured the difficulties of producing so many petition signatures; while the absolute numbers of educated, urban elites, who formed the core constituency of the Congress, was significant, they faced challenges in broadening their signature lists. The literacy rates of India and the UK, according to the 1891 censuses, were approximately 6% and 94%, respectively, although this was not necessarily a barrier to signing petitions in either country, given the possibility of making a mark.[133] Moreover, despite the acknowledged legality of petitioning Parliament or the crown, colonial officials discriminated against the careers of lawyers and other professionals supporting the Congress, while the Indian police resorted "to open violence against the supporters." Since signing depended upon public subscription, the risks of supporting a controversial petition were even greater than those facing workers and tenants in Britain.[134] In producing an exceptionally large petition from a colonized people, Indian nationalists demonstrated the broader reality that colonized peoples lacked the related privileges that made petitioning a more potent tool in British or settler campaigns.

As Liberal MP for Finsbury from 1892 to 1895, Naoroji continued to see petitions as a prime way to win metropolitan attention. In both 1893 and 1895 he was able to present many of the petitions, bearing tens of thousands of Indian signatures, demanding examinations for the Indian civil service be offered in India to enable for Indians to compete with English

[132] Moore, "The Twilight of the Whigs," 414; *India*, 15 April 1892, 92, 96.
[133] "General Report on the Census of India, 1891," *PP* 1893, C. 7181, 7, 276-7.
[134] *India*, 4 July 1890, 190; *India*, 19 Dec. 1890, 330.

clerks.[135] He advised the lawyer M.K. Gandhi and other leaders of the Indian community in South Africa when, following the 1893 inauguration of responsible government in Natal, the white political elite sought to exclude South Asians who would otherwise qualify to vote under property qualifications.[136] Gandhi organized petitions, first, to the Natal Legislative Assembly and the Natal Premier, the sponsors of the odious franchise bill, at the end of June 1894; then, one pair of petitions to the Governor and another pair to the Natal Council, in early July; and, lastly, to the British Colonial Secretary, in mid-July. For the final petition, historian Judith Brown notes, "10,000 signatures were collected in two weeks, and Gandhi's main helpers were Muslim traders who used their own transport without payment."[137] In 1902, following the Boer War, Naoroji convened a conference of British Indians and their supporters in the Westminster Palace Hotel to protest the civil disabilities placed on South Asian residents of South Africa; he signed, on behalf of the delegates, a petition to the Commons. The following year a petition to the House of Lords from a meeting of Indians resident in London objected to charging a portion of the costs of the South African War to the Indian revenues, which they construed as "dishonouring to the Empire and destructive to the welfare of India."[138] In 1909, more than 8,000 inhabitants of Madras protested against the lack of civil rights of South Asian subjects resident in South Africa, emphasising that this was a sustained, transimperial campaign to different centres of power.[139] However, it is perhaps telling that Gandhi and the community in South Africa enjoyed one of their few successes from a petition requesting the Natal authorities provide a third entrance to public buildings, for them, so they did not have to share a "non-

[135] SCPP, *Reports* (1893, 1895).
[136] Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi before India* (London, 2013), ch. 5; Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (Stanford, CA, 2016), 96-7.
[137] Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, CT, 1989), 50-55; see also Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, 2008), 119-21; James Jaffe, *Ironies of Colonial Governance: Law, Custom, and Justice in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 2015), 271.
[138] Indians resident in London, Petition, 10 Aug. 1903, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/6/14/40.
[139] SCPP, 1902, appendix 231; SCPP, 1909, appendix 51.

whites" entrance with Africans.[140] Their petitions could modify the accommodation of Indians within a racial hierarchy, but not overturn it, emphasizing the limitations of petitioning for colonial subjects.

Naoroji offered such a detailed defense of petitioning to Congress in 1906 because other campaigners had advocated direct, self-reliant modes of contesting colonial rule, rather than seeking to claim and exercise their full rights as British subjects. Bepin Chandra Pal, Shyamji Krishnavarma, and other leaders of a new generation of nationalists preferred a boycott of the colonial government, withholding petitions that would, by their nature, be interpreted as endorsing or British authority. It is tempting to see petitioning as inhibiting these new modes of Indian nationalist protest, which Gandhi would embrace and refine as Swaraj following his return to India.[141] However, Dinyar Patel has recently argued that, "Parliament was a weapon of the weak, but it was nevertheless a weapon that had yielded some results" for Indian nationalists.[142] Moreover, he points to Gandhi's comments, in 1931, that he and Naoroji had been following the same path, beginning with petitioning, that provided a platform on which, ultimately, to develop different tactics.[143] From this perspective, petitioning developed a movement and publicized the nationalist cause, even as it demonstrated the limits of the right to petition transplanted to a restricted and repressive political culture. Indeed, the lesson one Congress supporter drew from the Victorian petition campaign was that the pressures that stir "Parliament are those of its constituents, and of general public opinion at home."[144]

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[140] Paul Power, "Gandhi in South Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 7, no. 3 (October 1969): 441-55, at 445.
[141] *Justice,* 5 January 1907, 8; Shruti Kapila, "Self, Spencer and Swaraj: Nationalist Thought and Critiques of Liberalism, 1890–1920," *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 1 (April 2007): 109-127; Swarupa Gupta, "The Idea of Freedom in Bengali Nationalist Discourse," *Studies in History* 29, no. 1 (February 2013): 21-40; Nicholas Owen, "The Soft Heart of the British Empire: Indian Radicals in Edwardian London," *Past & Present* 220, no. 1 (August 2013): 143-84; Mark Frost, "Imperial Citizenship or Else: Liberal Ideas and the India Unmaking of Empire, 1890-1919," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, no. 5 (October 2018): 845-73.
[142] Patel, "The Grand Old Man," 141.
[143] Ibid., 384-9.
[144] *India*, 11 March 1892, 42.

## Conclusion

This article has revealed how a ubiquitous practice, celebrated as a universal right of British subjects, operated in distinct ways in the different territories, legal regimes, and political cultures of the empire. This suggests three interpretive points. First, an analysis of petitions to the Commons reveals the key the role of Parliament and parliamentarians, as well as colonial authorities, in ordering the business of colonialism. The formal openness of Parliament to receiving petitions from all contributed to a self-image of tolerance and constitutionalism. Second, studying the petitions on colonial issues from the British Isles helps to explain some of the everyday processes through which empire was "silenced," marginalized, or repackaged by popular engagement with parliamentary government. Petitioning, when orchestrated by missionary groups or political parties, could provide episodic public participation in the politics of empire, but many other issues that touched on empire or colonial matters were obscured through the arcane workings of the contemporary petitions system. The episodic nature of petitioning on colonial topics demonstrates the growing use of "insider" strategies by pressure groups, missionaries, and business lobbies in influencing imperial policy, and hence the sporadic manufacture of public opinion on imperial questions.

Third, despite the formal equality of the right of subjects to petition, the practical inequities of opportunity to petition Parliament ensured that this freedom merely confirmed the political peripheralization of colonized subjects, just as property qualifications or – as in India – the absence of representative institutions ensured that the rule of law upheld white supremacy without necessarily specifying race. The ability to petition Parliament meant something less in the absence of the political culture and legal norms enjoyed within Great Britain. Sandra Den Otter, writing of the law in colonial India, has pointed to the contradiction between "liberal

jurisprudence and the requirements of an authoritarian state."[145] In this article, we have traced such a tension between the right of all subjects to petition and the desire to preserve imperial authority and racial hierarchies, which ultimately placed limits on the exercise of that right in practice. Hence, British subjects might translate pre-colonial practices or learn from other parts of the empire in petitioning Parliament and other authorities, but encounter arbitrary judgements and impediments. Translation errors extended beyond the clerks' inability to transcribe unfamiliar scripts or languages. Without sympathetic MPs or a metropolitan lobby, complaints might be silenced or ignored back in Westminster.

Reviewing the diverse experiences of colonial petitioners emphasizes the essential duality between citizens in the imperial metropole and colonial subjects recently delineated by Josep Fradera in his comparative study of the British, French, Spanish and American empires. This duality, Fradera argues, was an important marker of the "imperial nation" that emerged in the aftermath of the age of revolutions. In the British imperial context, "the concept of citizenship as a precise political status made little sense," with subjecthood instead being central to claiming rights and invoking the law.[146] Yet despite the formal equality of British subjects' rights to petition the Imperial Parliament, the experiences we have traced in this article helped to contribute to the political and legal drawing of a "global colour line" and "widened some distinctions among classes of colonial subjects."[147] Amanda Behm has recently suggested that "historical racism" as much as biological racism, justified segregationist practices under a shared subjecthood to the crown and the Imperial Parliament.[148] James Bryce is one of those she identifies as a late-imperial craftsman of historical and legal justifications

[145] Sandra Den Otter, "The Law, Authority and Colonial Rule," in *India and the British Empire*, eds N. Guptu and D. Peers (Oxford, 2012), 168-90, at 190.
[146] Fradera, *The Imperial Nation*, 221.
[147] Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*; Benton and Ford, *Rage For Order*, 182; Fradera, *The Imperial Nation*, 209-22.
[148] Amanda Behm, "Settler Historicism and Anticolonial Rebuttal in the British World, 1880-1920," *Journal of World History* 26, no. 4 (December 2015): 785-813, at 813.

for binary constitutional privileges across the British Empire, which would eventually see discriminatory property or literacy tests transmute into explicitly racial citizenship. One wonders if Bryce was recalling his own experience, as an MP presenting some of the 1890 Congress petitions on Legislative Councils to the Commons, when he compared the experiences of subjects of the British and Roman empires in a celebrated 1901 essay: Colonized peoples could only appeal through petition to the imperial centre, whether in Rome or in a Westminster Parliament, "in which the Indian subjects of the Crown have not been, and cannot be represented," he judged.[149]

Yet, colonial petitioners could and did use an array of subscriptional forms to represent concerns to imperial authorities in myriad ways, even allowing for constrained opportunity. As this article has shown, inequalities of power and the anxiety to maintain colonial authority served to undercut the self-image of enlightened British imperial rule. In unearthing "hidden transcripts," James Scott has noted that "collective insistence, through petitioning, on the 'rights' to which subordinate groups feel entitled carries an understood 'or else' with the precise consequences of a refusal left to the imagination."[150] As we have suggested, petitioners in the British Empire regularly exposed the ways in which authorities discriminated, by race where territory proved insufficient as a proxy, between whose "rights" might be reasonable to request and whose "collective insistence" might constitute authentic representation.

[149] James Bryce, "The Roman Empire and the British Empire in India" in his *Studies in History and Jurisprudence*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1901), I, 30-31.
[150] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT, 1990), 95; see also Frost, "Imperial Citizenship," 865.

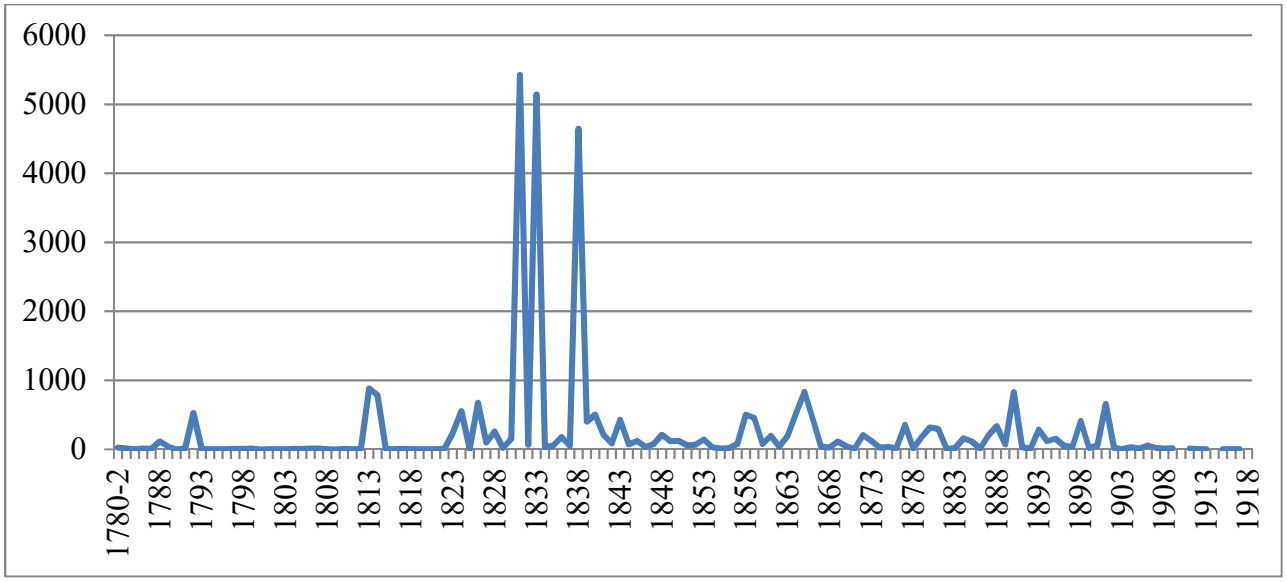


**Fig. 1** Time series of public petitions to the House of Commons in the Colonies category, 1780-1918

Source: *Journals of the House of Commons*, 1780-1832; Select Committee on Public Petitions, *Reports*, 1833-1918.

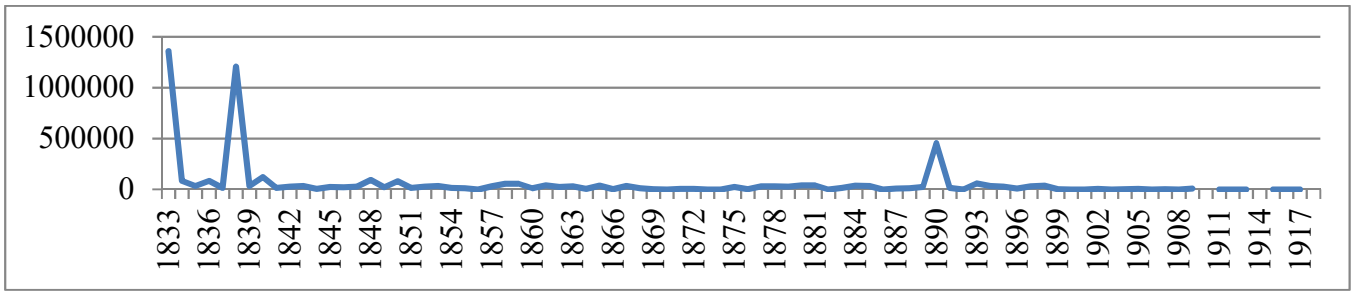


**Fig. 2** Time series of numbers of signatures recorded for public petitions to the House of Commons in the Colonies category, 1833-1918

Source: Select Committee on Public Petitions reports, 1833-1918.

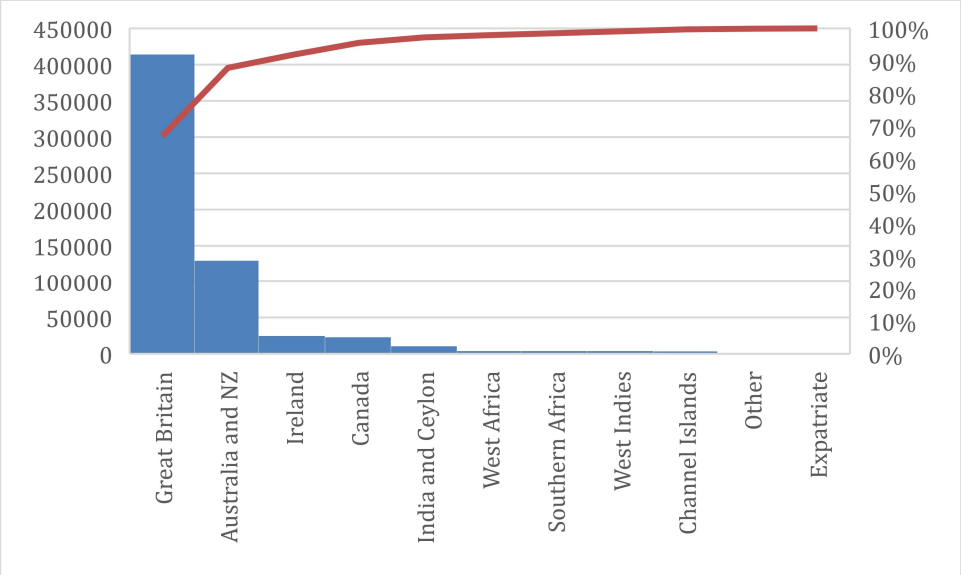


**Fig. 3:** Pareto chart of number and percentage of signatures on petitions to the House of Commons opposing any change to the Royal Declaration, by region, 1902 session.

Source: SCPP, *Reports* (1902).