

PETITIONS, PARLIAMENT AND POLITICAL CULTURE: PETITIONING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, 1780–1918*

I

On 31 March 1871, a ‘monster petition’ signed by a quarter of a million ‘Women of Great Britain and Ireland’ was presented in the House of Commons. The petitioners prayed for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, which authorized the invasive inspection of suspected prostitutes with the intention of combating venereal disease in garrison towns. The petition, five miles long when rolled out, was placed on the floor of the chamber, rather than the table as was customary, owing to its colossal size.¹ The day before, the petitioners had informed ‘two or three hundred’ members of parliament ‘that an extraordinary petition would be presented next day’. Parliamentarians came ‘swarming in to look’ at the petition, and the blind Liberal MP Henry Fawcett told his ‘boy who leads him, “Take me to the large petition, I want to *feel* it”, and he felt it all over!’² After the presentation, the official newspaper of the campaign urged supporters to organize more petitions and signatures as ‘every name is of use — every name swells the national roll, and is in itself a solemn testimony against oppression’.³

This example illustrates how petitions were a crucial site of representation between people and parliament, how petitioning

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¹ *Shield*, 8 Apr. 1871, 450, 452.

² Josephine Butler to Mrs Tanner, 4 Apr. 1871: London School of Economics, The Women’s Library, 3JBL/03/28.

³ *Shield*, 1 Apr. 1871, 443.

enabled a vibrant public politics, and how these practices constituted a channel for political participation beyond the ranks of the elect and their electors. The significance of a new study of petitions and petitioning lies in exploring these three areas. First, petitions were a key component of the shifting ecosystem of popular participation and representation during the long nineteenth century. Petitions connected parliamentary with popular politics and enabled local activity to be co-ordinated as part of national campaigns. Historians such as Frank O’Gorman, Jon Lawrence and James Vernon have long emphasized electoral culture as a key theatre for nineteenth-century popular politics.⁴ However, election rituals were episodic: until 1910, general elections in the United Kingdom could be up to seven years apart. Furthermore, we should avoid exaggerating how ‘democratic’ the UK political system was in terms of both the franchise and the opportunity to exercise it. By the early twentieth century, the UK had one of the least democratic franchises compared to other European states, and there remained high numbers of unopposed returns in which candidates were elected without a poll.⁵ An over-emphasis on elections and electoral culture has led historians to miss the scale and significance of petitions that enabled regular interaction between people and parliamentarians outside the often long lags between elections. Members of parliament could solicit petitions to add pressure behind their parliamentary manoeuvres.⁶ Petitioning movements often spanned party lines, yet national party machines developed alongside, and learned from, the repertoire of collective action pioneered by organized

⁴ Frank O’Gorman, ‘Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England, 1780–1860’, *Past and Present*, no. 135 (May 1992); Jon Lawrence, *Electing our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009); James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), 80–104; Marc Baer, *The Rise and Fall of Radical Westminster, 1780–1890* (Basingstoke, 2012).

⁵ H. C. G. Matthew, R. I. McKibbin and J. A. Kay, ‘The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party’, *English Historical Review*, xci (1976), 723–4; Trevor Lloyd, ‘Uncontested Seats in British General Elections, 1852–1910’, *Historical Journal*, viii (1965); Luke Blaxill and Taym Saleh, ‘The Electoral Dynamics of Conservatism, 1885–1910: “Negative Unionism” Reconsidered’, *Historical Journal*, lix (2016), 435–43.

⁶ Richard Huzzey, ‘Contesting Interests: Rethinking Pressure, Parliament, Nation, and Empire’, in Richard Huzzey (ed.), *Pressure and Parliament: From Civil War to Civil Society* (Chichester, 2018), 10–11.

petition drives. Liberal associations used petitions to rally criticism of Disraeli's answer to the Eastern Question in the late 1870s, while the Conservative Party's Primrose League spearheaded petitions against Home Rule for Ireland whenever Gladstone's later ministries threatened the union.⁷

Secondly, petitioning (the practices associated with the drafting, signing and presentation of petitions) enabled a vibrant public politics. Petitioning provided the focus for other activities, including meetings, demonstrations, print culture and voluntary activism. Studies of specific movements, including anti-slavery, parliamentary reform, free trade and Chartism, have recognized the importance of petitions as a mechanism for popular politics, but the culture of petitioning beyond these famous agitations remains unexamined.⁸ Classic accounts of Victorian politics, influenced by post-1945 models of political modernization, looked for harbingers of twentieth-century general elections such as mass organized parties or class voting. In so far as historians considered petitions at all, they assumed an inevitable decline as the franchise expanded. The lack of surviving petitions and their signatory lists meant that there was no evidence base for this generation of historians to apply the sociological techniques used to analyse poll books.⁹ Regardless

⁷ *York Herald*, 3 May 1877, 5; *Leicester Chronicle*, 5 Jan. 1878, 10; *Western Times*, 26 Apr. 1878, 2; *Manchester Courier*, 14 May 1886, 8; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 6 Apr. 1893, 4. On party machines, see Kathryn Rix, "'The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections'": Reassessing the Impact of the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act', *English Historical Review*, cxxiii (2008), 78–82; Matthew Roberts, 'Resisting "Arithmocracy": Parliament, Community, and the Third Reform Act', *Journal of British Studies*, 1 (2011), 407.

⁸ Paul A. Pickering, "'And your Petitioners, &c": Chartist Petitioning in Popular Politics, 1838–48', *English Historical Review*, cxvi (2001); Henry Miller, 'Popular Petitioning and the Corn Laws, 1833–46', *English Historical Review*, cxxvii (2012); Benoît Agnès, 'A Chartist Singularity? Mobilizing to Promote Democratic Petitions in Britain and France, 1838–1848', *Labour History Review*, lxxviii (2013); Robert Poole, 'French Revolution or Peasants' Revolt? Petitioners and Rebels in England from the Blanketeers to the Chartists', *Labour History Review*, lxxiv (2009); Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (Basingstoke, 1986). Recent surveys of the period generally confine consideration of petitions to these movements: James Vernon, *Modern Britain, 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2017); David Cannadine, *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom, 1800–1906* (London, 2017).

⁹ T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms in Reformed England: Case Studies from the North-East, 1832–1874* (Hassocks, 1975); David Cresap Moore, *The Politics of Deference: A Study of the Mid-Nineteenth Century English Political System* (Hassocks, 1976); J. R. Vincent, *Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted* (Cambridge, 1967).

of official responsiveness, social scientists have recently suggested that petitioning served many valuable purposes, including mobilization, organization and recruitment, in diverse national and temporal contexts.¹⁰ This explains the high levels of medium- and small-scale petitioning as well as mighty mass-subscription agitations. It also suggests that major petition drives, in developing broad popular coalitions on public issues that cut across geographical boundaries, established a more nationally integrated political culture. Yet petitioning grounded national interests and ideological clashes in local personalities and places in ways that highlight the links rather than the gulfs between the nationalization of politics and a politics of place.¹¹

Thirdly, petitions and petitioning were relatively open, inclusive forms of political participation since all British subjects enjoyed the formal right to petition. Pioneers of 'history from below', such as E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, seeking evidence of class-consciousness, found deferential appeals to authority to be unpromising sources and shared radicals' criticisms of petitioning as a pointless form of political action.¹² Yet petitioning could lead to substantial

¹⁰ Daniel Carpenter and Colin D. Moore, 'When Canvassers Became Activists: Antislavery Petitioning and the Political Mobilization of American Women', *American Political Science Review*, cviii (2014); Daniel Carpenter, 'Recruitment by Petition: American Antislavery, French Protestantism, English Suppression', *Perspectives on Politics*, xiv (2016); Catherine Bochel, 'Petitions Systems: Contributing to Representative Democracy?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, lxvi (2013); Thomas Caygill and Anne-Marie Griffiths, 'Parliament and Petitions', in Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Louise Thompson (eds.), *Exploring Parliament* (Oxford, 2018).

¹¹ On local, national and the 'translocal', see Katrina Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848* (Manchester, 2016), 313; Katrina Navickas, 'A Return to Materialism? Putting Social History Back into Place', in Sasha Handley, Rohan McWilliam and Lucy Noakes (eds.), *New Directions in Social and Cultural History* (London, 2018), 97–9; Mike Sanders, review of Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place*, in *Reviews in History*, <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1987>> (accessed 3 Sept. 2019). For classic accounts of party organization as a key driver of the nationalization of politics, see H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (London, 1959); E. J. Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party: Conservative Leadership and Organization after the Second Reform Bill* (Oxford, 1968). For recent debates among revisionists over the politics of place, see Luke Blaxill, 'Electioneering, the Third Reform Act and Political Change in the 1880s', *Parliamentary History*, xxx (2011); Kathryn Rix, *Parties, Agents and Electoral Culture in England, 1880–1910* (Woodbridge, 2016); Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998), ch. 7.

¹² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789–1848* (London, 1962), 152; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 539, 597, 688.

changes. The petitions of Dissenters, Catholics and anti-Catholics, and parliamentary reformers were key catalysts for the religious and political upheavals of 1828 to 1832, as much as the high politics emphasized by J. C. D. Clark.¹³ Any British *ancien régime* was petitioned away, not simply dissolved by elite partisanship. In reaction to older narratives of electoral reform celebrating Britain's peaceful transition to democracy, revisionist histories emphasize how politicians sought to define an exclusive, disciplined citizenship through debates about fitness to exercise the parliamentary franchise.¹⁴ However, while any expansion of the right to vote required positive parliamentary authorization, the right to petition was permissive. In the absence of any precedents to the contrary, petitioners of every social rank pushed the boundaries of who could petition and how they petitioned. This article recovers the ways in which contemporaries understood a deeper and wider range of political practices beyond voting and influencing the votes of others. The openness of the right to petition does not mean that all petitions or petitioners were regarded with equal favour by MPs or that individuals possessed equal opportunity to petition. James Epstein is right to note that there was unequal access to cultural resources in practice, but petitioning nonetheless remained a remarkably open form of political activity in a deeply hierarchical society.¹⁵ As the example of the Contagious Diseases Acts campaign suggests, petitions and petitioning were critical in enabling women's political agency during a period in which they were 'borderline citizens' in a gendered polity.¹⁶ Middle-class activists possessed greater resources of cultural and social capital that enabled them to mobilize political machines, but individuals of humble means

¹³ J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology, and Politics during the Ancien Régime*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2000), 550–64.

¹⁴ Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000); Anna Clark, 'Gender, Class and the Constitution: Franchise Reform in England, 1832–1928', in James Vernon (ed.), *Re-Reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996).

¹⁵ James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford, 2003), 9.

¹⁶ Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867* (Oxford, 2009); Sarah Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (New York, 2013); Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge, 2012).

submitted petitions alongside deep-pocketed national campaigns. Petitioning enabled varying levels of agency, from organizing mass petition drives and drafting or circulating petitions locally, to choosing whether to sign a petition or not. Recent work by Patrick Joyce and James Vernon has emphasized the development of the bureaucratic ‘technologies’ of government that allowed the Victorian state to govern a ‘society of strangers’.¹⁷ However, a study of petitions and petitioners refocuses attention on human agency, as exercised by organizers and signers, and away from these bureaucratic systems of control.

Petitioners were well aware of the long history of petitioning, which the inhabitants of Warrington asserted in 1817 was the ‘birthright of every Briton’.¹⁸ Drawing on the rich scholarship on petitions in medieval and early modern Britain enables us to place the nineteenth century within a longer historical perspective and reveal what was different about this period.¹⁹ Few elements of the nineteenth-century repertoire of petitioning were entirely new: linking petitions with demonstrations or meetings, using print to communicate petitions to ever wider audiences, or coordinating correspondence to connect local activity as part of a national campaign, will be familiar to early modernists. The difference lies in the institutionalization and intensification of

¹⁷ Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013); James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2014), 14–15.

¹⁸ *Journals of the House of Commons* (hereafter *Cf*), lxxii (1817), 27.

¹⁹ Gwilym Dodd, *Justice and Grace: Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007); Gwilym Dodd, ‘Kingship, Parliament and the Court: The Emergence of “High Style” in Petitions to the English Crown, c. 1350–1405’, *English Historical Review*, cxxix (2014); W. Mark Ormrod, Gwilym Dodd and Anthony Musson (eds.), *Medieval Petitions: Grace and Grievance* (Woodbridge, 2009); Jason Peacey, *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013), ch. 8; David Zaret, ‘Petitions and the “Invention” of Public Opinion in the English Revolution’, *American Journal of Sociology*, ci (1996); David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton, 2000); Amanda Jane Whiting, *Women and Petitioning in the Seventeenth-Century English Revolution: Deference, Difference, and Dissent* (Turnhout, 2015); Mark Knights, ‘London’s “Monster” Petition of 1680’, *Historical Journal*, xxxvi (1993); Mark Knights, ‘Participation and Representation before Democracy: Petitions and Addresses in Premodern Britain’, in Ian Shapiro *et al.* (eds.), *Political Representation* (Cambridge, 2009); Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain* (Oxford, 2005), ch. 3.

these practices across the nineteenth-century polity on an unprecedented scale that was consistently sustained.²⁰ The explosive nature of popular petitioning during the English Revolution led to the Act against Tumultuous Petitioning 1661 (13 Car. II, c. 5), which sought to discourage petitioning on political and religious issues.²¹ One result was that much eighteenth-century petitioning focused on economic, sectional and local grievances.²² By contrast, from the late eighteenth century a revival of petitioning on national public issues, especially religious, constitutional and humanitarian questions, paved the way for the heyday of public petitions to the Commons.²³

Placing this experience of petitioning within a comparative context identifies what was distinctive about British political culture. Politics across North America and western Europe experienced an ‘explosion’ in petitioning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.²⁴ There were common trends

²⁰ About 65,000 men may have signed the ‘monster’ petitions during the Exclusion Crisis of 1679–80: Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain*, 119. By comparison, two hundred years later our data captures 1.5 million signatures across more than 250 issues in 1880. Eighty thousand anti-vivisectionists sent their annual petition to parliament, while, among many other public petitions, more than 580,000 petitioned against Sunday licensing for alcohol: *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions, 1878–9*, 796; 1880, 676. Even when adjusting for population growth, petitioners signed more often and in greater numbers in our period.

²¹ Joanna Innes, ‘Legislation and Public Participation, 1760–1830’, in David Lemmings (ed.), *The British and their Laws in the Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 2005), 113; Knights, ‘Participation and Representation before Democracy’, 41–2; Joanna Innes, ‘People and Power in British Politics to 1850’, in Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (eds.), *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750–1850* (Oxford, 2013), 139–40.

²² Philip Loft, ‘Involving the Public: Parliament, Petitioning, and the Language of Interest, 1688–1720’, *Journal of British Studies*, lv (2016), 2–4; Julian Hoppit, ‘Petitions, Economic Legislation and Interest Groups in Britain, 1660–1800’, in Huzzey (ed.), *Pressure and Parliament*; Julian Hoppit, *Britain’s Political Economies: Parliament and Economic Life, 1660–1800* (Cambridge, 2017), 150–62; Philip Loft, ‘Petitioning and Petitioners to the Westminster Parliament, 1660–1788’, *Parliamentary History*, <<https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.37505>> (accessed 4 Sept. 2019); we are grateful to Philip Loft for sharing his article with us in advance of its publication.

²³ Henry Miller, ‘Petition! Petition!! Petition!!! Petitioning and Political Organization in Britain, c.1800–1850’, in Henk te Velde and Maartje Janse (eds.), *Organizing Democracy: Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2017), 46–7.

²⁴ Daniel Carpenter and Doris Brossard, ‘L’Éruption patriote: The Revolt against Dalhousie and the Petitioning Explosion in Nineteenth-Century French Canada’, *Social Science History*, xliii (2019).

across different national contexts: the emergence of collective petitioning on public issues on an unparalleled scale; the entrenchment of the constitutional right to petition; the development of sophisticated petitioning campaigns; and, drawing on ideas of popular sovereignty, petitioners' implicit or explicit challenge to the legitimacy of legislatures elected under limited franchises.²⁵

Within this wider context, the development of petitioning in the UK was exceptional in its precocity and its vast scale. Pioneering mass campaigns, notably against slavery, inspired imitation in other countries, which is in itself testimony to the perceived efficacy of petitioning.²⁶ Revealingly, the English word 'petition' was even appropriated in Spanish, replacing earlier vocabulary.²⁷ In 1789, as the Commons contemplated the first avalanche of anti-slave-trade petitions, the National Assembly of France was only just usurping their king's prerogative to receive petitions. In the following decades, the 'British style' of petitioning was seen as an exemplar to those 'reinventing traditions' elsewhere.²⁸ Britons' right to petition was, unusually, based on historical precedent rather than codified constitutional rights, which created ambiguities that petitioners exploited. The deferential form of petitions, typically addressed

²⁵ Henry Miller, 'Introduction: The Transformation of Petitioning in the Long Nineteenth Century, 1780–1914', *Social Science History*, xliii (2019); Carol Wilton, *Popular Politics and Political Culture in Upper Canada, 1800–1850* (Montreal, 2000), chs. 1, 2, 4; Ronald J. Krotoszynski Jr, *Reclaiming the Petition Clause: Seditious Libel, 'Offensive' Protest, and the Right to Petition the Government for a Redress of Grievances* (New Haven, 2012), ch. 4; Joris Oddens, 'The Greatest Right of Them All: The Debate on the Right to Petition in the Netherlands from the Dutch Republic to the Kingdom, c.1750–1830', *European History Quarterly*, xlvii (2017); Maartje Janse, '“What Value Should We Attach to All These Petitions?” Petition Campaigns and the Problem of Legitimacy in the Nineteenth-Century Netherlands', *Social Science History*, xliii (2019); Benoît Agnès, 'Le “Pétitionnaire universel”: les normes de la pétition en France et au Royaume-Uni pendant la première moitié du XIX^e siècle', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, lviii (2011); Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity* (Chapel Hill, 2003).

²⁶ Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, 31, 43–4.

²⁷ Diego Palacios Cerezales, 'Re-Imagining Petitioning in Spain, 1808–1823', *Social Science History*, xliii (2019).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 491; Diego Palacios Cerezales, 'Embodying Public Opinion: From Petitions to Mass Meetings in Nineteenth-Century Portugal', *e-Journal of Portuguese History*, ix (2011), <https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/html/issue17/pdf/v9n1a01.pdf> (accessed 15 Oct. 2019); Janse, 'What Value Should We Attach to All These Petitions?'; Ambrogio A. Caiani, *Louis XVI and the French Revolution, 1789–1792* (Cambridge, 2012), 157.

to ‘the Right Honourable the Commons assembled’ from ‘your Humble Petitioners’, could be pregnant with threat, in part owing to international precedents for revolutions started by disappointed petitioners. It is not difficult to comprehend why many British elites feared that the presentation of the Chartist petition in April 1848 heralded an uprising: they had read, in recent weeks, of petitions interwoven with demands for revolutionary change in the German states, Austria and France.²⁹

Petitioning grew amid other forms of political participation and grounded national interests and ideological clashes in local personalities and places.³⁰ Major petition drives, in developing broad popular coalitions on public issues that cut across geographical boundaries, established a more nationally integrated political culture. Single-issue associations and organized campaigns pioneered, consolidated, spread and standardized the repertoires of petitioning that were available to contemporaries. Petitioning prompts, then, an alternative way to think about the nationalization of politics through Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian anxieties rather than privileging later preoccupations with electoral culture and party development.

After briefly outlining our methodology (section II), the article reveals for the first time definitive figures on the scale and trajectory of public petitions to the Commons between 1780 and 1918 (section III). Then we show how the emergence of mass-subscription campaigns pioneered and underpinned a repertoire of collective action and popular politics (section IV), before examining the broader culture of petitioning (section V). Our analysis of crucial issues for petitioners offers new insights into key debates about religion and secularization, the evolution of the British state and social policy, and the place of empire within UK political culture (section VI). Finally, the article reflects on the broader implications of restoring the centrality of petitions, petitioners and petitioning to nineteenth-century

²⁹ *Liverpool Mail*, 26 Feb. 1848, 2; *Morning Advertiser*, 4 Mar. 1848, 3; *Morning Post*, 6 Mar. 1848, 5; *Morning Chronicle*, 16 Mar. 1848, 5; 21 Mar. 1848, 6; Hans-Joachim Hahn, *The 1848 Revolutions in German-Speaking Europe* (Harlow, 2001), 59–63; Carola Lipp and Lothar Krempel, ‘Petitions and the Social Context of Political Mobilization in the Revolution of 1848/49: A Microhistorical Actor-Centred Network Analysis’, in Lex Heerma van Voss (ed.), *Petitions in Social History*, suppl. 9 to *International Review of Social History*, xlvi (2001).

³⁰ Navickas, ‘A Return to Materialism?’, 97–9.

politics for our understanding of political participation, representation, democracy and political culture (section VII).

II

During our period, public petitions to the Commons were the best-recorded form of petitioning, but they should be recognized within a wider culture of petitions to other authorities, including the monarch and local government.³¹ We have analysed the number of public petitions to the Commons, the issues they raised and, after 1833, the number of signatures attached to them. Since the original petitions have not survived, we have relied on two sources to create our data. The reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions (SCPP), established in 1833, systematically recorded every public petition to the Commons, including the number of signatures, issue, place and collective self-description of the petitioners. Until 1906 the SCPP grouped issues into five categories: parliament, ecclesiastical, colonies, taxes and miscellaneous (see Table 1). Compiling the end-of-year summaries (which recorded the aggregate petitions and signatures per issue in a session) reveals that between 1833 and 1918 there were 29,562 different issues in public petitions to the Commons.³² In Table 2 we have reallocated the formerly ‘miscellaneous’ issues across the other original categories as well as into five new categories that we have created to analyse the entire period from 1780 to 1918.

In establishing the SCPP, legislators were responding to the enormous growth in the number of public petitions in the preceding decades. Before 1833, all petitions lay alongside the votes, motions and reports in the *Journals of the House of Commons*, which provide our second source of data. To analyse the growth of petitioning to the Commons after 1780, we have

³¹ James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown, and Public Opinion* (Macon, Ga., 1986); Robert J. Bennett, *Local Business Voice: The History of Chambers of Commerce in Britain, Ireland, and Revolutionary America, 1760–2011* (Oxford, 2011), 411–19; David R. Green, ‘Pauper Protests: Power and Resistance in Early Nineteenth-Century London Workhouses’, *Social History*, xxxi (2006); R. A. Houston, *Peasant Petitions: Social Relations and Economic Life on Landed Estates, 1600–1850* (Basingstoke, 2014); Steve Poole, *The Politics of Regicide, 1760–1850: Troublesome Subjects* (Manchester, 2000).

³² Issues that attracted petitions in different years are counted separately rather than as one issue. Pro and anti sides of the same subject are counted as separate issues.

TABLE 1

CLASSIFICATION OF ISSUES, PETITIONS AND SIGNATURES FOR PUBLIC PETITIONS TO THE COMMONS BY ORIGINAL CATEGORIES USED BY THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC PETITIONS (SCPP), 1833–1918*

SCPP classification	Issues		Petitions		Signatures	
	No.	% of total	No.	% of total	No.	% of total
Parliament	1,772	6.0	63,899	6.7	23,028,381	14.0
Ecclesiastical	3,256	11.0	316,230	33.2	49,946,894	30.3
Colonies	1,264	4.3	20,844	2.2	4,657,632	2.8
Taxes	2,711	9.3	118,874	12.5	18,799,966	11.4
Miscellaneous	19,559	66.2	396,692	41.6	56,965,837	34.6
None (1906–18)	1,000	3.4	37,387	3.9	11,408,176	6.9
Total	29,562		953,926		164,806,866	

* Source: *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions, 1833–1918*.

compiled comparable data from the *Journals*. Reflecting a greater emphasis on the ‘interests’ of geography, property and trade in the unreformed parliament, the clerks seldom recorded the number of signatures. Their industry focused on indexing the places that had sent petitions rather than counting and aggregating the petitions received in a session regarding particular measures. The surge in petitioning strained these procedures, leading the clerks and printers of the *Journals* to scrimp on the details of the ‘prayer’ (the petitioners’ request) or merely to summarize the list of places from which multiple petitions on the same question had arrived on a given day. These expediencies in parliamentary record-keeping created small disparities between the number of petitions declared, the number of petitioning places enumerated, and those listed in the *Journals’* indexes.³³

A further complication has been the need to impose post-1833 criteria, based on what would have qualified for the SCPP reports, on data from the earlier period.³⁴ Following the clerks, we have defined public petitions as those that concerned

³³ Compare, for example, petitions against slavery in index and reports for *Cj*, lxxix (1824–5), 155.

³⁴ In entering data for public petitions in 1780–1832 for the specific purpose of analysis alongside the SCPP reports for 1833–1918, we necessarily replicated the frailties of the later period’s blunt categorization of petitions, which often crossed

(cont. on p. 12)

measures of more general applicability in distinction from those private petitions concerning powers related to a highly local or personal question. Georgian parliaments acted as ‘a gigantic rubber stamp, confirming local and private enterprise’ by approving petitions for private bills.³⁵ These initiatives generated the ‘local Acts of a national parliament’, establishing specific enclosures, turnpikes and canals, giving Westminster a pivotal role in directing the evolution of social policy and economic development without the apparatus of a centralized state.³⁶ Parliamentarians separated the processes for different types of petition in the later 1830s, with new committees for private bills and new procedures for hearing petitions contesting election results.³⁷ The final tallies necessarily hinge on our judgement of the 47,199 petitions we considered ‘public’ and the many others excluded as ‘private’ in the period 1780 to 1832.³⁸

However, any methodological issues involved in creating the pre-1833 statistics, errors in data entry, the unreliability of our sources or the particular distinctions we have drawn would not change the overall patterns we trace below. The significant change in the long nineteenth century was the growth of public petitions. This trend had emerged as economic groups responded to changes in taxation or other legislation that might affect their

(n. 34 cont.)

boundaries. Patterns of human error in data entry will also be inconsistent since particular years were prepared by a team of three.

³⁵ Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (Oxford, 1991), 166. See also Robert Dale Tennyson, ‘Private Legislation: Function and Procedure in the Eighteenth Century’ (University of California, Berkeley, Ph.D. thesis, 2009).

³⁶ Joanna Innes, ‘The Local Acts of a National Parliament: Parliament’s Role in Sanctioning Local Action in Eighteenth-Century Britain’, in David Dean and Clyve Jones (eds.), *Parliament and Locality, 1660–1939* (Edinburgh, 1998); Rosemary Sweet, ‘Local Identities and a National Parliament, c. 1688–1835’, in Julian Hoppit (ed.), *Parliaments, Nations and Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660–1850* (Manchester, 2003); Hoppit, ‘Petitions, Economic Legislation and Interest Groups in Britain’; Hoppit, *Britain’s Political Economies*, 98.

³⁷ Matthew Cragoe, ‘Sir Robert Peel and the “Moral Authority” of the House of Commons, 1832–41’, *English Historical Review*, cxxviii (2013), 68–76.

³⁸ The highly regional structure of the economy creates difficult cases of national petitioning on bills with ostensibly local applications. We have excluded local fisheries but counted those granting monopoly privileges over a wide area. Petitions relating to three ambitious new fisheries in 1811 make up 32 per cent of the total public petitions we have recorded for that year, demonstrating the impact of these fine judgements on annual counts for these earlier years: *CJ*, lxxvi (1811), 58–60.

TABLE 2

CLASSIFICATION OF ISSUES AND PETITIONS FOR PUBLIC PETITIONS TO THE COMMONS, 1780–1832, AND FOR ISSUES, PETITIONS AND SIGNATURES FOR PUBLIC PETITIONS TO THE COMMONS, 1833–1918, BY NEW CATEGORIES*

Classification	Issues		Petitions		Signatures	
	No.	% of total	No.	% of total	No.	% of total
1780–1832						
Parliament	259	6.1	5,553	11.7		
Ecclesiastical	384	9.0	10,261	21.7		
Colonies	251	5.9	10,042	21.3		
Taxes	1,395	32.9	11,152	23.6		
New categories						
Social	495	11.7	2,994	6.3		
Legal	331	7.8	1,797	3.8		
Economy	821	19.3	4,331	9.2		
Infrastructure, communications	211	5.0	652	1.4		
War and peace	97	2.3	437	0.9		
Total	4,244		47,219			
1833–1918						
Parliament	2,048	6.9	67,451	7.1	24,939,922	15.1
Ecclesiastical	3,530	11.9	338,431	35.5	55,575,696	33.7
Colonies	1,434	4.9	21,776	2.3	4,804,034	2.9
Taxes	3,503	11.9	139,221	14.6	23,887,047	14.5
New categories						
Social	7,054	23.9	276,012	28.9	37,967,562	23.0
Legal	3,550	12.0	26,375	2.8	6,917,932	4.2
Economy	4,094	13.9	32,091	3.4	4,456,778	2.7
Infrastructure, communications	3,733	12.6	38,407	4.0	3,861,587	2.3
War and peace	616	2.1	14,162	1.5	2,396,328	1.5
Total	29,562		953,926		164,806,886	

* Source: *Journals of the House of Commons*, xxxviii–lxxxvii (1780–1832); *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1833–1918.

trade by organizing petitions in the eighteenth century.³⁹ In the longer term, the growth of organized campaigns on religious, constitutional and humanitarian issues was to be more important in driving the development of mass petitioning, as we shall see.

³⁹ Loft, 'Involving the Public'.

III

The growth in petitioning to the Commons in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, and its sustained scale, can be quantified in three ways. First, there was an expansion in the range of issues in public petitions, including, after 1801, petitions formerly directed to the Irish parliament. There were 4,244 issues in public petitions between 1780 and 1832 and a further 29,562 for the period 1833 to 1918 (Figure 1). Secondly, there was massive growth in the number of public petitions (Figure 2). This was not merely the result of demographic change. Between 1801 and 1841 the population of England, Wales and Scotland increased by 76 per cent, and yet the number of public petitions to the Commons increased by over 12,000 per cent.⁴⁰ The SCPP reports record 953,926 public petitions from 1833 to 1918 and we have added 47,219 for the period 1780 to 1832. Thirdly, public petitions generated huge numbers of signatures by 1833, when they first began to be recorded. The 953,926 public petitions recorded for the SCPP years contained almost 165 million signatures, or almost two million per session on average (Figure 3).

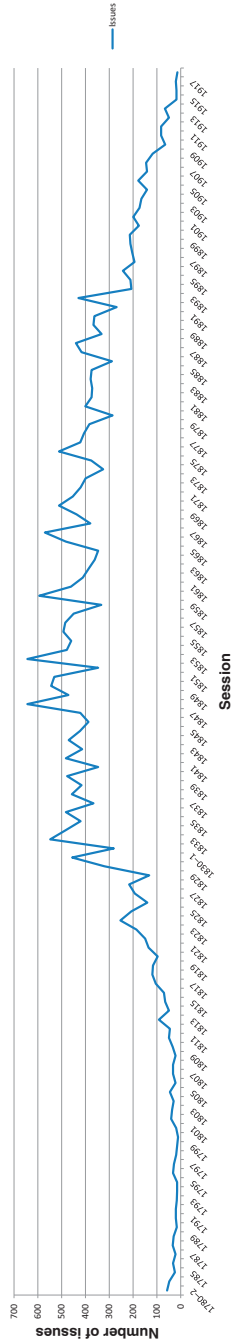
The chronology of petitioning the Commons during the long nineteenth century falls into three distinct stages. Public petitioning expanded from the last decades of the eighteenth century, but the late 1820s saw a sharper rise in terms of the volume of petitions (Figures 1 and 2).⁴¹ By the early nineteenth century, the presentation of petitions was used to initiate debate by putting up to four questions to the House, which, when combined with the volume of petitions, absorbed an increasing amount of parliamentary time.⁴² By the 1830s there were frequent complaints that the time of the House was preoccupied with petitions, with one Tory squire sneering that ‘the Reform’d Parliament does absolutely nothing but talk &

⁴⁰ The number of public petitions rose from 144 in 1801 to 18,056 in 1841. The census figures are taken from B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), 9–10. As there were no Irish census returns before 1821, we have excluded Ireland from this comparison.

⁴¹ David Lemmings, *Law and Government in England during the Long Eighteenth Century: From Consent to Command* (Basingstoke, 2011), 162–4.

⁴² *Select Committee on the Despatch of Public Business*, Parliamentary Papers, 1854 (212), vii, 77.

FIGURE 1
NUMBER OF ISSUES IN PUBLIC PETITIONS PER SESSION, 1780–1918*



* Sources: *Journals of the House of Commons*, xxxviii–lxxxvii (1780–1832); *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1833–1918.

present absurd petitions'.⁴³ Consequently, in 1833 the government and the speaker agreed to establish the SCPP and restrict MPs from speaking on petitions. This was enshrined in the House's Standing Orders in 1842.⁴⁴

The scale of popular petitioning did not decline after these procedural changes. Nor, indeed, did major electoral reforms deter petitioners, which problematizes existing understandings about the relationship between democratization and petitioning. Older accounts, grounded in theories of political modernization, assumed that parties and elections superseded petitions as the right to vote expanded.⁴⁵ On the contrary, petitions to parliament surged after the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, which seemed to make the Commons more open to popular pressure.⁴⁶ The relationship between these enfranchisements and surges in petitioning is unsurprising given that politicians intended the first two Reform Acts to reform the representative system rather than establish democracy. In 1832 many electors were disenfranchised by the residency and rate-paying clauses, and historians of that Act now stress the importance of boundary changes and the redistribution of seats as much as the franchise.⁴⁷ To treat the Reform Act of 1832 as a simple franchise extension on the pathway to democracy, as recent political science accounts have done, is questionable.⁴⁸ Similarly, the Act of 1867 was intended to 'popularize' not democratize the constitution by

⁴³ Ralph Sneyd to Lord Clare, 29 Apr. 1833: Keele University Library, Special Collections, SC 6/185. See also James Grant, *Random Recollections of the House of Commons, from the Year 1830 to the Close of 1835, Including Personal Sketches of the Leading Members of All Parties*, 5th edn (London, 1837), 85; 'Art. XV: First and Second Reports of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Petitions. Parliamentary Papers', *Westminster Review*, xviii (1833), 493.

⁴⁴ *CJ*, lxxxviii (1833), 10; *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xlv, cols. 156–82 (7 Feb. 1839); lxii, cols. 474–88 (14 Apr. 1842).

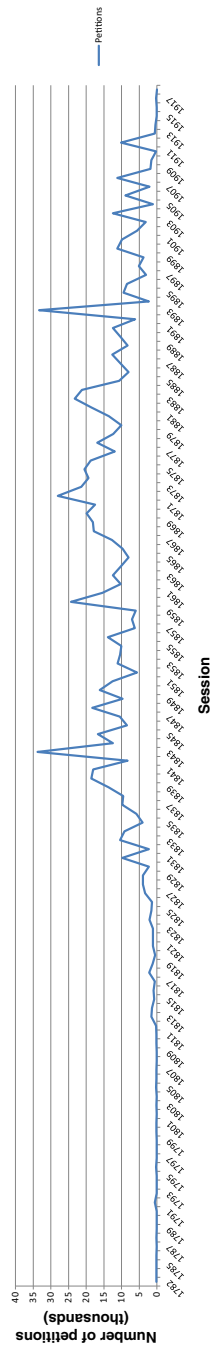
⁴⁵ Colin Leys, 'Petitioning in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *Political Studies*, iii (1955).

⁴⁶ Krotoszynski, *Reclaiming the Petition Clause*, 95–6.

⁴⁷ Philip Salmon, 'The English Reform Legislation, 1831–32', in D. R. Fisher (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1820–1832*, 7 vols. (Cambridge, 2009), i, 389–92, 411–12; Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993), 72–3; Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford, 2015), 86–98.

⁴⁸ Thomas Ertman, 'The Great Reform Act of 1832 and British Democratization', *Comparative Political Studies*, xliii (2010); Toke S. Aidt and Raphaël Franck, 'Democratization under the Threat of Revolution: Evidence from the Great Reform Act of 1832', *Econometrica*, lxxxiii (2015).

FIGURE 2
NUMBER OF PUBLIC PETITIONS PER SESSION, 1780–1918*



* Sources: See Figure 1.

placing the existing political system on a broader, stronger basis by enfranchising some working men.⁴⁹

Finally, the number of public petitions fluctuated more wildly in the 1890s and 1900s, and there was a waning of the broader culture of petitioning the Commons reflected in the decline in the number of issues per year from 430 in 1893 to just sixty-seven by 1914 (Figure 1). However, much of Edwardian subscriptional activity addressed alternative authorities, including the king and the prime minister, and such petitions are not captured in our data. This displacement prefigured a decoupling of petitioning from parliamentary politics in the twentieth century. Although signing petitions remained popular, as evidenced by late twentieth-century social surveys, petitioning diversified into a range of less well-recorded forms that make it difficult to provide a systematic overview comparable to the nineteenth-century data.⁵⁰ The average number of petitions and signatures per session from 1900 to 1914 was less than half the average for the overall SSCP years, and was sustained to an even greater degree by a few long-running campaigns (such as those for the disestablishment of the Welsh Church) rather than a wider culture of petitioning. Of the 80,541 public petitions from 1900 to 1914, 74 per cent were for issues that generated more than five hundred petitions, compared to 61 per cent for the period 1833 to 1899. In the Edwardian era, 87 per cent of the total signatures came from issues that generated more than a hundred thousand signatures, compared to 71 per cent for the preceding period.

IV

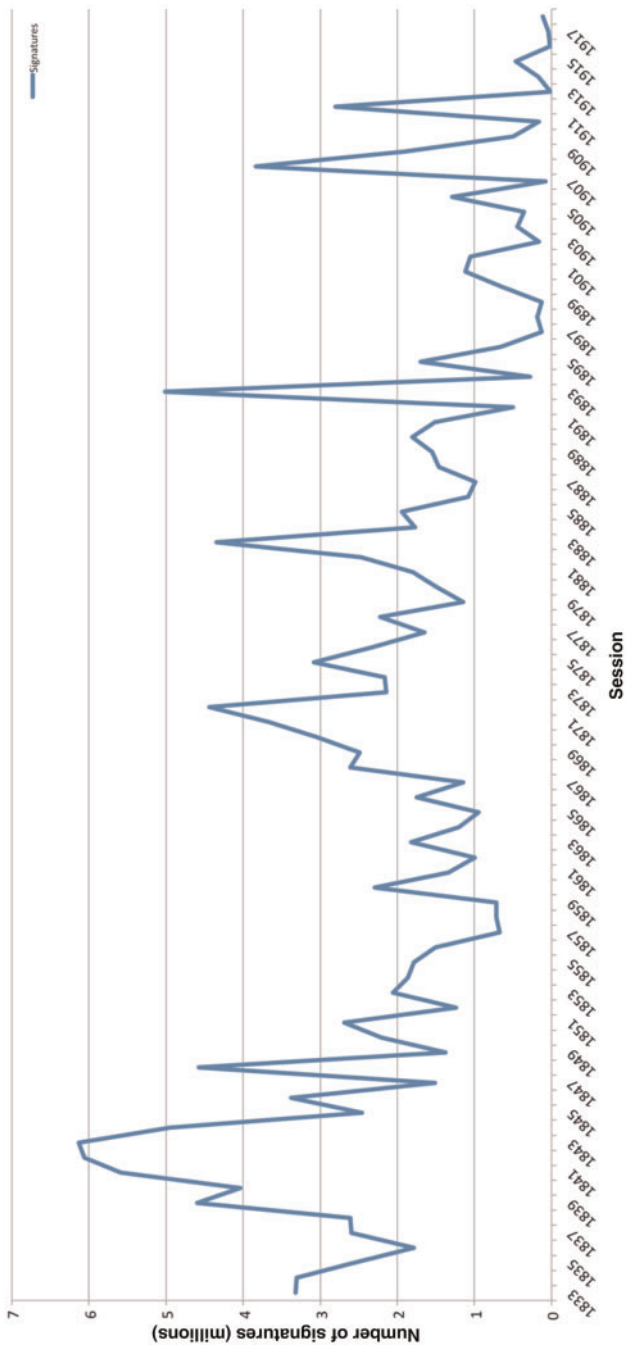
The emergence of mass, collective petitioning on public issues was closely associated with the rise of the petition drive, or ‘institutional’ petitioning, often co-ordinated by single-issue associations.⁵¹ The growth of this phenomenon explains why Charles Tilly found a ‘parliamentarization’ of popular

⁴⁹ Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848–1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham, 2011), 9.

⁵⁰ Henry Miller, ‘The British Women’s Suffrage Movement and the Practice of Petitioning, 1890–1914’, *Historical Journal* (forthcoming).

⁵¹ Miller, ‘Introduction’; Peter Jupp, *British Politics on the Eve of Reform: The Duke of Wellington’s Administration, 1828–30* (Basingstoke, 1998), 219–20. We define mass petitions as issues generating more than five hundred petitions, or, after 1833, more than a hundred thousand signatures within a single session.

FIGURE 3
NUMBER OF SIGNATURES ON PUBLIC PETITIONS PER SESSION, 1833–1918*



* Sources: *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions, 1833–1918.*

contention during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: his database of newspaper reports captured how popular gatherings increasingly directed demands to national authorities, especially parliament, rather than local intermediaries.⁵² The petition was the key mechanism connecting this popular activity with parliamentary politics. Since petitioning for private or local statutes became a routine part of municipal or county business throughout the eighteenth century, it is understandable that these techniques began to be deployed on a broader spectrum of issues. Public petitioning regarding taxation or economic regulation expanded into other issues: hence, British petitioning in sympathy with the American revolutionaries added pleas to restore peaceful trade.⁵³ Sophisticated campaigns, such as the movement for economic reform of 1780, adapted the practice of co-ordinated petitioning by commercial interests to mobilize counties and major towns simultaneously. The drive for parliamentary reform in 1782 expanded on the geographical scope of the earlier movement by including small boroughs who complained that their representation had been ‘usurped’.⁵⁴ Mobilizing only counties and certain types of borough in the campaigns of 1780 and 1782 imposed a ceiling on the potential number of petitions and signatures, but these movements were nevertheless exemplars of the new organized, co-ordinated mode of subscription that paved the way for the subsequent explosion of petitioning. After 1787 anti-slave-trade campaigners perfected the model of national mobilization and inspired formidable petition drives for the promotion of Christianity in India (873 petitions in 1813) and parliamentary reform (1,479 in 1818).

From the 1820s these ‘institutional’ campaigns accounted for a disproportionate amount of petitions and signatures. For example, in 1827 and 1829 petition drives organized by protectionists, pro- and anti-Catholics, and Protestant Dissenters represented 74 per cent and 82 per cent of public petitions, respectively. By the 1830s,

⁵² Charles Tilly, ‘Parliamentarization of Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834’, *Theory and Society*, xxvi (1997); Richard Huzzey, ‘A Microhistory of British Anti-Slavery Petitioning’, *Social Science History*, xliii (2019).

⁵³ Sweet, ‘Local Identities and a National Parliament’; James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Non-Conformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990), 375–6.

⁵⁴ Ian R. Christie, *Wilkes, Weyhill and Reform: The Parliamentary Reform Movement in British Politics, 1760–1785* (London, 1962), 77, 166–74.

the success of the movements for parliamentary reform, Catholic emancipation, repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and the abolition of slavery validated petitioning and provided exemplary models for future mass campaigns. As the organ of the anti-Contagious Diseases agitation reflected in 1871, 'the success of every great movement had been largely due to the free and continuous exercise of the right to petition'.⁵⁵ Signing a petition provided a basis for further forms of collective action, and petitioning acted as a focal point for movements that connected parliamentary strategy with extra-parliamentary popular politics, combining grassroots activity with central co-ordination.⁵⁶ As John Dunlop, a founder of the temperance movement, argued in 1840, petitioning 'induces a plurality of individuals to record publicly their opinions on some point of importance; and as they cannot well retract such a solemn declaration, they are the more permanently combined by the act'.⁵⁷

Mass petition campaigns were one of the major drivers of the increased and sustained scale of petitioning across the long nineteenth century. For the SSCP years, 337 issues (1.1 per cent) generated more than five hundred petitions in a single session, but these accounted for 594,851, or 62 per cent, of the total number of public petitions. A similar number of issues, 325, or 1 per cent, produced over a hundred thousand signatures in a single session, but these contributed 72 per cent of the total 165 million signatures on public petitions. The incidence and coincidence of a series of major campaigns within a parliamentary session created peaks in petitioning activity (Figures 2 and 3).⁵⁸ In 1843 the Commons received 33,764 petitions, the highest number for a session within our period. Of these petitions, 89 per cent came from the opposition to the corn laws and educational clauses of the Factory Bill, which together accounted for 84 per cent of the 6.1 million signatures. Revealingly, when political associations temporarily abandoned parliamentary petitioning for tactical reasons, the petitions on these issues fell to negligible quantities. There were 15,808

⁵⁵ *Shield*, 4 Apr. 1871, 442.

⁵⁶ Miller, 'Petition! Petition!! Petition!!!', 52.

⁵⁷ John Dunlop, *The Universal Tendency to Association in Mankind Analyzed and Illustrated: With Practical and Historical Notices of the Bonds of Society, as Regards Individuals and Communities* (London, 1840), 125.

⁵⁸ Innes, 'Legislation and Public Participation', 116–18.

petitions presented in favour of the permissive bill for the local prohibition of alcohol in four sessions (1869–72), but only thirty-five in 1873, after the United Kingdom Alliance declared a break from petitioning.⁵⁹

The broader significance of single-issue campaigns lay in pioneering and spreading practices that constituted the repertoire of mass petitioning and, more broadly, popular politics. Anti-slavery activists in the late eighteenth century perfected many of the key innovations, such as establishing a central co-ordinating body with local auxiliaries, using print and correspondence to connect and co-ordinate activity, and timing petitions to support parliamentary tactics.⁶⁰ These techniques allowed activists to direct national campaigns in which signature gathering was largely decentralized. As in the United States, petitioners took advantage of a postal concession that encouraged them to direct petitions to Westminster. Under the Postage Acts of 1814 and 1837, petitions weighing less than six ounces could be sent post-free to parliament; after 1840 this was raised to thirty-two ounces, providing petitions were left open at the sides and sent without a cover.⁶¹ This concession was valuable given that most mass movements urged petitions to be ‘numerous and numerously signed’, demonstrating support from various places and groups, rather than produce a singular mass petition, as favoured by the Chartists.⁶²

Central bodies acted as resource hubs, distributing printed or engrossed petition texts and blank signatory sheets. While the architects of petition drives often relied on volunteers, often women, they sometimes subsidized local activity from central funds or through paid canvassers. In the 1830s, John Fielden and Lord Stanhope paid £25 each to ‘missionaries’ opposed to the new poor law for this purpose.⁶³ The costs of mass petitioning could be considerable. The Anti-Corn Law League spent £1,037 9s. on raising petitions from December 1845 to July 1846 (see

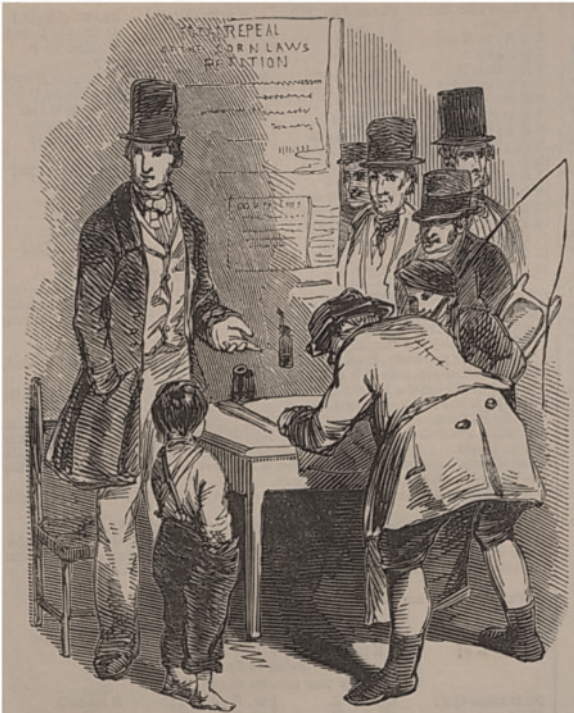
⁵⁹ *Alliance News*, 8 Feb. 1873, 89.

⁶⁰ J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (Manchester, 1995), 45–51, 58–61, 96–114; Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*, 67, 70–1, 75–7.

⁶¹ 54 Geo. 3, c. 169, §17; 1 Vict., c. 35, §4; 3 & 4 Vict., c. 96, §41; Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, 100.

⁶² Matthew Balme, Short Time Committee, printed circular, 1 Apr. 1845: West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford, DB27/C1/6/1.

⁶³ James Turner to John Fielden, 7 Dec. 1835: John Rylands University Library of Manchester, FDN/1/2/1/7.



ANTI-CORN-LAW PETITION STREET SIGNATURES.

A thing my station quite below—
 Work—now I am M.P. no more.
 Then bring me pen, and paper bring:
 He'll find that I can stand alone!
 I'll do the independent thing—
 Coquet with all, but vote with none.
 It was not thus this time last year;
 It never would have been, but thou
 Hast kicked me out, and left me here.
 Save honour, I have nothing now.
 In vain defiance I would breathe—
 A Conscience I should like to wear—
 But that's no go with means beneath
 Five hundred pounds, at least, a year.
 Can conscience stave off writs, a shoal?
 Can conscience pay my tailor's bill?
 I think I'll vote, upon the whole,
 Black White—and rest a member still.

In which unheroic mood we leave the repentant nominee for the present.

A few words upon the Free Trade Petitions to which thousands of signatures have been obtained in the *al fresco* style illustrated by our artist. The corner of a street is a favourite site for this open avowal of a public grievance: a table, such as the thimble-rig men once used, is set up instanter; one signing petitioner makes many; and the signs-manual, doubtless, present some curious specimens of calligraphy. Thus have been gathered many of the thousands of signatures appended to the petitions presented to Parliament during the past week: of the 14,600 from Southwark; 72,000 from Lambeth; 64,000 from the City; 83,000 from Finsbury, &c. Time presses: so, thanks to the itinerant supporters of the Premier's Plan.

1. 'Anti-Corn-Law Petition Street Signatures', *Illustrated London News*, 14 Feb. 1846, 116.

Plate 1).⁶⁴ The Catholic Association in Ireland in the 1820s funded its petitioning campaign through small voluntary donations ('rent') from the rural poor.⁶⁵ Although parliamentary precedents required petitions to be written texts, the expense and material culture of petitioning was shaped by printing and postal technologies. Detailed accounts of other associations reveal that they spent much of the money on printing and posting petition forms, circulars and signatory sheets, as well as writing out petitions. In 1884 the Northern Counties Electoral League for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act spent over £175 on petitions, of which 19 per cent was on printing, 30 per cent on postage and 21 per cent on employing twenty-six people to engross petitions.⁶⁶ Contemplating a second petition in favour of women's suffrage in 1866, Emily Davies observed that 'to cover a wide field & bring the matter before everybody who may possibly be interested will necessarily involve a great waste of printing & postage'.⁶⁷ The time, money and energy that campaigners invested in petitioning is testament to its central importance within nineteenth-century repertoires of collective action.

While mass petitioning may have been part of a trend towards the parliamentarization of popular contention, petition drives were frequently embedded in local political structures. Public meetings ensured a powerful link between the intensification of parliamentary pressure and the strengthening of local political institutions. Hence, it was common for 'respectable' petitioners to send signed requisitions — in essence a pre-petition — to a local official such as the mayor, asking him to convene a meeting to petition the Commons or another authority. The gathering of signatures for requisitions became a standard part of the grassroots organization of petition drives, along with resolutions and speeches at public meetings.⁶⁸ Indeed, in February 1833, anti-slavery activists in York agreed that 'as the names to a

⁶⁴ Anti-Corn Law League accounts, 1843–46: West Sussex Record Office, Add. MS 5546.

⁶⁵ Fergus O'Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation: Daniel O'Connell and the Birth of Irish Democracy, 1820–30* (Dublin, 1985), 76–9, 106–7.

⁶⁶ Northern Counties Electoral League for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, 'Cost of Petition Work, 1884': London School of Economics and Political Science, TWL, 3AMS/B/01/01, FL036.

⁶⁷ Emily Davies to Helen Taylor, 4 Aug. 1866, in Emily Davies, *Collected Letters, 1861–1875*, ed. Ann B. Murphy and Deirdre Raftery (Charlottesville, Va., 2004), 186.

⁶⁸ Huzzey, 'Microhistory of British Anti-Slavery Petitioning'.

petition were never read in Parliament, and sometimes never seen', it was useful for requisitions to be gathered in booksellers' shops so 'the signatures affixed to the requisition might give the public a specimen of what they could do' when a petition was subsequently created.⁶⁹

The process of signature gathering was another way in which petitioning enabled a participatory public politics at a local level. Chartists went from door to door in residential areas or visited workplaces.⁷⁰ Shops and newspaper offices proved reliable venues for petitions to be deposited for signature.⁷¹ Churches might host petitions, or churchwardens might help visiting campaigners to canvass the parish, though there could be some sensitivity over how far clergy coerced congregants' signatures.⁷² Trade unions institutionalized petitioning as part of their conferences. In 1876 Joseph Arch and other leaders of the Agricultural Labourers' Union used their gathering to launch a petition for extension of the franchise to rural inhabitants on the same terms as those in the boroughs, which they hoped would 'strengthen the hands' of their parliamentary advocates. Later that same day, they drafted another petition, opposed to military conscription and war (see Plate 2).⁷³ The institutionalization and intensification of petitioning parliament driven by mass campaigns, then, created further opportunities for political participation by underpinning a broader repertoire of popular politics.

V

There was, however, a broader culture of petitioning beyond organized campaigns. Of the 29,562 issues in the SCPP years, 84 per cent generated ten petitions or fewer, and 68 per cent generated a hundred signatures or fewer. The increase in the volume of petitions and signatures was also driven by a 'long

⁶⁹ *York Herald*, 9 Feb. 1833, 4.

⁷⁰ Malcolm Chase, 'What Did Chartism Petition For? Mass Petitions in the British Movement for Democracy', *Social Science History*, xliii (2019); Pickering, 'And your Petitioners, &c'.

⁷¹ *Sheffield Register*, 12 Apr. 1793, 3; *Fife Herald*, 14 Feb. 1833, 1; *Stamford Mercury*, 28 May 1841, 2; *Lancaster Gazette*, 17 Jan. 1846, 1.

⁷² *Leicester Herald*, 4 Mar. 1829, 2; *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 5 Apr. 1851, 1; *Dundee Courier*, 27 Apr. 1885, 1.

⁷³ *Illustrated London News*, 3 June 1876, 545.

tail' of small- and medium-scale petitioning on a diverse range of issues. To express this another way, if we remove the issues generating more than five hundred petitions, or a hundred thousand signatures after 1833, in a session, the remaining issues still contributed four to five thousand petitions and 560,000 signatures on average per session during the Victorian heyday of petitioning.

This popular culture of petitioning was founded on the right to petition. Whereas scholars have argued that restriction of the parliamentary franchise defined the political nation through the exclusion of women, working-class men and colonial subjects, petitioners could transgress these limits.⁷⁴ British subjects' right to petition parliament did not rest on a codified constitutional right as in the United States or European polities, but rather it rested on the right of subjects to petition the monarch guaranteed by the Bill of Rights of 1689, which late eighteenth-century legal judgments ruled to be qualified by the Act against Tumultuous Petitioning 1661, but, even more importantly, by parliamentary precedents.⁷⁵ As it was a permissive right, petitioners themselves entrenched the popular right to petition through repeated exercise and assertion of the liberty. For example, in 1823 the York Whig Club declared in their reform petition that it was 'the undoubted right of Englishmen to approach the House of their nominal representatives, with Remonstrances and Petitions'.⁷⁶

In response, MPs increasingly accepted a formal right for all British subjects to petition parliament from the late eighteenth century, without prohibition by gender, race, class, property ownership, literacy or the franchise. The prime minister, William Pitt, acknowledged in 1795 that 'supposed or real grievances may, as a matter of right, be presented to Parliament by all ranks of people'.⁷⁷ The right to petition even extended beyond language, as shown in 1833 by a petition of the

⁷⁴ Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. 9 and 328–52; Hall, McClelland and Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation*.

⁷⁵ Mark Knights, "The Lowest Degree of Freedom": The Right to Petition, 1640–1800', in Huzzey (ed.), *Pressure and Parliament*.

⁷⁶ *C7*, lxxviii (1823), 231.

⁷⁷ *Parliamentary Register: or, History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons. Containing an Account of the Most Interesting Speeches and Motions; Accurate Copies of the Most Remarkable Letters and Papers; of the Most Material*

(cont. on p. 27)



2. 'Agricultural Labourers' Union at the Memorial Hall, Farringdon-Street', *Illustrated London News*, 3 June 1876, 545. Reproduced by permission of Durham University Library.

inhabitants of Calcutta, which contained 220 signatures in Roman script and seventy-seven 'signatures in native characters'.⁷⁸ By the early nineteenth century, parliamentarians and petitioners alike understood the right to petition parliament within a discourse of popular constitutionalism.

The right to petition did not, of course, accord a right to respect, as is evident from debates about the maturity and respectability of signatories. Accusations of young boys signing petitions proved to be such a staple of satire that by 1865 it was admitted to be 'an old grievance'.⁷⁹ Others questioned the authenticity of petitions, as in the case of newspaper stories of

(n. 77 cont.)

Evidence, Petitions, &c. Laid Before and Offered to the House, during the Sixth Session of the Seventeenth Parliament of Great Britain, xliii (1796), 243 (17 Nov. 1795).

⁷⁸ *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1833, ii, 1503.

⁷⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 3 June 1865, 10. See also *Daily Telegraph*, 21 Apr. 1893, 3.

invented or forged signatures.⁸⁰ In such an open political activity a degree of fraud was probably inevitable, and in 1869 Sabbatarians took one of their own paid canvassers to court when they realized he had been forging signatures.⁸¹ Unlikely or fake signatories attracted condemnation, though Paul Pickering has pointed out that working people might well have adopted pseudonyms to avoid retribution from employers and landlords or have asked someone else to add their name if they could not write.⁸² Yet the totemic status of the right to petition meant that, while critics might point to abuses, few called for a curtailment of that right.

There were few restrictions on the content, as opposed to the form, of petitions.⁸³ A precedent from 1656 prohibited printed petitions to the Commons.⁸⁴ Seditious meetings legislation passed in 1795 and 1817 required the sanction of local officials for public meetings attended by fifty or more people for the 'purpose or pretext' of petitioning monarch or parliament on matters of church and state; revived laws in 1819 covered economic questions too.⁸⁵ Yet these statutes were temporary and the parliamentary debates on them served to restate and entrench the regular right of subjects to petition.

Because the right to petition was shaped by precedents, petitioners could always push for a more expansive meaning than that advocated by MPs. The fact that only the lord mayors of the City of London and Dublin had the privilege of presenting their petitions in person did not prevent a series of social movements from making creative use of precedent to claim a right of audience or deputation.⁸⁶ In 1833 MPs lost the right to speak when presenting a petition. This reduced the right of petition to a right of submission, much to the chagrin of

⁸⁰ *Hull Packet*, 14 Apr. 1848, 4; *Norfolk Chronicle*, 22 Apr. 1848, 2.

⁸¹ *London Daily News*, 12 June 1869, 2.

⁸² Pickering, 'And your Petitioners, &c'.

⁸³ *CJ*, lxxii (1817), 155; lxxiii (1818), 338; lxxxii (1826–8), 262.

⁸⁴ *CJ*, vii (1651–60), 427; xlvi (1792–3), 738; lxviii (1812–13), 623–4; lxxii (1817), 128–9, 156; Peacey, *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution*, 295.

⁸⁵ 36 Geo. III, c. 8; 57 Geo. III, c. 19; 60 Geo. III & 1 Geo. IV, c. 6.

⁸⁶ Miller, 'Introduction', 419; *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xlv, cols. 609–91 (19 Feb. 1839); lxiii, cols. 25–88 (3 May 1842); 5th ser., lii, cols. 213–14 (22 Apr. 1913); John Evelyn Denison, Viscount Ossington, *Notes from my Journal when Speaker of the House of Commons* (London, 1900), 218–19.

petitioners and radical MPs.⁸⁷ However, as the speaker declared in 1839, this restriction did not apply to individual cases, which could be ‘immediately entertained and discussed’ as a matter of urgency.⁸⁸ The Commons therefore remained a court of appeal for individuals seeking redress for legal complaints or abuses by local authorities.⁸⁹ In 1845 Elizey Price of Kingswinford, near Dudley, complained of the ‘cruel proceedings’ by which she had been taken into custody by local constables and experienced ‘great inconvenience and expense and endured much suffering’ in a petition she signed with her mark.⁹⁰ As this suggests, humble petitioners as well as mighty agitations made creative use of the right to petition, perhaps embarrassing antagonists or seeking to change the balance of power in their struggles.

It is trickier to evaluate the agency of those signing petitions touted by paid agents bankrolled by wealthy campaigners. Yet the choice to sign a mass petition is not qualitatively worse than the choice of voters, even under universal suffrage, faced with candidates of mass parties that can never perfectly represent any individual’s preferences.⁹¹ Still, signatures might be supplied, like votes before the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, as social obligations to others rather than personal expressions of opinion.⁹² By the time of the debates over Welsh disestablishment in 1914, Tory opponents breezily dismissed the more serious accusations of extorting signatures as ‘the eternal revival of the old argument about coercion by

⁸⁷ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xvii, cols. 1344–5 (17 May 1833); xxxv, col. 610 (28 July 1836); xlv, cols. 165–6, 177–8 (7 Feb. 1839); lx, cols. 117–19 (7 Feb. 1842); lxii, cols. 305–6 (12 Apr. 1842).

⁸⁸ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xlv, cols. 181–2 (7 Feb. 1839).

⁸⁹ It may be that we have been more ruthless in excluding petitions regarding individual grievances before 1833 than the SCPP clerks were after that date; but a more generous and inclusive policy towards such petitions in the *Journals of the House of Commons* would not alter the trends of public petitioning in the early nineteenth century.

⁹⁰ *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1845, 610 and appendix 532. (Appended texts are numbered individually for each year rather than referenced by page number.)

⁹¹ Bernard Manin, Adam Przeworski and Susan C. Stokes, ‘Elections and Representation’, in Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes and Bernard Manin (eds.), *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁹² Miles Taylor, ‘Interests, Parties and the State: The Urban Electorate in England, c.1820–1872’, in Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997).

landlords or employers'.⁹³ As this suggests, petitioning did not transcend the inequalities of wealth and power in modern Britain. However, its permissive form enabled individual petitioners and signatories to express views before, and alongside, their enjoyment of the ballot.

VI

In 1885 the Liberal journalist T. H. S. Escott wrote, 'The House of Commons is a great national court of grievance, and to these grievances its attention is drawn by petitions'.⁹⁴ In order to consider the variety of such grievances, we have surveyed the popularity of particular issues. Our data, presented in Table 2, suggests a focus on ecclesiastical affairs, the colonies and taxation before 1833. Religious and social issues predominated after 1833, followed by petitions relating to parliament and taxes. Other categories, concerning the law, infrastructure and economic and commercial regulation, accounted for two-fifths of the issues for the SCPP years, but only a tenth of petitions and signatures. This was because these areas tended to be dominated by medium- and small-scale petitioning on technical issues from experts or interested parties rather than mass campaigns mobilizing a broader public. While petitions can enhance our understanding of myriad different subjects, this section demonstrates their value to historiographies concerning secularization, state and market, and imperial culture.

Religion, usually categorized by the clerks under the ecclesiastical heading, was of paramount importance within the culture of petitioning. Throughout the long nineteenth century, constitutional controversies about religion mobilized both large-scale pressure for reform, as we have noted above, and also opposition. The failure of mass counter-petitioning against Catholic emancipation in the 1820s did not deter members of established and Nonconformist Churches from subsequent popular defences of the Protestant Constitution. Signing petitions on ecclesiastical affairs was enduringly popular because it was not merely reflective, but actively constitutive, of

⁹³ *Hansard*, 5th ser., lxi, cols. 647–8, 669–70 (20 Apr. 1914).

⁹⁴ T. H. S. Escott, *England: Its People, Polity and Pursuits*, new revised edn (London, 1885), 384.

religious identities. As one Wesleyan minister from Leeds remarked of the ten thousand petitions against the state endowment of the Catholic seminary at Maynooth in 1845, 'these are definitions of Protestantism'.⁹⁵ Similar public confessions of faith guided Anglicans defending their established privileges, with more than a million Britons petitioning against the Whigs' proposed reforms to the Church of Ireland in 1835.⁹⁶ As late as 1912, the opposition to Welsh Church disestablishment produced 2.3 million signatories, the largest annual total for any issue in our data.⁹⁷ Such religious rivalries generated petitions captured in other categories, too. State education schemes, categorized as social, remained an enduring trigger for mass petitioning, from the Whig schemes for a national system for Ireland in the early 1830s to the education bills of the early twentieth century.

However, our data reveals a growing interest by 'ecclesiastical' petitioners in moral behaviour as much as confessional truth. Campaigns might arise from scriptural controversies that are largely forgotten today but were deeply important to pious Victorians, such as the steady stream of petitions, from the 1850s onwards, for or against legalizing the marriage of a widower to his deceased wife's sister.⁹⁸ On a larger scale, Sabbatarianism accounted for 39 per cent of public petitions to the Commons on ecclesiastical issues from 1833 to 1918: more than 650,000 petitioners sought to abolish Sunday labour within the Post Office in 1850, for example.⁹⁹ However, the vast majority of Sabbatarian petitions related specifically to Sunday drinking, highlighting campaigners' concern for moral reform as much as pharisaical fidelity. In 1883 nearly 1.4 million signatories supported a bill restricting the Sunday sale of intoxicants. This conforms to Dominic Erdozain's theory that churches could, ironically, be agents of certain forms of secularization, by focusing on moral

⁹⁵ A. S. Thelwall (ed.), *Proceedings of the Anti-Maynooth Conference of 1845* (London, 1845), 27.

⁹⁶ *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1835, p. xxvi.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1893–4, 1648; 1895, 479; 1912–13, 364.

⁹⁸ Nancy F. Anderson, 'The "Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister Bill" Controversy: Incest Anxiety and the Defense of Family Purity in Victorian England', *Journal of British Studies*, xxi (1982).

⁹⁹ *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1850, 1610.

conduct and temporal evils amounting to a ‘secularization of sin’ in the later Victorian period.¹⁰⁰

However, moral controversies over alcohol also indicate the failure of categorization to capture fully the animating motives of petitioners. Parliamentary clerks categorized petitions concerning the sale of intoxicants on Sundays as ecclesiastical, while others relating to licensing were filed under taxes; we have reclassified as social those petitions regarding temperance originally listed as miscellaneous. This fragmentation obscures the fact that questions of drink and sobriety accounted for nearly 30 per cent of all petitions and signatures after 1833. Churches continued to stimulate some of the largest numbers of signatures on petitions well into the twentieth century, suggesting that they had no interest in secularizing politics even if they were busy secularizing sin. When the Liberal government brought forward a bill permitting local vetoes on licensing in 1908, 1.2 million petitioned in support, mobilized by supporting churches.¹⁰¹ Large campaigns tended to elicit counter-petitioning, and an alliance of drinkers and industry countered with almost 1.6 million signatures against the bill. Petitioning struggles over the drink issue show the complexities of judging secularization in modern Britain. On the one hand, the enemies of temperance mounted a spirited defence of state neutrality on a personal liberty; on the other, churches formed interdenominational alliances to suppress the spread of a secular sin. In these ways, the role of religion in popular politics fed off the slow separation of church and state, which raised new contests over whose doctrine would now inform social policy.

More generally, the growth of petitioning on social issues was shaped by broader shifts within the state in the early nineteenth century, particularly the rise of national legislation on welfare,

¹⁰⁰ Dominic Erdozain, ‘The Secularisation of Sin in the Nineteenth Century’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, lxii (2011), 75–7. See also C. G. Brown, ‘Did Urbanization Secularize Britain?’, *Urban History Yearbook*, xv (1988), 11; John Wolfe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843–1945* (London, 1994), 256–61; Jeremy Morris, ‘Secularization and Religious Experience: Arguments in the Historiography of Modern British Religion’, *Historical Journal*, lv (2012).

¹⁰¹ *Northampton Chronicle and Echo*, 21 Mar. 1908, 3. A large Methodist petition to the Lords suggests that petitioners were well aware where their cause was likely to encounter opposition: James Clifford Dunn, ‘A Force to Be Reckoned With? The Temperance Movement and the “Drink Question”, 1895–1933’ (University of Central Lancashire M.Phil. thesis, 1999), 71.

education and public health, with implementation and enforcement left to local authorities. The expanding local state, primarily in the form of elected councils and boards after 1835, was increasingly empowered through permissive public bills that reduced the pressure on parliament to process private and local bills.¹⁰² This development encouraged national mass petitioning over the powers directed to local authorities concerning the instruction of religion in schools or licensing. Given that it aroused passions about local control of highly emotive issues, such nationalization of petitioning on social policy still rested on the power of place. Conversely, the creation of new national or local state apparatus to administer social policy created new avenues for petitioners. This explains why, except for drives for the alteration of the 1834 new poor law in 1837–8 and 1878–9, relatively little of the popular opposition to that statute was expressed in petitions to parliament. Poor-law repealers, as well as paupers, made use of petitions to express their views to the Poor Law Commission as well as boards of guardians.¹⁰³ Furthermore, granting greater powers or responsibilities to local government led petitioners to target town councils where hitherto such demands would have been directed to parliament. In 1863 Bolton's town council received a series of petitions promoting the expansion of a recreation ground, including one treated with particular respect since it was 'signed by 1,400 of the ward's 1,700 rate-payers'. In the next few years, working men and pious activists would skirmish over the opening hours and refreshments policy of the recreation ground in a series of petitions, often supported by hundreds of signatures, all logically directed to the town hall rather than parliament.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² E. T. Stokes, 'Bureaucracy and Ideology: Britain and India in the Nineteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, xxx (1980), 138; Joanna Innes, *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2009); Philip Harling, *The Modern British State: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, 2001), 63–70 and ch. 3; John Prest, *Liberty and Locality: Parliament, Permissive Legislation, and Ratepayers' Democracies in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990).

¹⁰³ Nicholas C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement, 1834–44* (Manchester, 1971), 42; Green, 'Pauper Protests', 149; Paul Carter and Natalie Whistance, 'The Poor Law Commission: A New Digital Resource for Nineteenth-Century Domestic Historians', *History Workshop Journal*, lxxi (2011); Peter Jones and Steven King, 'Voices from the Far North: Pauper Letters and the Provision of Welfare in Sutherland, 1845–1900', *Journal of British Studies*, lv (2016).

¹⁰⁴ John Garrard, *Leadership and Power in Victorian Industrial Towns, 1830–80* (Manchester, 1983), 200–3.

The reshaping of the nineteenth-century state did not occur in a vacuum, but was partly a product of popular pressure from different groups. For example, the efforts of the factory movement kept proposals to regulate industrial working conditions and limit working hours on the parliamentary agenda. As a largely working-class campaign, albeit with parliamentary champions such as Lord Ashley, the agitation built on the legacy of earlier nineteenth-century movements for the removal of restrictions on trade unions. With its blend of Tory radicalism, its mobilization of men, women and children, and its regionally concentrated support, the factory movement proved to be an outlier rather than an exemplary model for later agitations and, indeed, working-class politicians. All the same, it sought to mobilize a broad, diverse coalition behind its goals, in keeping with the successful formula of anti-slavery and other agitations. By contrast, late nineteenth-century organized labour made little use of parliamentary petitions. Only in a few cases, such as railway accidents legislation, did they aim to apply popular, as opposed to sectional, pressure on the state. Besides using hard-won legal rights to strike, union leaders, one is tempted to conclude, sought parliamentary redress as members of the Gladstonian Liberal Party and then through independent labour politics, rather than by single-issue campaigning.¹⁰⁵

Petitions on economic questions forced parliament to be increasingly responsive to a public of taxpayers and consumers rather than, as before, simply adjudicating between the grievances of sectional or producer groups. Trades and particular interests had long petitioned the legislature regarding specific taxes or regulations. Fierce contests between trades continued, as, for example, the battle between butchers and tanners over horse-hide regulation, which produced more than 250 petitions between 1799 and 1824.¹⁰⁶ However, much of the nineteenth-century growth in petitioning on material questions addressed and constituted the public as consumers or taxpayers

¹⁰⁵ *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1878, appendix 181; R. W. Kostal, *Law and English Railway Capitalism, 1825–1875* (Oxford, 1994), 277–8. See also Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992); James Owen, *Labour and the Caucus: Working-Class Radicalism and Organised Liberalism in England, 1868–1888* (Liverpool, 2014).

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, *C7*, lxxix (1824–5), 312, 318–19.

as part of campaigns beyond specific sectors.¹⁰⁷ This broader appeal explains why the agitation against the corn laws generated far more than a million signatures in each of the years 1840 to 1843 and, when the Anti-Corn Law League returned to the tactic, 1846.¹⁰⁸ In 1816 MPs defeated the government's plans to renew income tax after the Commons received 375 anti-renewal petitions in just over a month. The legacy of such episodes shows that petitions provided an important popular political context to the formation of the mid-Victorian fiscal constitution, in which the state sought to maintain neutrality between competing interests, relied on a few high-yielding taxes for revenue, and exercised restraint to secure public trust.¹⁰⁹ Other examples of material issues confirm the important shift that politicians now regarded public petitioning as a popular element in the legislative process rather than a trial of interested parties more familiar in the eighteenth century. For instance, the largest petitions regarding infrastructure often related to consumer rights, offering a parliamentary channel for 'the flow between everyday life and politics'.¹¹⁰ Petitions concerning London's gas supply garnered nearly fifty thousand signatures in 1867. Responding to growing numbers of petitions from their customers, the gas companies orchestrated counter-petitioning from shareholders, a tactic that the president of the Board of Trade, Sir Stafford Northcote, regarded as 'unfair and not in the spirit of the constitution'.¹¹¹

Furthermore, the pattern of petitioning to the Commons allows us to reappraise the place of imperial issues and colonial subjects within British political culture. The colonies category shrank dramatically after 1833 owing to the termination of West Indian slavery. Abolitionist drives made up about a

¹⁰⁷ For the different eighteenth-century publics expressed through petitioning, see Loft, 'Involving the Public'; Loft, 'Petitioning and Petitioners to the Westminster Parliament'.

¹⁰⁸ *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1840, 1025; 1841, 895; 1842, 729; 1843, ii, 1756; 1846, 716.

¹⁰⁹ Martin Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1799–1914* (Cambridge, 2001), ch. 3.

¹¹⁰ Vanessa Taylor and Frank Trentmann, 'Liquid Politics: Water and the Politics of Everyday Life in the Modern City', *Past and Present*, no. 211 (May 2011), 239.

¹¹¹ Martin Daunton, 'The Material Politics of Natural Monopoly: Consuming Gas in Victorian Britain', in Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (eds.), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford, 2001), 81–2.

quarter of all public petitions to the Commons in 1824 and about half in 1826, 1830–1 and 1833. Indeed, the five thousand petitions in 1833 captured more than 1.3 million signatures and would almost be equalled in 1838, when more than 1.1 million petitioners demanded an early end to the unpaid period of ‘apprenticeship’ that had followed Caribbean emancipation.¹¹² Only one other colonial question attracted mass support after the 1830s. Nearly four hundred thousand petitioners, many in India, supported Charles Bradlaugh’s bill of 1890 to introduce South Asian representatives to the governing Indian councils. This initiative came nearly half a century after petitions from the British Indian Association and other ‘native’ pressure groups had raised such a proposal as a step towards introducing self-rule in the subcontinent.¹¹³

Yet the relative paucity of petitions regarding colonial issues from the British Isles should not be taken as evidence of ‘absent-minded’ imperialism.¹¹⁴ Rather, it reveals how conscious domestic engagement with imperial issues seems to have focused on specific episodes.¹¹⁵ Moreover, Britons engaged with their empire in ways that hid or marginalized the place of conquest and coercion, by, for example, reclassifying colonial affairs as commercial questions. Clerks shifted petitions relating to protective duties on sugar from their colonies category into that of taxes in the 1840s.¹¹⁶ Moreover, our data omits subscriptional appeals directed to other authorities. British subjects might sign prayers on imperial issues to authorities other than the Commons

¹¹² *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1833, ii, 1598; 1837–8, 660.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 1853, 508; 1856, appendix 1269; Narendra Chapalgaonker, *Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian Constitution*, trans. Subhashchandra Waghlikar (London, 2016), ch. 3; *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1890, 737 and appendix 30.

¹¹⁴ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004).

¹¹⁵ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009), 15, 238; Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow, 2005), 239–42.

¹¹⁶ *Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions*, 1844, 919. On sugar duties, see Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 2012), ch. 4. On marginalizing empire, see Catherine Hall, ‘At Home with History: Macaulay and the *History of England*’, in Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006).

or, indeed, the Lords. Hence, chambers of commerce or missionary societies memorialized ministers directly.¹¹⁷

While colonial subjects also enjoyed the formal right to petition parliament, in the absence of the same rights and political culture enjoyed by subjects in the British Isles petitioning offered more limited opportunities for resistance to colonial rule. In practice, the opportunity to draw up, canvass and convey a petition, according with the etiquette of the Commons, limited access for colonial subjects. A nominal openness to colonial petitioners sustained the British self-image of the rule of law without formal discrimination relating to race.¹¹⁸ Yet when ‘native subjects’ petitioned parliament, they were often wealthier individuals, as in the case that arose in 1827 of ‘several freeholders, of the mixed race’ in the West Indies.¹¹⁹ Where colonial subjects could organize broad-based appeals, the Commons data under-represents their petitions as it only captures subscriptional activity directed at the imperial legislature and excludes those addressed to a governor, any local assembly or, especially in crown colonies, the monarch.¹²⁰ Notably, black Jamaicans turned to petitions as an early step in protesting the post-emancipation labour laws of the assembly and governor on their island; indeed, the Colonial Office’s contemptuous treatment of a memorial from the parish of St Ann to the queen in 1865 was a major factor in the subsequent Morant Bay rising.¹²¹ The infamous petitions from Uitlanders in

¹¹⁷ *Globe*, 5 Jan. 1881, 5; Barrie M. Ratcliffe, ‘Commerce and Empire: Manchester Merchants and West Africa, 1873–1895’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vii (1979); Anthony Webster, ‘Business and Empire: A Reassessment of the British Conquest of Burma in 1885’, *Historical Journal*, xliii (2000), 1017–19.

¹¹⁸ Richard Huzzey, ‘British Liberties, American Slavery, and the Democracy of Race’, in Ella Dzelzainis and Ruth Livesey (eds.), *The American Experiment and the Idea of Democracy in British Culture, 1776–1914* (Farnham, 2013).

¹¹⁹ *C7*, lxxxii (1826–8), 551–2.

¹²⁰ Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell, ‘“Bring This Paper to the Good Governor”: Aboriginal Petitioning in Britain’s Australian Colonies’, in Saliha Belmessous (ed.), *Native Claims: Indigenous Law against Empire, 1500–1920* (Oxford, 2012); Hannah Weiss Muller, ‘From *Requête* to Petition: Petitioning the Monarch between Empires’, *Historical Journal*, lx (2017); Karen O’Brien, *Petitioning for Land: The Petitions of First Peoples of Modern British Colonies* (London, 2018); K. 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*, xxvii (2000), 45–6.

¹²¹ Gad Heuman, ‘1865: Prologue to the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica’, *New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, lxxv, 3–4 (1991); Jake Christopher

the Transvaal, in 1898 and 1899, addressed the queen, not parliament, in their pleas for British intervention against the Boer republic.¹²² In this way, the frailties in our data and the structure of parliamentary politics reveal as much as the positive evidence of petitioning campaigns in the long nineteenth century.

VII

While petitions to the Commons on key subjects can illuminate their relevant historiographies, how does an appreciation of the phenomenon as a whole relate to debates on the popularization of politics in this period? The growth of petitions to the Commons after the first two Reform Acts suggests that we cannot presume that petitioning was simply an ersatz ballot; the relationship between petitioning and a more universal suffrage appears to be far more complicated. Of course, the gradual extension of the parliamentary franchise to less wealthy men and, eventually, women did change the context of petitioning. Yet it would be wrong to suggest that the expansion of the suffrage rendered redundant the technology so often used to demand it. The sustained scale of public petitioning amid an expanding electorate clearly encouraged parliamentarians to think differently about the role of popular opinion. In the early part of the period, petitions might be invoked as a supplementary way of virtually representing property and interests. In 1789 the Yorkshire MPs Charles Duncombe and William Wilberforce agreed that, despite ‘the pains which had been taken by circular letters to procure petitions against the act’, there must be limited discontent with the County Elections Act given that ‘no petitions whatsoever had come from the counties’.¹²³

If the success or failure of a mobilization campaign might, then, be judged in terms of the breadth of its geographical success, we can see a growing focus on the numbers of signatories long before

(n. 121 cont.)

Richards, ‘Political Culture in Jamaica before Anticolonial Nationalism’, *History Compass*, xv (2017), <<https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12332>> (accessed 10 Sept. 2019).

¹²² A. N. Porter, *The Origins of the South African War: Joseph Chamberlain and the Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1895–99* (Manchester, 1980), 189–99.

¹²³ *Parliamentary Register . . . during the Sixth Session of the Sixteenth Parliament of Great Britain*, xxv (1798), 536, 539 (27 Mar. 1789).

politicians weaned the electoral system off the representation of property rather than people.¹²⁴ In a debate on the Factories Bill in 1833, for example, William Sadler argued that a petition of 130,000 signatories should outweigh one of three hundred workmen ‘perfectly satisfied with the regulations already established’.¹²⁵ The popular status of the right to petition made MPs reluctant to object to the presentation of petitions, but they could critique the legitimacy or authority of petitions with which they disagreed. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, critics sought to judge petitions against their relative size among those who might potentially have signed. Hostile politicians dismissed petitions in favour of votes for women for only capturing the signatures of a minority of the female population.¹²⁶ Suffragists complained that for such MPs ‘it would make no difference if all the women in their constituency — in England — in the world — wanted votes!’¹²⁷

This comment underlines the constant contests over the meaning of petitions to the Commons and awareness that their value lay beyond suasion or immediate impact. It is clear that petitions were part of a wider eco-system of participatory politics and representation and so their appeal could rise, decline or be redirected based on their value to those initiating, receiving or signing them. If the expansion of the franchise and mass politics did not directly supplant petitioning, then it did indirectly reshape the institutional impetus for petitioning the Commons towards the end of our period. A stronger role for party whips and party leaders from the 1890s onwards consolidated the power of the government to control the passage of legislation through parliament. The decline of the independent MP and the rising power of Downing Street and the whips’ office imperilled the fate of organized petition drives as extra-parliamentary support for private members’ bills.¹²⁸ While petitioning might still have uses in terms of mobilizing

¹²⁴ Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, 71–4.

¹²⁵ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xiii, cols. 1056–7 (27 June 1833).

¹²⁶ Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women’s Suffrage in Britain* (London, 1978), 154, 156.

¹²⁷ Catherine Marshall’s Minutes of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies provincial council meeting, 8 Oct. 1910: Carlisle Archives Centre, D Mar 3/10.

¹²⁸ Patrick Dunleavy *et al.*, ‘Leaders, Politics and Institutional Change: The Decline of Prime Ministerial Accountability to the House of Commons, 1868–1990’, *British* (cont. on p. 40)

numbers, identifying supporters, raising public awareness and attracting media attention, it represented a less attractive parliamentary strategy. In the United States, with very different institutions and a longer history of mass suffrage, the number of petitions to Congress also tailed off in the early twentieth century. The diminution there is also attributable to a shift in initiative away from legislators, given perceptions of growing presidential power and the introduction of referendum initiatives.¹²⁹ Similarly, while the early- and mid-Victorian Commons was responsible for a vast terrain of domestic and colonial policy, it was the target for petitions on these subjects. As many of these functions passed to local government through permissive legislation or, in the colonies, to responsible or representative government, it seems likely that the focus of petitioning pressure followed with this authority and partly explains the twentieth-century decline in Commons records.

Rather than present a rise-and-fall narrative, the history of petitions to the Commons is better understood as rise-and-displacement. By the twentieth century, women suffragists had grown frustrated with the Commons and addressed their petitions to the monarch as figurehead, or to the prime minister as executive, or to a local MP as a form of electoral pressure.¹³⁰ Hence, it seems plausible that a decline in petitions to the Commons reflected a shift in initiative away from parliament rather than an absolute disenchantment with petitioning as a form of pressure on power or a tool of political organization. In fact, it may be the case that petitioning simply shifted from the Commons to authorities that did not record and publish statistics. In this sense, our data charts the rise and fall of parliamentary government rather than the triumph of ballots as

(n. 128 cont.)

Journal of Political Science, xxiii (1993); Matthew Flinders, 'Shifting the Balance? Parliament, the Executive and the British Constitution', *Political Studies*, 1 (2002).

¹²⁹ Krotoszynski, *Reclaiming the Petition Clause*, 103, 129–34, 150; Bruce E. Cain and Kenneth P. Miller, 'The Populist Legacy: Initiatives and the Undermining of Representative Government', in Larry J. Sabato, Howard R. Ernst and Bruce A. Larson (eds.), *Dangerous Democracy? The Battle over Ballot Initiatives in America* (Lanham, Md., 2001); William E. Leuchtenburg, *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton* (Oxford, 2015), 11–22.

¹³⁰ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 6 Mar. 1907, 3; *Belfast News-Letter*, 9 July 1909, 8; *Manchester Courier*, 19 Feb. 1910, 10; *Common Cause*, 25 July 1912, 15; Miller, 'British Women's Suffrage Movement and the Practice of Petitioning'.

the sole expression of popular politics. Indeed, a focus on the changing means of political participation illuminates the connections between the national and the local, parties and other collectivities, or ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics.¹³¹ The function and meaning of petitions to the Commons changed throughout the long nineteenth century, but it seems likely that beyond their heyday their legacies persisted into the later twentieth century. Elections, while important, merely punctuated the everyday politics of representation for voters and non-voters, which was pursued through petitions to other authorities, in individual and co-ordinated letter writing, and in the doorstep conversations, casework and constituency surgeries that supplanted public meetings.¹³²

As this article has shown, the cumulative impact of petitioning, aside from the fate of particular causes and campaigns, provided a hybrid form of political representation. Petitions encouraged a participatory politics, serving as both an end and a means for creating communities of interest or concern.¹³³ Intermingling with meetings, print and electoral cultures, petitioning prompted individual and collective deliberation on parliamentary business or overlooked grievances. While the SCPP records did not circulate far beyond Westminster, the press reported the submission of local or national petitions, promoting deliberation as well as emulation in other communities. Petitions themselves offered a form of representation by materializing, on paper, personal or popular demands, as well as confronting the elected House of Parliament with the wider ‘people’, not just voters, that they claimed to represent. While it would be wrong to deny that wealthy backers of mass campaigns enjoyed greater agency than individual

¹³¹ Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place*, 313; R. J. Morris, ‘Civil Society, Subscriber Democracies and Parliamentary Government in Great Britain’, in Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord (eds.), *Civil Society before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Lanham, Md., 2000); David Craig, ‘“High Politics” and the “New Political History”’, *Historical Journal*, liii (2010), 474–5.

¹³² Oonagh Gay, ‘MPs Go Back to their Constituencies’, *Political Quarterly*, lxxvi (2005); Philip Norton, ‘Parliament and Citizens in the United Kingdom’, *Journal of Legislative Studies*, xviii, 3–4 (2012); Matthew Hilton et al., *A Historical Guide to NGOs in Britain: Charities, Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2012), 372–6; Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 146–9, 157–61.

¹³³ Daniel Carpenter, ‘Representation at a Visual Interface: Institutions as Encounters between Early American Government and its Citizens’, in Partha Chatterjee and Ira Katznelson (eds.), *Anxieties of Democracy: Tocquevillian Reflections on India and the United States* (Oxford, 2012).

signatories, petitioning encouraged expression of a greater plurality of views than voting for a choice of representative, however broad the franchise. Thus, petitions constituted nearly a million putative anti-parliaments across our period, serving ‘to multiply and challenge representative claims’ by the government and the legislature.¹³⁴

During the debates over parliamentary reform in 1832, Sir John Malcolm denied that he and his fellow MPs should be influenced by an avalanche of petitions. According to *Hansard*, he warned that ‘The people, by their petitions, seemed likely to become a fourth estate, which, he maintained, was not consistent with the Constitution of this country’.¹³⁵ However, petitioners, just as much as the reporters in the press gallery, did become parliament’s ‘fourth estate’, augmenting or challenging MPs’ right to speak for ‘the Commons’. While parliamentarians authorized the rules for electoral representation, petitioners took the initiative in Promethean experiments under existing precedents. Generations of petitioners exploited the medium by expanding the uses and demands of their prayers, supported by increasingly numerous and inclusive signature lists. In this article it is hard to do justice to the range and breadth of petitioning, though we have sought to establish the value of these sources for future historians of political movements and controversies in this period. We can conclude, instead, that petitions did not simply represent an early modern survival of tradition or a means for the disenfranchised to seek their real prize, the vote; rather, petitioning was a powerful organ of pressure on a parliament still often resistant to popular sovereignty and the linchpin of a wider popular politics.

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¹³⁴ Bryan Garsten, ‘Representative Government and Popular Sovereignty’, in Ian Shapiro *et al.* (eds.), *Political Representation* (Cambridge, 2009), 91.

¹³⁵ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., xiii, cols. 337–8 (1 June 1833).

ABSTRACT

This article analyses nearly one million petitions received by the House of Commons to reveal a culture of petitioning that recast the political culture of modern Britain and Ireland. It argues, first, that petitions provided a much more regular and continuous form of interaction between people and Parliament than elections. Second, petitioning—meaning the practices associated with the drafting, signing and presentation of petitions—enabled a vibrant, performative public politics. Third, petitions and petitioning were relatively open, inclusive forms of political participation since all British subjects enjoyed the formal right to petition. We examine the role of formidable campaigns of mass mobilisation, but also humble appeals of marginalised individuals. Our data has significant implications for our understanding of the nationalisation, organisation, and popularisation of politics in this period. We argue that attention to petitions helps us to decentre parliamentary elections as the principal connection between local and national politics. Indeed, petitioners responded to the shifting boundaries between the central and devolved state in deciding to which authorities they would direct petitions. Petitioning campaigns pioneered the mass, organised, national movements that would gradually emerge as the hallmark of stronger political parties. This did not undermine petitioning. However, the consequent growth of disciplined parties strengthened executive power, at the expense of parliamentary government, redirected petitions from the Commons. Furthermore, the continuing expansion of petitioning alongside extensions of the franchise suggests that petitions did not function as an ersatz ballot. Rather, petitions and debates between parliamentarians and petitioners over the meaning of growing lists of signatories suggest that petitioning catalysed a range of other forms of participation and hence forged an ever more popular politics.