

# The Politics of Petitioning: Parliament, Government, and Subscriptional Cultures in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918

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## Abstract

Over the course of the long nineteenth century, people in the United Kingdom signed a wide variety of petitions, addresses, testimonials, and related documents. Though many forms of subscriptional culture had medieval and early modern origins, their transformations across this period reveal the shifting perceptions of the crown, parliament, the administrative state, and local government. The article draws on a dataset of more than 1 million petitions to the House of Commons and surviving data from the House of Lords, alongside qualitative evidence of signed addresses to other authorities. This reveals a pattern whereby applications and requests increasingly took new, bureaucratic forms, and petitions became more closely associated with the representation of public opinion. The study suggests the value of examining the practices and processes, alongside the languages and ideas, that shaped political culture. This emphasises the participatory and representative politics of name-signing as a means to materialise popular opinion in a responsive - but not democratic - state.

## I

Before they enjoyed the right to vote in parliamentary elections, most Britons represented their opinions or hopes in signatures and marks applied to petitions, addresses and other written requests to authorities. A growing body of literature on the specific and general use of public petitions to parliament has made clear the importance of this practice in terms of fostering popular politics, mobilisation and new forms of political culture across the long nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Yet contemporaries would have understood public petitions to parliament as one mode among

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller, 'Petitions, parliament and political culture: petitioning the House of Commons, 1780–1918', *Past & Present*, 248 (2020), pp. 123–64; Henry Miller, 'The British women's suffrage movement and the practice of petitioning, 1890–1914', *Historical Journal*, 64/2 (2021), pp. 332–56; Paul Pickering, "'And Your Petitioners, &c'": Chartist petitioning in popular politics, 1838–48', *English Historical Review*, 116 (2001), pp. 368–88; Richard Huzzey, 'A microhistory of British antislavery petitioning', *Social Science History*, 43/3 (2019), pp. 599–623; Malcolm Chase,

a broader and diverse spectrum of name-signing practices that Mark Knights has termed, for an earlier century, ‘subscriptional culture’.<sup>2</sup> The scale and pervasiveness of subscription in the long nineteenth century has been hitherto obscured as signed requests came in a variety of different forms, under different names, and were addressed to various authorities, all of which had distinct processes for receiving them. Furthermore, the variations in record-keeping practices across institutions, including central and local government and the crown, has led to an unevenness in the survival rates of these petitions, which in any case are split across many archives. For example, after 1833, the Select Committee on Public Petitions recorded and classified every public petition received by the House of Commons, yet the original documents do not survive. By contrast, the House of Lords did not record petitions in any systematic way, but hundreds of manuscript petitions presented by peers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are held by the Parliamentary Archives, although the reasons for their retention remain unclear.<sup>3</sup>

Reconstructing subscriptional cultures in the long nineteenth century, and revealing their contexts and transformations, alters existing understandings of British political culture, the historical development of the United Kingdom as a state, and the history of petitioning more broadly. Firstly, the ‘new political history’ of the last twenty years has dissolved older distinctions between high and low politics through an emphasis on the fluidity of languages and ideas across the political spectrum.<sup>4</sup> Instead of focusing on the formal structures such as the electoral system or party organisation, other revisionist accounts have shown the ways in which a broader electoral culture enabled widespread political participation even in an era marked by franchise reforms that were exclusionary as much as democratising.<sup>5</sup> This article argues that subscriptional practices should be considered alongside political languages and ideas and electoral culture as among the most important mechanisms that mediated the shifting relationship between subjects and the state, or the people and politicians.

<sup>1</sup> ‘What did Chartism petition for? Mass petitions in the British movement for democracy’, *Social Science History*, 43/3 (2019), pp. 531–51; Robert Poole, ‘Petitioners and rebels: petitioning for parliamentary reform in Regency England’, *Social Science History*, 43/3 (2019), pp. 553–79.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 109–62.

<sup>3</sup> Parliamentary Archives, House of Lords Petitions boxes, HL/PO/6/1–15.

<sup>4</sup> David Craig and James Thompson (eds), *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2013); Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid (eds), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991); Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998); David Craig, “‘High politics’ and the “‘new political history’”, *Historical Journal*, 53/2 (2010), pp. 453–75.

<sup>5</sup> James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993); Frank O’Gorman, ‘Campaign rituals and ceremonies: the social meanings of elections in England, 1780–1860’, *Past & Present*, 135 (1992), pp. 79–115; Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009).

Secondly, examining interactions between petitioners and different institutions provides a new perspective on the historical development of the British state. During the course of the nineteenth century, and particularly after 1850, Martin Daunton and others have shown that the British state sought to avoid being seen as arbitrating between or favouring competing interests. This ‘disinterested’ approach engendered high levels of public trust and legitimacy in the Victorian state, particularly regarding fiscal policy.<sup>6</sup> Alongside the gradual cutting back of state patronage networks through economic reform, these administrative and financial changes, as much as parliamentary reform, served to undermine the traditional radical critique of ‘old corruption’ by transforming popular perceptions of the state.<sup>7</sup> Studying subscriptional cultures highlights the importance of processes, as well as policy outcomes, to reshaping the relationship between subjects and state. The openness and accessibility of parliament, government and the monarchy to petitioning suggests that these processes helped to provide a degree of popular legitimacy to these institutions that underpinned and renewed their authority. Moreover, the study of the broader culture of petitioning emphasises how far the choices of signatories reflected, accelerated, and prefigured shifts in power – and perceived power – between parliament, the crown, and central and local government.

Thirdly, the article contributes to refining existing understandings of the historical trajectories of petitioning, which has attracted a growing literature.<sup>8</sup> Comparative historical studies of petitioning over the *longue durée* have made clear that petitions have always been an instrument of rule as much as mechanisms for popular expression or protest.<sup>9</sup> In the British context, the ancient tradition of petitioning monarchs transmuted into the ‘legal-judicial’ requests made to courts and parliament long before petitions assumed a representative and expressive function in

<sup>6</sup> Martin Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1799–1914* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 58–76; Eugenio Biagini, ‘Popular Liberals, Gladstonian finance and the debate on taxation, 1860–1874’, in Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid (eds), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 134–62; H. C. G. Mathew, ‘Disraeli, Gladstone and the politics of mid-Victorian budgets’, *Historical Journal*, 22/3 (1979), pp. 615–43.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Harling, *The Waning of ‘Old Corruption’: The Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 255–8; Jonathan Parry, ‘The decline of institutional reform in nineteenth-century Britain’, in David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (eds), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 164–86; Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: ‘Habits of Heart and Mind’* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 373–4.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Karin Bowie and Thomas Munck, ‘Early modern political petitioning and public engagement in Scotland, Britain and Scandinavia, c. 1550–1795’, *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, 38/3 (2018), pp. 271–8, and other articles in their special issue; Maggie McKinley, ‘Petitioning and the making of the administrative state’, *Yale Law Journal*, 127/6 (2018), pp. 1538–1637; Cristina Leston-Bandeira, ‘Parliamentary petitions and public engagement: an empirical analysis of the role of e-petitions’, *Policy & Politics*, 47/3 (2019), pp. 415–36; R. Krotoszynski, *Reclaiming the Petition Clause: Seditious Libel, ‘Offensive’ Protest and the Right to Petition Government for a Redress of Grievances* (New Haven, CT, 2012), pp. 81–152.

<sup>9</sup> David Zaret, ‘Petition-and-response and liminal petitioning in comparative/historical perspective’, *Social Science History*, 43/3 (2019), pp. 431–51.

political culture and popular politics. The British wars of the mid-seventeenth century unleashed brief flourishes of popular petitioning.<sup>10</sup> In western Europe and north America petitioning was transformed in the long nineteenth century into a mass, collective, public form of political activity addressed to national legislatures.<sup>11</sup> Situating these developments within a contextualised and detailed study of British subscriptional culture reveals that the nineteenth century was the critical moment in which petitioning was redefined from encompassing a broad range of submissive (often procedural) requests to its modern meaning as a set of participatory and expressive practices linked to political representation. At the same time, other types of petition associated with individual or private requests became more closely associated with other genres, such as the evolution of pauper petitions into application forms for public welfare. We have limited our consideration to genres of name-signing, though the publication of named financial subscriptions is a closely related and important topic in itself.<sup>12</sup>

To understand the role and significance of petitions we pay attention to the value of these practices and interactions to signatories or petitioners on the one hand, and, on the other, their value to politicians and institutions as mediated by the systems in place to receive petitions. Because the value to petitioners and authorities varied depending on the specific type of petition, this provides a rationale for anatomising what we call 'signature politics' during a formative period in the British political development. In analysing the diverse forms of subscriptional culture and their value to petitioners and authority we examine, in turn, petitions to both houses of parliament, and to central government, the monarch and local authorities. In doing so, we chronicle the ways in which a subscriptional culture developed in reaction to changing relations between parliament, government and the multiplying layers of the state.

## II

In the century after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, parliament began meeting more regularly and assumed a busy role approving, or rejecting, private and local bills initiated by petition. MPs spent a great deal of time in committees to hear proposals for building infrastructure, enclosing common land, or undertaking other improvements, as well as to

<sup>10</sup> David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013); Jason Peacey, *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 267–96; Laura Stewart, *Rethinking the Scottish Revolution: Covenanted Scotland, 1637–1651* (Oxford, 2016); R. A. Houston, *Peasant Petitions: Social Relations and Economic Life on Landed Estates, 1600–1850* (Basingstoke, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Henry Miller, 'Introduction: the transformation of petitioning in the long nineteenth century (1780–1914)', *Social Science History*, 43/3 (2019), pp. 409–29.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Flew, *Philanthropy and the Funding of the Church of England, 1856–1914* (London, 2015), pp. 81–2; Sarah Flew, 'Unveiling the anonymous philanthropist: charity in the nineteenth century', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20/1 (2015), pp. 20–33.

objections raised by counter-petitioners.<sup>13</sup> By the early nineteenth century, parliament passed roughly 150 local acts each year, rising to an annual average of nearly 240 by the end of the century; each of these statutes could attract multiple petitions, as would others that failed to make it onto the statute book.<sup>14</sup> From the beginning of the eighteenth century, particular trades and businesses also petitioned parliament about public legislation, to seek relief from hardships, or to express an opinion on ministerial policies affecting their economic interests. Hence, eighty-nine, mostly hostile, petitions from British manufacturers responded to William Pitt's Irish commercial resolutions in 1785.<sup>15</sup> The significance of such petitions to parliamentarians, aside from the specific issues they raised, was as valuable sources of information and ammunition for debate.<sup>16</sup> By the 1760s and 1770s, mercantile communities such as Bristol, Liverpool and Bridport pronounced on the constitutional rights of the conflict with the American colonies as well as its effects on commerce.<sup>17</sup> In the wake of the agitation over John Wilkes, Samuel Johnson satirised the 'progress of a petition' to the king or parliament by imagining how

[o]ne man signs because he hates the papists; another because he has vowed destruction to the turnpikes; one because it will vex the parson; another because he owes his landlord nothing; one because he is rich; another because he is poor; one to shew that he is not afraid; and another to shew that he can write.<sup>18</sup>

In the following fifty years the numbers of petitions multiplied, as petitioners' concerns diversified and new organisations such as anti-slavery societies mobilised signatures on religious and political issues on an unprecedented scale.<sup>19</sup> An additional factor in the growth of petitions to parliament was the Anglo-Irish legislative union of 1801,

<sup>13</sup> Julian Hoppit, 'Petitions, economic legislation and interest groups in Britain, 1660–1800', in R. Huzzey (ed.), *Pressure and Parliament: From Civil War to Civil Society* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 52–71; 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 (ed.), *Parliament and Locality, 1660–1939* (Edinburgh, 1998), pp. 23–47; 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), pp. 48–63; Frederick H. Spencer, *Municipal Origins: An Account of English Private Bill Legislation Relating to Local Government, 1740–1835* (London, 1911).

<sup>14</sup> R. J. B. Morris, 'Local government, local legislation: municipal initiative in parliament from 1858 to 1872' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2014), pp. 16–28; HMSO, *The Chronological Table of Private and Personal Acts 1539–1997* (London, 1997), <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/changes/chron-tables/private>> [accessed 10 Aug. 2018].

<sup>15</sup> Brodie Waddell, 'The politics of economic distress in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, 1689–1702', *English Historical Review*, 130/543 (2015), pp. 318–351; Philip Loft, 'Involving the public: parliament, petitioning, and the language of interest, 1688–1720', *Journal of British Studies*, 55/1 (2016), pp. 1–23; *Commons Journal* [hereafter, *CJ*], vol. xl.

<sup>16</sup> Hoppit, 'Petitions', p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> James Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown, and Public Opinion* (Macon, GA, 1986), pp. 17–36.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Eugene Charlton Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organisation* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), pp. 19–20.

<sup>19</sup> Huzzey and Miller, 'Petitions, parliament and political culture', pp. 140–3.

which abolished the parliament of Ireland in Dublin, thus forcing Irish petitioners to address Westminster.<sup>20</sup>

The repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828) and the passing of Catholic emancipation (1829) and the Reform Act (1832) all demonstrated the effectiveness of mass petitioning the Commons. This stimulated more petitions, especially as there was the prospect of further legislative changes under a Whig government and a lower house dominated by Reform MPs.<sup>21</sup> By 1833, the huge volume of public petitions, and the practice of initiating debate on their presentation, prompted the creation of a new system for processing petitions to prevent them from monopolising parliamentary time. After 1833, a select committee published reports for MPs on public petitions received by the House and members were restricted from speaking on petitions. The committee's reports record 953,926 petitions from 1833 to 1918, containing almost 165 million signatures. Our hand count from the House's journals has added more than 47,000 public petitions for the preceding period, from 1780 to 1832, though we cannot recover data on signatures' numbers before 1833. Combined, these sources constitute a database of more than a million public petitions across the longer period from 1780 to 1918. To put it another way, on average there were roughly 7,200 petitions a year from 1780 to 1918 and an annual average of 2 million non-unique signatures per session between 1833 and 1918. Public petitions were the linchpin of mass campaigns seeking major political change, from abolitionists in the eighteenth century to women's suffragists in the early twentieth century. For groups with limited insider access to the corridors of power, such as working-class radicals and Chartists, public petitions enabled them to mobilise numbers as well as perform an array of functions that explains their popularity and centrality to nineteenth-century popular politics. Petitions facilitated alliances and networks with elite politicians, put issues on the parliamentary agenda, raised public awareness, garnered press attention, constituted collective identities within movements or campaigns, exerted pressure on parliamentarians, and were means of political recruitment and organisation.<sup>22</sup> For MPs, presenting public petitions allowed them to represent their constituents, as well as opinion more broadly, by issue, strengthening their legitimacy. This

<sup>20</sup> W. N. Osborough, 'Constitutionally constructing a sense of oneness: facets of law in Ireland after the Union', *Irish Jurist*, 37 (2002), pp. 227–40.

<sup>21</sup> While the total numbers of petitions in 1829 against Catholic Emancipation, mostly from Great Britain, outnumbered those in favour, mostly from Ireland, the latter clearly demonstrated the levels of organisation that might translate into rebellion: Charles Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 155; Brian Jenkins, *Era of Emancipation: British Government of Ireland, 1812–1830* (Kingston, Ontario, 1988), pp. 256, 267–9. Unless otherwise stated, this paragraph, including figures, is based on Huzzey and Miller, 'Petitions, parliament and political culture'.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*; Henry Miller, 'Petition! petition!! petition!!!: petitioning and the organisation of public opinion 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), pp. 43–61; Miller, 'Introduction', pp. 421–4.

was why many MPs encouraged petitions. For example, in 1829, William Duncombe, Tory MP for Yorkshire, after agreeing to present a petition against Catholic emancipation, privately wrote that 'it is very desirable that the Representatives of the People should know the real sentiments of their constituents'.<sup>23</sup> Only at the very end of our period, and on a very modest scale, did campaigners experiment with coordinated letter-writing campaigns to MPs, though this would become a common medium later in the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> Instead, petitions contained and channelled popular participation in a form that meant that petitioners, including radical critics of the political system, submitted to the formal authority of parliament.<sup>25</sup>

Alongside the growth of petitions on public affairs, private petitioning to parliament on highly personal matters diminished. This was driven by the state's development of departments and bureaucracies for officials to process applications. After 1844, aliens seeking naturalisation could direct a memorial to the Home Secretary, rather than petitioning parliament for a private act.<sup>26</sup> The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act removed the requirement for husbands or (since 1801) wives, in England and Wales, to petition for divorce as a private act of legislation.<sup>27</sup> A series of reforms to patent law obviated the role of parliament in varying or extending patents granted by the British Patent Office and its predecessor bodies.<sup>28</sup> As in the United States, an 'administrative state' grew from 'siphoning off' functions previously performed by petitions to the legislature.<sup>29</sup> As a consequence, between the first and last decades of the nineteenth century, the numbers of personal private acts plummeted from around one hundred a year to an average of three, and more broadly, these changes slowly diminished parliament's traditional role as a court of appeal.<sup>30</sup> The transfer of specialised requests from parliament to the courts or a growing state bureaucracy further encouraged an association of petitioning with the representation of popular opinion on public policy.

Patterns of petitioning reveal the changing relationship between, and perceptions of, the Commons and the Lords, which influenced the tactical choices of campaigners. Petitions to the Lords suggest the sustained power and importance of the upper house, which petitioners recognised

<sup>23</sup> William Duncombe to John Headlam, 11 Feb. 1829, Durham University Library, HHM/A9/53A.

<sup>24</sup> David M. Fahey, 'Brewers, publics, and working-class drinkers: pressure group politics in late Victorian and Edwardian England', *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 13/25 (1980), pp. 85–103, at p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> Miller, 'Introduction', p. 425.

<sup>26</sup> Rieko Karatani, *Defining British Citizenship: Empire, Commonwealth and Modern Britain* (London, 2003), pp. 51–5.

<sup>27</sup> Frederick Clifford, *A History of Private Bill Legislation* (2 vols; London, 1885–7), II, pp. 403–21.

<sup>28</sup> Klaus Boehm and Aubrey Silberston, *The British Patent System* (2 vols; Cambridge, 1967), I, pp. 25–32; Philip Johnson, *Privatised Law Reform: A History of Patent Law through Private Legislation* (Abingdon, 2017), pp. 186–7.

<sup>29</sup> Maggie McKinley, 'Petitioning and the making of the administrative state', *Yale Law Journal*, 127/6 (2018), pp. 1548–49.

<sup>30</sup> HMSO, *The Chronological Table*; James Hart, *Justice Upon Petition: The House of Lords and the Reformation of Justice* (London, 1991).

**Table 1** Comparison of Public Petitions to the Commons and the Lords, 1867–68

1867–8 session	Number of public petitions Commons	Number of public petitions Lords	Number of signatures on public petitions Commons	Number of signatures on public petitions Lords
	17,859	1,324	2,612,740	240,630

Source: Lords Select Committee on Public Petitions, *Reports* (1867–8); Select Committee on Public Petitions, *Reports* (1867–8).

to a greater extent than modern scholarship, where there is a tendency to ‘backdate the supremacy’ of the Commons in the twentieth century to earlier periods.<sup>31</sup> Given greater nineteenth-century expectations of its responsiveness to public opinion, the Commons remained the primary focus for the efforts of petitioners. The Lords never instituted the systems of accounting and restraint used by the elected chamber, because, Erskine May observed in 1844, ‘few petitions are addressed to the House of Lords’ and as ‘no inconvenience arises from the license of debate on presenting them, so on the other hand, the necessity for any general system of classification and publicity is little felt’.<sup>32</sup> We can capture snapshots of the chambers’ relative popularity, even in the absence of comprehensive data for the upper house. In the early and mid-nineteenth century, the volume of public petitions to the Lords expanded, even if the Commons was usually a more popular target. In 1829 there were even more petitions to the Lords (4,069) than to the Commons (3,955), as ultra-Protestants appealed to peers to oppose Catholic emancipation.<sup>33</sup> In 1845, there were 16,691 petitions to the Commons, but an impressive 10,225 to the upper house, mostly accounted for by Protestant opposition to the state endowment of the Catholic seminary at Maynooth in Ireland.<sup>34</sup> In 1867–8, exceptionally, the Lords Select Committee on Public Petitions recorded the numbers of signatures on petitions received. Compared to the figures for the Commons from the same session, Table 1 shows that by this point the volume of petitions and signatures to the lower house had greatly outstripped those to the Lords. This is confirmed by a sample from 1876, in which there were 1,756 petitions to the Lords, but 18,718 to the Commons.<sup>35</sup>

In both Houses, petitioners identified parliamentarians with either local connections or sympathetic views to present petitions. For example, in the early nineteenth century, Durham’s corporation typically sent

<sup>31</sup> Philip Salmon, ‘Parliament’, in David Brown, Robert Crowcroft and Gordon Pentland (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800–2000* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 83–102, at p. 90.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Erskine May, *A Treatise upon the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament* (London, 1844), p. 306.

<sup>33</sup> *CJ*, lxxxiv (1829); *Lords Journal* [henceforth *LJ*], lxi (1829).

<sup>34</sup> Select Committee on Public Petitions [henceforth SCPP], *Reports* (1845); *LJ*, lxxvii (1845).

<sup>35</sup> SCPP, *Reports* (1876); *LJ*, cviii (1876).



its petitions to the upper house for presentation by the Bishop of Durham or local aristocrats such as the duke of Cleveland or earls of Durham and Darlington.<sup>36</sup> Pressure groups were more inclined to direct petitions to peers or MPs identified with their concern, as when in 1855 activists directed petitions in favour of prohibiting the sale of alcohol to advocates including the Bishop of London and the earl of Shaftesbury.<sup>37</sup> Campaigners focused their energies on the Lords when contentious bills moved up from the Commons, confirming the importance of timing in exerting popular pressure on the parliamentary process. From the start of their campaign, in 1787, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade prepared provincial petitioners to launch their appeals at a concerted moment in the legislative process; once it became clear in 1806 that opposition from peers threatened the passage of abolition, petitioners targeted the Lords.<sup>38</sup> The Anti-Corn Law League resumed parliamentary petitioning in 1846, sending 150 petitions to the Lords to arrive alongside the government's corn bill, which they correctly anticipated would receive a hostile reception from peers.<sup>39</sup> To give another example, in 1908 groups such as the Methodist Temperance Society focused their petitions on the Lords, given that the supportive Liberal ministry did not enjoy a majority there.<sup>40</sup>

If reformers sought to fend off opposition from the peers, other petitioners appealed to the Lords in expectation of a more sympathetic hearing. On 25 June 1868, 400 petitions, containing 54,272 signatures, arrived to coincide with the Lords debate on the second reading of Gladstone's bill to disestablish the Church of Ireland. Of all the year's petitions to the Lords, this comprised 30 per cent of the total number and 23 per cent of total signatures.<sup>41</sup> This was not just another example of careful timing from petitioners, but was also a call for the House to act in its traditional role as defender of the Protestant constitution. Similarly, peers' typical status as great landowners and their greater insulation from electoral pressure meant that protectionist groups held high hopes when appealing to the Lords. Ports, merchants and shipowners from across the four nations petitioned the Lords in 1849, knowing that they were sympathetic to their pleas to retain the existing navigation laws, which protected British shipping, with 300 petitions, containing 168,771

<sup>36</sup> Resolutions of meeting of inhabitants of Durham on slave trade, 4 July 1814, and Draft letter from Mayor of Durham to Thomas Clarkson, 9 Feb. 1814, Mayor of Durham to Lord Durham, Feb. 1826, Duke of Cleveland to J. Hutchinson, 14 May 1838, Durham County Record Office, DU 1/29/14, 16, 32, 52(2).

<sup>37</sup> *The Alliance*, 20 Jan. 1855, p. 228.

<sup>38</sup> Seymour Drescher, 'Whose abolition? Popular pressure and the ending of the British slave trade', *Past & Present*, 143 (1994), pp. 141–3.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Miller, 'Popular petitioning and the corn laws, 1833–46', *English Historical Review*, 127/527 (2012), pp. 882–919, at p. 893.

<sup>40</sup> James Clifford Dunn, 'A force to be reckoned with? The temperance movement and the "drink question", 1895–1933' (unpublished University of Central Lancashire MPhil Thesis, 1999), p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> House of Lords Select Committee on Public Petitions, *Reports* (1867–8).

signatures, presented for this purpose.<sup>42</sup> The conservative, landed and Protestant character of the Lords, as well as their veto power before 1911, meant that petitions were often directed to the upper house from ultra-Protestants, protectionists and other petitioners in opposition to major reforms.

Though peers did not represent a territorial constituency, their linkages to specific counties, towns or regions, through family or land ownership, meant that they often presented petitions from these areas and perhaps claimed to speak for more than just themselves.<sup>43</sup> On 3 May 1841, the duke of Buckingham presented over 120 petitions from Buckinghamshire (where his estates lay) and from contiguous counties expressing opposition to any alteration in the corn laws.<sup>44</sup> As he was an arch-protectionist himself, we may conclude that political sympathy and local obligations simply combined in this instance; yet, great landowners were often accused of extorting signatures from vulnerable tenants or employees to give the appearance of popular support. Free traders sniped that pro-corn law petitions were ‘created by landlords, to be presented to landlords, ... for the benefit of landlords’.<sup>45</sup> For peers, despite such criticisms, the presentation of petitions allowed them to claim to represent public opinion on particular issues or from particular places. So, protectionist peers like Buckingham clashed with Whig free traders, such as Earl Fitzwilliam, who presented many petitions, including one hundred on 25 May 1841, many from urban areas in Yorkshire, a county in which he possessed immense estates.<sup>46</sup> More generally, petitions enabled peers to claim a degree of popular legitimacy and support that was valuable in moments when they clashed with the elected house or opposed the legislative agenda of Liberal governments. In 1832, presenting a clutch of petitions against the Whig government’s Irish education scheme, the earl of Roden declared that these ‘were expressive of the opinions of persons of all classes in Ireland’.<sup>47</sup> Petitions to the Lords offered different opportunities to petitioners, and were valuable to them and peers for reasons distinct from petitioning the Commons.

### III

While parliament was typically the primary repository for petitioners’ requests, another important and distinctive subscriptional form were petitions, usually called memorials, to central government departments and ministers. The practice of merchants, manufacturers and other

<sup>42</sup> ‘Further supplemental return of petitions to the House of Lords against the alteration of the navigation laws’, *Parliamentary Papers* [hereafter *P.P.*] (1849), vol. xiv.

<sup>43</sup> On an earlier period, see Paul Langford, ‘Property and “virtual representation” in eighteenth-century England’, *Historical Journal*, 31/1 (1988), pp. 83–115.

<sup>44</sup> *Hansard*, vol. lvii, col. 1372, 3 May 1841.

<sup>45</sup> *Anti-Corn Law Circular*, 19 March 1840, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Hansard*, vol. lvii, cols 1474–7, 6 May 1841, vol. lviii, col. 739, 25 May 1841.

<sup>47</sup> *Hansard*, vol. x, col. 852, 28 Feb. 1832.

sectional groups memorialising government was well established from the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>48</sup> From the late eighteenth-century local chambers of commerce were established across Britain that were ‘primarily founded to lobby government on economic policies’.<sup>49</sup> The founding of these bodies on a permanent basis institutionalised memorials as the main mechanism through which business lobbies interacted with government. For example, between 1821 and 1889 Manchester Chamber of Commerce sent 233 memorials to government.<sup>50</sup> Most of these memorials concerned foreign trade, tariffs, and domestic and international postal services, and were addressed to the treasury, board of trade, foreign office and post-master general, but also to the lord chancellor, when they touched on bankruptcy laws or limited liability. Lobbying through memorials was often effective. After the Manchester Chamber memorialised the post-master general in 1868, the number of collections and deliveries in the town was promptly increased.<sup>51</sup>

Memorials were often forwarded through the medium of MPs, acting as guardians of local economic interests. The Liverpool Parliamentary Office, established in 1812, sent memorials to government by the port’s merchants through their MP. In this period, they included cabinet ministers such as George Canning and William Huskisson, who often endorsed these requests. Forwarding one memorial, Huskisson wrote that ‘it is impossible not to allow considerable weight’ to the complaints of the memorialists who ‘include all the Bankers and many of the first Brokers and Merchants’ in his constituency.<sup>52</sup> In the mid-1850s, the Bradford Chamber of Commerce found that, despite having their own parliamentary agent, the government was more ready to ‘attend to their requests’ if memorials went through the conduit of their local representatives.<sup>53</sup> Business lobbies, of course, sent petitions regarding legislation or taxation that affected their perceived interests to parliament, as when Richard Arkwright’s patent came up for renewal in 1785, and to the crown, as in the case of West Indian planters and merchants in 1782. However, sectional interest groups often found that memorials enjoyed certain advantages compared to these other types of petitions.<sup>54</sup>

Unlike petitions to the Commons, memorials were not constrained by parliamentary precedents: they could be printed, they could contain

<sup>48</sup> Perry Gauci, *The Politics of Trade: The Overseas Merchant in State and Society, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 127–35.

<sup>49</sup> Robert J. Bennett (ed.), *Documents of the First Chambers of Commerce in Britain and Ireland, 1767–1839* (Oxford, 2018), p. 1; Robert J. Bennett, *Local Business Voice: The History of Chambers of Commerce in Britain, Ireland and Revolutionary America, 1760–2011* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Manchester Chamber of Commerce, *Annual Reports* (1821–89), Archives+, Manchester Central Library, MF 1287.

<sup>51</sup> Arthur Redford, *Manchester Merchants and Foreign Trade* (2 vols; Manchester, 1934–56), II, pp. 146–7.

<sup>52</sup> William Huskisson to Francis Freeling, 11 Dec. 1825, Liverpool Record Office, PAR 3/59.

<sup>53</sup> Bradford Chamber of Commerce, *Fifth Annual Report* (1856), pp. 13–14, WYB111/2/1, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford, WYB111/2/1.

<sup>54</sup> Bennett (ed.), *Documents*, pp. 439–42; Planters and merchants interested in the West Indies, Printed address to George III, 29 Jan. 1782, reprinted *ibid.*, pp. 433–4.

additional documents and they did not require authentic individual signatures, which meant that names could be added to a printed document remotely, without the need for the localised signature-gathering processes that were integral to public petitioning. Whether forwarded through MPs or not, memorials and their covering letters provided an opportunity for memorialists to address ministers directly and to initiate a dialogue with them. For instance, in 1842 the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce used four memorials to engage the prime minister Sir Robert Peel in debate over the currency question.<sup>55</sup> Memorials were private or semi-private documents that provided a privileged communicative pathway between government and those business lobbies that were generally averse to deploying tactics from the expanding repertoire of political protest and public campaigning.<sup>56</sup> Late eighteenth-century attempts by some radical businessmen such as the Manchester cotton merchant Thomas Walker to use larger, more generally signed public petitions proved to be problematic, controversial and less effective.<sup>57</sup> When pressure groups or other political campaigns such as the late Victorian anti-Contagious Diseases Acts agitation used their own memorials, they tended to treat them more as public texts, to be widely circulated and published, as was the case with public petitions.<sup>58</sup> For sectional groups the memorial was more useful as a private, discreet appeal to authority than as a public document.

Whereas public petitions to parliament were usually brief, memorials were typically lengthy, dense documents, serving as memoranda. Memorialising the home secretary, Lord John Russell, in 1837, Manchester reformers offered a detailed six-page critique of the technical defects in the operation of the legislation to regulate factory work.<sup>59</sup> Memorialists based their persuasive appeal on evidence, interest and expertise rather than numbers of signatures, invocations of public opinion, or assertions of right and justice as was increasingly the case with parliamentary petitions. Memorials from pressure groups on public issues often emphasised the expertise of the memorialists. A memorial to the Liberal prime minister William Gladstone in the 1880s from campaigners for the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Act, classified signatories as religious ministers, clergymen, military officers and medical doctors.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Richard Spooner to Sir Robert Peel, 3 Aug. 1842, British Library Additional Manuscripts [hereafter BL Add. MS.] 40513, fos 69–71; Spooner to Peel, 4 Nov. 1842, BL Add. MS. 40518, fos 109–11, 112–15; Spooner to Peel, 26 Nov. 1842, BL Add. MS. 40519, fos 250–1, 257–61; Spooner to Peel, 9 Dec. 1842, BL Add. 40520, fos 190–4.

<sup>56</sup> Bennett (ed.), *Documents*, pp. 42–6.

<sup>57</sup> Bennett, *Local Business Voice*, pp. 411–19.

<sup>58</sup> Ladies' National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts [LNA], Memorial to William Gladstone from the undersigned, The Women's Library, London School of Economics [henceforth TWL, LSE], [n.d., 1880s], 3AMS/B/01/01, box FL 036.

<sup>59</sup> 'Copy of a memorial from the Short-time Committee of Manchester, addressed to his majesty's Secretary of State for the Home Department', *P.P.* (1837), 1, pp. 203–8.

<sup>60</sup> LNA, Memorial to William Gladstone from the undersigned, TWL, LSE, [n.d., 1880s], 3AMS/B/01/01, box FL 036.

Memorials, then, were one of the ways in which pressure and interest groups demonstrated their expertise to government, and occasionally, to a wider public, prefiguring the rise of the politics of expertise associated with non-governmental organisations in the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup>

Memorials had added advantages compared to petitions in two other respects, both of which emphasise their importance for developing and maintaining ties with and access to elite politicians. Unlike public petitioners, there was a greater expectation among memorialists that their memorials would be considered by government and that they would receive a response, even if their demand was not granted. The correspondence of the Liverpool Parliamentary Office contains various letters from civil servants and ministers responding to memorials, acknowledging receipt and stating they have been laid before the relevant department.<sup>62</sup> In his study of early nineteenth-century government, Peter Jupp has observed that 'both the six divisions of the Treasury and the single Trade Board met approximately twice a week to consider the massive quantities of memorials, petitions and enquiries dealing with all aspects of finance and commerce'.<sup>63</sup>

Even more importantly, memorials served as calling cards for face-to-face lobbying since they enabled political representation and official communication outside and beyond their written texts. While authorities generally resisted the claims of petitioners for a right of audience, including Chartists in 1842, favoured memorialists seem to have enjoyed the privilege of deputation, usually accompanied by local MPs.<sup>64</sup> When Kent agriculturists opposed the government's removal of import duties on foreign fruit in 1838, they followed their memorial with a deputation to the board of trade.<sup>65</sup> Birmingham businessmen used similar tactics when lobbying the prime minister Lord John Russell for currency reform in 1847, and by Manchester merchants when pressing the foreign secretary Lord Malmesbury to order the navy to protect British commercial interests during the Mexican civil war in 1858.<sup>66</sup> In 1888 the Associated Chambers of Commerce memorialised the government and sent a deputation to lobby in favour of arbitration in trade disputes between the United States and United Kingdom.<sup>67</sup> Memorialists did not enjoy a right of deputation, however, and their admittance seems to have been largely at the discretion of the minister in question. Ministers were less keen to see deputations representing pressure groups or mass political campaigns, as

<sup>61</sup> Matthew Hilton, James McKay, Nicholas Crowson and Jean-François Mouhot, *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>62</sup> Lord Chetwynd to General Gascoyne, 25 Nov. 1814, Liverpool RO, 328 PAR 1/2.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Jupp, *British Politics on the Eve of Reform: The Duke of Wellington's Administration, 1828–1830* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 121.

<sup>64</sup> *Hansard*, lxiii, cols 13–88, 3 May 1842.

<sup>65</sup> Carl J. Griffin, 'Placing political economy: organising opposition to free trade before the abolition of the corn laws', *Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers*, 34/4 (2009), pp. 489–505, at p. 495.

<sup>66</sup> *The Times*, 25 Oct. 1847, p. 7; Redford, *Manchester Merchants*, II, p. 91.

<sup>67</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 21 Feb. 1888, p. 3.

opposed to local or economic interests that made specific, limited requests. The factory movement for regulating working hours made extensive use of memorials and deputations, which shows that this practice could in very particular circumstances be used by working-class campaigners and not just business lobbies.<sup>68</sup> More typically, however, prime minister Benjamin Disraeli declined in 1880 to receive a deputation of women's suffragists, citing the pressure of other business in his acknowledgement of their memorial.<sup>69</sup>

The memorial evolved into a distinctive form of petition, offering particular possibilities for chambers of commerce and other sectional interest groups. Indeed, the memorial can be seen as the common root for practices that have subsequently diversified and specialised into the modern repertoire of insider business lobbying to government.<sup>70</sup> Through memorials and deputations, memorialists and government forged increasingly formalised channels for interaction and consultation between interest groups and the state. Such processes and procedures did not jeopardise the state's hard-earned reputation for disinterestedness but did provide valuable information to government with regard to specific or technical issues, and served to integrate new social and economic actors within established political structures.

#### IV

Petitions to the monarch, often styled as addresses, were an important way in which eighteenth-century subjects expressed their loyalty to the Hanoverian dynasty, the established institutions of church and state, and the Protestant religion, particularly during the wars with revolutionary and Napoleonic France.<sup>71</sup> Even when expressing reformist or radical opinions, addresses to the crown were 'generally more complimentary and adulatory in their character' than petitions to parliament.<sup>72</sup> The style of addresses was profoundly shaped by the gender of the recipient. Addresses to kings typically referred to their addressee in paternalistic terms. An address from the inhabitants of Bradford to William IV, in favour of a ten-hour day in factories, 'most humbly appeal[ed] to Your Majesty, as the Father of your People, to interpose your Constitutional Authority,

<sup>68</sup> John Morgan Cobbett to John Fielden, 2 Nov. 1841, John Rylands University Library of Manchester, FDN/2/1/24.

<sup>69</sup> Manchester Society for Women's Suffrage, *Thirteenth Annual Report* (1880), pp. 6–8, Archives+, MCL, M50/1/4/13.

<sup>70</sup> For insider or sectional interest groups in the twentieth century, see J. D. Stewart, *British Pressure Groups: Their Role in Relation to the House of Commons* (Oxford, 1958); Wyn Grant, *Pressure Groups and British Politics* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 18–20. For a similar yet distinct evolution from petitioning to lobbying in the United States, see Maggie McKinley, 'Lobbying and the Petition Clause', *Stanford Law Review*, 68/5 (2016), pp. 1131–1205.

<sup>71</sup> Knights, *Representation*, pp. 109–62; Katrina Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848* (Manchester, 2016), pp. 23–7; Edward Vallance, *Loyalty, Memory and Public Opinion in England: 1658–1727* (Manchester, 2019).

<sup>72</sup> Henry Jephson, *The Platform: Its Rise and Progress* (2 vols; London, 1892), I, p. 13.

and to throw the shield of your Royal Protection over the Children of the Poor'.<sup>73</sup> After Victoria's accession in 1837, petitioners, especially women, addressed the queen using maternal rhetoric, as in the case of anti-slavery and anti-corn law addresses.<sup>74</sup>

As a matter of routine, local councils, churches and societies, sent addresses to the crown to celebrate or commiserate on royal births, marriages, deaths and coronations. Some enterprising vellum merchants actively promoted addresses on these occasions, eager for business from subscribing towns and cities.<sup>75</sup> Such addresses, however, were not divorced from wider politics. An address from Durham's corporation to George III in 1803 after a recent assassination attempt expressed 'congratulations on the providential discovery and prevention of the late traitorous designs against your august person and the stability of the state'.<sup>76</sup>

While such addresses often expressed loyalty and endorsed the political status quo, they could be vehicles for expressing more subversive opinions. Many radicals and reformers sent addresses offering support to George IV's estranged wife, Queen Caroline, in 1820–1, when the king attempted to divorce her.<sup>77</sup> Sending addresses to the queen gave constitutionally impeccable cover to broader criticisms of the political system. In a political culture in which republicanism was a fringe view, popular monarchism (the idea that the monarch and subjects were bound together in a shared social contract) was a commonly-held belief across the political spectrum.<sup>78</sup> Accordingly, very different groups, including radicals, ultra-Tories and women suffragists, addressed the monarch as a higher power than a parliament or government they regarded as corrupt, illegitimate or unrepresentative.<sup>79</sup> These groups appealed to the monarch to sanction reforms, oppose legislation, dissolve parliament, or dismiss governments in the name of their subjects. In 1829, the ultra-Tory MP Sir Robert Inglis, seeking to stop the granting of civil rights to Catholics, urged others to 'stir up the country: not to petition, but to address the King for a dissolution'.<sup>80</sup> Addressing the monarch allowed petitioners

<sup>73</sup> Inhabitants of Bradford, Printed petition to William IV [1835], Archives+, MCL, Broadside collection, f. 1835/8b.

<sup>74</sup> Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867* (Oxford, 2009), p. 44; Miller, 'Popular petitioning', p. 916; Arianne Chernock, *The Right to Rule and the Rights of Women* (Cambridge, 2019), p. 158.

<sup>75</sup> Circular regarding vote of condolence on the death of the duke of Albany (1871), Hull Town Council records, Hull History Centre, C TCC/14/45.

<sup>76</sup> Durham Corporation, Address to George III, 15 March 1803, Durham County Record Office, DU 1/28/11.

<sup>77</sup> John Stevenson, 'The Queen Caroline affair', in John Stevenson (ed.), *London in the Age of Reform* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 117–48; Malcolm Chase, *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 173, 175–6, 181–2.

<sup>78</sup> Steve Poole, *The Politics of Regicide, 1760–1850: Troublesome Subjects* (Manchester, 2000); Paul Pickering, "'The hearts of the millions": Chartism and popular monarchism in the 1840s', *History*, 88/2 (2003), pp. 227–48; David M. Craig, 'The crowned republic? Monarchy and anti-monarchy in Britain, 1760–1901', *Historical Journal*, 46/1 (2003), pp. 167–85.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178; Miller, 'British women's suffrage movement'.

<sup>80</sup> Lord Colchester, *The Diary and Correspondence of Charles Abbot, Lord Colchester* (3 vols; London, 1861), III, p. 601.

to avoid acknowledging the authority or legitimacy of parliament or government, and indeed call on the crown to exercise its supremacy over these other branches of government.

Petitioners might address the monarch alongside a parliamentary strategy, rather than as an alternative to it. London shipwrights, left destitute after the end of the American revolutionary war, sent dual requests to the crown and to parliament, on the logic that the former would encourage the latter to act on their concerns.<sup>81</sup> Memorials, addresses and petitions to a monarch might be presented as papers laid before MPs, when they contemplated action on relevant business.<sup>82</sup> Supporting a measure through the legislative process meant that petitioners petitioned Commons, Lords and monarch in turn, switching between different authorities and different styles as they did so. Hence, after the Lords ignored their petition to follow the Commons in passing parliamentary reform in October 1831, the inhabitants of Manchester addressed William IV to intervene and to take 'decisive constitutional means' to secure the measure onto the statute book.<sup>83</sup> The number of addresses to the monarch, and signatures on them, was not systematically recorded, but scattered references suggest that it was a regular practice and one that could surge in specific contexts. Addresses expressing loyalty were commonly published in *The London Gazette*, and, indeed, for some occasions, the journal contained little else.<sup>84</sup> There remained a stream of addresses to the monarch from individuals seeking redress for personal grievances across the nineteenth century, too. In the 1850s, Victoria received around 800 such petitions a year.<sup>85</sup> When mass campaigns sought to mobilise their support in addresses, this could lead to a huge volume of signatures directed to the monarch. In 1842 over 500 anti-corn law addresses from women were sent to Victoria, containing over 500,000 signatures.<sup>86</sup> In 1851, outraged Protestants dubbed the re-establishment of a Roman Catholic hierarchy in England as 'Papal Aggression' and raised 3,145 addresses, containing over one million signatures, appealing to the queen as head of the Anglican Church and defender of the Protestant faith.<sup>87</sup>

The evolution of petitions to the crown reveals important shifts in the constitutional position of the monarchy. The 1689 Bill of Rights guaranteed the right of subjects to petition the monarch, and allowed petitioners to claim access to a royal audience for their grievances, and

<sup>81</sup> *CJ*, xlii, 657.

<sup>82</sup> *CJ*, xliii, 308.

<sup>83</sup> Inhabitants of Manchester, Petition to the House of Lords, 15 Sept. 1831, and Address to William IV, 11 Oct. 1831, Archives+, MCL, M91/33/1, fos 96–8, 109–10.

<sup>84</sup> *London Gazette*, 13 Aug. 1830, pp. 1729–33, 1 Aug. 1837, pp. 2009–17, 7 May 1901, pp. 3118–22.

<sup>85</sup> Poole, *Politics of Regicide*, p. 27.

<sup>86</sup> 'A return of the number of petitions, memorials or addresses, presented to Her Majesty from public meetings, town councils, conferences or other bodies, for the repeal of the corn laws, from 1 January 1841 to the present time', *P.P.*, lx (1842).

<sup>87</sup> 'Return of the number of addresses presented to Her Majesty relative to the establishment of a Roman Catholic hierarchy', *P.P.* lix (1851).



this was a key component of popular monarchism. Indeed, would-be royal assassins were often frustrated petitioners insisting on their right to personally remonstrate with the monarch.<sup>88</sup> However, a number of assassination attempts on Victoria in the 1840s led to legislation that closed down such personal access to the monarch.<sup>89</sup> Before this period, petitioners might approach the monarch personally, ask aristocrats and MPs to present addresses at social functions at court, or send petitions through the medium of the home secretary. Some privileged bodies, such as the Protestant Dissenting Deputies, retained a right to submit addresses personally to the monarch, but most petitioners were directed to send their addresses to Victoria via the home secretary.<sup>90</sup> It seems likely that in practice most addresses got no further than the home office, which selected those that the royal private secretary ought to be notified about; the remainder received a polite, non-committal acknowledgement.

What originated as a security measure and an administrative convenience came to assume the status of a constitutional convention by the end of the nineteenth century, providing a firewall protecting the crown from politics. When the Unionist MP Colonel Saunderson planned to present a petition against Irish home rule from Ulster in 1893, the royal private secretary, Sir Henry Ponsonby, lectured him on why this was constitutionally impossible:

The Queen can receive no political petition or address without the knowledge of her responsible advisers, nor can she reply to any such appeal except with their advice. It would be, I imagine, unconstitutional if such an address as you describe were privately presented to Her Majesty. The meaning of the petition is, of course, that the Queen should dismiss her present [Liberal] ministers, and you will understand that it would be impossible for Her Majesty to listen to such an Address without some responsible adviser being in attendance.<sup>91</sup>

Edwardian suffragettes complained, with some justice, that the convention that petitions to the crown must be presented by the home secretary rather than personally by petitioners was contrary to their liberties as subjects under the 1689 Bill of Rights.<sup>92</sup> Yet by the early twentieth century, petitioners' rights as subjects in this area had been reconfigured as part of the broader redefinition of the constitutional position of the monarchy, which was increasingly distant from party government and representative institutions. While petitions to the monarch, as the suffragettes recognised, might generate valuable publicity, petitioners had few illusions that monarchs would exercise their higher authority over the other branches of government.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Poole, *Politics of Regicide*, p. 212.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177–211.

<sup>90</sup> Bernard Lord Manning, *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies* (Cambridge, 1952), pp. 453–69.

<sup>91</sup> Sir Henry Ponsonby to Colonel Saunderson, 16 July 1893, quoted in Reginald Lucas, *Colonel Saunderson MP: A Memoir* (London, 1908), pp. 203–4.

<sup>92</sup> Miller, 'British women's suffrage movement'.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

## V

Petitions to central government, parliament and the crown emerged from vibrant local cultures of subscription. Petitioners not only petitioned local authorities, but used local institutions as conduits through which to send petitions to national authorities. Although Charles Tilly's study of popular contention has suggested that by the turn of the nineteenth century parliament increasingly became the focus of public demands, those demands still often emerged from meetings convened by local officials in response to signed requests, which were essentially pre-petitions.<sup>94</sup> Local citizens signed requisitions to an officer, such as a mayor, magistrate or sheriff, who might consent to approve a gathering where attendees could debate the merits of a petition to parliament or another body. In counties, freeholders requisitioned lord lieutenants or high sheriffs to hold county meetings, as when, in 1823, a county meeting in favour of reform was held in York, following a requisition signed by 2,400 freeholders.<sup>95</sup> Since a constitutional right to petition was better entrenched than freedom of assembly, this process provided some protection from state persecution of controversial opinions and the repressive legislation of 1795, 1817 and 1819 that sought to restrict public meetings by radicals.<sup>96</sup> Chartists might also take the precaution of requisitioning the mayor to permit a meeting of their campaign for parliamentary reform, as in 1838 in Nottingham.<sup>97</sup> However, signed requisitions for meetings became rarer over the nineteenth century, as public spaces for assembly proliferated and legislative limitations on public assembly lapsed.

Regardless, reforms of local government, from the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 to the creation of county councils in 1889, frequently required residents to demonstrate the will of the community by collecting signatures in support of the creation or dissolution of local councils. New industrial towns such as Birmingham or Manchester petitioned for incorporation as municipal boroughs in the late 1830s, prompting bitter disputes between Liberals and Conservatives over the veracity of signatures for and against incorporation.<sup>98</sup> Richard Cobden complained that in Manchester, Conservative opponents of incorporation had 'pretended to get upwards of thirty thousand names, for which

<sup>94</sup> Charles Tilly, 'Parliamentarization of popular contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834', *Theory and Society*, 26/2–3 (1997), pp. 245–73; Huzzey, 'Microhistory'.

<sup>95</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Jan. 1823, p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Mark Knights, "'The lowest degree of freedom": the right to petition parliament, 1640–1800', in Richard Huzzey (ed.), *Pressure and Parliament: From Civil War to Civil Society* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 18–34; Huzzey, 'Microhistory'.

<sup>97</sup> R. A. Church, *Economic and Social Change in a Midland Town: Victorian Nottingham, 1815–1900* (London, 1966), p. 128.

<sup>98</sup> Nicholas C. Edsall, 'Varieties of radicalism: Attwood, Cobden and the local politics of municipal incorporation', *Historical Journal*, 16/1 (1973), pp. 93–107.

they were well-paid ... [but] four-fifths were forgeries'.<sup>99</sup> The 1848 Public Health Act allowed rate-payers to petition for the General Board of Health to intervene in their area. As late as 1887, the Allotment Act permitted six electors or ratepayers to petition for the provision of public gardens, though the authorities had plenty of room to evade compliance.<sup>100</sup> Petitioning provided the central state with a mechanism to ascertain local consent. Even without statutory invitations, petitioners might urge local authorities to exercise their legal powers. In 1813 cotton weavers in Bolton, Bury and Manchester coordinated memorials to county magistrates, pleading for the enforcement of dormant Stuart legislation to fix their wage.<sup>101</sup>

The delineation and proliferation of local authorities throughout the nineteenth century 'and Westminster's preference for general and permissive, rather than local and specific, legislation' encouraged residents to petition bodies such as councils upon a range of social issues. With a large cache of surviving borough petitions, Hull offers an important case study of signatory culture in a particular town. Much petitioning concerned practical issues of 'pavement politics', such as the debate over the location of the town's fishmongers. In 1836, a petition from ten residents demanded the removal of the fish stalls along the church walls. In 1848, when the town council ordered the fish dealers to relocate from Wellington Street, twenty signed a protest and suggested that, instead, the installation of a tap would help prevent 'our offensive smell'.<sup>102</sup> Other petitions fought, on local terrain, the battles over morality and social policy that were prosecuted in Westminster. In 1890, churches and Sunday Schools organised a petition of over 1,600 signatures opposing permission for bands to play in the park on the Lord's Sabbath.<sup>103</sup> The following year, around 700 women signed a protest against the election of Edward Robson, a local brewer, as mayor, given 'the widespread injury to our sex, caused by the traffic in strong drink, and to the innocent little ones who have to bear neglect'.<sup>104</sup> Such petitions to local authorities complemented those sent to parliament in previous years on issues such as the Sunday

<sup>99</sup> Richard Cobden to William Tait, [1838], in John Morley, *Life of Richard Cobden* (2 vols; London, 1908), I, p. 134.

<sup>100</sup> John Prest, *Liberty and Locality: Parliament, Permissive Legislation, and Ratepayers' Democracies in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 30–1, 45–6; Micheline Nilsen, *The Working Man's Green Space: Allotment Gardens in England, France, and Germany, 1870–1919* (Charlottesville, VA., 2014), pp. 32, 56–7; J. A. Chandler, *Explaining Local Government: Local Government in Britain since 1800* (Manchester, 2007), pp. 44, 73, 77, 141.

<sup>101</sup> Bolton weavers, Petition to Lancashire quarter-sessions [1813], Salford weavers, Petition to Lancs. q-sess. [1813], Manchester weavers, Petition to Lancs. q-sess. [1813], Lancashire Archives, QSP 2639/152, 153, 154.

<sup>102</sup> Hull residents, Petition for removal of fish stalls, 1836, and Hull fish dealers, Petition, Town Council records, 1848, Hull History Centre, C TCC/2/2, C TCC/1/747.

<sup>103</sup> Hull Sunday Schools, Petition against bands in the parks, 1890, Town Council records, Hull History Centre, C TCC/2/101; J. Hetherington, Speech on presentation of Sunday Schools petition against bands in the park, 1890, Town Council records, Hull History Centre, TCC/2/101/3.

<sup>104</sup> Hull women, Petition against election of Mr. Robson, Town Council records, Hull History Centre, C TCC/2/105.

closure of museums or restrictions on alcohol sales, and provide further evidence that campaigners strategically switched between different tiers of authority.<sup>105</sup>

Requests to local government expressed collective preferences on amenities or public policy, but petitions, at the start of our period, also had a regular role in meeting individual needs. For many ordinary Britons in this period, petitioning meant requesting help from authorities during a time of hardship or an application for some privilege; these might be local arms of the state or the alms of private charity. Convicted prisoners, their families and allies might organise petitions to a judge seeking clemency, with further petitions organised to the home office or the monarch if local appeals failed.<sup>106</sup> Within the Royal Navy, petitioning was systematised to negotiate employment or welfare issues.<sup>107</sup> The sheer variety of uses for the petition form is evident from instructional texts such as the *English Letter-Writer* (1770).<sup>108</sup> Its 'Universal Petitioner' section offered forms of petitions to try to become a Chelsea pensioner; to win 'places in the Customs, Stamp-Office, Post-Office, &c.'; and to gain hospital admission as 'a young Man afflicted with the Venereal Disease'. These were essentially personal letters of application, but in a petitionary rather than epistolary form. Over the course of the nineteenth century, these types of personal petition gradually gave way to the letter and the pre-printed application form.

A rich range of work has recovered the tradition of pauper letters and petitions for poor relief under the old and new English poor laws.<sup>109</sup> In many parts of England by the early nineteenth century, paupers appear to have presented personal, informal letters to the parish; Thomas Sokoll's research finds only a handful obeying the stylised features of a petition in the parishes he has studied.<sup>110</sup> By contrast, recent work on Scotland has suggested that 'highly stylised petitions', reflecting a 'far more formal' relationship and bearing greater similarity to continental Europe, persisted. Only in the later nineteenth century would highland Scots adopt the English rhetoric of 'entitlement, civic obligation, and

<sup>105</sup> *Hull Packet*, 20 April 1883, p. 8; *Hull Daily Mail*, 13 May 1886, p. 2.

<sup>106</sup> V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770–1868* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 197–208; Peter King, *Crime, Justice, and Discretion in England, 1740–1820* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 317–24.

<sup>107</sup> Ellen Gill, *Naval Families, War and Duty in Britain, 1740–1820* (Woodbridge, 2016).

<sup>108</sup> George Brown, *The New English Letter-Writer; or Whole Art of General Correspondence* (London, 1770).

<sup>109</sup> David Englander, 'From the abyss: pauper petitions and correspondence in Victorian London', *London Journal*, 25/1 (2000), pp. 71–83; David R. Green, 'Pauper protests: power and resistance in early nineteenth-century London workhouses', *Social History*, 31/2 (2006), pp. 137–59; Steven King and Peter Jones, 'Testifying for the poor: epistolary advocates and the negotiation of parochial relief in England, 1800–1834', *Journal of Social History*, 49/4 (2016), pp. 784–807.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas Sokoll, 'Writing for relief: rhetoric in English pauper letters, 1800–1834,' in Andreas Gestrich, Steven King and Raphael Lutz (eds), *Being Poor in Modern Europe: Historical Perspectives 1800–1940* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 101–3.

defiance' in more informal letters of request.<sup>111</sup> Generally, though, during the course of the nineteenth century the pre-printed form started to replace the petition as the principal means of application for welfare or other state services. Though 'petition' remained a synonym for 'request' in everyday speech, the petition would increasingly be a material form associated with collective demands for public action, rather than personal applications for private benefits.

As testament to the ubiquity of petitions, there is evidence scattered across the archives that petitions could be adapted as a form of pressure, expression, and request, even in the absence of traditions or systems for receiving petitions. The adaptability of the genre allowed servants employed in York's Retreat asylum to petition the governing committee to start supplying the kitchens with sugar grown by free, not slave, labour in 1827.<sup>112</sup> Three hundred residents of Torbay, in 1836, sent a petition to the trustees of the local turnpike trust, pressuring them to resolve a dispute with a landowner and get on with providing long-awaited transport connections.<sup>113</sup> Emergent trades unions sometimes used signed petitions to communicate workers' demands, though this inevitably risked reprisals against signatories.<sup>114</sup> A study of clerical workers in London suggests that their petitions to employers tended to grow larger, with one to the Great Western Railway attracting thousands of signatures.<sup>115</sup> Petitioners did not even need to be employees or dependents of the authority they petitioned – as in the 1908 case of local clergy petitioning the Hindhead golf club against 'employment of young caddies on the links on the Sabbath'.<sup>116</sup> The petition remained an enduringly accessible and flexible weapon in the armoury of campaigners into the twentieth century.

## VI

Between 1780 and 1918, authorities and petitioners carved new, often specialised, channels of access to the multiplying layers of the state through practices of subscription. The historical growth of the policy-making functions of the state was closely related to, and shaped by, the interaction between authorities and petitioners. The history of petitioning provides an alternative perspective from which to observe the relationship between the state and the people, which was mediated

<sup>111</sup> 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*, 55/1 (2016), pp. 87–9, 96–8. See also Houston, *Peasant Petitions*, pp. 171–216.

<sup>112</sup> Servants of the Retreat, Petition regarding sugar, 1827, Retreat archives, Borthwick Institute, York, RET/8/9/5.

<sup>113</sup> H. H. Walker, 'The petition for the making of the Torbay Road, 1836', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 95 (1983), pp. 208–18.

<sup>114</sup> Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trades Unionism, 1666–1920* (London, 1919), pp. 228–9, 242–3.

<sup>115</sup> Michael Heller, *London Clerical Workers, 1880–1914: Development of the Labour Market* (London, 2011), pp. 80–1.

<sup>116</sup> *Portsmouth Evening News*, 25 July 1908, p. 3.

through various interactions beyond and outside formal electoral politics. During this period, petitioning shifted to being a practice associated with political expression and representation, since application forms and other bureaucratic documents diminished the relative commonality of other forms.

By analysing a wide variety of subscriptional texts, usually found in particular archival series and studied within particular historiographies, this article reasserts name-signing (by signature or mark) as a common political, as well as social, experience for ordinary subjects. Edward Higgs has suggested the ‘alphabetisation of the sign manual as part and parcel of a transformation of written culture from the late Middle Ages onwards’, as names supplanted aristocratic seals in representing the assent of the ‘juridical person’.<sup>117</sup> This article has demonstrated the sheer ubiquity of occasions when Britons of all ranks might authorise the use of their name, whether by hand or by permission, in subscription to petitions and related documents. This is not to say that subscription signified a wholly personal act of self-representation; from the examples we have presented, petition signatures could be performances of patronage, obligation or virtue, as well as expressions of will. Naturally, the social meaning and habitual nature of the signature act continued to overlap with its use in letters and legal documents, but the petition and its close relations became much more strongly associated with political representation over the long nineteenth century.<sup>118</sup>

For millions of UK subjects without the right to cast votes for MPs, subscriptional texts offered one of the principal forms of self-representation and community representation. Even for those who could vote, subscriptional culture permitted creative strategies and adaptable tactics that placed the initiative, timing and substance in the hands of organisers and signatories, except where specifically constrained. Petitioning, then, as much as electoral reforms and the development of organised parties, played a significant role in changing expectations of political representation and popular sovereignty. This article has, however, shown that wealthy and well-connected interests might gain more satisfaction and appreciation from those they petitioned, especially in the form of ministerial memorials and deputations. Legislators faced a plurality of petitions that only emphasised the interpretative art involved in reconciling diverse, inconsistent views – except that, for most of our period, parliamentarians often regarded themselves as trustees of the nation’s best interests rather than as representatives whose

<sup>117</sup> Edward Higgs, *Identifying the English: A History of Personal Identification, 1500 to the Present* (London, 2011), pp. 58–71.

<sup>118</sup> On the epistolary, literary, and legal significance of signatures, see, respectively, James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635* (Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 93–7; Sarah Nash, ‘What’s in a name? Signature, criticism, and authority in “The Fortnightly Review”’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 43/1 (2010), pp. 57–82; Stephen Mason, *Electronic Signatures in Law* (3rd edn, Cambridge, 2012), pp. 16–47.

legitimacy hinged on their responsiveness to the represented.<sup>119</sup> Petitions to parliament grew alongside the electorate during the nineteenth century, only faltering in its final decades. This probably reflects a shift of initiative from parliamentary government to the executive authority of Downing Street, as parliamentarians became ‘incorporated’ representatives, likely to follow party whips.<sup>120</sup> Yet it appears that the consequence of these important changes was a shift to other targets, in central or local government, rather than an abandonment of petitioning in favour of the ballot box.<sup>121</sup>

That a broader subscriptional culture survived the decline of public petitions to parliament only serves to underline the continued importance and variety of these modes to petitioners and authorities and within UK political culture more generally, even after 1918. While it is clear that officials and institutions gained authority and information from receiving subscriptional appeals, the reception might be only one way of assessing ‘success’ for those organising and signing them. As S. Erdem Aytac and Susan Stokes have written of contemporary politics, collective action in protests or elections may be motivated by emotional responses engendering a fear of the costs of abstention, and the same seems likely for petitioners.<sup>122</sup> Hence, subscribing to requests provided an expressive, not merely instrumental, form of representation to signatories.<sup>123</sup> While petitions and social movements are usually examined separately from threats of violence and revolution, it is clear that signatures on the People’s Charter or the Ulster Covenant could muster both perceived and intended threats of rebellion.<sup>124</sup> As more people enjoyed the right to vote, subscriptional texts might act as expressions of favour or disfavour for representatives in the punctuation between elections. Looking across a century, scattered archives, and various forms, it becomes clear that these subscriptional texts materialised a hybrid form of participation and representation. Intersecting with the elections, print, protest, languages, and institutions that constituted the political culture of the modern United Kingdom, subscriptional culture both reflected and powered changes in state, society and representation.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/1468-229X.13103>

<sup>119</sup> Philip Pettit, ‘Varieties of public representation’, and Bryan Garsten, ‘Representative government and popular sovereignty’, in Ian Shapiro, Susan C. Stokes, Elisabeth Jane Wood and Alexander S. Kirshner (eds), *Political Representation* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 61–89, 90–110.

<sup>120</sup> Pettit, ‘Varieties of public representation’, p. 63.

<sup>121</sup> Huzzey and Miller, ‘Petitions, parliament and political culture’, pp. 162–3.

<sup>122</sup> S. Erdem Aytac and Susan Stokes, *Why Bother? Rethinking Participation in Elections and Protests* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 30–6, 76–82.

<sup>123</sup> Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin, ‘Expressive voting and electoral equilibrium’, *Public Choice*, 95/1 (1998), pp. 149–75.

<sup>124</sup> Mehmet Döşemeci, ‘The kinetics of our discontent’, *Past & Present*, 248 (2020), pp. 253–89, at pp. 286–8; Huzzey and Miller, ‘Petitions, parliament, and political culture’, p. 131; A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis: Resistance to Home Rule, 1912–14* (London, 1967), pp. 262–6.

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