



## Petitioning and Petitioners to the Westminster Parliament, 1660–1788<sup>\*</sup>

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Narratives of the mid-18th-century state as drifting towards oligarchy and closure have long been superseded by accounts stressing its responsiveness to outside interests and opinion. Participatory election rituals, crowd activity and the expansion of print media demonstrate that political activism was not limited to a narrow circle of elites, even after the passage of the 1716 Septennial Act. Additionally, as an institution after 1688 the Westminster parliament rendered itself useful to propertied society through its passage of greater amounts of legislation. However, while the strength of party and trajectory of electoral participation is well mapped, as are addresses to the crown, the petitioning of interest groups has had few systematic quantitative surveys. This article first sets out the chronology of petitioning to both houses of parliament from 1660 to 1788, demonstrating that petitioning was at its height before 1722, rather than rising to its greatest levels with the reform movements in the 1780s. Second, the article demonstrates the role of petitioning in expanding the political nation beyond the boundaries of parliamentary boroughs, and why, on occasion, petitioning involved women and illiterate men. Third, in order to emphasize the continuity in petitioning and its contribution to the formation of public opinion, the article compares the different roles that concurrent subscription practices envisaged for the public. Finally, the article argues that despite the rising tendency to cite numerical strength to arbitrate political divisions, petitioners continued to legitimise their voices on the basis of representing collections of reasons and interests rather than opinion.

**Keywords:** 18th century; economy; interests; participation; petitioning; popular voice; public sphere; Westminster parliament; women

1

As a generation of scholars have shown, government in the early modern period was frequently done with, rather than to, the people. This held true even following the growth of the ‘fiscal-military’ and ‘information’ state after the revolution of 1688, and the reduction in the public’s role as electors after the passage of the 1716 Septennial Act (which reduced the frequency of general elections from three to seven years). A shift towards closure in voting was met with increased openness elsewhere, including in print culture, petitioning,

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the physical accessibility of the Westminster parliament, and in the rituals of elections themselves.<sup>1</sup> Collective petitioning, which assumed a new political role in the 1640s, and was given a new lease of life in the form of loyal addresses to the crown and as commentaries on the increasing number of bills considered by parliament after 1688, remained a significant means to represent opinion, demonstrate loyalty and share knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the century, petitions performed a conservative role as an ‘instrument of state’.<sup>3</sup> For Westminster parliamentarians, tasked with evaluating hundreds of proposals for legislation as a result of the parliament’s ‘coming of age’ after 1688, petitionary complaints from lower sorts and local powers helped compensate for the often inadequate information that the central state held on itself. Receiving petitions also aided parliamentary understanding of the effectiveness of the authorities that its legislation had increasingly empowered after 1688.<sup>4</sup> Petitions provided a means of transferring knowledge and expertise held by local companies, corporations or individuals to the centre, helping to inform the quality of parliamentary deliberations.<sup>5</sup> Through being open to receiving such grievances and advice after 1688, parliamentarians rendered their body a useful one, and resultingly weakened demands for their reform during the 18th century.

Within the context of the growing secondary literature on premodern petitioning, the first purpose of this article is to establish systematically how often public groups took advantage of the Westminster parliament’s increased presence after 1688 to submit petitions on legislative topics. While the parallel growth of loyal addresses to the crown from the 1650s to the early 19th century have been established by Knights and Vallance, and the history of parliamentary petitioning from 1787 to 1918 by Miller and Huzzey, the pattern and history of Restoration and 18th-century petitioning to Westminster has previously only been subject to partial surveys and studies of particular campaigns.<sup>6</sup> The data presented here confirm what previous work has suggested, namely that petitioning was common and important to parliament’s ability to umpire between competing interests and ideas for England’s improvement. But these data do question the assumption that lobbying and collective petitioning grew more intense in the later part of the 18th century.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they show that

<sup>1</sup> Summarized in Frank O’Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electorate of Hanoverian England, 1734–1832* (Oxford, 1989), and Joanna Innes, ‘Legislation and Public Participation, 1760–1830’, in *The British and their Laws in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. David Lemmings (Woodbridge, 2005), 102–32.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Knights, ‘Participation and Representation before Democracy: Petitions and Addresses in Premodern Britain’, in *Political Representation*, ed. Ian Shapiro (Cambridge, 2009), 35–58.

<sup>3</sup> David Zaret, ‘Petition and Response and Liminal Petitioning in Comparative/Historical Perspective’, *Social Science History*, xlii (2019), 431–51; Martyn Lyons, ‘Writing Upwards: How the Weak Wrote to the Powerful’, *Journal of Social History*, xlix (2015), 317–30.

<sup>4</sup> Julian Hoppit, ‘Patterns of Parliamentary Legislation, 1660–1800’, *HJ*, xxxix (1996), 109–31.

<sup>5</sup> John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (1989), 232; Alison Olson, *Making the Empire Work: London and American Interest Groups, 1690–1790* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Ted Vallance, *Loyalty, Memory and Public Opinion in England, 1658–1727* (Manchester, 2019); Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture* (Oxford, 2005); Henry Miller, ‘Petitioning and Demonstrating’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800–2000*, ed. David Brown, Robert Crowcroft and Gordon Pendand (Oxford, 2018), 454–67.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Tilly, ‘Parliamentarization of Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834’, *Theory and Society*, xxvi (1997), 245–73; Henry Miller, ‘Petition! Petition!! Petition!!!: Petitioning and the Organisation of Public Opinion in Britain, 1800–1850’, in *Organising Democracy: Reflections on The Rise of Political Organisations in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Henk te Velde and Maartje Janse (Basingstoke, 2017), 46; Julian Hoppit, *Britain’s Political Economies: Parliament and Economic Life, 1660–1800* (Cambridge, 2017), 153–4.

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petitioning per capita was as high in the 1750s as in the 1780s. The range of topics on which petitions were presented also confirms Innes's view that arguing for a single-issue campaign revolutionising petitioning in the later 18th century has only limited explanatory power.<sup>8</sup>

The article's second purpose is to demonstrate the multiple layers of the 18th-century political nation, the different interventions that different publics felt able to legitimately make, and the competing meanings of putting a signature to a petition. The contours of the 18th-century political nation with the right to exercise formal political influence was traditionally defined by the size of the electorate and those of higher status, who tended to sign addresses to the crown and submit instructions to MPs. Because petitioners sought to speak from positions of experience and demonstrate that all interests collectively defining the public interest were on side, the contours of the petitioning political nation were wide and flexible.<sup>9</sup> Petitioners could include women, the illiterate, those from outside boroughs, and those lacking the right to vote, but only upon particular legislative issues. The pattern of subscribers emphasizes that subscription cultures did retain some oligarchic character: addresses demonstrating loyalty to the monarch tended to come from chartered companies and boroughs, assertive instructions to MPs from the same, while it was the petitions to parliament on legislation and state-oaths that were the most open type. Although subscription activity can be taken as illustrative of the influence that extra-state forces had in society in the period before universal suffrage, many petitioners remained institutional, rather than ad hoc, associations.

Third, the article reflects on the continuity of petitioning to the Westminster parliament in the 18th century, and the continuing insufficiency of quoting majority support to establish the reasonableness of a measure.<sup>10</sup> This was despite an increased desire to seek out large numbers of subscribers, especially compared with the Restoration practice that frequently avoided demonstrating the popularity of a measure. Mark Kishlansky has described an increasing recourse to 'emerging majoritarianism' in later Stuart politics, in an attempt to arbitrate a divided nation.<sup>11</sup> However, I contend that greater numbers signed petitions in order to swear to the truth of an argument, or to demonstrate that all the constitutive interests of society were onside. The fact that the occupations and localities of petitioners were carefully listed suggests that a majority of persons in themselves, lacking such social qualifications, neither 'make [an argument] right, nor convince the nation it is so'.<sup>12</sup> Deliberating reasonably between interests remained both the mainstay and policer of the public sphere.

<sup>8</sup>Innes, 'Legislation and Public Participation', 121.

<sup>9</sup>Innes, 'Legislation and Public Participation'.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Huzzey, 'Contesting Interests: Rethinking Pressure, Parliament, Nation, and Empire', *Parliamentary History*, xxxvii (2018), 3–4, 17; cf. James Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Non-Conformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990), part 3; N.C. Phillips, 'Edmund Burke and the County Reform Movement, 1779–1780', *EHR*, lxxvi (1961), 254–78; Ian Christie, 'The Yorkshire Association, 1780–4: A Study in Political Organisation', *HJ*, iii (1960), 144–61; J.R. Miller, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade 1787–1807* (Manchester, 1995).

<sup>11</sup>Mark Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection: Social and Political Choice in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986), 228; Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 353.

<sup>12</sup>Abel Boyer, *The Political State of Great Britain* (60 vols, 1711–40), xlvii, 494.

The primary data for this article are based on counts of what I have termed ‘large responsive petitions’, received by the Westminster parliament between 1660 and 1788.<sup>13</sup> These were submitted on, or after, the second reading of a piece of legislation which had already been introduced into parliament. My counts do not, therefore, include those petitions used to introduce private legislation, as required by standing orders after 1685, or for the relief of debt or introduction of legal appeals.<sup>14</sup> I employ the term ‘responsive’, because I believe it better captures the role for the public in the legislative process than other frequently used terms, such as ‘private’, ‘premodern’ or ‘material’ petitioning. To use the commonly used terminology and describe the rise of ‘public’, ‘modern’ or ‘political petitioning’ from the 1760s implicitly suggests the connotations of ‘private’ and unpolitical for these earlier forms of activity,<sup>15</sup> while to state that there was also a shift towards ‘mass’ petitioning over the same time frame ignores the fact that many pre-1760 petitions were subscribed by large numbers.<sup>16</sup> Because this article emphasizes the changing role for the public represented in petitions, I have also counted only ‘large’ petitions seeking to represent a collective – being signed by more than 20 people in the case of the Lords (for which the petitions survived the destructive fire of 1834) and by a group for those received by MPs. Here, I employ a schema of ‘acclamatory’ petitioning demonstrating loyalty, being joined first by sustained campaigns of ‘responsive’ petitions, produced in response to legislation, and then by ‘initiatory’ petitioning that were critical and disruptive towards the settlement of 1688.<sup>17</sup>

## 2

From 1660 to 1788, 12,431 large responsive and initiatory petitions were presented to the Westminster parliament. Of this number, 653 were sent to the house of lords, and these form the basis for a discussion of subscribers in the third section of this article, having survived the fire of 1834.

As Figure 1 shows, the incidence of petitioning was uneven. Although the narrow conventions of petitioning were broken during the 1640s because print and popular petitioning were employed without elite legitimation, national campaigns directed at parliament only became sustained in the later Stuart period. During the 30 years following the Restoration, only 235 large responsive petitions were presented, or less than 0.15 per sitting day. This was nine times lower than the post-1688 average of 1.36 per sitting day, reflecting the fact that

<sup>13</sup> Philip Loft, ‘Involving the Public: Parliament, Petitioning and the Language of Interest, 1688–1720’, *Journal of British Studies*, lv (2016), 2.

<sup>14</sup> *CJ*, ix, 719.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. David Zaret, ‘Petitions and the “Invention” of Public Opinion in the English Revolution’, *American Journal of Sociology*, ci (1996), 1497–555; Peter Fraser, ‘Public Petitioning and Parliament before 1832’, *History*, xlvi (1961), 195–211; Joanna Innes, ‘People and Power in British Politics to 1850’, in *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France and Ireland, 1750–1850*, ed. Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (Oxford, 2013), 140.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Miller, ‘Introduction: The Transformation of Petitioning in the Long Nineteenth Century (1780–1914)’, *Social Science History*, xlii (2019), 409–29; Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 116, 117, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Initiatory petitions had important pre-1760 precedents, including the petitions of the 1640s, the London ‘monster petition’ of 1680 during the Exclusion Crisis and the Kentish petition against whig foreign policy in 1701. In Scotland, addresses against the failure of the Darien scheme in 1699 and the Union in 1706–7 provide examples— see Karin Bowie, *Scottish Public Opinion and the Anglo-Scottish Union, 1699–1707* (Woodbridge, 2007). For ‘initiating’ debate as an important characteristic of post-1780 petitioning, see Miller, ‘Petition!’, 52.

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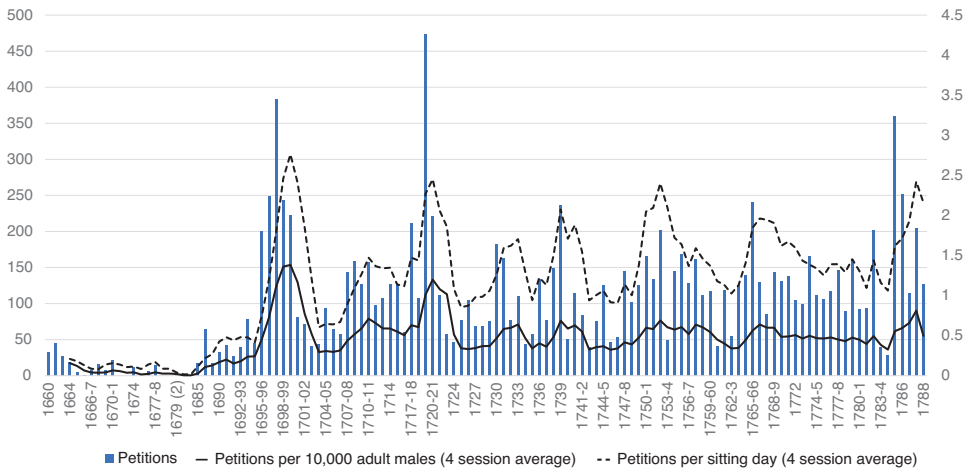


Figure 1: Large Responsive and Initiatory Petitions to the Westminster Parliament, 1660–1788.

Sources: *CJ*, xviii–xlii; Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/JO/10/1/283–375, main papers; HL/PO/JO/10/1/402–505, main papers; HL/PO/JO/10/6/1–560; HL/PO/JO/10/7/1–123; HL/PO/JO/10/3/183–280, large parchments.

parliamentary meetings before the revolution of 1688 had been too unpredictable to allow petitioners to organise. Half the sessions lasted less than 50 days, while only four of the 121 held in the period 1689–1800 were similarly short.<sup>18</sup> This lull was also found with loyalist addresses to the crown: The *London Gazette* notes that only one was presented to Charles II between 1665 (the paper's first year of issue), and 1680.<sup>19</sup> The 'monster' address to Charles calling for a meeting of parliament during the Exclusion Crisis and counter-petitioning from loyalists marked the resurgence of addressing, with 1,353 presented in the eight years to the revolution.<sup>20</sup>

The greatest number of petitions presented to parliament coincided with the 'rage of party' from the mid 1690s to 1722, though petitioners were motivated by clashes of interest rather than party politics. This early period saw higher rates of petitioning per sitting day and head of population than that experienced during the early reform movements after 1780. In 1697, the final year of the Nine Years War, the first great sustained petitioning period began and an average of 260 large responsive petitions were presented annually until 1701 (1,380 in total). Because the length of parliamentary sessions also varied within this period, these figures may also be expressed in terms of the number of large responsive petitions presented per sitting day. In these terms, the first seven years after 1689 saw an average of 0.6 presented, rising to 2.3 (1696–1701) and then halving to 1.0 (1701–16). It then doubled to 2.1 (1717–22) and fell to an average of 1.2 (1722–42), before rising again to 1.4 (1742–60).

<sup>18</sup>Hoppit, 'Patterns of Parliamentary Legislation', 113.

<sup>19</sup>The pre-1680 address was from the City of London: *London Gazette*, 17–21 Dec. 1674.

<sup>20</sup>Knights, 'Participation and Representation', 45.

Despite the 1780s seeing the rise of anti-slavery petitioning, campaigns for economical reform and the disputed trade treaty with Ireland, all of which suggests that the decade may have marked a watershed in the history of petitioning, the total number of large responsive or initiatory petitions did not surpass earlier activity.<sup>21</sup> On average per sitting day there were 1.4 petitions presented in both the 1760s and 1770s, before a more substantial rise to 1.8 from 1780 to 1788. Given that the population under the jurisdiction of the parliament expanded to include Scotland only after 1707, that the total British population rose by more than half from 1701 to 1781, and four times as many acts were passed each session after 1760 than had been the case in the period after 1688, these data suggest that responsive petitioning to the Westminster parliament was greatest in the later Stuart and early Hanoverian period.<sup>22</sup>

We cannot ignore the fact, however, that there may have been a relative decline in the numbers of petitions per head of population in this later period because petitioners, instead, sought to collect greater numbers to a single document. In the 19th century, the average number of signatures per petition fluctuated by an average of up to 500 from year to year.<sup>23</sup> This reflected the fact that while on some issues the numbers of signatures were deemed to be the most significant argument in favour of a position, on others transparently demonstrating the support of different localities and interests took precedence. Additionally, one response to the rise of initiatory petitioning may have been to tighten control of responsive petitioning, with organisers seeking to police language and signatures in order to differentiate themselves from more critical subscription forms (as chambers of manufacturers did, claiming to petition on behalf of a diversity of manufactures under a single banner).<sup>24</sup> As shown below, in section three, later petitions had a larger number of descriptions of their subscribers compared with the period to 1722, suggesting that there was also some consolidation of petitioners' efforts in the later part of the century.

Neither were the patterns of subscription influenced solely by the Westminster parliament. Even after 1688, parliament remained only one of the forums that the public sought (and needed) to lobby to make and alter policy.<sup>25</sup> The many legal particularisms and regulatory power of baronies, boroughs and assizes made local powers and arms of the executive significant recipients of collective petitioning.<sup>26</sup> The board of trade received proposals from commercial groups, individual members of parliament were sent instructions, and campaigns in support of John Wilkes and on the American war saw initiatory petitions presented to the crown rather than to parliament. Importantly for Scottish interests after 1707, the convention of royal burghs retained some coercive power regulating Scotland's economy and society. Through acting as an umpire for Scottish interests in the way that

<sup>21</sup> See above, note 7.

<sup>22</sup> Hoppit, *Britain's Political Economies*, 41; E.A. Wrigley, 'British Population during the "Long" Eighteenth Century, 1680–1840', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain. Vol. 1: Industrialisation, 1700–1860*, ed. Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson (Cambridge, 2004), 64.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2013), 110–14.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Bennett, *Local Business Voice: The History of Chambers of Commerce in Britain, Ireland, and Revolutionary America, 1760–2011* (Oxford, 2011), 158, 165, 167.

<sup>25</sup> Joanna Innes, 'The Protestant Carpenter: William Payne of Bell Yard (c. 1718–1782). The Life and Times of a London Informing Constable', in Joanna Innes, *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2009), 279–342.

<sup>26</sup> J.A. Houston, *Social Relations and Economic Life on Landed Estates, 1600–1850* (Basingstoke, 2014).

Table 1: *Subjects of Large Responsive and Initiatory Petitions to the Westminster Parliament, 1689–1788*

	1689–1722	1722–55	1755–88
Communications & enclosure	1756	1957	2037
Manufacturing and industry	1760	1159	924
Social issues	121	150	673
Government and law	130	186	422
Overseas trade	439	212	66
Taxation	287	137	112
Religion	144	157	139
Finance	236	24	118
Armed forces	193	23	55

Notes: ‘Communications and enclosure’: river navigation, turnpikes and enclosure; ‘Social issues’: poor relief and crime prevention; ‘Government and law’: elections, the constitution and law reform; ‘Religion’: primarily church building rather than calls for to revisit the religious settlement of 1688–9; ‘Finance’: coinage, banking and events such as the South Sea Bubble.

Sources: See Figure 1.

the Westminster parliament did for Scotland, the collective view of Scottish burghs could be presented to Westminster through the convention as a *fait accompli*, while the views of English interests remained to be thrashed out in parliament.<sup>27</sup>

The motivating topics of responsive petitioning to Westminster, reflecting the subject profile of parliamentary legislation, consisted overwhelmingly of economic and social issues, as Table 1 shows. Table 2 shows that 1,184 petitions, or 9% of all large petitions presented to Westminster after 1688, were sent on just 14 campaigns in 11 parliamentary sessions. Of these, only one (the slave trade) did not originate in response to a measure relating to political economy.

Historians are familiar with the lobbying history of mercantile interests and trading companies in the making of policy and the development of Britain as a major power.<sup>28</sup> However, it was manufacturing interests who were the most prominent petitioners attempting to shape Britain’s political economy. In the years up to 1760, some 1,500 petitions were presented on the woollen industry, and 500 on leather. As Julian Hoppit has noted, legislative proposals involving river navigation and road-building schemes that affected numerous interests and property holdings were especially contentious.<sup>29</sup> As a reflection of this, some 1,500 large responsive petitions were presented on canal and river communication projects and 2,300 on turnpike roads from 1688 to 1788. Negotiating with affected parties was therefore essential to increase the chances of success for such legislation. Despite constitut-

<sup>27</sup>Bob Harris, ‘Towards a British Political Economy’, in *Regulating the British Economy, 1660–1850*, ed. Perry Gauci (Farnham, 2011), 83–106.

<sup>28</sup>Perry Gauci, *The Politics of Trade: The Overseas Merchants in State and Society, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 2001); Perry Gauci, ‘Learning the Ropes of Sand: The West India Lobby, 1714–60’, in *Regulating the British Economy*, ed. Gauci, 107–22.

<sup>29</sup>Hoppit, *Britain’s Political Economies*, 98–9.

Table 2: Campaigns to the Westminster Parliament Receiving 49 or More Large Responsive or Initiatory Petitions, 1688–1788

Legislation	Year	Number of large petitions
Calicoes, importing	1719/20	212
Irish commercial treaty	1785	126
Leather, duty	1697	106
Leather, exporting to Ireland	1717/18	92
Leather, dealing	1739	90
South Sea Bubble	1721	90
Hawkers and pedlars	1730	81
Slave trade	1787/8	78
Wool, preventing export	1731	57
Linen, import duties	1774	55
Weaver navigation	1719/20	50
Derwent navigation	1719/20	49
Wool, preventing export	1739	49
Roads, preservation	1745	49

Sources: See Figure 1.

ing 70% of economic legislation with 600 enclosure acts alone in the 1770s, only 260 large responsive petitions were submitted on enclosure bills.<sup>30</sup>

The first substantive initiatory petitioning campaigns directed at the Westminster parliament occurred only towards the end of the period covered in this article, and did not result in an upsurge in the overall numbers of petitions. After 1772, 12 were submitted from Dissenters seeking toleration, 36 on economical reform in 1779, 50 on parliamentary reform after 1782, and 78 on the slave trade and 43 on the reform of the royal burghs of Scotland in 1787–8. This confirms that it was primarily activity directed towards the crown, rather than parliament that marked the resurgence of initiatory petitioning from the time of Wilkes.<sup>31</sup>

### 3

Manufacturers, retailers and the population at large were well aware of the opportunities and threats that came from increased parliamentary activity after 1688, making them regularly active as petitioners in defence of their interests.<sup>32</sup> Using the 30,405 adjectives employed by petitioners to describe their social status and the 100,000 signatures that survived on the two types of large petitions presented to the Lords, this section focuses on two elements. First, the profiles of the political nation defined in each of the three types of petitioning reflected

<sup>30</sup>Hoppit, 'Patterns of Parliamentary Legislation', 121–2; Hoppit, *Britain's Political Economies*, 93, 98.

<sup>31</sup>Knights, 'Participation and Representation', 41, 47.

<sup>32</sup>In contrast, only 1.3% of all the social descriptions to large petitions between 1688 and 1788 explicitly referred to agricultural occupations.

the multilayered nature of the political nation. Second, demonstrating the support of specific interests, occupations and localities was a means to authenticate the reasonableness of the position assumed and the accuracy of the evidence cited. Assuming that reason remained the policer of the public sphere meant that demonstrating numbers alone remained an insufficient cause for petitioners to be taken seriously in parliamentary deliberations.<sup>33</sup>

The pattern of subscribers to petitions demonstrates that there were multiple layers to the political nation, and despite the accessibility of petitioning, not all had an equal voice.<sup>34</sup> The two formal systems of defining the political nation emphasized a division between voters and non-voters, and the authority of the landed elite in parliament and officeholders in communities. Over the century, the proportion of men with the right to vote declined from 23.4% in 1722 to 17.2% by 1790, and the Septennial Act of 1716 meant that instead of exercising their vote every 2.5 years they had to wait an average of six years.<sup>35</sup> The English counties were subject to a uniform franchise of 40s. freehold, but the franchise varied in boroughs, where often the vote was restricted to members of the corporation. Only a tenth of all seats in the Commons had an 'inhabitant' or ratepayer franchise.<sup>36</sup> The second conception of the political nation, and not necessarily a larger one, comprised those who constituted the officeholders of society. These included men from the middle sorts and who probably constituted a tenth of the adult male population in 1700.<sup>37</sup>

Petitioning was a significant alternative form of engagement to voting that demonstrated a parallel layering of the political nation, because different social groups participated on different subjects and forms of petitioning. This means that here, unlike John Phillips in his account of initiatory petitioning in the 1780s, I do not believe that petitioning can offer concrete evidence of the absolute shape of the political nation.<sup>38</sup> This is because the legitimate participants differed from issue to issue. The cited status, gender, localities and interest of subscribers was fundamentally an act made strategically in support of an argument or to demonstrate a claim, rather than a roll-call of those deemed members of the political community.

Initiatory petitioning remained the preserve of members of corporations and the electorate in many petitioning campaigns to 1780.<sup>39</sup> In 1701, the Kentish petition to the Commons criticizing tory foreign policy was signed by only justices, members of the grand jury and freeholders.<sup>40</sup> This echoed the pattern found on petitions on introducing landed qualifications for MPs in 1696 and those against the Septennial Bill in 1715.<sup>41</sup> The later

<sup>33</sup>Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*.

<sup>34</sup>Innes, 'Legislation and Public Participation', 102–3.

<sup>35</sup>O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties*, 178–80; John A. Phillips, *Electoral Behavior in Unreformed England: Plumpers, Splitters, and Straights* (Princeton, NJ, 1982), 53, 59, 63–4.

<sup>36</sup>*The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1690–1715*, ed. Eveline Cruickshanks, Stuart Handley and D.W. Hayton (5 vols, Cambridge, 2002), i, 36, 73, 78, 106–7.

<sup>37</sup>Mark Goldie, 'The Unacknowledged Republic: Officeholding in Early Modern England', in *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500–1850*, ed. Tim Harris (2001), 153–94.

<sup>38</sup>John A. Phillips, 'Popular Politics in Unreformed England', *Journal of Modern History*, lii (1980), 601.

<sup>39</sup>Instructions to members of parliament only originated with borough corporations – Paul Kelly, 'Constituents' Instructions to Members of Parliament in the Eighteenth Century', in *Party and Management in Parliament, 1660–1784*, ed. Clyve Jones (Leicester, 1984), 169–89.

<sup>40</sup>*CJ*, xxiii, 518.

<sup>41</sup>Parliamentary Archives [hereafter cited as PA], HL/PO/JO/10/1/487/1093, regulating the election of members, Jan. 1697; *CJ*, xviii, 429–30.

37 petitions on economical reform in 1780 were all headed by nobles, gentlemen or mayors and only two referred to ‘inhabitants’: the organisers were unwilling to look for support further down the social hierarchy than freeholders.<sup>42</sup> On initiatory petitions, the norm was to assert the anonymity of those below the rank of freeholder and those residing beyond the boundaries of boroughs or excluded from membership of county grand juries.<sup>43</sup>

There does seem to have been a widening in the 1780s of who participated on initiatory petitions, which could make the participation of electors and non-electors roughly equal in number. However, this was primarily the case with petitions from parliamentary boroughs and non-parliamentary towns, rather than counties. Places like Southwark, Glasgow, Westminster, and York consistently drew upon a larger proportion of the population and explicitly cited the support of non-voters throughout the century.<sup>44</sup> Phillips found that half of those who signed petitions on the Middlesex election were non-voters, and James Bradley showed that on the American petitions of 1775 some places saw only a fifth of subscribers coming from the electorate.<sup>45</sup> However, less than a third of the addresses presented on the Fox–North coalition in 1784 drew upon the support of the population below the rank of freeholders.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, petitions on the reform of the royal burghs to increase their accountability to the courts and anti-slavery in 1787 offered a break from this century-long pattern because almost all came from the tripartite classification of ‘traders, manufacturers and inhabitants’, regardless of whether they originated in rural or urban areas.<sup>47</sup> Citing this trio of interests excluded from participation in Scottish burghs, underlined the oligarchic nature of the government that petitioners were attacking.

In contrast, the wider nation was consistently more visible throughout the century on matters of economic regulation, which as Tables 1 and 2 showed, was the mainstay of responsive petitioning. Assessing the groups involved in initiatory petitioning led Phillips to estimate that a fifth of adult males could be considered as members of the political nation, but the evidence of responsive petitioning means that the net can be drawn far wider.<sup>48</sup> Illiterate men, women, and plebeian groups were sometimes deemed worthy to subscribe, rather than acting only through crowd activity and later being rendered invisible in newspaper reports, lest readers dismiss the crowd for being constituted of the unpropertied, who were regarded in the early modern period as the embodiment of

<sup>42</sup>Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Kentish Petition* (1701), 2.

<sup>43</sup>Phillips, ‘Popular Politics’, 606–7.

<sup>44</sup>Phillips, ‘Popular Politics’, 613. In 1743–5, some 2,241 London merchants professed their support for the public credit, a loyalist association of 887 signed in York and one drew upon the support from 2,900 Spitalfields manufacturers: *London Gazette*, 25–28 Feb. 1744, 10–14, 24–28 Sept., 28 Sept.–1 Oct., 5–8 Oct. 1745. In 1784, 4,000, including ‘inhabitants’, signed the address in Glasgow and 2,800 in Westminster and Leicester. Disfranchised Wolverhampton gathered the support of 2,485 inhabitants: *London Gazette*, 17–21 Feb. 1784. County addresses with one or two thousand signatures came only from freeholders and higher ranks in spite of their size – see Devon, Dorset, and Staffordshire: *London Gazette*, 6–9 Mar., 30 Mar.–3 Apr., 18–22 May 1784.

<sup>45</sup>Phillips, ‘Popular Politics’, 611; Bradley, *Religion and English Radicalism*, 144–5.

<sup>46</sup>*London Gazette*, Jan.–May 1784; Donald McAdams, ‘Addresses to the King and the Fox–North Coalition’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, xxxv (1972), 381–5.

<sup>47</sup>*CJ*, xliiii, 159, 187, 198, 199, 206–9, 212, 223, 230–3, 243, 248, 250, 253, 258, 261, 265, 275, 297, 304, 306, 319, 321, 327, 355, 374, 377, 382, 384, 389, 396, 414, 507, 516, 536, 636, 649, 651.

<sup>48</sup>Phillips, ‘Popular Politics’, 624.

disorder.<sup>49</sup> Table 3 shows the extent that parliamentary petitioning was not dominated by the higher ranks of society.

The legitimising source for wider involvement was the notion that petitioners were representing interests rather than individuals. Such language of interest was not used within the prayer of petitions, but was commonplace in the commentary surrounding a campaign.<sup>50</sup> One means to demonstrate that a policy was supportive of the public interest was to show in as transparent a way as possible that the constitutive interests of a locality or industry were on side. For example, opponents of the Rye Harbour Act of 1722 specifically requested a petition from landowners to justify their pamphlet arguments, echoing the strategic organisation of petitioning on the Don Navigation in the same year.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, this avoided the allegation that it was the self-interest of one section of society that was pushing for, or leading opposition to, a legislative proposal, because supporters of a position could demonstrate that their opinions were endorsed by a coalition of interests and localities. This produced a greater need to be precise in the descriptions of petitioners than had typically been present in contemporaneous accounts of society that tended to be less detailed the further down the social ranks they went.<sup>52</sup> Hence, a petition from Nottingham in 1765 did not come merely from ‘manufacturers’, but hosiers, framework knitters, stocking manufacturers, dealers, glove-makers and mitten-makers.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, a 1785 petition on the Irish commercial treaty was signed not only by cotton workers, but also by ‘velvet dyers’, ‘dyers of velverets’, ‘fustian dyers’, ‘cotton makers’, ‘cotton dyers’, and ‘linen dyers’.<sup>54</sup> Responsive petitioners were thus moving the political nation from being defined by corporate representation that anonymised the population below, towards a politics based upon interaction between interests.<sup>55</sup> The appeal that they made was for parliamentarians to umpire based on petitioner’s contribution to the public interest, rather than their numerical strength or rank.

A related reason for taking care when describing petitioners was the legitimacy that came from speaking from a position of authoritative knowledge. This was demonstrated by citing petitioner’s artisanal skills. West-country clothiers, it was written, ‘certainly must be the best judges’ on issues relating to their industry.<sup>56</sup> This returns us to one of the primary reasons why the state encouraged petitioning, because it was a means of sharing specific knowledge with society. As Perry Gauci has noted, the small numbers who signed mercantile petitions

<sup>49</sup>Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998), 224; John Walter, ‘Faces in the Crowd: Gender and Age in the Early Modern English Crowd’, in *The Family in Early Modern England*, ed. Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster (Cambridge, 2007), 97.

<sup>50</sup>Loft, ‘Involving the Public’, 17–22.

<sup>51</sup>East Sussex RO, DAP 16/3: decree of sewers for opposing a bill about Rye harbour, 18 Mar. 1722; T.S. Willan, *The Early History of the Don Navigation* (Manchester, 1965), 11, 91.

<sup>52</sup>I refer here to the social models of Gregory King, Joseph Massie, and Patrick Colquhoun, compared in Peter Mathias, ‘The Social Structure in the Eighteenth Century: A Calculation by Joseph Massie’, *Economic History Review*, x (1957), 42–5.

<sup>53</sup>*CJ*, xxx, 87.

<sup>54</sup>*CJ*, xl, 781.

<sup>55</sup>David Luebke, ‘Signatures and Political Culture in Eighteenth-Century Germany’, *Journal of Modern History*, lxxxiv (2004), 497–530; Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England’, *Journal of British Studies*, xlv (2006), 270–92.

<sup>56</sup>*A Dialogue Between Dick Brazenface the Card Maker, and Tim Meanwell the Clothier* (1711), 6.



implied that merchants mattered for their expertise, rather than popularity.<sup>57</sup> Politically, detailing petitioners' qualifications was also an effective tactic. Varied descriptions made petitioners appear spontaneous.<sup>58</sup> It also helped combat any perceptions that the public was irrational, or had been misled into signing.<sup>59</sup> An individual seeking to represent his or her interest was understood to act rationally. As George Berkeley wrote: 'he's a fool that acts on any other principle'.<sup>60</sup> This care taken to identify petitioners was a divergence from the Restoration practice, and is suggestive of the rising political stakes and the need to demonstrate that petitioners represented the 'general good' rather than a 'sham private interest'.<sup>61</sup> While 60% of Restoration petitions had only one descriptive term, this was the case in only 36% of petitions between 1688 and 1755. This declined again, to 24% between 1755 and 1788.<sup>62</sup>

It is notable that age was not part of the lexicon that petitioners employed to describe themselves. This is the opposite to the pattern found when petitioners attended parliamentary committees. At committees, age was deployed strategically to suggest that a witness's memory of the decay of trade or patterns of navigation could supplement or challenge information presented by engineers and parish officials.<sup>63</sup> Of the petitions to parliament presented before 1788, the last from England to refer to 'ancient' inhabitants was in 1738. Being employed as a campaigning tool in context of petitioning on the decay of the woollen trade in 1696 and poor relief, references to the petitioners' age were implying poverty rather than access to memory.<sup>64</sup>

The wealth and property of petitioners was also infrequently mentioned as a justification for their arguments. Most of the citations were related to communication schemes or enclosure legislation, which required the consent of a proportion of property-owners.<sup>65</sup> Those affected by the draining of land in Kent in 1776 or mill-owners impacted by the proposed Stour navigation in 1786, are two such examples.<sup>66</sup> Twelve owners of Scottish manufactories also thought fit to detail their wealth in the midst of the petitions from numerically much larger groups on the commercial treaty in 1785, some of the accompanying

<sup>57</sup>Gauci, 'Learning the Ropes of Sand', 110; Daeryoon Kim, 'Political Convention and the Merchant in the Later Eighteenth Century', in *Regulating the British Economy*, ed. Gauci, 131; William Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Williamsburg, VA, 2013), 123–4.

<sup>58</sup>Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt*, 126–7.

<sup>59</sup>Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*.

<sup>60</sup>Stephen Clark, 'Berkeley on Religion', in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth Winkler (Cambridge, 2005), 388.

<sup>61</sup>Staffordshire Archives, D(W)1778/1/ii/541: Robert Walmort to Lord Dartmouth, 9 Jan. 1719; *Answers in Behalf of the Well-Wishers to the Prosperity of the Nation, in Matters of Trade* (Edinburgh, 1700), 2.

<sup>62</sup>This is not a case of recording practices in the journals changing; the manuscript petitions presented to the Lords confirm this pattern.

<sup>63</sup>Hoppit, *Britain's Political Economies*, 207.

<sup>64</sup>*CJ*, viii, 187–8; xi, 623, 629, 631, 633, 648; xiv, 284; xv, 254, 496; xvi, 533, 682; xix, 28, 45, 49; xxi, 218. The last four references are to the building of churches, and so may be suggestive of a senior role in the community. The same may be the case on petitions on Westminster Bridge: *CJ*, xxiii, 36.

<sup>65</sup>W.E. Tate, 'Parliamentary Counter-Petitions during the Enclosures of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *EHR*, lix (1944), 396, 401–2.

<sup>66</sup>PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/268/35: Lydden and Sandwich petitions, 16 May 1776. These included 12 women and nine marks (of 107), and seven women and four marks (of 157), respectively; HL/PO/JO/10/3/278/41–2: Droitchwich petition, 1 May 1786. This included three women and seven marks as owners of mills (out of 67).

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petitions being 13,000 strong.<sup>67</sup> Such tactics allowed the petitioners to assert their ‘considerable majority, both with respect to number and value’.<sup>68</sup> Descriptions of the ‘greater’ or ‘most considerable’ landowners or traders are also rare – there were only 30 such references from traders and shopkeepers after 1750 compared with 700 groups who, instead, justified their presence by citing the goods they sold. As Alexandra Shepard has written, a reason to avoid citing personal wealth was that it could carry with it the connotation of seeking to advance one’s private interest rather than being concerned for the public good.<sup>69</sup>

If petitioners on matters of state frequently stressed their qualification to speak as flowing from their right to vote, and many subscribing interests emphasized their artisanal skill or specific knowledge, a further noteworthy means of establishing a legitimate voice was by describing petitioners as the ‘chief’ or ‘principal’ inhabitants, or ‘masters’ of others. The incidence of these terms confirms Henry French’s argument that the language of ‘chief’ inhabitants broadly matched an individual’s role in parish government.<sup>70</sup> However, while ‘chief’ and similar terms were commonly used to describe leading signatures to petitions on church matters, road building, high prices and poor relief in reflection of their role as ratepayers, churchwardens, trustees, and surveyors, it was not a status deemed useful to invoke on most of the economic subjects.<sup>71</sup> When the issue was the decay of an industry, petitioners were seeking to demonstrate the unity and the common chain of people who, instead of being divided by social rank, were united by shared interests. The locally-specific status of ‘chief inhabitant’ also made little sense in national debates over political economy, with parliament seeking to sort between national categories of economic interests.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps surprisingly and with the exception of petitions on wool riots, anti-slavery and political reform, petitioners did not generally attempt to undermine the authority of other inhabitants by emphasizing that only the ‘principal’ sort had sufficient qualifications to express judgment on the topics motivated by responsive petitions. Only 2% or 3% of petitions made reference to such social terms.<sup>73</sup> But because the invoked identities of the public in petitions was a strategic decision made according to the petition’s context and the arguments that campaign organisers advanced in parliament and through pamphlets, petitioning presented multiple faces of the same community to parliament.

In terms of illiterate men and women, groups almost uniformly absent from initiatory petitioning, their participation in responsive petitioning was clear but also restricted to select issues.<sup>74</sup> As a step down from the radical Leveller petitions of the civil war, on

<sup>67</sup> PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/277/51: proprietors of Scotland, 23 June 1785; *CJ*, xl, 759.

<sup>68</sup> *CJ*, xxxiv, 401.

<sup>69</sup> Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2015), 301.

<sup>70</sup> H.R. French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England, 1660–1750* (Oxford, 2008), 92, 127, 130. These statistics have been established through a search for social groups with these prefixes: considerable, principal, chief, capital, substantial, sufficient, ratepaying, respectable, praeses, extensive, and middle sort.

<sup>71</sup> From 1689 to 1788, 22 of the 155 petitions on poor relief came from only inhabitants, meaning that most had sponsorship.

<sup>72</sup> French, *Middle Sort*, 105–6.

<sup>73</sup> H.R. French, ‘Social Status, Localism and the “Middle Sort of People” in England 1620–1750’, *Past & Present*, No. 166 (2000), 76–7.

<sup>74</sup> Few men gave their marks in the Wilkite petitioning; see George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study of 1763 to 1774* (Oxford, 1962), 147. But see Edward Vallance, ‘Women, Politics and the 1723 Oaths of Allegiance to George I’, *HJ*, lix (2016), 975–99.

which thousands of women had participated and claimed an equal space in public politics, but continuing the tradition of female petitioning on issues of poor relief and property, women's signatures were concentrated on petitions where their role in the 'private' household or local parish could be extended into the public sphere.<sup>75</sup> The preservation and management of property and the politics of subsistence allowed the contribution of women to be acknowledged, echoing the practice in civil courts.<sup>76</sup> On other issues, because the emphasis was on citing the artisanal skills of petitioners to convince parliamentarians of their knowledge and the necessity of demonstrating that different interests were standing together, the work of women in aspects of textile manufacture and retail also made their participation recordable on petitions. This is not to say, however, that women did not act as networkers and 'scaffolders' of other petitioning campaigns, but the evidence of petitions is that their role was rendered invisible through their exclusion from actual subscription.<sup>77</sup>

To take each of these subjects in turn, women only crept into responsive petitions concerned with the defence of property. In the second half of the century, this saw women sign on enclosure (12 of 84 and 18 of 134, respectively),<sup>78</sup> land drainage in Lincolnshire, Kent and Cambridge (19 of 259, 1 of 41, and 6 of 42 respectively),<sup>79</sup> canal cutting (7 of 34),<sup>80</sup> and urban streets (1 of 53 and 17 of 322).<sup>81</sup> Here, women were included under the umbrella terms 'occupiers of houses', 'owners' or 'trustees', and so their participation occurred in line with familial responsibilities for managing property rather than wider claims of citizenship. In parish politics, women were also deeply integrated. This was the case on petitions dealing with the Lambeth and Norfolk poor (53 of 368 and 30 of 657),<sup>82</sup> a Gloucester gaol (124 of 585),<sup>83</sup> and the London night watch (79 of 2800).<sup>84</sup> Finally, we know that women formed a substantial portion of the weavers who protested regularly at Westminster in the 18th century, but this resulted in only a low level of subscription.<sup>85</sup> Only two of 182 subscribers on silk in 1721 were women,<sup>86</sup> but slightly higher were 17 of 74 on

<sup>75</sup>Hannah Worthen, 'Supplicants and Guardians: The Petitions of Royalist Widows during the Civil Wars and Interregnum, 1642–1660', *Women's History Review*, xxvi (2017), 528–40; Sylvana Tomaselli, 'The Most Public Sphere at All: The Family', in *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700–1830*, ed. Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona Ó Gallchoir and Penny Warburton (Cambridge, 2006), 239–56.

<sup>76</sup>Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (1998).

<sup>77</sup>Elaine Chalus, '“Ladies Are Often Very Good Scaffolding”: Women and Politics in the Age of Anne', *Parliamentary History*, xxviii (2009), 150–65.

<sup>78</sup>PA, HL/PO/JO/10/269/55: Shapwick enclosure, 13 May 1777; HL/PO/JO/10/3/257/21: Cummersdale enclosure, 8 Sept. 1766.

<sup>79</sup>PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/268/35–41: Kent drainage, 16 May 1776; HL/PO/JO/10/3/271/15: Billingham drainage, 3 Apr. 1778; HL/PO/JO/10/3/257/19: Streatham drainage, 6 May 1766.

<sup>80</sup>CJ, xxxi, 42.

<sup>81</sup>PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/256/22: Wareham rebuilding, 14 Apr. 1763; HL/PO/JO/10/3/250/2, 4, 10, 13–14: Islington to Paddington roads, Mar. 1756.

<sup>82</sup>PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/275/17/1–3: Lambeth poor, 12 Apr. 1783; HL/PO/JO/10/3/275/18, 23: Lambeth poor, 12 Apr. 1783; HL/PO/JO/10/3/267/18–20: Mitford and Launditch poor, 21 Apr. 1775.

<sup>83</sup>PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/273/44: Gloucester gaol, 9 May 1781.

<sup>84</sup>PA, HL/PO/JO/10/6/307: petition of the inhabitants of the city and liberty of Westminster, 29 Apr. 1720.

<sup>85</sup>*London Evening Post*, 16 May 1775, and for earlier, see Robert Shoemaker, 'The London “Mob” in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Journal of British Studies*, xxvi (1987), 273–304.

<sup>86</sup>PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/213/53–4: raw silk, 27 Apr. 1721.

a London petition against the import of calicoes in 1696.<sup>87</sup> The same pattern was found in the 1750s on linen and wool petitions, having a single woman in petitions with 66 and 444 subscribers.<sup>88</sup>

When they subscribed, female subscribers also tended to be included with illiterate men. For example, a petition on the Stourbridge canal in 1786 with 93 marks and 104 women out of a total of 324, saw men providing clear signatures at the top of the sheet.<sup>89</sup> The men providing what can be described as less distinct marks and shapes next to their names appeared with women closer towards the bottom and corners of sheets. These distinct clusters away from the top of petitions – appearing also on poor relief petitions and even on smaller petitions signed by just 40 – suggest that the involvement of these two groups was treated as more marginal to the petitioning process, and occurred at a later stage.<sup>90</sup> Whole parts of the attached sheets were nothing more than these two groups, suggesting that petitioning worlds joined only on paper rather than in physical time and space. Not all petitions were like this, however, and those from Gloucester in 1781, for a gaol, saw women and illiterate men interspersed throughout, suggesting that their subscription occurred side by side.<sup>91</sup> But importantly, these women subscribed together: 70% of female signatures on the Gloucester petitions came immediately before, after or within one name of another female signature, suggesting that women had gone together in small groups to sign.

The profile of petitioners was therefore flexible, but set within certain conventions that were focused on presenting the petition's prayer as informed and directed towards the public interest. For the most part, this rendered invisible the role of women even if they had participated in the accompanying protest. Bohstedt's argument that when politics moved out of the parish and towards labour organisations and trade committees, female participation was marginalised, does have an earlier parallel, in that the shift from protest to petition largely achieved the same result.<sup>92</sup>

With respect to male participants, the elastic political nation was deliberately re-fashioned to suit the different tests of reason and the public interest. Social identities presented in petitions did not present an objective social knowledge of status, but rather what was perceived to be the best support for the argument of the petition, strategically selecting whether to claim to represent a collection of voters, interests, or experts. This complexity of identity made length of work, interest, knowledge, and wealth available as legitimising tools. This does not mean that the hierarchy of society was becoming undone, however. There was an already set definition of legitimate initiatory petitioners by 1700, and it was not consistently broken until the last quarter of the century.

<sup>87</sup> PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/213/37: petition of retailers of calico, 28 Feb. 1721.

<sup>88</sup> PA, HL/PO/JO/10/7/123: petition of the drapers, 28 May 1759; HL/PO/JO/10/3/256/22: Yorkshire woollens, 7 May 1765.

<sup>89</sup> PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/278/52: Stourbridge canal, 1 May 1786.

<sup>90</sup> PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/267/18: Mitford and Launditch poor; HL/PO/JO/10/3/257/19: Streatham drainage, 6 May 1766.

<sup>91</sup> PA, HL/PO/JO/10/3/273/44: Gloucester gaol, 9 May 1781; HL/PO/JO/10/3/273/44–5: Gloucester gaol, 28 May 1781.

<sup>92</sup> John Bohstedt, 'Gender, Household and Community Politics: Women in English Riots, 1790–1810', *Past & Present*, No. 120 (1988), 113, 115, 118.

Spatially, responsive petitioning also enabled the representation of interests beyond the boundaries of parliamentary boroughs and county assizes. Petitioning thus aided the creation of a representative civil society that demonstrated its interests and agency to be distinct from the state, even if they did not assert popular sovereignty against parliament.<sup>93</sup>

In parallel to the functioning of ‘virtual representation’ where the property interests of MPs made them conscious of the interests of under-represented regions, petitioning provided the pre-1832 constitution with considerable flexibility.<sup>94</sup> As Table 4 shows, this ability was particularly important to London, Gloucester, the north, and the midlands. Counties over-represented at Westminster in terms of population, such as Cornwall, did not find their MPs backed up by the inhabitants themselves. Manchester, lacking its own representative, was able to send 150 responsive petitions between 1688 and 1788. Further south, unrepresented Newbury in Berkshire put together one petition every second year on average from 1689 to 1750, declining to every third year thereafter. At the other end of the scale, Bodmin in Cornwall, with two MPs, sent only three large responsive petitions over the whole period. Excluding petitions described as coming only from the general county community between 1688 and 1788, a third of Norfolk petitions cited the support of non-parliamentary towns and parishes, 76% from Yorkshire, and 88% in Surrey (excluding the borough of Southwark).<sup>95</sup>

The significance of this non-parliamentary borough involvement, was that responsive petitioning practices stood against that of initiatory and many acclamatory addresses for the majority of the century. They were also distinct from the habit of instruction-writing to MPs, where subscribers to instructions would be limited only to members of parliamentary boroughs and grand juries.<sup>96</sup> Even though initiatory petitions did occasionally draw upon the support of ‘inhabitants’ in addition to electors, they chose not to draw upon those resident outside the boundaries of parliamentary boroughs. Only 20 of the 210 addresses presented to the crown in 1702 came from outside the boundaries of parliamentary boroughs or the Cinque Ports of Kent and Sussex.<sup>97</sup> The 415 anti-jacobite addresses of 1745–6 also had only 32 not from corporations or grand juries, and only two of the 110 addresses presented in 1748 and 1758 broke from the pattern.<sup>98</sup> Of the freedoms of cities presented to William Pitt in 1757, all but one came from parliamentary boroughs.<sup>99</sup> In the 1769 Middlesex affair 18 counties and 20 boroughs petitioned, and the same pattern existed during the American crisis.<sup>100</sup> The same was the case in 1784, when only 6% of addresses came

<sup>93</sup>Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 381.

<sup>94</sup>Paul Langford, ‘Property and “Virtual Representation” in Eighteenth-Century England’, *HJ*, xxxi (1988), 83–115.

<sup>95</sup>Southwark sent 176 large petitions, compared with 200 from other individual sites in the wider county.

<sup>96</sup>Patrick Woodland, ‘Extra-Parliamentary Political Organisation in the Making: Benjamin Heath and the Opposition to the 1763 Cider Excise’, *Parliamentary History*, iv (1985), 117–18, 126–7.

<sup>97</sup>Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 146–7.

<sup>98</sup>*London Gazette*, 1745–58; 21–24 Jan. 1749, 30 Sept.–3 Oct. 1758.

<sup>99</sup>The exception was Birmingham: see Paul Langford, ‘William Pitt and Public Opinion, 1757’, *EHR*, lxxxviii (1973), 54–80.

<sup>100</sup>Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*, 112, 118. The exceptions in 1775 included Leeds, Halifax, and Bolton: see Bradley, *Religion and English Radicalism*, 320.

Table 4: *Distribution of English Constituencies and Large Responsive or Initiatory Petitioning (LRIP), 1689–1788*

	Parliamentary Seats %	Eng. Popn % in 1750	LRIP % 1689–1722	LRIP % 1723–55	LRIP % 1756–88
Northumberland	1.6	2.2	0.7	0.7	1.2
Cumberland	1.2	1.4	0.7	0.3	0.5
Westmorland	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.3	0.5
Durham	0.8	2.2	0.9	1.2	0.8
Lancashire	2.9	5.4	5.1	4.7	5.3
Yorkshire	6.2	8.8	8.7	7.5	11.2
North Total	13.6	20.6	16.7	14.7	20.0
Herefordshire	0.6	1.4	1.1	0.6	0.6
Worcestershire	1.9	1.9	3.5	2.9	3.2
Warwickshire	1.2	2.2	2.1	2.4	2.9
Northamptonshire	1.9	2.0	0.7	2.4	1.0
Rutland	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Leicestershire	0.8	1.6	0.9	0.8	1.0
Shropshire	2.5	2.3	0.6	0.6	2.8
Staffordshire	2.1	2.5	1.6	1.2	4.5
Cheshire	0.8	2.1	3.6	2.0	2.2
Derbyshire	0.8	1.8	1.6	0.9	1.7
Nottinghamshire	1.6	1.5	0.7	0.8	1.9
Midlands Total	14.6	19.5	17.9	14.9	22.3
Lincolnshire	2.5	2.8	1.1	1.9	3.0
Norfolk	2.5	4.0	3.1	1.6	2.3
Suffolk	3.3	2.8	2.2	1.2	1.2
Essex	1.6	3.2	2.8	2.5	1.2
Cambridgeshire	1.2	1.2	0.7	2.2	1.4
Huntingdonshire	0.8	1.3	0.4	1.4	0.5
Bedfordshire	0.8	0.9	0.8	1.2	0.3
Hertfordshire	1.2	0.5	1.4	1.5	0.9
Buckinghamshire	2.9	1.5	0.7	1.4	1.0
Eastern Total	16.9	18.2	13.2	14.8	11.8
Middlesex & London	1.6	9.9	9.1	21.7	11.7
Berkshire	1.9	1.6	2.0	2.1	1.5
Surrey	2.9	2.6	1.1	1.8	2.6
Sussex	5.8	2.6	1.1	1.6	2.1
Kent	3.7	3.1	2.6	4.8	3.8
Southeast Total	15.8	19.8	15.9	32.0	21.8
Dorset	4.1	1.6	1.9	1.1	1.9
Hampshire	5.3	2.4	2.8	2.1	2.2
Wiltshire	7.0	2.8	5.1	3.6	2.7

(Continued)

Table 4: *Continued*

	Parliamentary Seats %	Eng. Popn % in 1750	LRIP % 1689–1722	LRIP % 1723–55	LRIP % 1756–88
Somerset	3.7	3.9	7.0	2.8	3.1
Gloucestershire	1.6	3.5	7.9	7.4	4.5
Oxfordshire	1.9	1.6	0.8	1.1	1.4
Cornwall	9.1	2.2	1.7	0.9	1.9
Devon	5.3	5.0	8.4	4.0	4.3
Southwest Total	38.1	23.0	35.7	23.0	21.2

Notes: Definitions of regions are those applied in Paul Langford, 'Property and "Virtual Representation" in Eighteenth-Century England', *HJ*, xxxi (1988), 83–115. Population is from E.A. Wrigley, 'Rickman Revisited: The Population Growth Rates of English Counties in the Early Modern Period', *Economic History Review*, lxii (2009), 721, table 3.

Sources: See Figure 1.

from non-parliamentary boroughs or grand juries.<sup>101</sup> Being a non-parliamentary borough did not prevent its corporation from expressing itself through petitioning, but it was rare in acclamatory and initiatory petitioning for most of the century.

In terms of the geography of petitioning, the second notable feature is how English the activity was. Before 1707, Scottish politics saw extensive outbreaks of petitioning, and the period immediately after the Union also saw substantial levels of petitioning to Scottish governing institutions.<sup>102</sup> But only 600 petitions were sent from Scotland in the 80 years after 1707, and a negligible number of responsive petitions came from Britain's colonies: on average, only one a year from 1755 to 1783. Petitioning in this sense did not contribute to the integration of local, regional and national issues across Britain and its empire.<sup>103</sup>

## 5

Throughout the early modern period, the public had a considerable role both in sharing knowledge with parliamentarians, and providing them with a sense of where the public interest lay via pamphlets, petitions, the vote, crowd politics, and holding local office. The 18th-century state continued as this 'hybrid', balancing elements of public participation, oligarchy and representation.<sup>104</sup> Rather than treating the 1780s as a watershed in the intensity of petitioning, we can see the continuity in popular political participation across the

<sup>101</sup> *London Gazette*, Jan.–May 1784; Phillips, 'Popular Politics', 602.

<sup>102</sup> Karin Bowie, 'Popular Opinion, Popular Politics and the Union of 1707', *Scottish Historical Review*, lxxxii (2003), 229, 232.

<sup>103</sup> Only 30 large responsive petitions from Ireland and North America were presented to parliament in the years after 1760.

<sup>104</sup> Knights, 'Participation and Representation', 37.

period. The 18th century experienced a ‘thickening’ of petitioning, rather than its fundamental transformation.<sup>105</sup>

Despite marking an awareness that the interests of the nation were potentially distinct from those of the crown, subscription activity also continued to demonstrate features of oligarchy. The geography and subscribers of instructions and large numbers of addresses continued to anonymise the lower ranks, and those resident beyond the boundaries of boroughs. The right to voice opinion on key aspects of the state remained exclusive, and the communicative circuit between parliament and the nation remained much smaller on issues of reform and the repeal of legislation, than on the question of England’s improvement via legislative action. Responsive petitioning mattered, because it helped move petitioning out from being a privileged channel of communication between institutions and the state. It was a form of participation that suggested that the possession of knowledge and interest stood alongside landed property as a means to empower a legitimate ‘popular’ voice.<sup>106</sup>

Even though the 1780s saw no great break from the numbers of petitions presented in the early part of the century, participation in initiatory petitions did become broader. Thanks in part to Wilkes and the Middlesex election affair in 1769, the dislocation resulting from the American conflict and the reform association of 1780, initiatory petitioning moved from tending to originate from a parliamentary borough via an instruction, to a tool employed by the male population more generally. Although the number of petitions to parliament in the period after 1780 was not mould-breaking, the ‘age of reform’ widened the basis of the political nation and at times publicised the arguments of radicals that reform was not possible within the confines of the electoral system as it then stood.<sup>107</sup> This also produced a counter-reaction, however. The surviving petitions from manufacturing chambers looked backwards to the tradition of a single individual being capable of speaking for a whole community, rather than requiring demonstration through collective subscription.<sup>108</sup>

Finally, although in the early modern period there was a shift towards resolving disputed elections by determining the popularity of a candidate, petitions continued to be weighed by more than the numerical strength of their subscribers. This article has shown that petitioners legitimised their role through being the most knowledgeable, the most expert, or the best judges of the public interest. The meaning of putting a mark was often to provide credence to the arguments within the prayer of the petition or advanced more widely by lobbyists and writers, who hoped to demonstrate the range of interests and localities set to lose or gain from proposed legislation. As the gathering of signatures on petitions became more common, it also became more important to establish the qualifications of petitioners in order to arbitrate between them. Even as public opinion seemed to be assuming a new importance in politics, petitioners continued to talk to interest and reason as the means to arbitrate in a divided society.

<sup>105</sup>Huzzey, ‘Contesting Interests’, 3–4, 17.

<sup>106</sup>Hoppit, *Britain’s Political Economies*, 151.

<sup>107</sup>T.M. Parssinen, ‘Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics, 1771–1848’, *EHR*, lxxxviii (1973), 504–33; Innes, ‘Legislation and Public Participation’, 115–17, 120.

<sup>108</sup>Bennett, *Local Business Voice*, 158, 165, 167.