

Involving the Public: Parliament, Petitioning, and the Language of Interest, 1688–1720

Philip Loft

Abstract This article examines the nature of petitioning to the Westminster Parliament from the beginnings of the “rage of party” to the establishment of the whig oligarchy. It uses the largely unused archive of the House of Lords, which survived the parliamentary fire in 1834, to provide systematic evidence of public subscription to petitions produced in response to legislation. A total of 330 “large responsive petitions,” signed by fifty-six thousand people, were presented to the Lords between 1688 and 1720. This enabled a wide range of social and geographical groups to lobby Parliament. Parliamentarians actively sought to direct the public into voicing opinion through petitioning on matters of policy. The intervention of the language of “interest” from the mid-seventeenth century helped to legitimize and control public involvement in politics in the eyes of elites, and offered an alternative to political mobilization based on party allegiances and conceptions of society organized by ranks or sorts. The participation of the public through a regulated process of petitioning ensured that the whig oligarchy was porous and open to negotiation, despite the passage of the Septennial Act and declining party and electoral strife after 1716.

That early modern Britain had a “petitioning culture” is well known. Addresses and petitions were gathered to acclaim the accession of monarchs, raise a grievance, launch legal appeals, and support parliamentary bills. In the 1640s, and again in the 1760s, petitions were signed by thousands of people to aid campaigns against the church and crown, and later in support of parliamentary reform and the abolition of slavery.¹ Historians have shown that the late Stuart period saw an outpouring of addresses and loyalist subscription campaigns, and that communities and interest groups petitioned Parliament frequently throughout the eighteenth century.² More recently, Scott Sowerby has used addresses to map

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¹ The petitions of the 1640s are explored in Antony Fletcher, *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (London, 1981), 192, 195, 224. For an overview of petitioning in the eighteenth century, see Peter Fraser, “Public Petitioning and Parliament Before 1832,” *History* 46, no. 158 (October 1961): 195–211; Joanna Innes, “Legislation and Public Participation,” in *The British and Their Laws*, ed. David Lemmings (Woodbridge, 2005), 102–32; Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain* (Oxford, 2005), chap. 3.

² Stuart Handley, “Provincial Influence on General Legislation: The Case of Lancashire, 1689–1731,” *Parliamentary History* 16, no. 2 (July 1997): 171–84, at 172; Mark Knights, “London’s ‘Monster’ Petition

support for James II's religious policies.³ But these previous accounts have not systematically investigated the numbers subscribing to these petitions, the weight of opinion they reflected, and the ways in which petitioners legitimized and imagined their participation. Since the records of the House of Lords survived the parliamentary fire in 1834, its archive can provide systematic evidence of the extent of popular involvement in the petitioning of the Lords throughout the early modern period.

Petitions were submitted to Parliament and the Crown for a variety of reasons throughout the long eighteenth century. In the period covered by this article, 1688 to 1720, nearly four thousand petitions were made to the Lords. Broadly speaking, there were three main forms of petitioning.⁴ First, the majority of petitions to Parliament were procedural in nature, and had only a small number of signatures. These petitions were not created to oppose policy, but to introduce private bills and legal appeals to the Lords.⁵ The second form of petitioning is what I call large responsive petitions, and is the focus of this article. These are the petitions with more than twenty signatures that were supporting or contesting legislation already before Parliament. Between 1689 and 1720, a total of fifty-six thousand people signed one of the 330 large responsive petitions on legislative matters to the Lords.⁶ William Pettigrew has estimated that the proportion of counter petitions rose from 1 percent of all petitions presented to Parliament in 1660 to 24 percent by 1713, making large responsive petitions an important feature of politics after 1689.⁷ In order to differentiate the 330 petitions under investigation from those introducing business to Parliament, the adversarial addresses of the Episcopalians, political petitions of the Wilkites, and mass petitions of the Chartists, I refer to them as responsive petitions, as they were produced in response to legislation and were not initiating debates in the public sphere.⁸ The third form of petitions, those concerned with constitutional and religious issues, were not presented to the Lords in this period.⁹

of 1680," *Historical Journal* 36, no. 1 (March 1993): 39–67; idem, "Regulation and Rival Interest in the 1690s," in *Regulating the British Economy, 1660–1850*, ed. Perry Gauci (Farnham, 2011), 63–82. Some mercantile petitions are examined in Perry Gauci, *The Politics of Trade: The Overseas Merchant in State and Society, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 2001), and William Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1672–1752* (Chapel Hill, 2013), chap. 4.

³ Scott Sowerby, *Making Toleration: The Repealers and the Glorious Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 145–52, 194–212.

⁴ This division follows that advanced in Innes, "Legislation and Public Participation," 114–15.

⁵ For the role of petitions in relation to private bills, see Shelia Lambert, *Bills and Acts: Legislative Procedure in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1971), chap. 5. I examine appeals to the House of Lords in "Peers, Parliament and Power under the Revolution Constitution, 1685–1720" (PhD diss., University College London, 2015), chaps. 1–2.

⁶ I focus on petitions with more than twenty signatures in order to make sense of the large number of petitions to Parliament and identify a separate "class" of legislative petitions. This is a means of filtering out petitions on less "general" issues and identifying those that drew in the public and reflected a degree of political organization by an interest group or a locality.

⁷ William Pettigrew, "Constitutional Change in England and the Diffusion of Regulatory Initiative, 1660–1714," *History* 99, no. 338 (December 2014): 839–63, at 851.

⁸ For adversarial addressing, see Karin Bowie, "Scottish Public Opinion and the Making of the Union of 1707," 2 vols. (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2004), 2:196–98.

⁹ For more on political petitioning during the eighteenth century, see Mark Knights, "The 1780 Protestant Petitions and the Culture of Petitioning," in *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture, and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Ian Haywood and John Seed (Cambridge, 2012), 46–69; John

This article examines the effect of the transformation of Parliament's role as a legislative marketplace after 1689 on the pattern of petitioning activity and the extent of public involvement in the signing of petitions. After 1689, parliamentary statutes increasingly replaced orders of the Privy Council, royal proclamations, and court judgments as the means by which interest groups regulated the British economy.¹⁰ The central state was a reactive one, with most legislation reflecting the lobbying and petitioning of interest groups and individuals.¹¹ Petitioning allowed local communities to represent themselves to Parliament, bring legitimacy to its decisions, and reduce the tensions between the center and locality that created the instability of the seventeenth century.¹² In this form, petitioning offered a means for the middling and lower sorts to lobby for changes in policy, during what used to be seen as the "aristocratic century."¹³

Subscribing to large responsive petitions raised concerns across the political spectrum about the capacity of the public to be rational arbiters of policy disputes. The responses of parliamentarians to these concerns are the second focus of this article. Mark Knights has shown that contemporaries believed the partisan electoral conflicts in the late Stuart period had manipulated the public, who, consequently, could not be trusted to act in a rational way.¹⁴ The divided nature of public opinion, the accusations of lying, and the alleged mercenary behavior of voters during elections raised questions about the capacity of the public to judge the claims of competing parties. In Knights's account, anxieties over the decay of public discourse and the decay of reasoned debate were among the factors resulting in the Septennial Act of 1716, which reduced the frequency of general elections from every three to every seven years.

Petitioning, even on local acts of Parliament, also raised concerns about misrepresentation, lying, and the participation of ignorant and poorer sorts. In response, MPs and peers attempted to regulate the public voice and encourage its expression through more consensual mechanisms. With the Tumultuous Petitioning Act of 1661 and the Riot Act of 1716, political elites sought to circumscribe petitioning and violent riot of the kind experienced during the upheavals of the 1640s and the "rage of party" in the late Stuart period. They encouraged instead a more deliberative politics, where petitioners would participate within limits and with regard to laws proposed by elites and middling sorts. Just as they participated less frequently in the election of MPs, the public was discouraged from commenting on constitutional

Phillips, "Popular Politics in Unreformed England," *Journal of Modern History* 52, no. 4 (December 1980): 599–625.

¹⁰ Julian Hoppit, "Parliamentary Legislation, 1660–1800," *Historical Journal* 39, no. 1 (March 1996): 109–31; William Pettigrew, "Regulatory Inertia and National Economic Growth," in *Regulating the British Economy*, ed. Perry Gauci, 25–41.

¹¹ Tim Keirn and Lee Davidson, "The Reactive State: English Governance and Society, 1690–1750," in *Stilling the Grumbling Hive: The Response to Social and Economic Problems in England, 1689–1750*, ed. Lee Davidson, Tim Hitchcock, and Robert Shoemaker (Stroud, 1992), xi–liv.

¹² Julian Hoppit and Joanna Innes, eds., *Failed Legislation, 1660–1800: Extracted from the Commons and Lords Journals* (London, 1997); Norma Landau, "Country Matters: 'The Growth of Political Stability' a Quarter-Century On," *Albion* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 261–74; Sir John Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675–1725* (London, 1967).

¹³ John Cannon, *Aristocratic Century: The Peerage of Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1984); Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (Oxford, 1990), chap. 3.

¹⁴ Mark Knights, "John Locke and Post-Revolutionary Politics: Electoral Reform and the Franchise," *Past and Present* 213, no. 1 (November 2011): 41–86; idem, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, chap. 7.

and religious issues through petitioning. But parliamentarians were largely content for the public to comment on the local and specific matters that petitioners would have known through their everyday lives. This meant eighteenth-century Britain was still ruled by an oligarchy, but, in Paul Langford's words, "it was one which operated within a restricted framework and on a consensual basis; it accepted the priorities of a broadly bourgeois society."¹⁵ Petitioning provided a mechanism for the public to demonstrate where the public interest and majority lay, helping political elites to understand and manage the greater plurality of interests present in the eighteenth century. The weakening of oligarchy in the 1760s reflected a shift from petitioning as a "responsive" mechanism to one that initiated debates in the public sphere, as was the case in the campaigns of John Wilkes or the antislavery movement.

I begin by exploring the chronological and geographical distribution of large responsive petitioning from 1689 to 1720. I then consider the nature of restrictions on petitioning and ask why parliamentarians had an increasingly tolerant attitude to this form of public participation. I conclude with a discussion of the impact of petitioning on political culture, the role of the language of "interest," and the nature of oligarchy in early modern Britain.

PATTERNS OF PETITIONING

The 330 large responsive petitions presented to the House of Lords from 1689 to 1720 represent a significant increase from the levels of petitioning during the Restoration period, reflecting the more frequent meeting of Parliament and growth in its legislative business. Table 1 shows the chronological incidence of large responsive petitions to the Lords. There were two main prompts encouraging petitioning in this period. The first were the economic policies pursued in the postwar periods, namely bills dealing with the silk and wool industries in the late 1690s and trade with France and Spain during the 1710s. The second was the "working up [of] a temper" of parliamentarians into a "love of navigation" after the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697 and again between 1717 and 1722, when projectors funded "bubbles" in river and road improvement schemes.¹⁶ The expansion of the number of projecting schemes in the context of the South Sea Bubble, together with the tensions of the "Calico Crisis," were responsible for this outburst of petitioning after 1717; a decline in the frequency of general elections after the repeal of the Triennial Act was not its cause. Significantly, no large responsive petitions were sent to the Lords on religious issues in this period. It is probable that the frequency of general elections provided a more attractive forum for the expression of religious partisanship. Unlike debates on communication projects or economic regulation where divisions were based on the "clashing of interests" or local rivalries, religion was fundamental in the division between whigs and tories, and capable of being a determining factor in any electoral contest.¹⁷

¹⁵ Langford, *Public Life*, vii.

¹⁶ Ashton Papers, River Weaver Navigation, British Library (hereafter BL) Add MSS 36914, fol. 84.

¹⁷ One notable exception is the dispute between the old and new East India companies, which did have a party-political dimension, but no large responsive petitions were presented to the Lords on this subject.

Table 1—Chronological Distribution of Large Responsive Petitions to the House of Lords, 1689–1720

Time Period of Parliamentary Sessions	Number of Signatures	Total Number of Large Responsive Petitions (20 Signatures or More)	Number of Petitions with 50–100 Signatures	Number of Petitions with More Than 100 Signatures
1689–1694	19,807	15	3	4
1695–1700	10,935	105	30	35
1701–1706	2,926	37	21	6
1707–1712	1,216	20	5	4
1713–1717	4,209	38	14	15
1717–1720	16,572	112	23	50

Sources: HL/PO/JO/10/1 Main Papers; HL/PO/JO/10/6 Main Papers; HL/PO/JO/10/3 Main Papers (Large Parchments), Parliamentary Archives (hereafter PA).

Note: There were two sessions in 1717; the second, which ran into 1718, has been counted in the last time bracket.

Knights has suggested that there may have been a shift from “innovative petitioning to a form of national acclamation” in the late 1710s, which threatened the growth of the public sphere and critical debate.¹⁸ If this had occurred in isolation, it would indicate that because the public increasingly chose to sign addresses to demonstrate loyalty and allegiance to the government, the public’s role as a regular and critical arbiter of policy disputes was weakened. However, [table 1](#) suggests that extensive public mobilization continued, expanding the political nation and the extent of negotiation on policy. Responsive petitions to Parliament raised and maintained partisan divisions in periods when addresses were few in number, as they were in the early 1690s and the late 1710s, ensuring that “a civil war [rages] among neighbourhoods and societies,” though motivated by the “clash of interests,” rather than the “rage of party.”¹⁹ There was no contraction in the number of large responsive petitions during the period from 1689 to 1720—a year that saw nearly seventy thousand people sign a petition to Parliament if petitions to the Lords are representative of petitions to the Commons. The hostile rhetoric against the “more violent and lasting heats and animosities among the subjects” found in the Septennial Act, the Riot Act, or against the Kentish petition of 1701 seems to have had little, if any, impact on the extent of public involvement in responsive petitioning.²⁰

The pattern represented in [table 1](#) can be seen only as suggestive of the general trend in large responsive petitioning. As Julian Hoppit has shown, most bills

For a discussion of the affair, see Henry Horwitz, “The East India Trade, the Politicians, and the Constitution, 1689–1702,” *Journal of British Studies* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 1–18.

¹⁸ Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 162.

¹⁹ Daniel Defoe, *A New Test of the Sence of the Nation ...* (London, 1710), 82–83, 85–86; Mark Knights, “Participation and Representation before Democracy: Petitions and Addresses in Pre-Modern Britain,” in *Political Representation*, ed. Ian Shapiro et al. (Cambridge, 2010), 45–46, table 2.2; idem, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 123.

²⁰ Septennial Act 1715, 1 Geo. I St 2, c. 38.

failed in the Commons, suggesting most petitioning would have occurred there, making the wider trend a different one.²¹ For example, the national campaign against the leather duty saw 154 petitions presented only to the Commons in 1697; straw hat makers presented thirteen petitions to the Commons in 1719, with peers receiving none.²² Bills that reached the Lords tended to receive fewer petitions: the bill to improve the navigation of the River Tone in 1699 resulted in only one petition to the Lords, but six to the Commons.²³ There were also specific factors that led petitioners to appeal to peers. The Commons were not as receptive to the inhabitants of Wales in 1689 as the Lords, complaining that “they had several petitions ... [but because they] were not well obtained, they did not see fit to read them.”²⁴ Interest groups sometimes chose to rely on one house. The London Weaver’s Company petitioned only the Lords between 1718 and 1720, presumably reflecting the strength of their interest in the upper house.²⁵ Thus, the data from the Lord’s archive can reflect only a small proportion of overall petitioning activity relating to Parliament.

The ability of the public to appeal to other parts of the state and resolve issues in institutions other than Parliament also had an impact on the incidence of petitioning. London livery companies and the corporation were capable of addressing the demands of interest groups before Parliament became involved. Curriers petitioned the curriers company in January 1700; the company also gave journeymen twenty pounds to support their petition to Parliament.²⁶ London’s common council was subject to lobbying by outside interests, 120 inhabitants attended the council in support of a petition in 1717 and cheesemongers petitioned the council in 1720.²⁷ The treasury was also petitioned, but the petitions it received were far smaller in size compared to those presented to Parliament. A petition on the regulation of Hackney coaches had nearly 120 signatures and was the largest that treasury ministers received between 1689 and 1720.²⁸ Individuals were petitioned, too, such as Viscount Weymouth, whom sixty-five landholders in Frome petitioned in 1710 for his support.²⁹ But it was the Westminster Parliament that received petitions with the largest number of signatories, reflecting its central role in making policy after 1688.

Public involvement in responsive petitioning was firmly part of late Stuart and early Hanoverian political culture. Throughout the eighteenth century, responsive petitioning was high and could be national in scope. Large numbers of petitions

²¹ Hoppit and Innes, eds., *Failed Legislation*, 14–15.

²² Brewer, *The Sinews of Power*, 233; *Commons Journal* (hereafter *CJ*), xix, 245, 249–52, 273, 276–77, 283. Petitions on finance matters were presented to the Commons, reflecting the financial privileges of the lower house.

²³ *CJ*, xii, 154, 423–24, 441, 465; *Lords Journal* (hereafter *LJ*), xvi, 380.

²⁴ *CJ*, x, 103–4.

²⁵ Weavers Court Minutes, CLC/L/WC/B/001/MS04655/011, fols. 245L, 290L, London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA).

²⁶ Curriers Court Minutes, CLC/L/CK/B/002/MS06113/001, fols. 77, 83, LMA.

²⁷ Court of Aldermen Minutes, 21 April 1707, COL/CA/02/02/9; Court of Aldermen Minutes, April 1717, COL/CA/02/02/12; Court of Common Council Minutes, January 1720, COL/CC/03/01/2, LMA.

²⁸ The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Petition of Hackney Coachmen, December 1694, T 1/31/59.

²⁹ Petition of the Landholders of Frome, 1710/11, PET/1/33, PA.

were received by Parliament from across England against the leather duty in 1697, with 154 petitions sent to the Commons, and from across Great Britain in 1719, when 220 petitions were received by both houses on the Calico Bill.³⁰ Between 1730 and 1732, 109 communities petitioned the Commons against the practices of hawkers and peddlers.³¹ This activity compares favorably with the sixty petitions, mainly from the Midlands and Scotland, to Parliament against the Irish trade propositions of 1785.³² It is at a comparable level to the 1640s, when sixteen petitions were presented complaining of the decay of trade in 1642.³³ The collection of thousands of signatures on petitions relating to economic bills in the 1780s had some early parallels in the late Stuart and early Hanoverian period, though later in the century petitions were greater in frequency and size.³⁴

The level of national petitioning reflects the awareness of a shared grievance and capacity for national organization amongst different communities and interests, even if petitioners' descriptions of themselves retained a focus on their specific locality and interest. London curriers had ordered their clerk to write to supporters in the country to "desire their assistance in money and making interest of the members of Parliament," and entered into correspondence with Bristol curriers to draft a petition.³⁵ London weavers sent copies of their petition to Norwich in November 1719 to encourage its allies there to petition on the Calico Bill.³⁶ The brother ports of Kent and Sussex frequently coordinated petitions along the southeast coast during the 1710s and 1720s. The mayor of Folkestone had been able to gain the support of Great Yarmouth's corporation to petition for "our own common interest."³⁷ The response of Folkestone's mayor to the presentation of petitions from the "western towns [was to] hope Hythe, Sandwich, Dover, Rye, and Hastings will do the same."³⁸ The final petitions were jointly agreed by the ports.³⁹ London was an important point where interest groups could coordinate their petitioning, but campaigns were also organized in the localities. Cheshire tanners had written to "all the county towns in the north and west of England" on leather issues, and planned to "join ... [their] petition with ... several others of the like nature from

³⁰ Petitions on the Act For Preserving and Encouraging the Woollen and Silk Manufactures of this Kingdom, 5–28 April 1720, HL/PO/JO/10/3/212/39-68, PA; *CJ*, xix, 180–391.

³¹ Jacob Price, "The Excise Affair Revisited," in *England's Rise to Greatness*, ed. Stephen Baxter (Los Angeles, 1983), 257–322, at 293.

³² David Schweitzer, "The Failure of William Pitt's Irish Propositions 1785," *Parliamentary History* 3, no. 1 (December 1984): 129–45, at 132.

³³ Beat Kümin and Andreas Wügler, "Petitions, Gravamina and the Early Modern State: Local Influence on Central Legislation in England and Germany (Hesse)," *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* 17, no. 1 (1997): 39–60, at 52; Fletcher, *The Outbreak of the Civil War*, 192, 195, 224.

³⁴ Joanna Innes, "People and Power in British Politics to 1850," in *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750–1850*, ed. Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (Oxford, 2013), 129–46, at 140.

³⁵ Curriers Court Minutes, CLC/L/CK/B/002/MS06113/001, 83, LMA; Curriers Annual Accounts, CLC/L/CK/D/001/MS14346/003, 159, LMA.

³⁶ Natalie Rothstein, "The Calico Campaign of 1719–1721," *East London Papers* 7 (July 1964): 3–21, at 9.

³⁷ Mayor of Folkestone to New Romney Borough, 26 March 1716, NR/AZ/79, fol. 1, Kent Archives (hereafter KA).

³⁸ Mayor of Folkestone to New Romney Borough, 12 April 1716, NR/AZ/79, fol. 1, KA.

³⁹ Corporations of Winchelsea, Rye and Hastings to New Romney Borough, 17–18 April 1716, NR/AZ/79, fol. 3, KA.

Bristol, Exeter, Worcester, Gloucester, Sudbury, and Shrewsbury.”⁴⁰ They had previously written “to our brethren in the country of Cumberland” with intelligence on parliamentary business, and had received information from supporters in Bristol.⁴¹ Even dispossessed groups were capable of national coordination. *The Cry of the Oppressed* recorded that sixty-five debtors prisons had been advised “to petition all the members of the several counties” on a bill for their relief. Fisherton prison in Salisbury was said to have petitioned thirty-one MPs as a result.⁴²

This petitioning culture was not only a feature of London or urban society. Extensive petitioning campaigns occurred in the localities and more rural regions. Table 3 shows the geographic distribution of large responsive petitions. The number of petitions from London totaled sixty-nine, constituting 20 percent of those presented between 1689 and 1720. The geographic distribution of petitions reflects the legislative issues that motivated them. Proposed legislation for improving river navigation and building new ports resulted in petitions from Yorkshire, Cumberland, and the northern Midlands; the regulation of the cloth and wool industries encouraged petitions from the West Country; and the enclosure of the New Forest led to petitions coming from Hampshire. Petitioners equivalent in number to a fifth of the voterates of Wiltshire were mobilized to petition the Lords on the wool industry and road communication in 1714 and 1717 respectively, while inhabitants equal in number to half the voterates of both Chester and Durham petitioned on navigation bills.⁴³ The largest petition of this period came from Wales, in support of a bill for the abolition of the Council of the Marches, and was signed by eighteen thousand people (equal in size to the entire voterate of the principality).⁴⁴ Significantly, the court had been re-established in 1660 with the support of petitions signed by three thousand people sent to the crown from Worcester, Hereford, and Shropshire.⁴⁵ But during the Restoration its judgements had been frequently subject to prohibitions by other courts, halting the implementation of its decisions. The council, which the petitioners argued to be “oppressive,” “useless,” and “different to other courts,” was removed in 1689, with the result that the Welsh appealed to the Courts of Westminster

⁴⁰ Northern Tanners to Tanners of Chester, 1712, ZG 21/8/25; Ralph Doll to Thomas Wilson, 4 April 1717, ZG 21/8/59, Cheshire Archives (hereafter CA).

⁴¹ William and Thomas Wilson to Edward Croughton, 13 March 1711, ZG 21/8/30, CA; Bristol Tanners to Chester Tanners, 18 March 1712, ZG 21/8/32, CA.

⁴² Moses Pitt, *The Cry of the Oppressed ...* (London, 1691), v.

⁴³ The term *voterate* refers to the number of electors actually voting, as only in a small number of constituencies is it possible to provide estimates of the electorate. Figures are from Eveline Cruickshanks, Stuart Handley, and David Hayton, eds., *The House of Commons, 1690–1715*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, 2002), vol. 2; Petitions on the Woollen Industry, 2–7 July 1714, HL/PO/JO/10/3/205/15–17; Kensington Road Act, 14 June–5 July 1717, HL/PO/JO/10/3/208/19–27, PA; River Weaver Navigation, 6 April–2 May 1720, HL/PO/JO/10/3/212/20–38, PA; River Wear Navigation, 18–20 May 1717, HL/PO/JO/10/6/271/4026, PA; HL/PO/JO/10/3/208/10–11, PA.

⁴⁴ Petition of the Several of Inhabitants of Wales, 1 June 1689, HL/PO/JO/10/1/408/80, PA. Figures are from Cruickshanks, Handley, and Hayton, eds., *The House of Commons*, 2:781–822. Those areas signing the petition include Carmarthenshire, Denbighshire, Llandudno, Montgomeryshire, and Pembroke.

⁴⁵ Caroline Skeel, *The Council in the Marches of Wales: A Study of Local Government During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1904), 167–68; TNA, State Papers, 29/27–39/84–131, Petitions on the Council of the Marches, 10 July 1661.

Hall on civil cases.⁴⁶ The abolition of one of the last Welsh institutions was embraced by the rural population of the province, who were able to mobilize in such numbers to produce a petition larger in size than that collected in London during the Exclusion Crisis.⁴⁷

Although no large responsive petitions came from Scotland to the House of Lords before 1720, Scotland had a strong petitioning culture. In 1689, there was “a petition by several thousand hands for the settlement of that kingdom according to the example of England,” and petitions were also collected to dissolve the Union in 1713.⁴⁸ As Karin Bowie has shown, seventy-nine addresses were organized against the Treaty of Union in late 1706 and early 1707. These represented the hostility of around twenty thousand subscribers, with different communities able to shape the messages of each address.⁴⁹ Lower levels of Scottish legislation at Westminster meant national institutions in Scotland were important recipients of popular pressure and seen as fora to pursue local schemes for improvement, especially in the early stages of union. In August 1709, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland received “addresses subscribed by some thousands of hands from Edinburgh, and the places about, against ... [the] abuses” of the Episcopal minister James Green-shields. He had appealed to the Lords from the Court of Session against their suppression of his reading of the English liturgy in Scotland.⁵⁰ The Convention of Royal Burghs also served as a significant point of contact for Scottish localities after 1707, and often lobbied the Westminster Parliament on behalf of Scottish interests.⁵¹ But, as Bob Harris has shown, Scottish petitioning to Westminster did increase as the century continued.⁵² Forty petitions had been sent to the Commons on the Calico Bill in 1719 and petitions had also been presented in defense of Scottish linen interests throughout the 1710s.⁵³ By the 1780s, the presence of parliamentary agents in London, regular news from correspondents in the Scottish press, and more legislation specific to Scotland combined to create a large growth in Scottish petitioning directed to the Parliament at Westminster.⁵⁴

This survey of petitioning to the House of Lords shows that groups from across mainland Britain were capable of being mobilized in defense of their interests,

⁴⁶ Quotes from Committee Book, 11 and 13 June 1689, HL/PO/CO/1/5, PA. Remaining Welsh civil litigation came under the jurisdiction of Westminster King’s Bench in the 1770s. See Thomas Watkin, *The Legal History of Wales* (Chippenhams, 2007), 156–57.

⁴⁷ Knights, “London’s ‘Monster’ Petition of 1680,” 39. The abolition of the council was also initially opposed by William III. See *Life and Works of Sir George Savile, First Marquis of Halifax*, ed. Helen Charlotte Foxcroft, 2 vols. (London, 1898), 2:210.

⁴⁸ Narcissus Luttrell, *A Brief Relation of State Affairs*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1857), 1:518; *Daily Courant*, 22 September 1713.

⁴⁹ Bowie, “Scottish Public Opinion,” 2:187–90, 207.

⁵⁰ *Correspondence of Reverend Robert Wodrow*, ed. Thomas McCrie, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1842), 1:30–31.

⁵¹ The records of the convention are found in James Marwick, ed., *Convention of the Royal Burghs of Scotland*, 7 vols. (Edinburgh, 1870–1918).

⁵² Bob Harris, “The Scots, the Westminster Parliament, and the British State in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Parliaments, Nations and Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660–1850*, ed. Julian Hoppit (Manchester, 2003), 124–45, at 128; idem, “Parliamentary Legislation, Lobbying, and the Press in Eighteenth-Century Scotland,” *Parliamentary History* 26, no. 1 (February 2007): 76–95.

⁵³ *CJ*, xix, 180–391. As these were presented to the Commons, they have not survived.

⁵⁴ Harris, “Parliamentary Legislation, Lobbying, and the Press,” 77.

Table 2—Large Responsive Petitions to Both Houses of Parliament at Select Periods, 1660–1789

Period	House of Lords	House of Commons (General Bills)
1660–1665	No data	113
1666–1670	No data	38
1671–1675	No data	19
1676–1681	No data	19
1689–1694	15	136 (1694–95 only)
1695–1700	105	154 (Leather Duty, 1697)
1701–1706	37	No data
1707–1712	20	86 (1708–9 only)
1713–1717	38	118 (1713 only)
1717–1720	112	369 (1719–20 only)
1779–1784	33	No data
1784–1789	141	880

Sources: In addition to those listed under [table 1](#), see *Commons Journal*, viii–xix; *Reports From Committees, 1831–2*, 18 vols. (London, 1832), 5:10; John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State 1688–1783* (London, 1989), 233; Hoppit, and Innes, eds., *Failed Legislation*, 19; Innes, “Legislation and Public Participation,” 117–19; Colin Leys, “Petitioning in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Political Studies* 3, no. 1 (February 1955): 45–64, at 57; Pettigrew, “Regulatory Inertia and National Economic Growth,” 27.

Note: Due to the loss of records for the Commons in the Parliament fire of 1834, petitions presented to the Commons on general bills have been used for the period before 1720 to enable a comparison. The figure for the Lords between 1779 and 1789 is also for petitions on general bills, i.e., bills affecting more than an individual or small group and with a larger geographic scope, although not all of these petitions were heavily subscribed.

reflecting the presence of a national political culture. In the next section I consider the conventions and rules governing petitioning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

CONVENTIONS AND RULES GOVERNING PETITIONING

The frequency and scale of large responsive petitioning after 1689 was a fairly novel experience for parliamentarians. As [table 2](#) shows, the Commons received only 189 petitions on general bills during the Restoration (many of which would have had fewer than twenty signatures), while 154 were presented against the leather duty to the Commons in 1697 alone. Although Parliament remained secretive in some respects after 1689, with the Lords continuing to refuse printing even a summary of its proceedings, other everyday participatory practices reflected the increasing desire of both parliamentarians and those “out of doors” to enable public participation and commentary in debates on proposed bills.⁵⁵ Peers and MPs increasingly saw public

⁵⁵ John Hatsell, *Precedents of Proceedings in the House of Commons*, 4 vols. (London, 1818), 2:180–82. Peter Thomas explores the rare employment of prohibitions against strangers accessing the chambers of

Table 3—Geographic Distribution of Large Responsive Petitions and Their Signatories to the House of Lords, 1689–1720

Regions	Large Responsive Petitions, per Thousand People
London	0.14
North	0.07
Southwest	0.07
Midlands	0.03
Southeast	0.03
East Anglia	0.02
Wales	0.01
Scotland	0.00
Regions	Signatures per Thousand People
Wales	45
London	21
Southwest	10
North	8
Midlands	2
Southeast	2
East Anglia	1
Scotland	0

Sources: See references for [table 1](#). Apart from London, which is shown separately here, the regions are those in Peter Clarke, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, 1540–1840*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 2000), 2:30. Population figures are from Tony Wrigley, “Rickman Revisited: The Population Growth Rates of English Counties in the Early Modern Period,” *Economic History Review* 62, no. 3 (August 2009): 711–35.

Note: Thirty-six petitions make no reference to their place of origin.

involvement as desirable and necessary for legislative business and took steps to organize and regulate public participation through petitioning, rather than seeking to reduce and suppress it. The practices of responsive petitioning and participatory lobbying thus continued to be informed by the methods and practices advanced in the 1640s.⁵⁶

Parliamentarians acted against petitioners in this period, but primarily when petitioners intimidated MPs and peers or when the collection of signatures resulted in rioting. The 1648 declaration and ordinance Against tumultuous Assemblies, under Pretence of preparing Petitions, and the 1661 act, Against Tumults and Disorders upon p[re]tence of p[re]paring or p[re]senting publick Petic[i]ons or other Addresses to His Majesty or Parliament, placed similar limits on petitioning. Both were hostile to the public petitioning on constitutional and religious matters, and they contained clauses that helped to regulate the number of petitioners appearing at

Parliament during the mid-eighteenth century in *The House of Commons in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1971), chap. 8. For a similar exploration in the mid-seventeenth century, see Jason Peacey and Chris Kyle, “Under Cover of So Much Coming and Going: Public Access to Parliament and the Political Process in Early Modern England,” in *Parliament at Work: Parliamentary Committees, Political Power, and Public Access in Early Modern England*, ed. Jason Peacey and Chris Kyle (London, 2002), 1–24.

⁵⁶ Jason Peacey, *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013), 394–413.

Westminster. The 1661 Act is often interpreted alongside the Licensing Act of 1662 as an attempt to “prevent the more effective involvement” of the public in politics, discouraging petitions signed by more than twenty people and the use of print to publicize them.⁵⁷ However, its aim was to hinder the creation of political petitions and suppress the violent presentation or collection of all petitions.

Through this legislation, MPs and peers sought to suppress the potential intimidation of Parliament by large crowds, who would “fright him [a peer] into unwilling compliance.”⁵⁸ This attitude led peers to reject two petitions, both produced during 1689. The first was “the humble petition of a great number of citizens and other inhabitants of the cities of London and Westminster” that “desire[d] the ... Prince of Orange ... [to] be speedily settled in the throne.”⁵⁹ Significantly, the petition “was not signed,” but presented “in a tumultuous manner.”⁶⁰ “The gang” had said that “if [they were] not satisfied, [they] will come themselves” and they were already “begin[ning] to threaten the bishops.”⁶¹ The petition was eventually presented to the Lords, but “they could not read it because it was not signed by any person.” The process of gathering signatures eventually led to the petition being suppressed by the lord mayor, who believed that its collection had “improved into a tumult.”⁶² A petition in the same year from the silk weavers of London and Canterbury was also “presented ... in a tumultuous manner,” because there was an “unusual manner of application of men, who ought to be better directed.”⁶³ The petition, which was signed by seven men, was only accepted after the Lords had “first require[d] that those crowds would go home.”⁶⁴ Narcissus Luttrell estimated that “two or three thousand men and women of the trade” were present.⁶⁵ This fear also hindered the collection of large responsive petitions in the localities. James Oglethorpe, MP in 1731 said he had declined to collect a petition signed by more than six thousand people, because “it might occasion tumults.”⁶⁶ These were the forms of petitioning the 1661 act sought to suppress—not those for which more than twenty signatures had been gathered, nor those presented to Parliament by more than ten people, when either had been done in a “tumultuous” fashion.

⁵⁷ Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 126–27; Paul Seaward, *The Cavalier Parliament and Reconstruction of the Old Regime, 1661–1667* (Cambridge, 1989), 72–73; Jonathan Scott, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge, 2000), 408–9.

⁵⁸ Manuscript Minutes, 18 April 1695 (deleted entry), HL/PO/JO/5/1/30, PA. Violence and intimidation were occasional features of electoral contests. See William Speck, *Tory and Whig: The Struggle in the Constituencies* (London, 1970), 27–31, and the constituency profiles in Cruickshanks, Handley, and Hayton, eds., *The House of Commons*, vol. 2.

⁵⁹ Count de Mayole, *A Collection of State Tracts, Published on Occasion of the late Revolution in 1688*, 3 vols. (London, 1705), 1:105. The petition is discussed further in Lois Schwoerer, “Press and Parliament in the Revolution of 1689,” *Historical Journal* 20, no. 3 (September 1977): 545–67, at 552.

⁶⁰ John Resesby, *The Memoirs of the Honourable Sir John Resesby* (London, 1734), 310.

⁶¹ Historical Manuscript Commission, *Manuscripts of Lord Kenyon Fourteenth Report* (London, 1894), 216.

⁶² Mark Goldie et al., eds., *The Entering Book of Roger Morrice*, 6 vols. (Woodbridge, 2007), 4:514.

⁶³ *LJ*, xiv, 311.

⁶⁴ Petition of Bailiffs, Wardens, and Assistants of Weavers of London and Canterbury, 14 August 1689, HL/PO/JO/10/1/413/140, PA.

⁶⁵ Luttrell, *Brief Relation*, 1:568–69.

⁶⁶ David Hayton, “Accounts of Debates in the House of Commons, March–April 1731, Supplementary to the Diary of the First Earl of Egmont,” *Electronic British Library Journal* (February 2013): 1–40, at 37.

Parliamentarians sought to police the process of petitioning through these acts. The clause in the 1661 Act banning a group of more than ten people presenting a petition was only used to regulate and control public access to the Palace of Westminster. The MP, Sir William Pultney, was “not fond of falling upon addressers” with force; it was “not the way to make friends for the King.”⁶⁷ The physical mobilization of ordinary citizens was part of the culture of responsive petitioning. In one case in 1697, women had been “hired to a ring a bell ... to raise the weavers” to petition Parliament. The crowd that subsequently entered the lobby of the Commons and Westminster Hall later became violent as a result of “scandalous” rumors spread by their opponents that the bill had been rejected.⁶⁸ This participatory element of petitioning and the relatively unrestricted access of the public to the Palace of Westminster are consistent features of early modern political culture that weakened only after the 1817 Seditious Meetings Act.⁶⁹

Within the boundaries set by parliamentarians, responsive petitioning was becoming a more central part of the parliamentary process in the second half of the seventeenth century. Parliamentary procedure required public notices for bills, ensuring that the wider public was informed of bills that affected them. Opponents of the River Wey Navigation Bill in 1759 successfully lobbied for the legislation to be rejected on the grounds that “no public notice, either by advertisement or otherwise,” was given of the intention of the bill’s proposers to petition Parliament.⁷⁰ Even before petitions to Parliament were organized, meetings were held in the affected locality to co-opt any opposition. Supporters of the Dunn Navigation Bill stressed that they had “frequently proposed [their project] to many of the landowners of the river ... at a general meeting” and there was also a “large meeting at Doncaster to prove the practicalness of the thing.”⁷¹

The extent of public involvement in debates on legislation was aided by the decision of parliamentarians to force lobbyists and interest groups to present their arguments through print and to introduce private bills with a petition. Echoing the practice of the 1640s, when the Commons had ordered cloth workers to print their petition because the “business [was] of a general concernment,” MPs ordered that all private bills had to be printed before their first reading in 1705, which was later made into a standing order in 1722 for both houses.⁷² Similarly, the Lords

⁶⁷ Anchitell Grey, ed., *Debates of the House of Commons, From the Year 1667 to the Year 1694*, 10 vols. (London 1769), 9:513.

⁶⁸ *CJ*, xi, 667–68, 682–84.

⁶⁹ The 1817 Act banned meetings of more than fifty people “for the purpose or on the pretext of considering ... or preparing any petition” near Westminster Hall when Parliament or the courts were sitting. See 57 Geo. III c. 19 Clause XXIII. The Seditious Meetings Act of 1795 had not been so restrictive in terms of prohibiting meetings in Westminster. Richard Price, *British Society 1680–1880: Dynamism, Containment, and Change* (Cambridge, 1999), chap. 7, argues that the participatory nature of political culture and governing was a constant feature of the period from 1680 to the 1880s. France also saw a decline from “deliberative” to “demonstrative” political rallies during the nineteenth century; see Paula Cossart, *From Deliberation to Demonstration: Political Rallies in France, 1868–1939* (Colchester, 2013).

⁷⁰ Lambert, *Bills and Acts*, 168.

⁷¹ *The Methods Proposed for making the River Dunn Navigable And The Objections To it Answered. With an Account of the Petitioner’s Behaviour To The Land Owners* (London, 1723), 6; Thomas Willan, *The Early History of the Don Navigation* (Manchester, 1965), 46.

⁷² *CJ*, ix, 719; Derek Hirst, “Making Contact: Petitions and the English Republic,” *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 1 (January 2006): 26–50, at 40n63; *LJ*, xvii, 20; Lambert, *Bills and Acts*, 13.

ordered that petitions on legal appeals should be “published in print, to the end that all persons concerned may take notice thereof.”⁷³ This enabled an appeal to the public to be part of parliamentary proceedings, with the College of Physicians printing five hundred copies of their legal appeal, far higher than the membership of the Lords, while London carriers printed 850 copies of their pamphlet supporting a drawback on the leather duty.⁷⁴ The intensification of a print culture centered on Parliament did create tensions, with the MPs John Milward and Andrew Marvell both complaining that the presentation of papers was “too frequently done,” but a motion to ban the presentation of such papers at the door of the Commons was defeated in 1667.⁷⁵ Parliamentarians were willing to wait for petitions, believing “we ought to allow them time,” and demand that public bills would be printed to inform the public.⁷⁶ They created a “skeleton” of future business to provide advance notice to petitioners; the Commons ordered that “no petitions be received after ten o’clock in the forenoon.”⁷⁷ This process was not new in the 1690s, but there was an intensive attempt to organize and inform those who sought to participate in parliamentary business after the Glorious Revolution.⁷⁸ This was in contrast to the attitude of early Stuart parliamentarians, who had banned the printing of petitions, and enabled Parliament to function as a site channeling the multiple public spheres and interest groups of early modern Britain into national debates on matters of policy after 1688.⁷⁹

Although parliamentarians increasingly recognized the utility of petitioning, responsive petitions could still be rejected by either house. The Lords had thought twice about accepting the large responsive petition from Wales in 1689, having read “the statute 13 Car II concerning riots ... as to the petition.”⁸⁰ In 1697, a limit to petitioning was introduced on bills relating to public finance, an urgent concern during the Nine Years War. MPs justified their decision by arguing that “all are represented here” by their member; petitions were unnecessary, however small the number of subscribers, or how great the corporation or company.⁸¹

By invoking the idea that Parliament was the true representative of the political nation, MPs and peers were able to reject politically difficult petitions, though this did come at some cost. Claims on the power of Parliament initially intended by parliamentarians to justify the suppression of political petitions were also employed to suppress petitions commenting on proposed legislation. However, this resulted in heightened rhetoric from opponents concerning the right to petition, which checked Parliament’s actions. One rejected petition from London clergy in 1721

⁷³ *LJ*, xiii, 268–68.

⁷⁴ Harold Cook, “The Rose Case Reconsidered: Physicians, Apothecaries and the Law in Augustan England,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 45, no. 4 (October 1990): 527–55, at 545. Carriers Court Minutes, CLC/L/CK/B/002/MS06113/001, 206R, LMA.

⁷⁵ *CJ*, ix, 29; Martin Dzelzanis and Annabel Patterson, eds., *The Prose Works of Andrew Marvell*, 2 vols. (New Haven, 2003), 2:51; Caroline Robbins, ed., *The Diary of John Milward* (Cambridge, 1938), 152.

⁷⁶ Hayton, “Accounts of Debates,” 29; Historical Manuscript Commission, *Manuscripts of the Earl Comper*, 3 vols. (London, 1888), 2:385.

⁷⁷ *CJ*, xii, 83. Warnings would also be provided on specific bills.

⁷⁸ *LJ*, xi, 362.

⁷⁹ *CJ*, i, 419.

⁸⁰ Manuscript Minutes, 3 June 1689, HL/PO/JO/5/1/24, PA.

⁸¹ Hatsell, *Precedents*, 3:234–35; William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, 36 vols. (London, 1806–1820), 5:445.

saw some peers protest that “the right of petitioning ... is as essential to the public ... as the liberty of debate to the constitution of Parliament.”⁸² When petitions calling for the relief of those affected by the South Sea Bubble were rejected, the first septennial Parliament was also attacked in these terms. Opponents argued “our servants” in Parliament had “been the great invaders of [the right to petition] ... [and] prevented our redress.”⁸³ Such rhetoric suggests there was a clear expectation by the public that parliamentarians should accept their petitions on proposed legislation.

As a consequence of the decisions of parliamentarians to make aspects of their business more transparent, representing the public’s views through petitioning was becoming a more frequent practice after 1689. Although there were concerns about the public signing responsive petitions, parliamentarians desired petitions that commented on their legislative business. Why this was the case, and how parliamentarians squared wider public involvement with the ideals of deliberative and reasoned debate, are examined in the next section.

LEGITIMISING CONFLICT

Large responsive petitions were not accepted because they occurred sporadically and were uncontroversial; indeed, they could be highly organized affairs and had the potential to divide communities. During proceedings on the River Don Navigation Bill, a Mr. Sheburne had a “mob of five or six hundred about his house for the apprehension that he opposed the navigation.”⁸⁴ In Tiverton, five hundred people signed a petition on the wool industry in 1698, with later complaints that laborers were forming themselves “into combinations or clubs” and becoming “insolent”; they would “comply with whatever their clubs shall determine and assemble,” against the wishes of the mayor and corporation.⁸⁵ By accepting their petitions, parliamentarians acknowledged the presence of a wider political nation and made the process of ruling more open to negotiation and popular pressure, something that they had been unwilling to do on matters of state or public finance.

By allowing certain forms of petitioning, parliamentarians hoped to strengthen the institutional arrangements established after the Glorious Revolution and gain legitimacy for the local improvements being pursued in Parliament. In response to the Lords rejecting a petition in 1722, some peers protested that “rejecting such petitions and ... not receiving ... them” would “occasion disorders and tumult.”⁸⁶ Petitioning was a nonviolent means for negotiation that aided the development of political stability, but by different means than those Sir John Plumb set out nearly fifty years ago.⁸⁷

⁸² *The Petition of the London-Clergy to the House of Lords against the Quakers Bill* (London, 1721), 2.

⁸³ *A Complete History of the Late Septennial Parliament* (London, 1722), 12, 65. For the use of print as a means of “escalating” lobbying and political campaigns to maintain pressure on Parliament in such circumstances, see Peacey, *Print and Public Politics*, 353, 360.

⁸⁴ Willan, *Don Navigation*, 145.

⁸⁵ Petition of Mayor, Corporation, Gentlemen, Traders, and Inhabitants of Tiverton, 2 March 1698, HL/PO/JO/10/3/189/2c, PA; Cruickshanks, Handley, and Hayton, eds., *The House of Commons*, 2:155.

⁸⁶ *The Historical Register, Containing an Impartial Relation Of All Transactions, Foreign and Domestic*, 23 vols. (London, 1722), 7:32–33.

⁸⁷ Plumb, *Growth of Political Stability*, argued the whig oligarchy was created through the single party government, the growth of the executive and its control over Parliament, and greater stability for landed families through stricter estate settlements.

Neither did formally accepting these petitions require parliamentarians to consider them when judging the merits of a bill. There was a tacit recognition amongst parliamentarians that by accepting petitions, the role of the “public voice” could be safely contained without seeming to threaten the right of the wider public to participate. In response to the adversarial addresses in Scotland against the union, opponents claimed that the addresses threatened to turn MPs into “delegates.” They argued that the Scottish Parliament was a “sovereign constituted body” that would not be directed by outside opinion.⁸⁸ Daniel Defoe also stressed the unrepresentative nature of the addresses compared to Parliament, writing that he had “not heard [of] above five [of the] three hundred gentleman of quality and estates in Lothian” who had petitioned.⁸⁹ Others portrayed anti-union addresses as involving the “meaner sort [who] were imposed upon and deluded.”⁹⁰

This same rhetoric was also employed to undermine the legitimacy of the larger responsive petitions presented to the Westminster Parliament. There were allegations that petitioners had been “unwearyingly drawn into the signing of the petition” in 1721 on a river navigation scheme and the Corporation of Hereford in 1698 were accused of “clandestinely prevail[ing] upon William Williams, a poor boatman, and several other poor men of the town of Monmouth to subscribe a paper.”⁹¹ Opponents attempted to undermine the validity of petitions by tricking “ignorant work people” into signing blank sheets that were later presented as a petition,⁹² Petitions presented against the laying of water pipes in Southwark had led to complaints that they had been signed “by a number of persons for the most part unknown” to the people of Southwark, with claims that petitioners were “rewarded” for signing or given “half a crown ... to carry round the petition.”⁹³ The legitimacy of these larger responsive petitions could be undermined by questioning the social status or local credentials of the petitioners, by claiming that signatures were fraudulently obtained and therefore represented corrupted opinion, or by stressing the role of Parliament as the true representative body, echoing the rhetoric employed against overtly political and adversarial petitioning. This could be done without parliamentarians openly challenging the validity of the claims of petitioners or their right to participate.

Parliamentarians and elites attempted to maintain the political status quo by accepting large responsive petitions and their associated subscription campaigns; there was a tacit acknowledgement that it was no longer possible to eliminate the “public voice.” Elites actively sought petitions to inform parliamentary deliberations on legislation. John Brewer has argued that petitions provided information that was not easily available to parliamentarians at Westminster.⁹⁴ Petitions represented the

⁸⁸ George MacKenzie, *A Friendly Return, to a Letter* (Edinburgh, 1706), 29.

⁸⁹ Bowie, “Scottish Public Opinion,” 2:236.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁹¹ *A Calendar to the Records of the Borough of Doncaster*, 4 vols. (Doncaster, 1899–1902), 4:189; Willan, *River Navigation in England 1600–1750* (Oxford, 1936), 33.

⁹² *The Clothiers Complaint: or, Reasons For Passing the Bill Against the Blackwell-Hall Factors and Showing it to be a Public Good* (London, 1692), 23.

⁹³ Petition of Persons Residing and Dwelling in Southwark, 15 January 1694, and Petition of Inhabitants of Southwark, 22 January 1694, HL/PO/JO/10/1/460/771b and d, PA; Manuscript Minutes, 22 January 1693, HL/PO/JO/5/1/29, PA.

⁹⁴ Brewer, *The Sinews of Power*, 232.

views and claims of those deemed knowledgeable on the legislative matter at hand. Defoe argued, for instance, that petitions could offer a “just knowledge of the reality” and encouraged parliamentarians “to look a little into the state of manufactures.”⁹⁵ The rejection of these petitions would, as peers put it, “deprive the legislature of proper lights, which they might otherwise [have] received,” and result in poorer policy and weaker parliamentary deliberation.⁹⁶ This importance attached to “expertise” suggests why the average petition from merchants was signed by forty-nine people, less than half the average number of those who signed a large responsive petition to the Lords.⁹⁷

More than a third of descriptions of the petitioners who signed the large responsive petitions refer to either “inhabitants” or the “makers” of manufactured goods, making no reference to expertise or social status. These were groups that the Marquis of Halifax believed required “solicitors to pursue and look after their interests” that otherwise would be too weak and unwieldy.⁹⁸ This language of “interest” was a new intervention in political discourse during the mid-seventeenth century, and helped to increase the significance and legitimacy of petitioning from nonelite groups. There were four major consequences of contemporaries imagining society as constituted by various “interests.”⁹⁹ First, the concept of interest increased the anxieties and reality of partisanship, by allowing those who could claim to have a legitimate interest in any bill or policy to participate in debates on it. Enabling communities and individuals to pursue their private interests was seen to advance the public good.¹⁰⁰ The support of these interests was crucial to enforcing the law, as otherwise “it hath not root enough upon the public utility to maintain itself against private encroachments.”¹⁰¹ Through “preserv[ing] industrious men in a peaceable way of improving their own interest,” contemporaries argued that a plural politics was compatible with political stability.¹⁰² It therefore became necessary for policy-makers to actively seek out interests and allow them to influence change. As a result, it was seen as “very proper for those whose interest it is to be against making the Darwent navigable to join in a petition” if they “had land on the water,” as a wide range of groups did.¹⁰³ Private interests could be legitimized as

⁹⁵ Daniel Defoe, *A Brief State of the Question Between the Printed and Painted Calicoes And The Woollen and Silk Manufacture ...* (London, 1719), 38.

⁹⁶ *LJ*, xxi, 622.

⁹⁷ This figure excludes the 1689 Welsh petition.

⁹⁸ *Life and Works of Sir George Savile*, 2:470.

⁹⁹ On interest see John Gunn, *Politics and the Public Interest in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1969); Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments For Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977); Mark Knights, “Judging Partisan News and the Language of Interest,” in *Fear, Exclusion, and Revolution: Roger Morrice and Britain in the 1680s*, ed. Jason McElligott (London, 2006), 204–20; Langford, *Public Life*, 176–86; Steven Pincus, “From Holy Cause to Economic Interest: The Transformation of Reason of State Thinking in Seventeenth-Century England,” in *A Nation Transformed: England After the Restoration*, ed. Alan Houston and Steven Pincus (Cambridge, 2001), 272–98.

¹⁰⁰ Gunn, *Politics and the Public Interest*, 316.

¹⁰¹ John Humfrey, *The Obligation of Human Laws Discussed* (London, 1671), 111–12.

¹⁰² John Owen, *Truth and Innocence Vindicated In A Survey Of A Discourse Concerning Ecclesiastical Polity* (London, 1669), 77, 297–98; Steven Pincus, “Neither Machiavellian Moment Nor Possessive Individualism: Commercial Society and the Defenders of the English Commonwealth,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (June 1998): 705–36, at 730.

¹⁰³ Historical Manuscript Commission, *Manuscripts of the Earl Cowper* (London, 1888), 2:383.

contributing to the “public” interest. Thus, weavers justified their petition on the basis that “the complaint against the printed calicoes is the complaint of the whole nation, not the particular complaint of Spitalfields.”¹⁰⁴ The acknowledgement that the crown was only one interest amongst many created a plural conception of society in which conflict was an inbuilt feature of political and economic life, without the need for party divisions. This balancing of competing interests would “make the chief magistrate strong, while ... keep[ing] his interest in all of them,” and required those in power to seek out and identify those interests implicated in legislation.¹⁰⁵

Secondly, the situation, in which parliamentarians needed to “take in all parts” in order to consider the public interest, raised the question of how parliamentarians could discover the views of different interests and channel them into policy making while also ensuring the public contributed in a rational and dispassionate way.¹⁰⁶ Because elections did not provide the best means for this due to the restrictive franchise and their perceived tendency to encourage lying, corruption, and misrepresentation, Parliament itself had to provide the mechanism for the public voice to be heard through participation in committees or petitioning. Importantly, writers argued that MPs could not “be chosen to represent the sense of the people, because it’s impossible the sense of the people about future transactions, should be known.”¹⁰⁷ As a result of the extended length of parliaments after the repeal of the Triennial Act, one author argued that because “it is impossible for the people to foresee at the time of the election what affairs might come under their [MPs] deliberation,” there was a need to “furnish them with matters of instruction ... [or] addresses.”¹⁰⁸ The limited franchise meant the citizenship expected was not a passive one that deferred to representatives in Parliament, but rather an active one that was heard through certain regulated mechanisms.

Parliamentarians encouraged the public to participate in debates on these legislative issues because it was perceived that petitioners knew their own interest, were knowledgeable of facts, and were able to provide useful information to Parliament. Political elites considered it problematic for the public to judge political debates, because it was feared they were being misled by competing partisan commentaries. However, public commentary on issues the public had direct and lived experience of was seen as conducive to the application of reason and the creation of a deliberative politics.¹⁰⁹ One opponent of the “Monster Petition” created in London during the Exclusion Crisis argued that men “are to be esteemed capable of knowing their own wants, fears, and dangers ... yet not everyone is to be accounted sufficiently qualified ... to umpire differences between his majesty and his great council.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Daniel Defoe, *The Just Complaint of the Poor Weavers* (London, 1719), 7.

¹⁰⁵ John Humfrey, *A Defence Of The Proposition* (London, 1668), 99–100; Gunn, *Politics and the Public Interest*, 173; Thomas Burnett, *An Essay Upon Government* (London, 1716), 43.

¹⁰⁶ Gunn, *Politics and the Public Interest*, 173.

¹⁰⁷ *Gentleman's Magazine* 3 (1733), 465.

¹⁰⁸ *Craftsman* 11 (1737), 262.

¹⁰⁹ Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 332–33.

¹¹⁰ *An Impartial Account, of the Nature and Tendency of the Late Addresses in a Letter to a Gentleman in the Country* (London, 1681), 1.

Merchants petitioning in 1738 were claimed to be “the most proper hands for giving in such a representation ... [being] the most immediately interested in the facts.”¹¹¹ Equally, petitioners during the Excise Crisis of 1733 were said to have provided MPs with “the best information ... of their own neighbourhood particularly.” The “lower people,” such as the “small heritor’s and husbandmen, shop-keepers, seamen, [and] artificers,” were seen as qualified to advise Parliament on the legislative issues that came before the two houses for it was “in these they are occupied, and get their bread, and therefore must have great knowledge of the particular ... without knowledge of the particulars, he [an MP or peer] may with all his brightness invent very good things for utopia, but not for Britain.”¹¹²

On occasion, petitioners claimed that the success of legislation should depend on whether a bill had the support of the “majority” of the locality or interest it affected. Defoe echoed this, asking “what can the meaning of numbers be, but of strength?”¹¹³ Others argued that petitions provided a “sense of the county” to parliamentarians. For example, opponents of the Calico Bill were said to have been “so populous throughout the nation” that parliamentarians would not “lay it on without their ... consents.”¹¹⁴ Legal counsel and petitioners in parliamentary committees also appealed to the importance of numerical support. A bill on the silk industry was claimed to have been “brought in by very few throwsters [while] their main body ... disown [ed] it.”¹¹⁵ Calls for judging on a majority basis and considering the “general sense of this nation” were important in resolving disputes that could otherwise focus on what groups were qualified to judge based on their interest or expertise.¹¹⁶

The experience of the public in their “own dealings” contrasted with the “higher” political and constitutional issues that the public only saw as representations in print. Parliamentarians could trust petitioners to act as rational actors and witnesses to their own lives in this regard, for the “creator has not formed his rational creatures incapable of what is so needful for their wellbeing.”¹¹⁷ The interest that “will not lie” acted as a guide for public actions, because only “fools or madmen ... do not know or understand their own interest ... [and] act directly contrary to it.”¹¹⁸ Through the 1648 ordinance and the 1661 act, parliamentarians aimed to shift public involvement away from faction and violence, seen largely in the context of petitions motivated by “high politics,” towards more reasoned and deliberative debate on matters of their locality and circumstances. This process of regulated public participation and deliberation was strengthened further by the institutionalization of

¹¹¹ Cobbet, *Parliamentary History*, 10:572.

¹¹² *The Right Of British Subjects To Petition and Apply to their Representatives, Asserted And Vindicated* (London, 1734), xi.

¹¹³ Daniel Defoe, *Two Great Questions Considered: I. What is the Obligation of Parliaments to the Addresses or Petitions of the People ...* (Edinburgh, 1707), 16.

¹¹⁴ Reasons for Making the River Weaver Navigable, c.1720, BL Add MSS 36914, fol. 117, Sheet 2; *Weekly Journal*, 10 October 1718.

¹¹⁵ Committee Book, 13 January 1694, HL/PO/CO/1/5, PA.

¹¹⁶ Speech of James Milner, 28 May 1713, HL/PO/JO/10/6/235, PA; Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 353–54.

¹¹⁷ *The Right Of British Subjects*, xxv.

¹¹⁸ Daniel Defoe, *A Review Of The Affairs Of France: With some Observations on Transactions at Home*, 9 vols. (London, 1705), 2:254.

political arithmetic in Parliament and the hearing of witnesses in committees to “make out the facts.”¹¹⁹

Interest mattered, thirdly, as a test by which parliamentarians could establish whether the claims of petitioners were useful and true. By arguing that petitioners’ claims were based on their self-interest rather than the public interest, it was possible to dismiss their claims, and to control the pluralistic political culture the language of interest had helped to justify.¹²⁰ Shoemakers had petitioned against an act for the transportation of leather, arguing that it sought to serve “the interest of some particular persons.” Opponents of the woollen manufactures bill in 1698 claimed that the bill had been “calculated wholly for Exeter,” at the cost of the wider West Country,¹²¹ and petitioners opposing the Aire and Calder navigation argued the scheme was “only to the private advantage of the undertakers.”¹²²

Fourthly, the language of interest mattered in early modern discourse because it functioned as a driver in the creation of social identities.¹²³ The long histories of many of these bills and acts signify that these disputes were persistent features in many communities; regular bouts of litigating, protesting, and petitioning raised awareness of shared interests amongst inhabitants, and offered an alternative identity to those based on class, rank, or sorts. A legal dispute over improving Parton Harbour in Cumberland had lasted for nearly thirty years, and continued after the act of 1706 was passed. It had already been “rais[ing] a great hubbub,” with the first legal proceedings beginning in 1678, well before the statute was proposed and petitioning begun.¹²⁴ Similarly, the cheesemongers of London had been involved in litigation against the Corporation of Chester in the Exchequer about paying local duties, fearing that the judgement would be “troublesome to all the ports in the county” in 1699, and petitioned on the Weaver Navigation bill associated with it.¹²⁵ Litigation helped to crystallize identities amongst inhabitants, encouraging larger groups to represent themselves to Westminster through petitioning. This was aided by the intensity of petitioning, with communities subject to negotiation, mobilization, and division, session after session. The River Weaver Navigation Bill, for example, was revived five times between 1679 and 1721.¹²⁶ The county of Lancashire presented 111 petitions to the Commons between 1689 and 1731, or an average

¹¹⁹ Committee Book, 21 March 1694, HL/PO/CO/1/5, PA. For recent work on the role of political arithmetic in Parliament, see William Deringer, “Calculated Values: The Politics and Epistemology of Economic Numbers in Britain, 1688–1738” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2012), chap. 3; Perry Gauci, “The Clash of Interests: Commerce and the Politics of Trade in the Age of Anne,” *Parliamentary History* 28, no. 1 (February 2009): 115–25, at 124; Philip Loft, “Political Arithmetic and the English Land Tax in the Reign of William III,” *Historical Journal* 56, no. 2 (June 2013): 321–43.

¹²⁰ McElligott, ed., *Fear, Exclusion, and Revolution*, 209.

¹²¹ *Reasons humbly offered by the Poor Journey-men Shoemakers ... For preventing... the Act For Transportation of Leather* (London, 1685); Manuscript Minutes, 30 March 1698, HL/PO/JO/5/1/33, PA.

¹²² *Reasons Against the Bill For making the Rivers Ayre and Calder in the West Riding of Yorkshire Navigable* (London, 1699); see also *Making the River Dunn Navigable*, 3.

¹²³ For an analogy with regard to “local xenophobia” see Keith Snell, “The Culture of Local Xenophobia,” *Social History* 28, no. 1 (January 2003): 1–30.

¹²⁴ Robert Hainsworth, ed., *The Correspondence of Sir John Lowther of Whitehaven 1693–1698* (Oxford, 1983), 237, 245.

¹²⁵ Mayor and Aldermen of Liverpool to the Mayor of Chester, 14 October 1699, ZM/L/4/556, CA.

¹²⁶ Willan, *The Navigation of the River Weaver in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester, 1951), 2, 9, 12, 15, 17.

of 2.5 per session.¹²⁷ It was seen as a point of criticism to “get petitioners for the bill from many places where they are not at all concerned.” Petitioning was rooted in a locality and helped to solidify local and interest-based identities as a result.¹²⁸

With elections won on the majoritarian principle, the implications of the rhetoric of some petitions was that legislative matters should be too, though many petitions continued to stress the expertise and experience of petitioners or appealed to the desire of parliamentarians to balance competing interests. This is not to say, however, that petitioners did not continue to show deference to social hierarchy. Elites sought to create the impression of control and suggest that the petitions signed by large numbers of inhabitants were the result of their guidance. Peter Shakerly, MP for Chester, hoped that petitions would have a common statement and be initially signed by “the justices and grand jury at the quarter sessions.” Ideally, the next wave of petitions would come from “justices, gentlemen, [and] freeholders, adjacent to the River [Weaver].”¹²⁹ In Cumberland, John Lowther’s father had been in “so dangerous a condition” about the Parton Harbour Bill in 1705, being concerned “with a list of the whole grand jury, the hands of the mayor and aldermen and others of Carlisle, [and a] great many justices of the peace” from whom he needed support.¹³⁰ There were two competing processes at work in petitioning. There was an initial attempt in the first petitions to Parliament to stress social hierarchy by gathering signatures from the mayor, borough, corporation, or county body. This would then be followed by a second wave of petitioning signed by lesser inhabitants; this petitioning involved the use of print to appeal to the wider public, legitimized by the search for the “national interest” and parliamentarians’ need for external expertise or information.

The two languages of interest and of majority are significant in three respects. First, by legitimating public participation they enhanced the concern of political elites for the ability of the public to act as rational arbiters of disputes. However, rather than the Septennial Act and the ending of the “rage of party” reducing many of these fears, this culture of partisanship and the associated allegations of misrepresentation were present throughout the early modern period, driven by conflicts amongst petitioners and interest groups.¹³¹ Secondly, these languages mark the abandoning of any notion of unity within society, and the recognition by elites of the need for negotiation. Even though the electorate was restricted, individual judgement and an active citizenship had its place when determining the merits of a bill. These two features suggest that elites were relatively tolerant of opinion “out of doors” and sought to direct its representation into peaceful petitions presented on specific matters of policy, in an attempt to help resolve political divides through reasoned debate.

Such attitudes enabled the time between winter and late spring, when Parliament assembled, to become a “petitioning season.” When London weavers called for the

¹²⁷ Handley, “Provincial Influence,” 172.

¹²⁸ *A Dialogue Between Dick Branzensface the Card Maker And Tim Meanwell the Clothier* (London, 1711), 6.

¹²⁹ Peter Shakerly to George Kenyon, 20 January 1713, DDKE/acc. 7840 HMC/1141, Lancashire Archives.

¹³⁰ John Lowther to William Gilpin, 5 January 1705, D/Lons/W2/1/39/6a, fol. 1, Cumberland Archives.

¹³¹ Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 219, 360–74.

end to “violence ... upon the wearing of printed calicos” in 1719, they argued that there were “proper seasons, as well as proper methods, to be used to get redress of grievances ... [and] weavers [should] wait [until] the proper season to lay our case before the Parliament.”¹³² Although the 1661 Act did not go as far as the Ordinance of 1648, which declared there was a “right and a privilege” to petition, both laws acknowledged the existence of an avenue for legitimate petitioning.¹³³ The rise of legislation, the growth in responsive petitioning, and relative tolerance of public commentary meant Parliament was firmly established as a point of contact for petitioners after 1689. The experience and practices of public participation in responsive petitioning was quickly applied to adversarial and initiatory petitioning when it came to events such as the Excise Crisis of 1733, as the public was already used to being mobilized to comment on matters of public policy.

CONCLUSION

The pattern of petitioning campaigns to Parliament in the first thirty years after the Glorious Revolution shows the extent of popular mobilization, participation, and negotiation that surrounded the passage of bills in Parliament. In *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman*, Paul Langford demonstrated the extent to which propertied society was active in “public life” in the eighteenth century: associations, voluntary organizations, and other nonstatutory bodies and individuals used the power of parliamentary statute to advance schemes for improvement.¹³⁴ These were not driven by party politics, but rather by sectional and regional viewpoints. Because local institutions sought parliamentary authority to pursue many projects, petitioners could play an important role in determining their success, strengthening the self-government of these communities.¹³⁵ This gave a second wind to the participatory local state as a result of the transformation of Parliament’s legislative role after the Glorious Revolution. Within an oligarchic political system, the creation of petitions ensured a degree of pluralism, allowing elites to be informed and advised of opinion “out of doors.”

Petitioning also played an important part in the growth and maintenance of the public sphere. In several respects, petitioning after 1689 followed the pattern David Zaret has set out for the 1640s, albeit now at a more sustained and intense level.¹³⁶ Large responsive petitions were signed by many social groups from across the British Isles, and their signatories were not limited to members of established companies, local corporations, or the electorate. Petitioners criticized elites and proposed bills, appealed through print to the public to sign, and claimed legitimacy on grounds other than rank or membership of corporate bodies. The initiators of these

¹³² Defoe, *Just Complaint*, 40–41.

¹³³ “Declaration and ordinance Against tumultuous Assemblies, under Pretence of preparing Petitions,” in *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642–1660*, ed. Charles Firth and Robert Rait, 3 vols. (London, 1911), 1:1139.

¹³⁴ Langford, *Public Life*, chap. 3.

¹³⁵ Joanna Innes, “Local Acts of National Parliament: Parliament’s Role in Sanctioning Local Action in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Parliamentary History* 17, no. 1 (February 1998): 23–47, at 31, 33, 39, 42, 44.

¹³⁶ David Zaret, “Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion in the English Revolution,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (May 1996): 1538–43.

petitions violated the “secrecy” of Parliament, and contributed to a divisive political culture that continued beyond the repeal of the Triennial Act in 1716 and the decline of the “rage of party.” The later revival of political petitioning drew on the rhetoric, experience, and identities created and maintained through the collection of large responsive petitions. The clash of interests inherent in legislation helped keep the features of partisanship, and the concerns resulting from them, alive.

A frequently overlooked element of the Habermasian public sphere is that it proceeds along two tracks. While the seventeenth-century saw the growth of what Nancy Fraser called “weak” public spheres that consisted of wider civil society, it was only after 1688 that the “strong,” decision-making public sphere of Parliament came to be influenced on a permanent basis by these publics.¹³⁷ This is because parliamentarians encouraged the public to comment in reasoned deliberations on how eighteenth-century Britain should be ruled. In doing so, parliamentarians demonstrated that concerns for public reason and rationality were present at the conception of the public sphere. Nonetheless, after 1688 Parliament functioned as a site that allowed the multiple public spheres of early modern Britain to be represented and integrated into the structures of decision making, but without the embracing of representative models of government.

¹³⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, at 74–75.