
Introduction: The Transformation of Petitioning in the Long Nineteenth Century (1780–1914)

Henry Miller

This introductory essay, firstly, offers a comparative, historical perspective on the transformation of petitioning into a vehicle for mass popular politics across North America and Western Europe during the “long” nineteenth century (1780–1914). While petitions were well established as an instrument of state in many early modern states, from the late eighteenth century a new type of mass, public, collective petitioning, based on established or invoked rights, emerged on an unprecedented scale in many countries. Mass petitioning underpinned the nascent repertoires of collective action pioneered by social movements. At the same time, the reception of petitions was institutionalized by political authorities, particularly legislatures elected under limited suffrage, as a potential source of legitimation. Secondly, the introduction suggests why people petitioned, and continued to petition, when their campaigns were often unsuccessful in achieving immediate results. The answer lies in the manifold advantages of petitioning in enabling political organization, mobilization, identity formation, citizenship, political change, and the forming of networks with elite political actors. By shaping an emerging field examining petitioning and petitions, raising awareness of petitions as sources and the methodologies to exploit them, and addressing broad questions of interest to historians and social scientists, this special issue hopes to stimulate further research and contribute to a rich dialogue in the years to come.

The momentum for this special issue comes from the growing interdisciplinary interest in petitions and petitioning in a variety of historical and contemporary settings (e.g., Almbjär 2016, 2019; Ben-Bassat 2013; Bowie and Munck 2018; De and Travers 2019; de Costa 2006; Dodd 2014; Houston 2014; Krotoszynski 2012; McKinley 2016, 2018; Whiting 2015).¹ As well as this growing literature, developments since the publication of the classic special issue of the *International Review of Social History*, *Petitions in Social History* (Voss 2001), provide a strong intellectual rationale for a new collection of essays. First, the rise of e-petitioning and the crisis of traditional forms of modern representative politics associated with political parties and voting in many liberal democracies makes the examination of alternative popular forms of representation and participation timely (Alonso et al 2011; Bochel 2013; Riehm et al 2013; Wright 2015). At the same time, historians and social scientists have increasingly questioned traditional linear narratives of the rise of democracy in accounts of modern political development (Avril and Neem 2015;

1. I would like to thank Daniel Carpenter, Maartje Janse, Joris Oddens, and Robert Poole for their comments on the draft introduction. This special issue emerged out of a symposium held at the University of Manchester in 2015 that was supported by the History Division at the University, the Social History Society, and the Manchester Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence. I would like to thank all symposium participants for their contributions, especially Benoît Agnès, Faramerz Dhabhoiwala, Yann-Arzel Durelle-Marc, Mark Knights, Michelle Orihel, and Sami Pinabarsi.

Innes and Philp 2013). Such a viewpoint opens up new perspectives on alternative forms of political participation, representation, mobilization, and action that have previously marginalized by the privileging of trends that appeared anticipate modern twentieth-century political systems, such as the emergence of organized political parties (te Velde and Janse 2017). As Susan Zaeske has written of early-nineteenth-century America, “although petitioning was less direct than voting . . . it was not necessarily considered less powerful” (2003: 3). This was particularly the case during an era when many, if not all, people enjoyed the right to petition compared to the limited nature of the vote in many countries. As Carol Wilton has commented in her study of Upper Canada, “a much higher percentage of the population signed petitions than voted in . . . elections,” and this could be applied to many other countries (Wilton 2000: 4).

Second, this issue intends to stimulate conceptual and methodological thinking among historians and social scientists, especially at a time when the growth of digitization projects promises to transform access to petitions as historical sources.² For this reason, studies addressing the nature, chronology, and role of petitioning will perform a valuable service to the wider scholarly community. This special issue will critically examine the transformation of petitioning from the premodern “petition and response” model to the mass-mobilization model associated with social movements and other campaigns in the long nineteenth century. The essays shed much-needed illumination on why people petitioned by thinking about the generic functions of petitioning albeit within particular national contexts. The collection therefore represents a major leap forward, pulling together and moving beyond a fragmented literature.

Conceptually, rather than thinking of petitioning as an activity within particular campaigns, we should consider it as a shifting practice or mechanism. As signed written appeals to authority (Voss 2001: 6), petitions do have basic, shared characteristics, but are also mutable, flexible, and infinitely diverse. As a set of practices, as will be argued in the following text, petitioning was transformed across Western Europe and North America from the late eighteenth century. The new form of petitioning exhibited certain shared elements, but there were also differences shaped by distinct national contexts. More generally, the special issue highlights the value of petitions as sources and showcases different methodological approaches from history and social science, including prosopography, GIS or spatial mapping, and comparative analyses, as well as historical examinations of the culture of petitioning in specific contexts. With a view to stimulating further research, the special issue aims to raise questions and offer some suggestions as to how scholars think about petitions and petitioning, and how they might be researched.

Third, the special issue engages with themes that have long been central to *Social Science History* and of interest to historians and social scientists. The essays examine the

2. Such as the Harvard Antislavery Massachusetts Dataverse, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/antislaverypetitionsma>, the first of a number of digitized databases stemming from projects led by Daniel Carpenter, one of the contributors; or ProQuest’s digitization of the Select Committee on Public Petitions records (1833–1918) as part of its *Parliamentary Papers* database.

use of petitioning within social movements and other popular campaigns and consider petitioning as part of the wider relationship between popular contention, collective action, and citizenship (Palacios Cerezales 2019, Makovi 2019, Poole 2019, Chase 2019, Huzzey 2019, Carpenter 2019, and Brossard 2019). While most of the articles focus on specific national examples within Europe and America, points of contrast are provided by studies of petitioning in a colonial society (Jaffe 2019) and in premodern Eurasian states (Zaret 2019). These essays provide a breadth of perspective, and this introduction, by drawing out commonalities across different national petitioning cultures in this period, provides a basis for further comparative and transnational work.

The articles largely focus on Western Europe and North America during a period in which the practice of petitioning was transformed. The long nineteenth century (1780–1914) was “the century of democratization” if not democracy (Hoffman 2003: 299). This period was marked by the establishment or development of constitutional, liberal, representative systems that provided some guarantees of the rights of citizens and subjects. Parliaments and legislatures, albeit elected under limited suffrage, assumed, if they had not already, central importance within political and public life. Despite the limited nature of electorates, the expansion of the press, print culture, public meetings, petitions, and voluntary associations provided means through which public opinion could be expressed outside elections and by those without the vote (Bermeo and Nord 2000; te Velde and Janse 2017).

Within these contexts, the emergence of a new form of petitioning simultaneously presented a challenge and an opportunity to political institutions and actors. Mass collective petitioning, especially deploying the rhetoric of popular sovereignty, was one of the ways in which new forms of mass politics challenged political institutions, particularly legislatures based on restricted franchises, in this period. Social movements, voluntary associations, and organized extraparliamentary campaigns used mass petitioning to influence and exert pressure on politicians and institutions. The response of elite politicians to these developments was ambiguous and complex. Yet the new form of petitioning was also a phenomenon encouraged and promoted by elite political actors, as it provided a way to integrate mass politics within existing political structures and reinforce the legitimacy of political institutions.

The Transformation of Petitioning in Comparative Perspective

The practice of petitioning was transformed across Western Europe and North America between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The chronology of the emergence of mass petitioning correlates with Charles Tilly’s classic account of the development of a new, modern repertoire of collective action in Great Britain between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Tilly argued that there was a shift from a localized, parochial, bifurcated repertoire to a cosmopolitan, modular, and autonomous one, as part of the emergence of “national mass politics” (Tilly 1995: 45–46, 148). In other words, forms of collective action were increasingly universal rather than locally specific, transferrable, and aimed at the central state

rather than local elites. While petitions and petitioning were mentioned in Tilly's study, they figured as just one part of this new repertoire. Yet as we shall see, petitioning was the connective tissue for many of the elements of Tilly's nineteenth-century repertoire, such as public meetings, demonstrations, and the single-issue association.

Before examining the characteristics of this transformation it is important to understand the nature of petitioning in the premodern period. As David Zaret writes in this special issue, it is anachronistic to regard premodern petitioning as a form of protest when it was predominantly "an instrument of state." Petitioning was a "ubiquitous, relatively uniform practice" with petitioners seeking "benevolent deployments of power," such as patronage or dispute arbitration, from rulers. Petition and response relied upon privileged communication between petitioners and the state, without engaging a wider public, and such interactions were grounded on expectations of the obligations of rulers. Premodern states spent an extraordinary amount of time receiving, investigating, and responding to petitions, with administrative structures arranged to maximize the efficiency in doing so, for example, by developing templates for responses, recording and archiving petitions. The eighteenth century was a transitional period of "liminal petitioning," which combined the deferential style and traditional elements of petition and response, with the more assertive, organized, public nature of modern petitioning associated with mass mobilization and social movements in the nineteenth century. The transformation of petitioning was partially disguised by the persistence of traditional styles and formats of petitions. For example, in the largely Francophone British colony of Lower Canada, the *patriote* petitioners drew on the *ancien regime* tradition of the *requête* (Carpenter and Brossard 2019; see also Muller 2016).

The transformation can be summarized as a shift from the premodern "petition and response" model to one dominated by mass, public, collective petitioning based on established or invoked rights. Summing up the early-nineteenth-century American experience, Zaeske has written that "petitioning had been transformed from an individual submissive act [in]to a powerful instrument of mass democratic politics" (2003: 28). For the sake of simplicity, I shall call this new type of petitioning "mass petitioning." The institutionalization of petitioning to national legislatures on a hitherto unprecedented scale was arguably most pronounced in the United Kingdom and the United States (Huzzey and Miller *forthcoming*; McKinley 2018: 1557–59), but these trends are also discernible elsewhere. Indeed, in per capita terms one of the largest petitions of the period was the 1827–28 petition against Lord Dalhousie, the governor of Lower Canada, signed by 87,000 people, which largely drew its strength from Francophone *Canadiens* (Carpenter and Brossard 2019). Furthermore, there is evidence that these new practices were emerging in colonial settings (De and Travers 2019; de Costa 2006; Jaffe 2019).

The broad transformation was reflected in the key characteristics of the new form of petitioning that developed from the late eighteenth century. Examples of these characteristics appear before then, most notably during the English Revolution of the 1640s (Zaret 2000). However, the argument is that as a set of interconnected

practices, these characteristics emerged decisively in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, on an unprecedented scale and at a sustained level. The nature, timing, and development of new forms of petitioning were shaped by specific national contexts and operated within distinctive national political cultures with their own dynamics. In the following discussion, however, the focus will be on providing an outline of the transformation of petitioning through highlighting general trends and common developments rather than emphasizing national differences.

Mass Petitioning

The long nineteenth century was an era of mass petitioning. There was an “explosion” of petitions and signatures in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries across many American and European states (Carpenter and Brossard 2019). In the United Kingdom, between 1785 and 1789 just 880 public petitions were sent to the House of Commons. Sixty years later, the figure for an equivalent quinquennial period was almost 82,000 (Miller 2017: 46). From 1789 to 1865 the US Congress received 145,892 petitions (McKinley 2018: 1559). In France, between 1814 and 1848 more than 40,000 petitions were sent to the Chamber of Deputies (Agnés 2011: 45). In revolutionary situations, newly established legislatures were deluged with petitions. For example, the Frankfurt National Assembly founded during the 1848–49 German Revolution received 17,000 petitions signed by more than three million people (Lipp and Krempel 2001: 151). The Prussian or Berlin Parliament received approximately 13,000 petitions in 1848 (Langewiesche 2001: 136).

The practical problems in dealing with an unprecedented number of petitions frequently prompted procedural reforms from legislatures. In the United Kingdom, the Select Committee on Public Petitions (SCPP) was established in 1833 to record every single public petition sent to the House of Commons, and this was accompanied by a reform that prevented members of Parliament (MPs) from using the presentation of petitions to initiate debate (Miller 2012: 887–89). In the United States, the “gag” rules of 1836–44, prompted by the emergence of mass antislavery petitioning, led to the House of Representatives immediately “tabling” abolitionist petitions without any further discussion, and the more extreme gag passed in 1840 prevented abolitionist petitions from even being received, let alone discussed (Krotoszynski 2012: 114–20; Zaeske 2003: 11–12, 71–72, 78–79, 120, 150, 152–53; see also Wirls 2007 for the Senate “gag”). Antislavery petitions were therefore excluded from the “standard four-stage process” of “referral, investigation, reporting, and disposition” for petitions to Congress (McKinley 2018: 1561).

Private Grievances and Public Petitions

Part of the transformation of petitioning was the change of the content and focus of petitions. Petitioning on private, individual, and sectional economic grievances was

long established in many countries, and continued. But petitioning was increasingly adopted as a means to intervene on public or general issues. In France, while individual and local grievances continued to generate petitions in the first half of the nineteenth century, they were rapidly superseded in scale by “economic, social, religious, educational, humanitarian and political issues.” (Agnés 2011: 50, 54). In Spain, the emergence of petitions on general issues was “a completely new development” (Palacios Cerezales 2019). Commenting on the petitions for greater autonomy from the Catholic South in the late 1820s, the Dutch minister of justice, overlooking the patriot petitioning of the 1780s, told the king that never before had petitions addressed “general state interests, principles of government, questions of constitutional law” (Janse 2019). In Britain, the experience of popular petitioning during the English Revolution meant that petitioning on religious and political issues was discouraged for much of the following century (Innes 2006: 116; Loft 2016: 11), with the late eighteenth century being the crucial period for the emergence (or reemergence?) of petitioning on political issues that mobilized a broad public (Huzzey and Miller *forthcoming*).

The change in the nature of petitions was registered by the invention or adoption of new words to describe this phenomenon. In Spain, the term *petición* came to describe the new type of petition, while *representacione* denoted the traditional form of petitions for the redress of private, sectional, or individual grievances (Palacios Cerezales 2019). The 1801 Dutch constitution drew a distinction between *verzoeken* (requests), relating to private or individual grievances, and *voordrachten* (proposals), that is petitions concerning the general or public interest (Oddens 2017: 650). In Britain, the distinction between private and public petitions was formalized and institutionalized with the establishment of the SCPP in 1833 (Miller 2012: 887).

Collective Petitioning and Popular Sovereignty

Mass petitioning was collective petitioning, with most petitions signed by more than one person. In the case of America, Zaeske has argued that collective petitioning emerged in the early republican era (2003: 18–19). In the early nineteenth century, personal petitions accounted for half to three-quarters of the petitions received by the French Chamber of Deputies. By the 1840s, however, the figures were dominated by collective petitions. For example, 72 percent of petitions received in 1840 were collective petitions associated with particular campaigns (Agnés 2011: 49–50, 54). The growth of collective petitioning meant that traditional manuals providing advice to individual readers on petitioning were increasingly obsolete. Model petitions for individuals, based on epistolary or letter-writing practice, were largely irrelevant in an era of collective petitioning (*ibid.*: 63).

Collective petitions came from and claimed to represent a wider public beyond that of established corporate bodies, institutions, or interest groups. After the 1820 revolution in Portugal, “petitions became public political acts,” involving the general

population as signatories (Palacios Cerezales 2011: 3–4). Petitions, along with the press, came to be associated with the idea of public opinion (Miller 2017: 52–53). Influenced by ideas of popular sovereignty, the latent subversiveness of petitioning was that petitions and petitioners could claim to represent a broader public than legislatures elected by restricted franchises. As Edmund Morgan has written: “Petitioners were in a sense rivals of representatives, claiming to speak the voice of the people but unrestricted by the qualifications placed on voting and uninhibited by the responsibilities of being part of the government” (Morgan 1988: 224). In Britain, antiparliaments or conventions were illegal (Parssinen 1973), but mass petitions provided another means through which radical democratic movements could question the legitimacy of MPs and Parliament (Chase 2019; Pickering 2001; Poole 2019; Tilly 1995: 145–46).

The subversive power of collective, mass petitions explains why their ability to represent wider collective entities such as the people or nation was sometimes constitutionally restricted. In 1791 the French National Assembly passed the so-called Le Chapelier law that limited collective petitions to representing only individual signatories (Cowans 2001: 61; Rosanvallón 2007: 34–35). This was reaffirmed in the in the French constitutions of 1795 and Napoleon’s 1815 Additional Act (Lockwood 1890: 348, 375). In other polities, such as postindependence Belgium, revolutionary Italy in 1848, and the Austro-Hungarian empire after the Fundamental Law of 1867, the right to petition under a collective name was limited to legally constituted organizations (Dodd 1890, I: 129, 73; Wright 1919: 344). Similarly, an 1822 law designed to qualify the right to petition in Spain, prohibited petitioners from “speak[ing] in the name of the people, or of any corporation, society or class” (Palacios Cerezales 2019). In the Dutch Republic in the late eighteenth century, patriots developed the controversial practice of “delegate” petitions, in which petitioners signed documents that authorized delegates to sign in their name on future petitions. In response, the 1801 constitution stipulated that petitions required personal signatures from individuals rather than associations or delegates (Oddens 2017: 643–45). Collective petitioning could also be subversive in others way. In Spain (as well as Portugal and Latin America), petitions provided a source of legitimation for the *pronunciamientos* of the military, which, while professing loyalty to the state or monarch, sought the dismissal of governments or constitutional regime change (Fowler 2012, 2016; Palacios Cerezales 2019). For this reason, the 1876 Spanish constitution limited the right of petition for members of the armed forces (Dodd 1890, II: 202).

Petitions as Public Texts

The petitions associated with mass petitioning were public texts designed to appeal to a broad public, and most importantly, potential signers, as much as the authority that would be the ultimate recipient of the petition (Carpenter 2016: 700; Zaeske 2003: 53–55). They were circulated as printed petition forms and printed circulars, and

were reprinted in newspapers and other forms of print culture; discussed and moved at public meetings as resolutions; displayed in public space; and shown or read to potential signatories by activists and canvassers (Wilton 2000: 7). Once again, there were early modern precedents. During the English Revolution in the 1640s, printed petitions became a “means to constitute and invoke public opinion” whereas traditional petitions, addressing private grievances, represented a “privileged form of communication from the periphery to the political center” (Zaret 2000: 220, 240). Writing about the same period, Peacey has argued that most petitions continued to emanate from individuals or small groups, addressed private grievances, and, whether in manuscript or printed form, were intended to be discrete forms of communication between petitioners and Parliament. Peacey finds that printing petitions to appeal to a wider public was typically a last resort for frustrated petitioners (Peacey 2013: 267–97). The publicness of petitions on controversial political or religious issues (as opposed to individual or private grievances) during the English Revolution or the seventeenth-century Netherlands (see Reinders 2011) anticipated the later public form of petitions, but was exceptional during the early modern period. Premodern petitions were typically a “privileged communicative pathway for requests” going up the state administrative hierarchy and were not intrinsically public documents in the sense they became from the eighteenth century (Zaret 2019).

Petitioning, Associations, and Civil Society

Petitioning was a public activity embedded within associational life and civil society. Mass petitioning involved a set of practices that were essentially public. A good example of this development would be the adoption of the French word *pétitionnement* into circulation in Dutch political discourse in the 1820s, initially in the context of the campaign of the largely Catholic Southern Netherlands for greater autonomy, which eventually led to Belgian independence in 1830. The term literally meant “the action of petitioning,” and the importation of this word signified the public nature and new methods associated with petitioning, and especially, the mass collection of signatures through open, public techniques (Janse 2019). In Britain in the same decade, the growing number of sophisticated, highly organized petition drives by single-issue political associations has been described as “institutional petitioning” (Jupp 1998: 219–20; see also Huzzey and Miller [forthcoming](#)). To borrow from the parlance of social movement literature, petitioning and the associations that coordinated petition drives were mobilizing structures that articulated and organized collective action and movements (McAdam et al. 1996: 3–4).

Organized petition campaigns driven by associations were able to mobilize petitions and signatures on a colossal scale without historical precedent. For example, the movement for the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies produced 5,020 petitions in 1833, which contained more than 1.3 million signatures (Select Committee on Public Petitions 1833, II: 1598). The American antislavery campaign sent

8,647 petitions to the House of Representatives between 1833 and 1845 (Carpenter and Moore 2014: 483). In the Dutch Republic, in the 1780s the patriot movement organized petitioning on “an unprecedented scale” (Oddens 2017: 636). The first wave of mobilizations from the Catholic Southern Netherlands in 1829 produced 150 petitions and 50,000 signatures, while the second wave later that same year garnered 1,000 petitions and 300,000 signatures (Janse 2019). In France, the organized campaign for electoral reform produced 3,306 petitions and almost 190,000 signatures between 1838 and 1840, which were among the largest totals for the first half of the nineteenth century (Agnés 2013: 57–58). In Upper Canada, the successful campaign against the Alien Bill (which restricted the rights of US-born subjects) was signed by 14,000, while the 1831 petition for reform was signed by 22,000 (Wilton 2000: 4, 112). In Switzerland, petition drives garnered 39,000 signatures against the appointment of the controversial theologian David Strauss to the University of Zurich in 1839, and 32,000 for the expulsion of Jesuits from Vaud canton in 1844–45 (Lerner 2012: 233, 275–76). During the 1848 German Revolution, “petitions to the legislatures of the individual states and to the National Assembly” were “increasingly initiated and organized in mass form by the associations” (Wettengel 2001: 551).

It was no coincidence that mass petitioning was often pioneered by liberal, reform, radical, progressive, or opposition associations. Such groups, often lacking insider access to and support from political institutions, sought to compensate by seeking “an alternative source of legitimation” by appealing to the public and mobilizing numbers (Wilton 2000: 15–16; see also Carpenter and Brossard 2019; Chase 2019; Poole 2019; Tilly 1995: 69).

The British campaigns for abolition, free trade, and radical political reform all made use of sophisticated and highly organized mass petition drives, coordinated by central bodies, with local committees or branches responsible for much of the grassroots organization and signature gathering, including canvassing, holding public meetings, and leaving petitions to lie for signature in public places (Chase 2019; Drescher 1986; Huzzey and Miller *forthcoming*; Miller 2012; Pickering 2001). Similar techniques were employed elsewhere. For example, in Upper Canada and Lower Canada, reformers and *patriotes* generally held public meetings to establish committees at different levels that would then circulate petitions, collect signatures, and raise funds, especially to cover the cost of sending the petitions to Britain (Carpenter and Brossard 2019; Wilton 2000: 41, 50–51, 67–69). Through press and the post, organized petition drives circulated model texts, helping to standardize the content and style of petitions within mass campaigns covering diverse localities (Zaeske 2003: 50–51).

Organized petition drives were not only the province of secular, progressive reform campaigns orchestrated by social movement organizations and political associations. Mass petitioning represented a set of practices or techniques that were capable of being used by the whole spectrum of civil society, including religious, conservative, and even reactionary groups. However, these campaigns were typically reactive: mobilizing in response to changes in policy or legislation, or acting as

countercampaigns to reformist movements (Miller 2012: 895; Wilton 2000: 115–43). For example, in both Britain and the Netherlands, the papacy's attempts to reinstate a Roman Catholic hierarchy led to a storm of petitions from Protestants in 1850–51 and 1853, respectively, with the Dutch petition drive known as the *Aprilbeweging* or April Movement (Janse 2019; Paz 1992: 30–42). Proposals for secular or nonsectarian education systems provoked huge counterpetitioning campaigns from religious groups in a number of European countries (Janse 2019; Sperber 1991: 287). The 1812 attempt by Spanish *liberales* to abolish the Inquisition generated a massive backlash (Palacios Cerezales 2019). The anti-Strauss agitation in Zurich was coordinated by the Central Committee and drew strength from the conservative, rural population of the canton against the liberal, urban city (Lerner 2012: 233).

The Right to Petition

Mass-petitioning activity was grounded in established, perceived, or invoked rights. Petition and response was based on a mutual understanding of the reciprocal relationships and privileges of ruler and subjects (Zaret 2019). Within some national political cultures, such as Britain, there was a strong popular understanding of the customary right of subjects to petition (Huzzey and Miller *forthcoming*). However, from the late eighteenth century the right to petition was widely seen as a right of citizens and subjects and was enshrined in written constitutions as such, and, crucially, with far fewer restrictions than the right to vote. In the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging . . . the right of the people . . . to petition the government for the redress of grievances” (Krotoszynski 2012: 108–9). If the right to petition was enjoyed by citizens, this raised the question of who were citizens. In the United States, a resolution passed by the House of Representatives in 1837 explicitly denied that slaves had the right to petition, and the emergence of mass female abolitionist petitioning provoked extensive discussion about whether women could claim citizenship (Zaeske 2003: 79–81, 89). In Spain, the new “British style” of petitioning was intimately linked to contemporary debates about *derecho de petition*, or the right to petition (Palacios Cerezales 2019). As has already been noted, the constitutions of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic eras often specified that the right to petition was for individuals rather than associations. In the early nineteenth century the right to petition, as in Spain and Britain, provided a base on which to claim other freedoms, particularly those of assembly and association, that were less secure, particularly during periods of repression (Chase 2019; Miller 2017: 49–51; Palacios Cerezales 2019). The right to petition was thus always bound up with other rights and liberties claimed by citizens and subjects.

Britain was atypical in that the 1689 Bill of Rights guaranteed the right of subjects to petition the monarch, but not Parliament. However, the right to petition Parliament was widely claimed as one of the popular historical rights of British subjects (Chase 2019; Huzzey and Miller *forthcoming*; Knights 2018; Poole 2019). Yet there remained

the question into the early nineteenth century, of how far the right to petition was qualified by the 1661 Act Against Tumultuous Petitioning, which had been passed to prevent a reoccurrence of the popular political petitioning of the 1640s (see Carpenter 2016: 714–16; Innes 2006: 113). Early-nineteenth-century radicals, and other popular campaigns, played a crucial part in entrenching the right to petition in practice at a time when its precise constitutional status was ambiguous (Poole 2019).

Elite Responses

Political institutions and actors, as much as innovations by social movement organizations and popular campaigns, encouraged the growth of mass petitioning. However, the response of political elites to the emergence of mass petitioning was ambiguous and complicated. As noted previously, mass petitioning could implicitly challenge the legitimacy of legislatures elected under limited suffrage. Yet as the right to petition had come to be guaranteed in many constitutions, politicians rarely sought to deny that right entirely. Rather, parliamentary debates about the right to petition focused on the nature and extent of that right, and who should exercise it (Oddens 2017; Zaeske 2003: 20). For example, in America, proslavery politicians questioned the propriety of women petitioning and engaging in public politics (Zaeske 2003: 126–31).

Mindful of the popularity of petitioning, politicians sought to regulate and occasionally curtail the right to petition rather than suppress it outright. We have already noted the constitutional qualifications placed on collective petitioning in France and elsewhere, designed to prevent mass petitions speaking in the name of the people, and the “gags” in both Britain and the United States that limited the discussion of petitions in Parliament and Congress, respectively, although in the latter case, this restriction only applied to abolitionist petitions. Another common limitation was on petitioners’ physical access to legislatures. British politicians sought to prevent mass demonstrations outside Parliament to accompany the presentation of petitions from radical campaigns, and denied the right for such petitioners to speak in the House, or for them to have an audience with the monarch or government (Chase 2019; Poole 2019). Similarly, the constitutions of France (1879) and Italy (1848) explicitly excluded citizens from presenting their petitions in person (Wright 1919: 209, 344). This was another departure from petition and response, as premodern rulers did receive petitions, often while embarking on royal tours around their realms, although such rituals “dramatized power differentials” between subjects and sovereign (Zaret 2019). Perhaps the most extreme limitation of the right to petition came after the restoration of Spanish absolutism. An 1825 decree stipulated that petitions were henceforth to conform to the old model, to be representations to the king from deferent subjects rather than collectively signed, public texts from citizens with rights (Palacios Cerezales 2019).

While legislators rhetorically reaffirmed the right of subjects or citizens to petition, they sought to preserve their discretion and independence to deal with petitions as was most expedient (Oddens 2017: 646). In the British debates on the restriction of

speaking on petitions, the Conservative leader Sir Robert Peel argued that “[t]he public had an undoubted right to present petitions, and it was unquestionably the duty of the House to hear those petitions; but . . . the House had a right to determine in what way it could most conveniently discharge that duty” (Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, February 7, 1839: 167). The right to petition was interpreted narrowly by politicians as the right for petitioners to have their petitions presented or received, but not necessarily discussed, investigated, or acted upon. British politicians interpreted the right to petition in a way that upheld parliamentary sovereignty rather than popular sovereignty. In this vein, the future Whig prime minister Lord John Russell wrote, “The rights we have now been stating, viz. those of printing and petitioning, invest the people with no actual power or authority” (Russell 1823: 136).

Yet the emergence of mass petitioning presented opportunities for legislatures as institutions, and legislators as political actors. First, being open to public petitions allowed legislatures to strengthen their claims to legitimacy, particularly vis-à-vis monarchs. For example, the 1815 constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands required that petitions be sent to the monarch, bypassing the legislature. In spite of this stipulation, in the late 1820s, petitions from the Catholic south for greater autonomy were directed to the Second Chamber, which liberal deputies used to push their claims to represent the public and seek additional powers (Janse 2019). During the Bourbon Restoration in France (1815–30), the debate about the right to petition was part of a wider struggle over whether sovereignty resided with the monarch or with the public through the legislature. Royalists feared that Liberal deputies were using petitions and the right to petition as a means to exert greater “influence over the executive” (Alexander 2003: 92–94). Writing of the 1848 European revolutions, Jonathan Sperber has commented that “the mass movement of petitions . . . established parliament and its elected people’s representatives as an alternative instance to the monarch” (1994: 151).

Second, petitions allowed individual parliamentarians, parties, or factions to claim public backing on particular issues. Accordingly, legislators seldom disputed the right of citizens to petition, but with predictable regularity sought to question the legitimacy of those campaigns whose demands they opposed. Politicians would question the “quality” of the petitioners for such measures, for example, by arguing that certain groups such as women or working-class men carried less “weight.” Another tactic was to highlight apparent abuses in mass campaigns, such as the use of intimidation, misrepresentation, forgery, or fraud to secure signatures, to present popular campaigns as artificial rather than genuine (Carpenter and Brossard 2019; Miller 2012: 897; Palacios Cerezales 2019; Wilton 2000: 138). Accusations of abuses provided rhetorical justification for curtailments of the right to petition (Oddens 2017: 646–49; Zaeske 2003: 11). While legislators were often hypocritical in only closely scrutinizing the petitions and practices of campaigns they opposed, such attitudes reflected a wider distaste with the techniques of mass politics associated with the new form of petitioning. As one Dutch deputy declared in the 1850s “as much as I do respect the right of petition, so little do I respect a *petitionnement*” (Janse 2019).

Why People Petitioned

The pervasiveness of petitioning across many different political cultures in the long nineteenth century has become increasingly clear. Yet the question remains as to why did people petition? Part of the explanation for the popularity of petitioning may be famous examples of spectacularly successful campaigns, such as British antislavery, which provided inspiration and a model to emulate. To give other examples, the 1822 petition signed by 60,000 successfully blocked the proposed union of the two Canadian colonies, while the 1827–28 campaign led to the dismissal of Lord Dalhousie, lieutenant-governor of Lower Canada, by the British Government (Carpenter and Brossard 2019). In Upper Canada, opposition petitions prompted the Colonial Office to order the local government to reverse the Alien Bill (Wilton 2000: 36–43).

Yet most petitioning campaigns were unsuccessful in achieving their immediate aims. As Sperber has commented of the 1848 European revolutions: “Most petitions to the parliaments brought no results in 1848, and it is far from clear that the parliamentarians paid much attention to them” (1994: 151). Mass petitioning was a painstaking exercise, requiring sophisticated organization and the expenditure of energy, time, and resources, but the results were often disappointing. Indeed, petitioners such as the British Chartists knew that their mass petitions would be ultimately rejected by Parliament (Chase 2019). Why then, did people petition? The answer lies in the manifold advantages of mass petitioning as a form of political organization and mobilization.

In his historical survey of petitioning in the United States and United Kingdom, the legal scholar Ronald Krotoszynski has suggested that there was a shift from responsive petitioning (aimed at securing a legislative demand) to “hybrid or systemic” petitioning in the early nineteenth century. Mass petitioning was a “means of direct political action,” “a form of wide-open participatory democratic politics open to virtually anyone,” and a “major point of organizational focus,” and, crucially, this was true whether authorities responded to petitions favorably (2012: 84, 90, 122). These insights explain a number of otherwise inexplicable paradoxes. It explains why mass petitioning continued even when authorities were unresponsive or hostile and it seemed like a futile exercise, and even after the discussion of petitions in legislatures was severely restricted as in the United Kingdom and United States. It explains why the huge religious opposition to the Dutch education law of 1878, the so-called People’s *Petitionnement* was begun only *after* the statute had been passed. As Maartje Janse (2019) comments of this campaign, it appeared as if “the petition itself was secondary and the display of organizing power its main feat.” What follows provides a brief outline of the generic advantages of mass petitioning as a form of political organization and mobilization, drawing on both recent social science work and historical examples.

First, as Daniel Carpenter has recently argued, the petition is a technology used “identify sympathetic citizens and recruit them to . . . causes” (Carpenter 2016: 701).

The “recruitment by petition” thesis suggests that the most important audience for petitions are potential signatories rather than legislatures or monarchs. The signatory list provides a valuable source of information (e.g., names and addresses of individuals) for organizations, while the petitioning process, especially canvassing, builds up informal networks between existing activists and potential supporters (*ibid.*) The value of petitions and signatory lists as “databases” of information explain why organizations often kept the original copy for their own records, and sent a copy to the relevant political authority (*ibid.*, 705). Furthermore, as contemporaries recognized, signature gathering had a multiplier effect. As Emily Davies commented in 1866 on the first British petition for women’s suffrage: “every signature is in a manner reproductive, as it emboldens somebody else, who would otherwise be afraid, to sign” (Murphy and Raftery 2004: 209).

Second, as studies of American women’s antislavery petitions have shown, petitioning and particularly canvassing were crucial for building networks and developing skills necessary for public activism, including rhetoric, persuasion, advocacy, and organizational skills (Carpenter and Moore 2014: 490–93; Zaeske 2003: 27, 74, 110–11). Women canvassers in antislavery often became leading activists in later reform movements, including women’s suffrage (Carpenter and Moore 2014: 493–95). Petitioning was a training ground for the skills required for public politics and activism, or as a recent study of the US women’s suffrage movement has put it, petitioning was a “formative political practice” (Carpenter et al. 2018).

Third, petitioning and petitions were a key means of forming, articulating, and mobilizing collective actors and identities on the public stage. As Zaeske has shown, abolitionist petitioning campaign was crucial in the formation of American women’s collective political identity (2003: 172). The importance of solidarity and a common identity within petition campaigns comprising geographically and socially diverse constituencies is a key theme of many of the articles in this special issue (Carpenter and Brossard, Chase, Poole). Well-organized mass-petitioning campaigns rallied broad and diverse coalitions of popular support behind specific collective demands, cutting across geographical, religious, gender, and social divisions, as in the case of the British free trade petition drives (Miller 2012: 899–917). The petitions of the opposition movement in Upper Canada “mobilized a disparate constituency for extra-parliamentary agitation,” principally consisting of political reformers and Protestant Dissenters (Wilton 2000: 53). Petitions and petitioning were a critical way for social movements and popular causes to display worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment, which scholars have regarded as crucial in appealing to the public, media, potential supporters, and power holders (Tilly 2008: 121).

Fourth, petitioning was a way to expand and claim citizenship, which explains its heavy use by groups such as women and unenfranchised men, whose inclusion within the political nation was questioned, contested, and ambiguous during the long nineteenth century. As Gleadle (2009) has written of Victorian Britain, women were “borderline citizens,” who did participate in politics and public life, but their right to do so was always contested and lacked a secure basis in political and legal rights,

which explains the huge value and popularity of the right to petition. The right to petition served as a constitutionally impeccable bridgehead for wider claims to political participation, including ultimately the right to vote (Chase 2019; Poole 2019; Zaeske 2003: 127, 140; see also Tilly 1995: 382)

Fifth, the public nature of petitions as texts and petitioning as process was an effective way to publicize issues and causes to the public, media, and potential signatories, or as Malcolm Chase puts it in his contribution, “petitioning and memorializing were . . . iterative educational processes central to building political awareness.” Even if individuals declined to sign petitions, activists and canvassers argued that petitioning still had a valuable educative function in terms of raising general awareness. For example, one British suffragist described canvassing as “magnificent propaganda work” even if few signatures were obtained (*The Women’s Leader and Common Cause*, January 20, 1910). The elaborate, theatrical rituals associated with the delivery of petitions to political institutions, such as the Chartist procession of 1842 in Britain, or the Dutch “People’s *Petitionnement*” of 1878, were propaganda coups attracting widespread media coverage regardless of the response of the legislature (Chase 2019; Janse 2019; see also Miller forthcoming).

Sixth, petitions provided a means to access, form networks and alliances with elite political actors. Mass petitioning was encouraged, solicited, aided, and often led by politicians, who were not simply the passive recipients of the petitions produced by mass campaigns. Organized mass petitioning required the coordination of campaign tactics inside and outside legislatures (Miller 2012: 892–93). Movements depended on politicians to encourage, receive, and present petitions; rebut accusations and criticisms by opponents; and defend the right to petition. More broadly, popular petitioning relied on politicians to act as advocates and spokesmen (as they were almost all men) for their causes within institutional settings. For example, Radical MPs tabled motions on Chartist demands that were intended to coincide with the presentation of the National Petitions produced by the movement (Chase 2019). Although MPs could no longer use petitions to initiate discussion after 1833, this did not mean that petitions disappeared from debates in the House of Commons. Parliamentarians often discussed and cited petitions (and especially signatures) as evidence of popular support in debates (Miller 2012: 889; 2017: 52–53). The former president John Q. Adams defended the right of petition against the House “gag” rule in the 1830s, and particularly the right of women to petition as citizens (Zaeske 2003: 78–81, 127, 133–40). After the 1840 split of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Adams effectively marshalled the abolitionist petitioning movement from Congress (*ibid.*, 145–46). Elite politicians could also actively lead extraparliamentary petitioning movements. The Upper Canada reform movement was countered by progovernment petitions and loyal addresses led by Members of the Provincial Parliament, who also founded the British Constitutional Society to coordinate their efforts (Wilton 2000: 116–22).

Seventh, by identifying, organizing, and mobilizing popular support on a specific issue, petitioning campaigns could pave the way for more formal organization (Carpenter 2016: 706). These structures might be single-issue associations, as with

the National Charter Association, established in 1840, after the first Chartist petition, or local branches established in the wake of canvassing (Chase 2019), but also political parties. Mass petitioning often operated outside of the usual parameters of party and electoral politics, addressing issues on which parties were divided or uninterested (Carpenter 2016: 705). Yet there was often a correlation between mass petitioning and the later formation of organized parties and partisan voting. For example, the “People’s *Petitionnement*” in 1878 was followed by the formation of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, the following year, the first Dutch political party (Janse 2019). The struggle between reformers and government supporters in Upper Canada in the late 1820s and early 1830s preceded the formation of political unions and later a more formalized two-party system (Wilton 2000: 18). In the United States, opposition to the removal of Bank of United States deposits by President Jackson in 1832 was critical to the formation of the Whig Party, and the geographical patterns of petitioning on the issue remained reliable predictors of Whig Party voting preferences into the 1850s (Carpenter and Schneer 2015: 225–33).

Finally, the organized, mass mobilizations associated with petition drives could be catalysts for other changes beyond their specific demands. For example, in Switzerland, petitioning campaigns eventually led to protests outside the seats of power that forced the resignation of governments in the cantons of Zurich and Vaud in 1839 and 1845, respectively (Lerner 2012: 246, 283). In the Netherlands, the southern petitioning campaign of the late 1820s was part of the process through which Belgium gained independence (Janse 2019). To give another instance from the same country, in 1853, William III used the *Aprilbeweging* petition movement to engineer the dismissal of the liberal government he disliked (*ibid.*). As these three instances suggest, mass petitioning, particularly in unstable and highly fluid political contexts, could have unintended consequences as petitioning mutated into more direct forms of collective action, led to an escalation of demands, or was utilized for high political maneuvers by different factions within political elites.

As this survey suggests, the generic functions of petitioning as a means of mass political organization and mobilization provide the key to understanding the extraordinary popularity of this form of activity across many different political cultures in the long nineteenth century.

As already discussed, in his wide-ranging survey of premodern Europe and Asia, Zaret finds that the petitioning was an instrument of state rather protest with the eighteenth century a crucial “liminal” period bridging the transition between petition and response and modern petitioning. The hybrid nature of petitioning in colonial India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century provides a significant point of contrast for the other studies, as James Jaffe’s essay demonstrates. Petitions were used by individuals to seek redress within a hybrid legal culture that consisted of an imported judicial system, and co-opted customary forms. The rhetoric of petitions focused on procedural complaints, but significantly, shifted to wider public claims for substantive justice or fairness based on English common law, within the collective petitions that began to emerge in the 1830s, particularly to the British Parliament.

Petitioning's legitimation of various forms of collective action, including riots, rebellions, and *pronunciamientos*, during the revolutionary period in Spain (1808–23) is the subject of Diego Palacios Cerezales's study. The transformation of Spanish petitioning was linked to the growing influence of ideas about rights and popular sovereignty, and was used by *liberales* as well as their reactionary opponents, with the 1812 struggle over the abolition of the Inquisition seminal in entrenching the new type of petitioning within Spanish political culture. Regime change led to periodic attempts to restrict the new culture of petitioning. In his account of radical petitions in early-nineteenth-century Britain, Robert Poole similarly shows that petitioning was part of a continuum of collective action that included rebellion. The right to petition in Britain was based on historical precedents rather than codified rights and was shaped by the contest between working-class radicals and the state. Many radical petitions were rejected for procedural breaches, but while monitoring and seeking to contain the popular agitation, the government ultimately declined to use early modern statutes to suppress the movement, effectively entrenching the right to petition for later campaigns.

While mass petitioning in English-speaking countries has been well studied, one of the largest petitions in per capita terms in the nineteenth century was the 1827–28 *patriote* petition against the colonial government of Lower Canada, which was largely signed by French-speaking *Canadiens*. Daniel Carpenter and Doris Brossard's article shows that, as well as drawing on the Anglo-American tradition of petitioning, the petitioners drew on an older French culture of *requête*, *plainte*, and *Appel*, and made use of their established institutions as well as in the process of mobilization. In gathering signatures from a largely rural, geographically dispersed population the organization relied upon a "centralized prayer and decentralized canvass" with local *assemblées générales* acting as a crucial intermediaries between these two levels.

The working-class movement for democratic rights known as Chartism was the mightiest of all British social movements in the nineteenth century. Three mass petitions mobilized millions of signatures, and were central to the movement's political strategy and internal culture, as Malcolm Chase shows. While few Chartists expected a favorable response from Parliament, they remained enthusiastic petitioners due to the advantages mass petitioning offered in term of building identity, solidarity, and organization. As well as providing a close reading of the three petitions (which has never been done despite the huge historiography on the movement), the article considers the tactical quandary the movement faced after the apparent failure of the mass petitions.

The much-debated social roots of British abolitionism are the focus of Richard Huzzey's article, which examines the micropolitics of antislavery petitioning in Plymouth to make broader points about abolitionism and petitioning cultures. Providing a prosopographical analysis of signatories reveals the occupational, religious, and social profile of antislavery grassroots activism, its relationship with other issues, and the connections between local activity and national leaders. Huzzey's work is complemented by Kinga Makovi's groundbreaking spatial

analysis of signatories to an early abolitionist petition from Manchester that addresses theories of collective action. In her study, Makovi shows that the spatial patterning of signatures on the petition was structured not by occupation, religion, or kinship but by gathering places with a historic association with antislavery, which provided as the “micro-foundations of abolitionist action.” Mass petitioning was a catalyst for significant political change in the Netherlands, and presented both a challenge and opportunity to Dutch political actors and institutions in terms of legitimacy. Maartje Janse’s study provides a detailed example of the complicated and ambiguous response of political elites to mass petitioning and how they came to terms with this new phenomenon. Both deputies and monarchs sought to use petitions to strengthen their position against each other, while liberal and conservatives interpreted the right and practice of petitioning differently depending on the nature of the cause.

By shaping an exciting emerging field examining petitioning and petitions, raising awareness of petitions as sources and the methodologies to exploit them, and addressing broad questions of interest to historians and social scientists generally, this special issue hopes to stimulate further interest and research, and contribute to a rich dialogue in the years to come.

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