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Introduction

On 20 March 1874, Rebecca Abraham, Hannah Taylor, Harriet Mary Harris, and over 1,200 'Women of Manchester' petitioned the House of Commons for the removal of the legal disabilities that prevented women from voting in parliamentary elections.[1] This was one of eighty-five petitions in favour of women's suffrage presented that week from across the four nations of the United Kingdom.[2] The simultaneous presentation of petitions from different places was key to the strategy of the suffrage movement. As Lydia Becker, the Mancunian architect of the suffragist petitioning campaign, urged supporters in one of the many circulars she sent during the same decade: 'the air of the House of Commons should be filled with swarms of small Petitions, which, like a cloud of buzzing flies, will effectually arouse the attention of members to the subject that has called them forth.'[3]

Suffragists were not the only petitioners to appeal to MPs that week. The Women of Worfield, Shropshire, petitioned against a bill to legalise marriage with a deceased wife's sister; numerous highway boards requested amendment of the laws regarding turnpike roads; the Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce lobbied for the repeal of income tax; the Working Women of Leeds petitioned against any restriction on their labour; the inhabitants of Cork, and a series of Wesleyan Methodist congregations from York, were among the many petitioners who supported a bill that sought to protect girls over twelve from 'seduction', meaning sexual exploitation and abuse.[4] The herring fishermen of Cumlodden, Argyll, complained that the practice of trawling was 'ruining' their trade.[5] Over the course of the 1874 session, the House received over 19,000

[1] Select Committee on Public Petitions [henceforth SCPP], *Reports* (1874), p. 3, and appendix 2.
[2] SCPP, *Reports* (1874), pp. 3–6.
[3] L. Becker, Circular (n.d. [1870s]), Archives+, Manchester Central Library [henceforth MCL], M50/1/10/166.
[4] SCPP, *Reports* (1874), pp. 6, 8, 12.
[5] Ibid., appendix 18.

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petitions, containing 2.1 million signatures, addressing some 326 different issues, ranging from individual demands from former soldiers in the East Indian army, calls for the suppression of slavery in the Gold Coast, mass protests on a number of religious and moral questions, including Scottish church patronage, to more technical interventions relating to commercial and legal issues, such as the Irish court system.[6] As this brief survey suggests, the almost continuous presentation of petitions to Parliament was a mechanism that enabled diverse groups of petitioners to raise their grievances at the very heart of a political system that was far from democratic.

The petition of the 'Women of Manchester' was just one of the million or so public petitions received by the Commons from the UK and the empire between 1780 and 1918. The bulk of these petitions – over 950,000 – were presented between 1833 and 1918, and they contained almost 165 million signatures. In terms of their content, public petitions to the Commons addressed a diverse range of issues and were typically short. The text of public petitions began by formally addressing the Commons and stating the collective identity of the petitioners. Petitions closed with a request (or prayer) and finished with the customary line, 'And your petitioners will ever pray, &c', before the signatory list. In terms of the process and procedure, petitions, even for national campaigns, usually came from a specific place, and signatures were gathered locally, as in the case of the petition from the 'Women of Manchester'. They were then sent to an MP or peer to present. After 1833, procedural reforms curtailed the ability of MPs to initiate debate through the presentation of public petitions. The Select Committee on Public Petitions (SCPP), established in the same year, formally recorded and classified every single public petition received by the Commons and published this information in their *Reports*.[7]

However, petitioners did not just address the Commons or Parliament: hundreds of thousands of petitions were sent to monarchs, government, magistrates, and every imaginable form of authority. Famous examples of mass petitioning, such as the 1848 Chartist petition for democratic rights, signed by at least 2 million people and perhaps by as many as 5.7 million, were merely the tip of an iceberg of petitioning activity.[8] The colossal scale of the UK nineteenth-century experience was historically exceptional

[6] Ibid., pp. 991, 989, 994.
[7] For the parliamentary procedure for petitions see Chapters 1 and 4; for the general process of petitioning see Chapter 7.
[8] SCPP, *Reports* (1847–1848), p. 1537; P. Pickering, '"And Your Petitioners, &c.: Chartist Petitioning in Popular Politics, 1838–1848', *English Historical Review* [henceforth *EHR*], 116 (2001), 368–88, at 383.

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by comparison with earlier periods and to other contemporary polities. Examining this unique phenomenon restores petitions and petitioning to their central place in UK political culture as the most common form of interaction between people and politics. These practices enabled a vibrant, performative political culture, creating a dynamic, and ever-more popular politics even before most men and women had the vote.

A Nation of Petitioners is the first book to examine the heyday of petitions and petitioning in the UK. Its significance lies in three areas. First and foremost, the book alters existing understandings of UK political culture by restoring the importance of petitions and petitioning to the history of the period. Second, placing the UK experience within a broader chronological and geographical context and within the growing interdisciplinary literature on petitioning reveals that the nineteenth century was the key period for the transformation of petitions into their modern form. Third, a historical study of petitioning is important to a series of major debates within social and political science regarding representation, collective action, and democratisation.

Petitions, Petitioning, and UK Political Culture

Despite their ubiquity, petitions seemed marginal to the central research questions that preoccupied older scholarship. Post-war political historians focused on tracing the pre-history of the modern Westminster model that was then being delineated by contemporary social scientists, such as the roots of the two-party system.[9] Other historians studied nineteenth-century elections in the manner of post-war psephologists, while sociological explanations for Victorian voting behaviour were also developed.[10] The absence of the original petitions meant that this generation of historians could not quantitatively analyse signatories to petitions in the same way as pollbooks, which perhaps explains their neglect of this subject.[11] Scholars researching Victorian pressure groups documented petitioning within particular campaigns, but provided no broader analysis.[12] For

[9] J. Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857–1868* (London, 1972); H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (Hassocks, 1978).
[10] D. C. Moore, *The Politics of Deference: A Study of the Mid-Nineteenth Century English Political System* (Hassocks, 1976); H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885–1910* (London, 1967).
[11] J. Vincent, *Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted* (Cambridge, 1967). I am grateful to Joanna Innes for this point.
[12] B. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815–1872* (2nd ed., Keele, 1994 [1971]), p. 211; J. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 90, 105, 171.

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pioneering social historians, like E. P. Thompson, seeking to recover working-class experiences, petitions were unpromising sources because they were deferential appeals to authority that frequently reflected other identities as much as class.[13]

More recently, revisionist historians, sometimes termed the 'new political history', have shifted attention away from social structures towards the changing ideas and languages that have shaped modern British politics.[14] The close study of political discourses was central to the ground-breaking re-examinations of the transition from popular radicalism to popular liberalism.[15] Even historians of popular politics who have sought to retain a place for social class in their analysis have placed increasing weight on the culture and language of radicalism and Chartism.[16] Studies of late Victorian and Edwardian elections now stress the contested rhetoric that politicians and activists used to fashion coalitions of popular support.[17]

In terms of this rich literature, *A Nation of Petitioners* makes four interventions. First, by focusing on petitions and petitioning as practices, this book offers a new way of understanding political culture beyond languages and ideas. The discourse of popular constitutionalism has been a central thread of the new political history and, it has

[13] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), p. 539.

[14] For surveys see: S. Pedersen, 'What Is Political History Now?', in D. Cannadine (ed.), *What Is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 36–56; D. Craig, '"High Politics" and the "New Political History"', *Historical Journal* [henceforth *HJ*], 53 (2010), 453–76; D. Craig and J. Thompson, 'Introduction', in D. Craig and J. Thompson (eds.), *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 1–20; D. Craig, 'Political Ideas and Languages', in D. Brown, R. Crowcroft and G. Pentland (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800–2000* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 13–31.

[15] G. Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 90–178; E. F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment, and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992); M. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848–1874* (Cambridge, 1993); M. Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847–1860* (Oxford, 1995); E. F. Biagini and A. J. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour, and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991).

[16] R. Poole, 'The March to Peterloo: Politics and Festivity in Late Georgian England', *Past & Present* [henceforth *P&P*], 192 (2006), 109–53; K. Navickas, '"That Sash Will Hang You": Political Clothing and Adornment in England, 1780–1840', *Journal of British Studies* [henceforth *JBS*], 49 (2010), 540–65; T. Scriven, *Popular Virtue: Continuity and Change in Radical Moral Politics, 1820–70* (Manchester, 2017).

[17] A. Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London, 1868–1906* (London, 2007); J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998); D. Thackeray, 'Home and Politics: Women and Conservative Activism in Early Twentieth-Century Britain', *JBS*, 49 (2010), 826–48; N. Lloyd-Jones, 'The 1892 General Election in England: Home Rule, the Newcastle Programme, and Positive Unionism', *Historical Research* [henceforth *HR*], 93 (2020), 73–104; L. Blaxill, *The War of Words: The Language of British Elections, 1880–1914* (Woodbridge, 2020).

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been claimed, the 'master narrative' of nineteenth-century politics.[18] Yet the practices that above all else embodied this discourse – petitions and petitioning – have been curious blind spots in this literature.

Focusing on petitionary practices decentres the study of political culture away from the traditional historical focus on parties, politicians, activists, landmark electoral reforms, and elections. This approach provides a new way to understand and rethink the relationships between elite/high and popular/low politics; state and subjects; Parliament and people; and formal political institutions and a broader popular politics, within a coherent political culture that encompassed contestation and interaction in both Britain and Ireland. Using the lens of petitions and petitioning provides a new perspective on the interaction between the four nations and the UK state through Parliament.[19] The right of subjects to be represented in Parliament, and parliamentary authority over them, particularly when they were not formally represented by an MP, was challenged by American revolutionaries, later Irish parliamentarians and, later still, anti-colonial campaigners.[20] As we shall see, petitions remained a potentially subversive instrument that could be used by petitioners to challenge the authority and legitimacy of Parliament and the state. The book's primary focus is on Britain and Ireland, rather than the wider empire, and the analysis suggests that petitions could be used by petitioners from across the four nations to contest but also engage with the parliamentary state.

Between the Act of Union of 1801 and Irish independence in 1922, Ireland was represented at Westminster. Yet while Irish issues loom large in accounts of elite politics,[21] there continues to be a separation

[18] J. Vernon, 'Notes towards an Introduction', in J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 1–21, at p. 12; J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 295–330; P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 192–203; J. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1790–1850* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 3–28; J. Barnes, 'The British Women's Suffrage Movement and the Ancient Constitution, 1867–1909', *HR,* 91 (2018), 505–27; J. Gibson, 'The Chartists and the Constitution: Revisiting British Popular Constitutionalism', *JBS*, 56 (2017), 70–90.

[19] See Chapter 2.

[20] H. T. Dickinson, *Britain and the American Revolution* (London, 2014); F. G. James, Illustrious or Notorious?: The Historical Reputation of Ireland's Pre-Union Parliament', *Parliamentary History*, 6 (1987), 312–25; R. Huzzey and H. Miller, 'Colonial Petitions, Colonial Petitioners, and the Imperial Parliament, *c*. 1780–1918', *JBS*, 61 (2022), 261–89, at 281–87.

[21] K. T. Hoppen, *Governing Hibernia: British Politicians and Ireland, 1800–1921* (Oxford, 2016); J. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 128–37, 176–81, 261–333.

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in terms of popular politics.[22] Because petitions and petitioning were common practices across the four nations, placing them at the centre of the analysis provides a new way of assessing the extent to which Ireland was integrated (or not) into UK political culture. At a time when 'four nations' history is resurgent, petitions provide a new lens through which to understand how the UK became 'unified but not uniform' in Keith Robbins's apt phrase.[23] Moreover, examining petitions and petitioning helps to explain the expansion of popular politics in Wales and Scotland. In the former case, the development of popular politics has typically been tied to the later nineteenth-century growth of national sentiment and the growing dominance of the Welsh Liberal parliamentary party, or electoral culture.[24] In the Scottish context, the expansion of popular politics has been linked with early nineteenth-century radicalism and post-reform electoral culture and party politics.[25] The long-term growth of petitioning was another important driver of popular politics in both Scotland and Wales, both before and after 1832.

When viewed as practices petitions and petitioning provide a new way to rethink the relationship between politics and society. If, as James Thompson has written of the late Victorian and Edwardian period, 'public opinion' was the idea that connected the social and the political, then petitions and petitioning were the practices that linked the social and the political.[26] Scholars of twentieth-century Britain have recently turned to

[22] Exceptions include E. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge, 2007); M. Roberts, 'Daniel O'Connell, Repeal, and Chartism in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions', *Journal of Modern History [henceforth JMH]*, 90 (2018), 1–39.

[23] N. Lloyd-Jones and M. Scull, 'A New Plea for an Old Subject?: Four Nations History for the Modern Period', in N. Lloyd-Jones and M. Scull (eds.), *Four Nations Approaches to Modern 'British' History: A (Dis) united Kingdom?* (Basingstoke, 2017), pp. 3–32; K. Robbins, 'An Imperial and Multinational Polity: The "Scene from the Centre", 1832–1922', in A. Grant and K. Stringer (eds.), *Uniting the Kingdom?: The Making of British History* (London, 1995), pp. 244–54, at p. 253.

[24] M. Cragoe, 'Welsh Electioneering and the Purpose of Parliament: "From Radicalism to Nationalism" Reconsidered', *PH*, 17 (1998), 113–30, at 128–30; M. Cragoe, *Culture, Politics, and National Identity, 1832–1886* (Oxford, 2003).

[25] G. Pentland, *Radicalism, Reform, and National Identity in Scotland, 1820–1833* (Woodbridge, 2008); G. Pentland, *The Spirit of the Union: Popular Politics in Scotland, 1815–1820* (2011); I. G. C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland, 1832–1924: Parties, Elections, and Issues* (Edinburgh, 1986); G. Hutchison, '"A Distant and Whiggish Country": The Conservative Party and Scottish Elections, 1832–1847', *HR*, 93 (2020), 333–52.

[26] J. Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of 'Public Opinion', 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 2.

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examining the politics of everyday experience.[27] Viewed from this perspective, thinking of petitions and petitioning as practices allows us to see how nineteenth-century political activity was embedded in everyday actions. Petitions and petitioning were widespread social and cultural practices at every level of society, and addressed everyday local concerns as well as national debates in Parliament, from complaints to local magistrates about brothel-keepers to mass subscription campaigns for political and social reform.[28] Petitionary practices existed within a cultural context in which name-signing and public lists of names were ubiquitous, whether in the 'subscriber democracies' of middle-class voluntary associations, electoral registers, published lists of directors of joint-stock companies, testimonials to public figures, or requisitions to hold public meetings, to give just a few examples.[29] Focusing on practices shifts attention away from languages and ideas to other ways of conceptualising political culture as a coherent field embracing regular interactions between people and politics, and connecting everyday lived experiences to formal politics.

Second, petitions and petitioning provide a pathway towards understanding the evolving ecosystem of popular participation and representation across the long nineteenth century beyond electoral culture. Moving away from quantitative analyses of voting behaviour, historians of popular politics have emphasised electoral culture as a key theatre for interactions between politicians and the people.[30] However, while important, elections and electoral culture provided a limited mechanism for regular interactions between politicians and the people. A majority of adult men only gained the right to vote after 1885, and before 1910 parliamentary elections could be up to seven years apart. In contrast to episodic

[27] For example, V. Taylor and F. Trentmann, 'Liquid Politics: Water and the Politics of Everyday Life in the Modern City', *P&P*, 211 (2011), 199–241; E. Robinson, 'The Authority of Feeling in Mid-Twentieth-Century English Conservatism', *HJ*, 63 (2020), 1303–24.

[28] Inhabitants of Back Turner Street, Petition to magistrates of Manchester, 1 September 1795, in Archives+, MCL, *Volume of Broadsides on Thefts, Murder, Burglary, Robbery and Elections, 1792–1859*, BR FF 942–72 S176, p. 45.

[29] S. Morgan, 'The Reward of Public Service: Nineteenth-Century Testimonials in Context', *HR*, 80 (2007), 261–85; R. J. Morris, 'Civil Society, Subscriber Democracies, and Parliamentary Government in Great Britain', in N. Bermeo and P. Nord (eds.), *Civil Society before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Lanham, MD, 2000), pp. 111–34, at pp. 118–21; R. Huzzey, 'A Microhistory of British Antislavery Petitioning', *Social Science History* [henceforth *SSH*], 43 (2019), 599–624, at 602–5; J. Taylor, *Boardroom Scandal: The Criminalization of Company Fraud in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 78–79.

[30] F. O'Gorman, 'Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England, 1780–1860', *P&P*, 135 (1992), 79–115; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 80–104; J. Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 14–70.

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election rituals, petitioning provided a much more regular form of interaction between Parliament and the people, not to mention with parts of the state that were not elected. Many more people signed petitions across the nineteenth century than voted in parliamentary elections.[31] The presentation of petitions at Westminster brought popular politics right to the physical heart of a political system that remained dominated by a hereditary landed class. Restoring the centrality of petitions and petitioning to the contemporary ecosystem of representation and participation accordingly offers a new way of understanding the shifting dynamics between politicians, institutions, and people.

Third, in emphasising the open, inclusive elements of political culture this book challenges accounts that have stressed the exclusionary nature of nineteenth-century politics. Shifting away from celebratory narratives of Britain's peaceful evolution to democracy, scholars have re-read the Reform Acts and debates over the franchise to argue that they served to define the political nation in an exclusive way.[32] In defining the 'official political subject', the parliamentary franchise drew the boundaries of citizenship.[33] Extensions of the franchise were grounded on the exclusion of certain groups. The 1832 Reform Act, covering England and Wales, explicitly excluded women from voting for the first time, and this gendered franchise was not abolished until 1918.[34] The emphasis on masculinity within Victorian politics, as well as women's status as 'borderline citizens' as Kathryn Gleadle has put it, stemmed from this statutory exclusion.[35] The debates around the Second Reform Act of 1867, it has been argued, were shaped by class, race, and gender. The respectable working man was to be enfranchised, but this was set against the denial of citizenship to 'rough' working men, women, and non-white colonial subjects.[36]

[31] See Chapter 1.
[32] J. Abney, 'Negotiating an Electorate: Gender, Class, and the British Reform Acts', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kentucky (2016).
[33] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 15; M. Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England, 1832–1914* (Basingstoke, 2009) pp. 10–17.
[34] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 18, 25, 39.
[35] M. McCormack (ed.), *Public Men: Masculinity and Politics in Modern Britain* (Basingstoke, 2007); B. Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge, 2012); J. Tosh, 'Gentlemanly Politeness and Manly Simplicity in Victorian England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 12 (2002), 455–72, at 469–71; K. Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867* (Oxford, 2009).
[36] C. Hall, K. McClelland, and J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, and Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000). See D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 332–33, for the 1832 Reform Act and the making of the middle class.

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While the granting of the franchise required positive sanction from the state, the right to petition was permissive and could thus be reshaped and expanded through the efforts of petitioners, much to the chagrin of some parliamentarians. As the Tory MP Charles Williams Wynn complained in 1818: 'I verily believe that no one cause has been more conducive of evil, than the passive submission of the House to every species of indignity in the shape of petition, during the last eight years'.[37] All subjects possessed the formal right to petition, which was unlimited by gender, class, race, literacy, education, property, or the franchise. An overemphasis on citizenship, a term that only became more prevalent in political discourse in the later nineteenth century, has led historians to miss the significance of subjecthood as a category.[38] Subjecthood conferred rights, and one of the most important was the right to petition.

Of course not all petitioners were treated equally or had the same advantages, a point frequently evident in the case of colonial subjects appealing to the imperial Parliament.[39] But defining the political nation through the franchise ignores how people, including the unenfranchised, interacted with the formal political system and indeed challenged it. This was why petitioning became a vehicle for the mass political mobilisation of British women from early nineteenth-century abolitionism to the Edwardian women's suffrage campaigns, and a potent weapon through which to challenge male political authority.[40]

Fourth, examining petitions, petitioners, and petitioning restores a degree of popular agency to the relationship between state and people, calling into question the emphasis placed on 'liberal governmentality' as an instrument of rule by the state in governing a 'society of strangers'.[41]

[37] Charles Williams Wynn to Marquess of Buckingham, 1818, qu. in 2nd Duke of Buckingham, *Memoirs of the Court of England during the Regency, 1811–1820* (2 vols., London, 1856), II, p. 241.

[38] H. S. Jones, 'The Civic Moment in British Social Thought: Civil Society and the Ethics of Citizenship, c. 1880–1914', in L. Goldman (ed.), *Welfare and Social Policy in Britain since 1870: Essays in Honour of Jose Harris* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 29–43; A. Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford, 2015), p. 38; H. Weiss Muller, *Subjects and Sovereign: Bonds of Belonging in the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 16–44.

[39] R. Huzzey and H. Miller, 'Petitions, Parliament, and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780–1918', *P&P*, 248 (2020), 123–64; Huzzey and Miller, 'Colonial Petitions', 276–81.

[40] S. Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2013), pp. 109–25; C. Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London, 1992), pp. 62–71.

[41] P. Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London, 2003); P. Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013); J. Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain became Modern* (Berkeley, CA, 2014), pp. 51–76.

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Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality,[42] such accounts have argued that the state and its officials developed new mechanisms to regulate an emergent modern mass society and discipline the 'liberal subject'. Whereas a dense historiography has examined liberalism as a parliamentary party, a popular movement, or a series of interlinked political traditions, scholars like Patrick Joyce define it as a technology of rule.[43] Viewed from this perspective, the state's expansion of postal services to facilitate the flow of information is an example of the trend towards bureaucratic systems of control.[44] In the political realm, Joyce has argued that the '"rise" of so-called democratic government represented in many respects a *closing down* … of real democracy' due to the growth of a 'disciplined party system, the creation of a modern bureaucracy' and other controlling mechanisms.[45]

While the governmentality literature has emphasised the use of power by the state in everyday contexts to mould subjects, it has left little room for popular agency or resistance. Petitioning was increasingly bureaucratised in some respects: public petitions to the Commons were systematically recorded, counted, and classified after 1833, while petitioning was a key part of the shift towards greater organisation within Victorian political movements.[46] But the inherently unstable and double-edged nature of petitions as formal instruments of rule and informal mechanisms for popular activity meant that petitioning could never be fully controlled by the state. Indeed, in 1818, the Attorney General complained that radicals came forth with 'a petition in one hand and a sword in the other!'[47] Moreover, petitions were a 'weapon of the weak' and of the dispossessed to seek redress from authority, which explains the stream of individual petitioners who appealed to Parliament, many of them women.[48] A rich body of scholarship has examined petitions and letters from paupers and others within disciplinary institutions to recover how they challenged authority.[49] However, petitions and petitioning were not just weapons of

[42] M. Foucault, 'Governmentality', in G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. M. Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago, IL, 1991), pp. 87–104.
[43] Joyce, *Rule of Freedom*, pp. 1–2.
[44] Joyce, *State of Freedom*, pp. 53–143.
[45] Ibid., pp. 189–90.
[46] Vernon, *Distant Strangers*, pp. 81–82.
[47] *Hansard*, 1st series, xxxvii, 885–86 (9 March 1818).
[48] J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale, CT, 1990), pp. 96–101; SCPP, *Reports* (1846), appendix 548.
[49] D. Englander, 'From the Abyss: Pauper Petitions and Correspondence in Victorian London', *London Journal*, 25 (2000), 71–83; K. Price, 'Time to Write: Convict Petitions in the 19th Century', *Family & Community History*, 22 (2019), 22–39; S. King and P. Jones, 'Voices from the Far North: Pauper Letters and the Provision of Welfare in Sutherland, 1845–1900', *JBS*, 55 (2016), 76–98; P. Jones and N. Carter, 'Writing for

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