Popular Politics and Associational Activity in London and Lancashire, 1800 – 1832

Mary O'Connor

Somerville College, University of Oxford

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Short abstract

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The modes of organising popular engagement with public issues in the early nineteenth century went through continuous adaption. The creative work involved in finding the most appropriate methods was undertaken by thousands of unimportant men. A rich associational landscape provided organisational models and experience. Debating and trade societies were significant for both education and the acquisition of the skills of organising. Trade societies also influenced how working people organised outside of those societies.

These organisational processes are explored through four case studies of organising in London and Lancashire. Sectional groups interpreted what was encompassed by their interests narrowly and generally limited their campaigning to issues that concerned their members qua members. Public-interest groups adopted general identities, most commonly inhabitants, and made representations about the wider good. This shift to inhabitant as the preferred identity to pursue issues of public interest, away from the eighteenth-century view that voter was the appropriate identity, was key to the widening participation of the extra-parliamentary nation. The identity mobilised shaped not just how people were organised but the arguments that they advanced.

Pre-existing structures of local administration were developed in ways that allowed the political identity of inhabitant to be accessed by a broader range of people. Chronological changes in how meetings were called evidence the evolution of the form, which by the 1820s included public meetings of the working classes. Activity was sometimes conceptualised as political (a change from the eighteenth-century understanding) but a

preferred discourse of the public, encapsulated in public meetings and public opinion, offered a stronger claim to legitimacy. Towards the end of the period there was further diversification in the identities that might express opinions in the public interest, including societies and parts of localities.

Long abstract
Popular Politics and Associational Activity in London and Lancashire, 1800 - 1832

This thesis explores how the practices of extra-parliamentary political organisation changed in the early decades of nineteenth-century England. Events of the 1790s had heightened the felt need to appear legitimate and affected what were considered advisable modes of organising **(chapter 1)**. The huge increase in petitioning in the early nineteenth century also encouraged regularising the modes of organising. Campaigners rethought how they should proceed, driven in part by ideas about what legitimated the formulation and expression of collective opinions on public matters by different sections of the population. Despite the enormous historiography on popular politics in the period, there has been little scrutiny of the processes by which extra-parliamentary political life was organised. As a result, none of the approaches that historians have employed over the last sixty years are suited to explaining these changes. The definition of politics used in this thesis is 'the variety of ways in which people sought to shape their worlds by influencing or replacing governments'.

The body of this thesis is made up of four case studies of different forms of organising, selected partly because of historiographical neglect. Although two — debating societies and trade societies — are not about bodies that in general campaigned politically, they were both of central importance to the extending political engagements of the extra-parliamentary nation. The case study of organising in and of the locality reveals that locality structures provided the main methods of organising. The fourth uses anti-corn law campaigning in the late 1820s to explore the question of forum selection. These studies focus on two geographical areas, that of Manchester and four surrounding cotton towns, and the London parishes immediately to the north and east of the City of London. Neither

area included parliamentary boroughs before the Reform Act 1832, nor were they included within corporate boroughs. Lacking traditional representative structures, people had to be inventive about finding channels for their political engagement. While there were interesting differences between the two areas, the studies reveal important common patterns and trends.

The existing historiography provides (usually incidentally) some information about the eighteenth century, but as activity became more common, historians gave less attention to how it was achieved **(chapter 2)**. Crafting a precise and subtle account of nineteenth-century methods of organising for political purposes entails placing their endeavours in the context of previous practices and comparing the contemporaneous activities of different groups. The rich associational landscape of the early nineteenth century underpinned the nation's extending political engagements as involvement in groups formed for varied purposes provided invaluable and transferable organisational experience. The benefits of this culture of associating extended beyond personal experience to the many reports of societies' activities in the newspapers, which provided readers with a repertoire of approaches that might be emulated or adapted.

The increased engagement of the extra-parliamentary nation in national campaigning was accompanied by changes in how their activity was conceptualised **(chapter 3)**. Broadly, in the eighteenth century, politics and its cognates were terms used only about affairs of state and the activities of statesmen. Through the early nineteenth century, the topics of interest to the people gradually came to be termed political, although it was not until the Reform agitation in the early 1830s that extra-parliamentary activities were so described. The language of politics was employed unevenly, rising when the rights to meet or vote were at issue and receding when they were not. By contrast, the conceptualisation of activity and

opinion as public, encapsulated in public meetings and public opinion, rose more steadily and was, by the 1820s, the pre-eminent description. The preference for the public was an active choice. An ideology of the public underpinned the legitimation of generally defined groups (often inhabitants) campaigning about national matters.

By and large debating societies (widely defined) were not campaigning bodies **(chapter 4)**. Even societies that eschewed politics, however, provided a grounding in how to construct arguments and respond to those made by others, essential campaigning abilities. Many such private and semi-private societies of the period saw the development of the skill of public speaking as their *raison d'être*. The flexible form of private societies also provided a suitable and safe environment in which to develop knowledge about the issues of the day. Public debating largely disappeared. Private groups required little infrastructure or resources and could be organised anywhere around the country. In the 1810s, societies formed for political purposes by working people integrated debate more fully into their offerings and developed new practices to inspire members. A contested discourse developed around the practice of non-elite men speaking in public: public speaking was the description employed to validate their activities, whilst oratory, with its connotations of stirring the emotions, was used by those who sought to argue such activity was inappropriate, especially when working men were involved. The 1820s saw more pronounced separation by social status of participants and new behaviours adopted by discussion groups. As confidence increased, the terminology that described events that were overtly political crystallised into separate forms (political lectures and political meetings) and the use of debating as a generic term declined. Women had only limited opportunities to access these opportunities, and almost none to learn public speaking.

Private and public interests were pursued using different identities **(chapter 5)**. A database of around 1200 petitions submitted to the House of Commons from the study areas between 1800 and 1832 reveals the identities that organisers adopted to petition on different issues. Sectional groups, including Dissenters and trade societies, interpreted what was encompassed by their interests narrowly; they generally limited their campaigning to issues that concerned their members *qua* members. Rather than cohering around a sectional interest (commerce, work, religion), public-interest groups adopted general identities, most commonly inhabitants, and made representations as members of the public. General identities — inhabitant — could be adopted to campaign about all and any matters, regardless of the nature of the topic. There was some diversification of petitioning identities in the later 1820s, including that petitions that were now occasionally submitted in the name of campaigning societies. This reflected a trend whereby societies were beginning to be seen more as public bodies with an identity separate from the current members, and less as private groups of subscribers. Inhabitant nevertheless remained the leading political identity and came to largely overshadow those of freeholder and voter. Reasons why this identity was attractive to campaigners, which reached back to eighteenth-century developments, are suggested.

Forms of organising used in the context of local administration — town meetings in the northern region and vestry meetings in London — were developed in ways that allowed the political identity of inhabitant to be accessed by a broader range of people **(chapter 6)**. The type of meeting arranged had consequences for who might and did play an active part.

Using the northern region as a lens, broadly chronological changes in how meetings were called can be identified, evidencing the evolution of the form. Unofficial meetings (those called by private individuals after a requisition to the local authorities to call an official

meeting had been rejected) became an established form only in the 1810s. Disputes about the rejection of requisitions illustrate the arguments that were advanced to legitimate unofficial meetings. Nevertheless, official meetings were sometimes preferred, both because of access to resources and because some felt that opinions that emanated from officially called meetings had a stronger claim to represent the views of the locality. In the mid 1820s, a new form of what are here termed advertised meetings was devised which allowed locality meetings to be called for a section of the inhabitants, defined by either location or social status. This included 'the working classes' of a locality, who thus presented themselves as part of the community and as a public-interest group. The capacity to organise locality meetings had reached people who were far from being the leading men of the town.

In the London region, the inherent legitimacy of vestry meetings was harnessed for political purposes; most were official meetings. Parish sources reveal just how flexible and variable the label 'inhabitant' was, even when not qualified by adjectives such as 'leading'. We see that who could organise meetings, who was eligible to attend, who did in fact attend, and who could sign petitions varied, both between the parishes and by the issue. At times, the signatories of inhabitants' petitions were restricted to ratepayers or something still narrower. On other occasions, by making petitions widely available for signature, inhabitants were presented as synonymous with the people. There is very limited evidence of women attending meetings, none of them speaking or playing other leading roles. They did sign some petitions, but this remained a contested activity.

Mobilising wider areas of the metropolis presented significant practical problems. There was no obvious structure that had wide remit in the metropolis to organise within, or to adapt, which in turn meant that there was no easy way to evoke either the identity of

inhabitant or an equivalent public-interest identity. In the 1810s, organisers experimented with how meetings in the capital might be organised, to minimal effect. In the early 1830s, the new form of advertised meetings eased some of their practical problems; the ability to meet without seeking the sanction of local officials proved particularly useful where there were no such appropriate officials. Nonetheless, one of the reasons that London lost its status as the nation's leader of extra-parliamentary opinion was the lack of an appropriate, broadly drawn, public-interest identity for the metropolis.

In the early nineteenth century, the label 'public meeting' came to be understood as an assembly of people with generally defined identities (most commonly inhabitants) called together by public advertisement to discuss a specific issue **(chapter 7)**. Meetings were presented as open and deliberative. Those attending claimed to be concerned for the public good, driven by a sense of duty and the national interest, and drew on the early modern rediscovery of classical civic ideals to legitimise the engagement of members of the public with such matters. These qualities of publicness shaped both the conduct of meetings and the representations advanced from them, revealing that the development of public meetings served practical but also rhetorical needs that related to the conceptualisation of extra-parliamentary activity as of the public, rather than as politics (discussed in **chapter 3**). Furthermore, the conventions governing public meetings attempted to address the question of what weight should be attached to conflicting representations from the same place. The theory was that, once organisers had been open about the meeting and its subject, allowed wide attendance, made it possible for opposing opinions to be heard and discussed, all with the object of fostering the public good, it was unlikely that another public meeting of the same locality would reach a different view. Parliamentarians, of course, remained adept at seeking to discount opinions that did not suit them.

Trade societies were formed for varied work-related purposes, not to politically campaign **(chapter 8)**. Campaigning by the trades about non-work issues was limited by both external pressures (particularly the law) but also by internal dynamics. Protecting members of the trade and, if possible, improving their position was their primary, and highly valued purpose. Any forays into non-trade activities threatened internal unity (not easily constructed) and risked unwelcome attention from the authorities and parliamentarians. Nevertheless, trade-society activities allowed working men (mostly) to hone their skills of mobilisation, organisation and persuasion as well as providing access to networks of connections and pools of people. The trades' practice of using delegates to connect groups together, which continued to be unlawful even after the 1824 repeal of the Combination Act, was sufficiently influential that it was replicated in political societies formed by working people. When people wanted to campaign about non-work issues as working people, they generally did so either using those societies or the new form of public meetings of the working classes.

An examination of how the anti-corn law campaigning of the 1820s was organised shows how the connected issues of the form of meeting and the group it was desired to mobilise shaped the representations advanced, both in substance and in how they were expressed **(chapter 9)**. The widespread urban support for the anti-corn law campaign provided a suitable context for organisational experiments which were of particular benefit to working people. Local leaders decided what group to mobilise and how to do so. They formed a stratum of actors whose significance in widening the political nation has been underestimated. We can identify their experimentations and adaptations and realise that organisational skills were more widely acquired and practised than has been appreciated. Agitation about the corn laws required awareness of political economy theory, which increasingly influenced what people campaigned about and how they did so. Many

obtained their knowledge of political economy from attending debating societies and discussion groups as well as from involvement in trade societies, bringing us back to the rich associational landscape that underpinned political engagements.

These early decades of the nineteenth century were a bridge between the more limited activism of the later eighteenth century and the flourishing extra-parliamentary engagements evident from the later 1820s. **(chapter 10)**. When we compare the wide range of campaigning options available at the end of the period studied, and who could now access them, with the position in the late eighteenth century, we appreciate how much had changed. This thesis seeks to explain how that expansion was achieved. The period was perhaps exceptional for the caution with which organisers proceeded. The use of precedents from eminently safe and accepted bodies, as well as the emulation of activity in other areas of the country, illustrate their careful approach. There is some suggestion in the historiography that the political identities that might be used to campaign continued to diversify in the later 1830s and 1840s. Whether that is correct can only be established by applying the method used here and tracing changing approaches to organising through those years — and beyond.

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Abbreviations

ABTAs	Anti-Bread Tax Associations
BGVM	Bethnal Green Vestry Minutes
BPU	Birmingham Political Union
Bible Society	The British and Foreign Bible Society
BL	British Library
CJ	*Journals of the House of Commons*
CVM	Clerkenwell Vestry Minutes
HAD	Hackney Archives Department
Hansard	Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*
ILHC	Islington Local History Centre
IVM	Islington Vestry Minutes
LCS	London Corresponding Society
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
MALH	Manchester Archives and Local History
NAPL	National Association for the Protection of Labour
NUWC	National Union of the Working Classes
ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
OLSA	Oldham Local Studies and Archives
OSVM	Old Street Vestry Minutes
PP	*Parliamentary Papers*
SCI	Society for Constitutional Information
SLHL	Stockport Local Heritage Library
SMVM	Stratford St Mary Vestry Minutes
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge

SSBR	Society for Supporters of the Bill of Rights
SVM	Shoreditch Vestry Minutes
THLHLA	Tower Hamlets Local History, Library and Archives
TNA	The National Archive

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1: Introduction

In 1788 the Manchester authorities called a meeting of inhabitants to congratulate Pitt on his recent success with the Regency Bill. Opposition to the proposed meeting from the organisers' political opponents was couched in terms designed to appeal to late eighteenth-century reservations about the expression of collective opinions — 'the question is neither of such general importance as to require the universal discussion of the people at large, nor so peculiarly interesting to the town of Manchester as to demand a public discussion here'.[1] By the late 1820s attitudes had changed and the people of Manchester were presenting their views on myriad matters to Parliament and the country. Nor were they unusual in this: the national phenomenon of increased extra-parliamentary agitation in the nineteenth century is well established.

It is the argument of this thesis that understanding this change requires, amongst other things, a careful examination of the processes used to organise politically in the early nineteenth century. Crafting a more precise and subtle account of those processes entails reflecting on the challenges and choices that confronted would-be mobilisers and developing hypotheses about why they responded and innovated as they did. A comparison of the organisational forms employed to campaign in London and in the cotton towns of Manchester and its vicinity reveals common practices as well as differences that reflected local circumstances. While the differences are interesting, the fact that there were common patterns and trends is important. Shared and overlapping practices reinforced the idea that what was permissible in one locality or on one issue was legitimate for others, thereby establishing a common basis for the expression of public opinion.

[1] *Manchester Mercury*, 30 Dec. 1788.

Popular engagement with political issues in the early nineteenth century is the subject of a considerable historiography. It is surprising, therefore, that there has been so little scrutiny of the processes by which the extra-parliamentary nation found ways to organise politically. Specific causes and campaigns have been described with care, and these descriptions shed incidental light on methods of organising, but little has been done to elucidate how the means of formulating and expressing popular opinion developed and were revised over the period. It may be that, looking through the prism of hindsight, historians found the organisation of political meetings too familiar to be interesting, but in the early nineteenth century how to proceed was neither obvious nor straightforward.

As this thesis shows, organising practices went through a continuous process of adaptation and innovation from the later eighteenth century. At the start there was a patchwork of approaches which offered some people in some places the means of expressing their opinions about some issues. The process by which this developed into a general acceptance of the expression of collective opinions on national issues by the mass of the people was gradual and uneven. While broad national trends can be identified, the structures which were the preconditions to organising (e.g., forms of local government, cultural resources) varied by location. The identities which people adopted to express views also varied (freeholder, inhabitant, Dissenter, merchant, artisan, weaver) and these variations mattered since the kind of identity mobilised shaped the form of organisation used (and *vice versa*). Building on practices that were already accepted, people tried out different methods and made adaptations, seeking to avoid direct confrontation with hostile authorities and to cultivate the claim that their meetings constituted a legitimate contribution to public debate.

Paying attention to practice and the difficulties that organisers faced helps us to understand the dilemmas of those seeking to form and to lead extra-parliamentary opinion and to see reasons for the tactics they adopted. The creative work involved in finding the most appropriate methods was undertaken by thousands of unimportant men. They formed a stratum of actors whose significance in widening the political nation has been underestimated. It was local leaders who decided which group to mobilise — what identity to organise — though their choices were influenced by the times and the cause.

Studying the processes by which petitions and other representations were produced and the strategies they embodied also draws our attention to innovative rhetorical strategies. Organisers not only had to find practical means of action but also had to work out how to communicate ideas to those they sought to influence. Both the choice of identity and the form of organising affected what was argued and how it was expressed. A set of shared ideas and practices was constructed which underpinned the representation of the extra-parliamentary nation as the public.

The thesis focuses on how people campaigned about 'public matters', the types of issues categorised in the *Commons Journals* from 1803 as 'matters of a public nature' (further discussed in chapters 5 and 8). What was of a public nature was interpreted in broad terms and included issues relating to work and trade. Local and private matters, such as the authorisation of infrastructure developments or establishing local authorities and enclosures, were excluded from the category and campaigns about those matters fall outside the ambit of this thesis. When not replicating contemporary usage, 'politics' here means the 'variety of ways in which people sought to shape their worlds by influencing or replacing governments', a modern definition that captures the range of activities studied

here and is adjacent to the contemporary understanding of the term (some twenty-first century definitions are more expansive).[2]

1.1 Context and argument.

To set the scene for our enquiries we start by reviewing what can be extracted from the rather fuller eighteenth-century historiography (supplemented by a few easily accessible primary sources) about the chronology and shape of changes which laid the foundations for subsequent developments.

As meetings are fundamental to the organising processes studied here, the development of the use of that category provides a starting point. In the seventeenth century the main applications of the noun were either to Parliament in session or to some religious gatherings. The Royal Society provided an early publicised exemplar extending the term to private, secular occasions. Chartered companies were also users. The concept of a 'meeting' came into more general use through the eighteenth century.[3] Gradually events labelled as meetings were called by other commercial and trade interests, charitable bodies, and clubs and societies with varied social and educational purposes, including the freemasons. The spreading use of the term also implies increasing familiarity with the connected practices. The growth of friendly societies across the country in the later decades of the century was particularly significant in extending from a low base the number of people who knew how to arrange and conduct a meeting.

[2] Peter Guardino, *The Time of Liberty: Popular Political Culture in Oaxaca, 1750-1850* (Durham, 2005), p. 2.
[3] Based on searches in the databases Early English Books Online, Eighteenth Century Collections Online and 17th - 18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers for various dates between 1660-1710 (depending on the source), 3 and 15 Nov. 2023.

The label ‘meeting’ also came to be applied to some extra-parliamentary political gatherings. A political culture developed through the eighteenth century that was broadly tolerant of associational assembly and this probably helped to create a default assumption that what we would call political meetings were acceptable. Gatherings preparatory to parliamentary elections in boroughs and counties, particularly those for the selection of candidates, were early occasions when the word meeting was used in a political context.[4] So, in 1710 ‘a Meeting of a great many Gentlemen, Clergy and Freeholders of the County of Surry [sic]’ was held about the election of MPs for that county.[5] The use of meeting in other extra-parliamentary contexts was slower to develop. While bodies like common councils and vestries were sometimes said to have met, their gatherings were not generally termed meetings. In a volume of seventy-nine addresses delivered to Queen Anne from counties and boroughs about the Sacheverell affair in 1710, only one address was described as agreed at a ‘meeting’ (of the assizes); most of the gatherings of counties and boroughs self-described as ‘assembled’.[6] By contrast, many of the instructions to MPs about the excise crisis in 1733 were agreed in what were termed ‘meetings’, although the different character of these two movements (discussed below) makes the comparison imperfect.[7] Even before county meetings became the appropriate organising body (around the mid eighteenth century), a few county petitions and addresses were described as having been agreed at county meetings.[8]

[4] *Daily Courant*, 24 June 1710; W. A. Speck, *Tory & Whig: the Struggle in the Constituencies, 1701-1715* (London, 1970), pp. 34-35; however, a volume of advertisements relating to the 1721 general election referenced only one meeting, *A Collection of Advertisements, Letters… Relating to the Last Elections at Westminster and Hastings* (London, 1722).
[5] *Post Boy*, 8-10 Aug. 1710.
[6] *A Collection of the Addresses which have been Presented to the Queen since the Impeachment of the Reverend Dr Henry Sacheverell* (London, 1710); Geoffrey Holmes, *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell* (London, 1973), pp. 248-250.
[7] *Excise: Being a Collection of the Letters etc Containing the Sentiments and Instructions… against a New Excise* (London, 1733).
[8] Bryan Keith-Lucas, 'County Meetings', *Law Quarterly Review*, 70 (1954), pp. 109-14, footnote 18 for two county meetings in the late 17th century.

The collective descriptions of individuals who campaigned about matters of national contention slowly shifted during the eighteenth century, in loose correlation with changes in the conception of the gatherings where such interventions were agreed. It is helpful to distinguish (when the sources permit) between several things: the type of locality from which an intervention came (for example a county, parliamentary borough, corporate borough, etc.); the body or group that agreed that intervention; and the identity adopted to make the representations. In the 1710 volume of addresses to Queen Anne referred to above, most began by reciting the full panoply of appropriate officers assembled in the relevant county and borough bodies, often adding more generic identities of persons assembled, such as the nobility or freeholders; around one fifth also included inhabitants in the addressing identity.[9] The large number of people who signed some addresses (particularly in the late seventeenth century) suggests that signatures might be obtained after the occasion at which the address was originally agreed.[10] Instructions to MPs (employed during the exclusion crisis of 1679-1681 and revived in 1701) sometimes emanated from the relevant county or borough body, but sometimes were agreed at what were termed 'general meetings' of voters. Both instructions to MPs and petitions were, for example, submitted during the excise crisis of 1733.[11] As Paul Langford noted corporate procedures were insufficiently regular to ensure the timely issuing of instructions, nor did instructions require either corporate seals, or the use of official funds.[12] Most instructions

[9] *Collection of Addresses*; it was unclear where those from Westminster (p. 10) and Cirencester (p. 40) were agreed; Doncaster was a corporate but not a parliamentary borough (p. 43); Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture* (Oxford, 2005), chapter 3.
[10] Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, pp. 136-138 (note the exceptional addresses from tinners in 1683); Geoffrey Holmes and W.A. Speck, *The Divided Society: Parties and Politics in England 1694-1716* (New York, 1968), p. 56 for clergy signing a Wiltshire address in 1706 not having been present at the sessions; Speck, *Tory & Whig*, p. 31.
[11] Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727 -1783* (Oxford, 1989), p. 30.
[12] Paul Langford, *The Excise Crisis Society and Politics in the Age of Walpole* (Oxford, 1975), p. 51; Holmes and Speck, *The Divided Society*, p. 124; *The Annals of Europe for the Year... 1742* (London, 1745) pp. 292, 313; Paul Kelly, 'Constituents' Instructions to Members of Parliament in the Eighteenth Century', in Clyve Jones (ed.), *Party and Management in Parliament, 1660-1784* (Leicester, 1984), pp. 169-89.

came from parliamentary boroughs and from counties and were often sent in the context of elections, so the practice of meeting to approve election candidates probably influenced the holding of 'general meetings' of voters to agree instructions. The sending of instructions was often instigated by commercial interests who displayed a growing tendency to 'pass themselves off as representatives of the general feeling of their town'.[13]

When petitioning about national political issues resumed in the 1760s (having been discouraged since the revolution gave Parliament a secure place as the representative of the people) at first only counties and parliamentary boroughs were involved, but this soon changed. Wilkite petitioners from counties described themselves as voters, as did some from parliamentary boroughs. However, some borough petitions were expressed as emanating from 'inhabitants or citizens' and the practice of non-voters signing representations from parliamentary boroughs grew across the remainder of the century.[14] Campaigning about the dispute with the American colonies in the 1770s extended agitation about matters of national public interest to towns that were neither parliamentary nor corporate boroughs, whose petitions and addresses were said to come from their inhabitants.[15] Although these interventions usually had the approval of a town's authorities, they were not agreed by any chartered or statutory body, for generally these towns had none. Commercial concerns often motivated those engagements.[16] Meanwhile, many parliamentary boroughs that were divided on what position to take in relation to the American conflict sent petitions and addresses that were organised outside their regular

[13] Langford, *Excise Crisis*, p. 56.
[14] John Phillips, 'Popular Politics in Unreformed England', *Journal of Modern History*, 52 (1980), pp. 599-625, especially pp. 607-9, see the table at p. 611 for percentages of non-voters signing American addresses in parliamentary boroughs, with a high of 83% in Liverpool; Philip Loft, 'Petitioning and Petitioners to the Westminster Parliament, 1660-1788', *Parliamentary History*, 38 (2019), pp. 342-61, p. 357.
[15] Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995), provides a useful list, p. 238, footnote 3.
[16] Loft, 'Petitioning and Petitioners', p. 358 for eighteenth-century petitioning in response to parliamentary bills.

bodies and similarly described as from inhabitants. Petitioning against the slave trade from 1788 showed a similar pattern of engagement to that about the American conflict.[17] The blossoming of agitation about public matters in the 1790s was not restricted to the followers of the famous radical societies. For example, petitioners about the Seditious Meetings and Treason Bills in 1795 included trade societies and the board of the East India Company.[18] How these various identities organised to campaign in the public interest was not always transparent.

Historians' lack of interest about how people organised in the early nineteenth century means that the story cannot be continued beyond the eighteenth century using the same approach. The aim of this thesis is to begin to fill that gap. The arguments it advances are outlined below.

The 1790s mark a sharp break in extra-parliamentary agitation. The legal restrictions and general attitudes meant that campaigning was frowned upon during the later 1790s and the early years of the nineteenth century. When widespread campaigning resumed organisers adjusted how they proceeded. This shift was driven in part by ideas about what made legitimate the formulation and expression of collective opinions on public matters by different sections of the population. Events of the 1790s heightened the felt need to appear legitimate and affected what were considered the advisable modes of organising. The huge increase in the volume of petitioning in the early nineteenth century, both in absolute numbers and in the range of subjects, also encouraged the regularisation of the modes of meeting. Establishing ways to organise which were broadly accepted as legitimate mattered to several different audiences. First, most people were not prepared to participate in activity that appeared inappropriate or of dubious legality. Second, one purpose of

[17] See chapter 5.4; Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 357; *Norfolk Chronicle*, 24 Jan. 1778.
[18] *The History of the Two Acts* (London, 1796), pp. 403, 418, 505.

issuing collective opinions was to influence Parliament and for most causes this was more likely to be achieved if the way in which those opinions had been produced was perceived as legitimate. Finally, there was probably judged to be more chance of galvanising the wider nation to similar action if the modes used also had legitimacy.

Both Kant and Bentham had considered the topical question of how efforts to articulate public opinion could be defined and legitimised.[19] The social theorist Jürgen Habermas built on Kant's work in his theory of the public sphere.[20] Habermas's use of this concept, which has been much invoked by British historians, is considered at greater length later. Although it is of limited assistance for this thesis, one element is helpful. Habermas distinguished the public sphere from the realm of civil society in which people associated to pursue a variety of private projects — though British historians have not always followed him in making that distinction.[21] Here, it is argued that different claims to legitimacy were made by public-interest groups (corresponding to his public sphere) and private-interest groups (corresponding to his civil society).

In the early nineteenth century the most common identity adopted by public-interest groups when they met and petitioned about the issues that concerned the nation was inhabitant. Inhabitant was a nationally accessible and neutral identity, unconnected to any group — political, religious, or economic — that in the years prior to the Reform Act 1832 became the leading political identity, largely overshadowing those of freeholder and voter. This development built on trends of the later eighteenth century outlined above. It also

[19] Slavko Splichal, 'In Search of a Strong European Public Sphere: Some Critical Observations on Conceptualisations of the Publicness and the (European) Public Sphere', *Media, Culture & Society*, 28 (2006) pp. 695-714; Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784); Jeremy Bentham, *Of Publicity* (London, 1791); W.A. MacKinnon, *On the Rise, Progress and Present State of Public Opinion in Great Britain and Other Parts of the World* (London, 1828), for a less elevated contemporary take.
[20] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, 1989).
[21] Geoff Eley, 'Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century', in Craig Colhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (London, 1992), pp. 289-339, p. 298.

entailed extending and adapting organisational forms already in use in the context of local administration, which in the study areas here meant vestry and town meetings. How meetings of inhabitants could be called and by whom was gradually extended so that by the 1820s they could be called by any inhabitants. These extensions can be understood as arising from attempts to avoid statutory restrictions imposed in the 1790s and 1810s, but also responded to what those acts delineated as permissible. The new legal offence of unlawful assembly gave the authorities wide powers to prevent meetings that disturbed them (generally, large meetings of working people).[22] Most meetings of inhabitants, however, perhaps because so far as they could they mirrored established practice, came to be regarded as unremarkable.

In a connected innovation, meetings of groups that were defined in general terms (most commonly as inhabitants) and that addressed issues in the public interest came to be labelled as 'public meetings' and, having been conceived as such, came to display common characteristics. When people assumed citizenly identities for the purpose of taking part in organised and structured discussion about public matters, they represented that activity as civic-minded, deliberative and open to all (qualities encapsulated here in the term publicness). The phrase 'public meeting' became a term of art, connected to the reification and valorisation of 'public opinion'. Although rhetoric and reality were frequently not fully in step, the qualities of publicness significantly influenced the conduct of public meetings. This self-legitimating ideology was integral to what was the preferred conceptualisation of extra-parliamentary activity as 'public' rather than 'political'.

By contrast, private-interest groups (who were defined in specific terms) campaigned to further that interest. Most interpreted their concerns narrowly, campaigning only about

[22] Michael Lobban, 'From Seditious Libel to Unlawful Assembly: Peterloo and the Changing Face of Political Crime c1770-1820', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 10 (1990), pp. 307-52.

matters that directly affected them. There were often internal reasons that encouraged interest groups to take this approach. Campaigning about non-work issues by trade societies, for example, might have undermined their industrial purposes, been contrary to their rules, created internal divisions, drawn unwelcome attention from the authorities and possibly been unlawful. Further, private-interest groups could not hold public meetings for their gatherings were, by definition, not open. Because they represented the concerns of their constituent members it was also more challenging for private interests to package their interventions as primarily motivated by the national good (although they frequently argued that their interests overlapped with those of the nation).[23] The development in the late 1820s of what their organisers labelled as 'public meetings of the working classes' circumvented some of the problems that impeded the trades from campaigning about causes not directly related to their work and allowed working people to organise as such, using a public-interest identity close to that of inhabitant and to display the qualities of publicness.

Debating, which was essential to the process of organising politically, was also affected by the recalibration that occurred in the early nineteenth century. Public debating, which had often been a form of agitation, seems no longer to have been felt appropriate and debating instead became an exercise largely conducted by private groups. These groups facilitated the processes of education and persuasion about the issues and the acquisition of the key skill of public speaking by wider sections of society, both essential to the expansion of extra-parliamentary activity. The varied practices of debate in the early nineteenth century illustrate another issue of growing significance — separation by social status. Groups of

[23] John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York, 1989), pp. 201-4.

different social status increasingly met separately and often favoured different modes of debate and discussion.

The available resources constrained what was practical in any situation, meaning by this not merely access to space and finance, but also the organisational skills and knowledge of participants. Opportunities to participate in associational life for non-political purposes broadened. Furthermore, individuals did not operate only under one identity only or pursue one cause. People were influenced by the differing organisational practices they had experienced (or read about) and the skills they had developed in varied circumstances. Trade and friendly societies were particularly important for working people's acquisition of the skills of organising. The practices adopted in societies established by working people to campaign about non-work issues were clearly influenced by the culture of trade societies.

By the end of the period studied a more relaxed approach to how people organised is evident. The distinction between public-interest groups and private-interest groups began to blur. Some interest groups began to express opinions in the national interest about causes not directly related to their identity with, for example, Dissenters becoming (as such) highly active in anti-slavery campaigning.[24] How campaigning societies fitted into the picture also began to change. Campaigning societies were hybrid bodies: private because they were cause-specific interest groups, but public-facing in their aim of attracting wider support. For much of the period their role was to mobilise, educate and agitate, but not to petition parliament. By the end of the period, however, their self-conception and the functions they undertook were changing. A few began to petition under

[24] Joshua Civin, 'Slaves, Sati and Sugar: Constructing Imperial Identity through Liverpool Petition Struggles', in Julian Hoppit (ed.), *Parliaments, Nations and Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660-1860* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 187-205.

their own identity. Nevertheless, inhabitant remained the main political identity and the concept of publicness dominated both the practice of extra-parliamentary organisation and the ways in which it was presented throughout the Reform agitation.

1.2 Historiography.

In some very recent work Richard Huzzey (writing about requisitioning public meetings) and Henry Miller (on petitioning) have argued that investigating practice has the potential to renew the study of popular politics and contribute to existing historiographical debates.[25] Other historians, particularly Katrina Navickas and Janette Martin, have also studied the practice of organising, albeit not so labelling it.[26] Some work on the changing nature of philanthropic bodies through the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries gave methods of organising a central role.[27] This thesis endorses Huzzey's and Miller's argument by examining the process of organising politically.

Why is it helpful to make this intervention in the crowded field of historiography about popular politics in the period? What we know — and do not know — about organisational methods has been shaped by the frames and approaches used by historians and the stories they have been seeking to tell. Historians have tended to take associational forms as given. They have noted their emergence but done little to explain them, save as responses to legal restrictions. Furthermore, the main historiographical approaches used to study popular

[25] Richard Huzzey, 'Public Meetings, Respectable Requisitions, and Popular Politics in Great Britain and Ireland, c.1769-1850', *English Historical Review*, 138 (2023), pp. 185-221; Henry Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780 -1918* (Cambridge, 2023).
[26] Katrina Navickas, 'The Contested Right of Public Meeting in England from the Bill of Rights to the Public Order Acts', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society.*, 32 (2022); Katrina Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789-1848* (Manchester, 2015), pp. 199-221; Janette Martin, 'Popular Political Oratory and Itinerant Lecturing in Yorkshire and the North-East in the Age of Chartism, 1837-60' (PhD. thesis, University of York, 2010); Harry Smith, 'Propertied Life and Public Life: the Social History of Birmingham, 1780-1832' (D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 2013) used process as a method in his social history, p. 50.
[27] M. J. D. Roberts, *Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787-1886* (Cambridge, 2004); Roshan Allpress, *British Philanthropy in the Globalizing World: Entrepreneurs and Evangelicals, 1756-1840* (Oxford, 2023).

politics over the last sixty years cannot be employed to analyse the process of organising. The following discussion is broadly structured around the changing frameworks favoured by historians since the 1960s, although there were studies that used more than one approach.

During the 1960s and 1970s, inspired in part by the political activism of the period, there were two drivers of work that was conceptualised as 'popular politics'.[28] The first driver to study popular politics was a desire to study 'history from below', a broad area of enquiry focused on working people and encompassing political as well as other forms of history. George Rudé and Edward Thompson were important early exponents.[29] In *The Making of the English Working Class* Thompson argued that both work-related and political associations were key to the formation of the English working class in the early nineteenth century. The second impetus came from critiques of Lewis Namier's influential argument that eighteenth-century politics was not primarily shaped by questions of principle. Rather, connections and vested interests were key to parliamentarians' actions, with the implication that politics took place among a small elite.[30] A group of historians, inspired by Geoffrey Holmes and including W.A. Speck and H.T. Dickinson, argued that wider attitudes to the issues did matter in the early and mid eighteenth century, which was characterised by more popular political activity than had been recognised.[31] Earlier work had drawn on an older tradition of seeing the roots of pressure to expand the political nation early in the reign of George III and led Eugene Black and Ian Christie, among

[28] A google ngram suggests the phrase itself took off at that time.
[29] George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: a Social Study* (London, 1965); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963).
[30] L. B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929).
[31] Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (London, 1967); W. A. Speck, *Stability and Strife: England, 1714-1760* (London, 1977); H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1977).

others, to produce studies of extra-parliamentary organisations in the eighteenth century.[32] Many of the challenges to Namier's arguments, and indeed the work of Black and Christie, did not follow Rudé and Thompson in taking an interest in the social status and milieu of extra-parliamentary actors. However, later work by a younger generation of researchers did.

Studies concerned with the social status of actors moved beyond working people to incorporate the middling sorts. They were influenced in part by interest in the history of urbanisation and developing ideas about the significance of towns for the growth of extra-parliamentary politics.[33] John Brewer argued that from the 1760s the emerging middling sorts used their associations (developed in part to further their economic independence from the client economy) to express opinions about matters of national contention. He thereby brought voluntary associations to the centre of the stage, drawing attention to the many small clubs and societies that participated in political activity.[34] His work was highly influential, though it could be charged with underrating earlier protest. In *Whigs and Cities* Nicholas Rogers (drawing on arguments he had developed over many years) analysed the social and economic status of urban residents who used both formal institutions and societies in their political activities under the first two Hanoverian Kings (1714-60).[35]

[32] E. C. Black, *The Association: British Extra-Parliamentary Political Organization, 1769-1793* (Oxford, 1963); Ian Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform: the Parliamentary Reform Movement in British Politics, 1760-1785* (Aldershot, 1962), building on, for example, Henry Jephson, *The Platform: its Rise and Progress* (London, 1892).
[33] Peter Clark and Paul Slack, *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700: Essays in Urban History* (London, 1972).
[34] John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976); John Brewer, 'Commercialization and Politics', in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb (eds.), *The Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, 1982), pp. 197-262.
[35] Nicholas Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989) (expanding arguments made in several earlier articles); Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty* also analysed activity of middling and lesser sorts.

The processes of class formation continued to provide an intellectual framework for further work for some decades. Many studies were inspired by Thompson's iconic book.[36] Led by R.J. Morris, historians also argued that associational life was important in the formation and expression of middle-class identity, particularly from the 1830s.[37] Gender — its significance reinforced by associational practices — was brought into the story of class formation in the late 1980s, notably by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall.[38] However, by that time geo-political changes (led by the decline of the Soviet bloc) and intellectual fashions (in particular, postmodernism and the linguistic approach) had begun to reduce the appeal of class, with all its ideological baggage, as an explanatory framework. As a result, if not a strictly necessary result, studies of popular political organisation in the early nineteenth century became unfashionable, except as rethought according to the imperatives of cultural history (which is discussed below).

Work that did study popular political organisations failed to offer an approach that could be employed more generally. There was noticeably more work about the later 1830s and 1840s, as historians focused on national organisations like Chartism and the Anti-Corn Law League.[39] In so doing, they added to earlier work on other Victorian pressure groups, providing deep studies of specific organisations. No more than in preceding work, however, was much effort made to categorise and compare structures and methods,

[36] A few examples: Robert Glen, *Urban Workers in the Early Industrial Revolution* (London, 1984); I. J. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and his Times* (London, 1979); Adrian Randall, *Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry, 1776-1809* (Cambridge, 1991).
[37] R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: the Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester, 1990).
[38] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (Chicago, 1987); Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London, 1995).
[39] Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: a New History* (Manchester, 2007); Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The People's Bread: a History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 2000); Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838-1846* (London, 1958); see also Patricia Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from Without in Early Victorian England* (London, 1974).

although D.A. Hamer's study of the tactic of electoral pressure was a step in that direction.[40] Graham Wootton's outline of the development of pressure groups was not pursued further.[41] Charles Tilly's sociological argument that there was a shift in the repertoires of protest (broadly from eighteenth-century direct action to nineteenth-century meetings and organisations looking to influence Parliament) failed to attract historians to develop his approach.[42]

From the 1980s what was termed the 'new cultural history' moved beyond studies of high and popular culture to encompass the customs and values of groups, emphasising how participants at the time understood and felt about their own activities. The study of past cultures was distinguished from the study of social history, with which it had previously been conjoined.[43] Historians of popular politics investigated the mentalities of groups and the bricolage of practices, rituals and symbols that they employed, using culture to counterbalance the linguistic turn's focus on the interpretation of texts.[44] Historians who remained interested in the politics of working people often fruitfully used cultural studies in conjunction with other approaches. Iain McCalman addressed the cultural influences of London's radical underworld, its ideologies and connections with criminal groups.[45] Robert Poole placed the march to Peterloo in the context of traditional, agricultural celebrations of

[40] J. T. Ward, *The Factory Movement, 1830-1855* (London, 1962); Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: the Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872* (London, 1971); D. A. Hamer, *The Politics of Electoral Pressure: a Study in the History of Victorian Reform Agitations* (Hassocks 1977); thanks to Henry Miller for these references; Eileen Yeo exceptionally considered practice in 'Some Practices and Problems of Chartist Democracy' in James Epstein (ed.), *The Chartist Experience; Studies in Working Class Radicalism and Culture 1830-1860* (London, 1982).
[41] Graham Wootton, *Pressure Groups in Britain, 1720-1970: an Essay in Interpretation with Original Documents* (London, 1975).
[42] Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834* (London, 1995).
[43] Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, 2004).
[44] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983); Paul A. Pickering, 'Class without Words: Symbolic Communication in the Chartist Movement', *Past & Present*, 112 (1986), pp. 144-62; Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998).
[45] Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Oxford, 1988).

the harvest.[46] Malcolm Chase focused on the mentalities of early trade societies.[47] From the 1990s the self-labelled 'new political history' claimed to merge an examination of the culture and experience of popular politics with analyses of the role of language in constituting that experience, sometimes adding a post-modern twist in the form of multiple and unstable meanings.[48]

In parallel with these developments, Habermas' theory of the public sphere (published in Germany in 1962, but not translated into English until 1989) offered historians a new narrative and vocabulary.[49] Habermas defined the public sphere as a space in bourgeois society where an individual's sense of entitlement to publicly express political opinions was formed and displayed. Following rational, disinterested debate by participants, who in those circumstances were considered equals, unanimous public opinion emerged. Habermas recognised, without substantively altering his model, that the qualities of rationality and disinterestedness were ideals and historians have evidenced how different reality was.[50] Habermas also failed fully to take account of the role of organisation in establishing and expanding the public sphere, perhaps because he omitted most of the nineteenth century from his survey.[51] Although he emphasised that public opinion arose from real discussions (and was not merely a print discourse) he was most interested in salons, clubs and reading societies which he saw as sites of unstructured, free critical discussion — perhaps emphasising these because, inasmuch as there was a public sphere in

[46] Robert Poole, 'The March to Peterloo: Politics and Festivity in late Georgian England', *Past & Present*, 192 (2006), pp. 109-54.
[47] Malcolm Chase, *Early Trade Unionism: Fraternity, Skill and the Politics of Labour* (Aldershot, 2000).
[48] Dror Wahrman 'The New Political History: a Review Essay', *Social History*, 21 (1996); Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: the Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994); James Vernon, *Politics and the People: a Study in English Political Culture, 1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993); James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (New York, 1994).
[49] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*.
[50] Jürgen Habermas, 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', in Colhoun (ed.), *Habermas*, pp. 421-61, pp. 425-6.
[51] Eley, 'Nations, Publics'.

Germany at this time, it was in these locations that it was to be found.[52] He paid little attention to the numerous societies formed in Britain to campaign for specific causes. These present significant problems for his theory, for they were not open to free discussion as their core beliefs were already established. He barely mentioned town and other local meetings.[53] To be fair, Habermas was attempting to explain the degradation of political discourse in twentieth-century Europe, not political activity in Hanoverian England.

The public sphere appeared to connect diverse areas of interest, offering an overarching concept that made it particularly attractive in post-class studies. It was used at both macro and micro levels. James van Horn Melton employed it to discuss the growing importance of 'the public' in three eighteenth-century European countries.[54] Kathleen Wilson applied it to her more granular study of the popular politics of eighteenth-century English towns, as did James Vernon in his post-modern take on nineteenth-century popular politics.[55] The empirical problems found in Habermas' work led to debates about one sphere or many, but these exercises proved largely sterile.[56] Peter Clark considered the distinction between the public and private spheres too uncertain for the concept to explain the growth of British associational life prior to 1800.[57]

Historians extended the public sphere to develop several new approaches. Literary historians, often self-described as interested in 'Romanticism', drew on the work of cultural historians as well as the idea of the public sphere to produce several studies focused on print and discourse. These broadened the appreciation of the significance of

[52] Ulrich in Hof, 'German Associations and Politics in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century' and Horst Möller, 'Enlightened Societies in the Metropolis: The Case of Berlin', both in Eckhart Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990).
[53] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, pp. 64-6, for possibly his only reference to public meetings.
[54] James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001).
[55] Wilson, *Sense of the People*; Vernon, *Politics and the People*.
[56] Colhoun (ed.), *Habermas*.
[57] Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies c.1580-1800: the Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), p. 463.

activities adjacent to the more directly political (in particular, lectures and wider discussions) and underlined the dialectical relationship between print and practice.[58] A few touched on organisational behaviours, particularly in connection with the 1790s radicals, but their focus remained the language by which these radicals self-presented and were perceived by outsiders.[59] In the early twenty-first century some historians became interested in the significance of space, a multi-layered concept that encompasses the physical (including geography), legality of use and any customary associations with a place. The spatial turn was influenced not only by the public sphere but also by cultural geography, gender studies and the significance of local identities.[60] As Katrina Navickas (amongst others) demonstrated, the prism of space can bring power relationships back into the picture, something often overlooked since historians moved away from class analysis.[61]

There is little in any of these recent approaches to assist with the study of the process of organising. The notion of the public sphere is too capacious to explain why organisation took one form, rather than another, or changed over time. Studying culture or employing the concept of space illuminates only some elements of organisation. Literary studies can tell us little about form and process. Because these historiographical preoccupations have dominated, we lack both empirical information and ways of conceptualising how early-nineteenth century organisational methods differed from those used in the eighteenth century, let alone explanations of why new methods were developed. Approaches which

[58] Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: the Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1996); Gillian Russell, 'Spouters or Washerwomen: the Sociability of Romantic Lecturing', in Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (eds.), *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840* (Cambridge, 2002).
[59] Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: the Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge, 2016); John Barrell, 'London and the London Corresponding Society', in James K. Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (eds.), *Romantic Metropolis: the Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 85-112.
[60] Navickas, *Protest*, useful summarises the historiography; Katrina Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism in Lancashire, 1798-1815* (Oxford, 2009).
[61] Navickas, *Protest*; Peter Clark, 'Politics, Clubs and Social Space in Pre-industrial Europe', in Beat Kümin (ed.), *Political Space in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 81-94 briefly considers several issues considered here.

allow us to tackle these questions are especially useful for the early nineteenth century, when associational forms developed in ways that historians have not identified. For these reasons, the process of organising politically is here made the subject of detailed scrutiny.

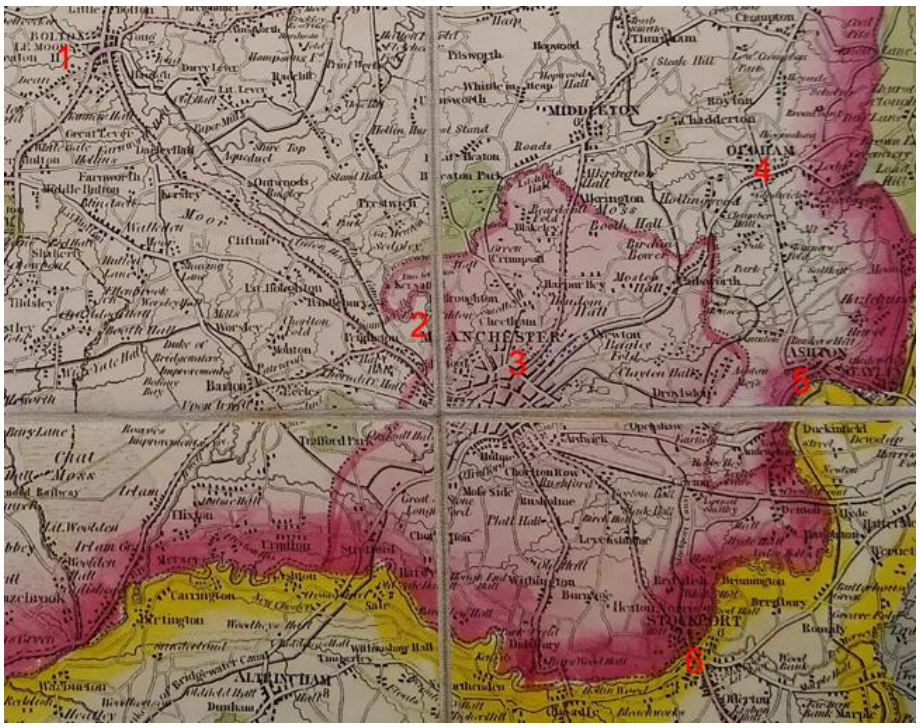
1.3 The study areas.

The body of the thesis consists of four case studies of forms of organising investigated with reference to groups that operated in two geographical areas. Narrowing the geographical focus of the investigations allowed activity to be detailed and contextualised. For example, this focus enabled the preparation of a database of petitions submitted to the House of Commons from the areas (discussed below). An urban focus was chosen because political life tended to be more intense in urban districts than in the countryside, and two areas are studied as a check against drawing general conclusions from local circumstances, whilst inevitably also introducing an element of comparison. The first study area is Manchester and the surrounding cotton towns and the second consists of part of London. Both areas had recently experienced significant population growth and their total populations were similar: in 1821 that of the London study area was around 380,000 and the northern towns circa 365,000. These locations, particularly that in the north, have attracted lots of attention from previous historians, also providing the opportunity to engage with their accounts.

The northern study area consists of Manchester (population in 1821, 186,942) and the surrounding cotton towns of Ashton (25,967), Bolton (50,097), Oldham (52,510) and Stockport (49,546).[62] The map of the region at figure 1.1 also marks Salford. Although Salford had its own governance structures it generally acted in conjunction with

[62] All population figures, including those for the London parishes, are from *Parliamentary Papers* [hereafter *PP*] (1822), 15 (502), Abstract of the Answers and Returns Under Act for Taking Account of Population of Great Britain, 1821.

Manchester. Salford was not separately investigated and, for convenience, has here been treated as part of Manchester (the Manchester population figure includes that of Salford). The area was in the vanguard of industrialisation with all the accompanying social, economic, cultural and political tensions.[63] Several of the towns still had medieval court leets (under the influence of the Lord of the Manor) that annually selected the main officers of the towns.[64] The towns increasingly acquired additional structures, such as statutory improvement commissions, to manage the challenges of growing urban centres.[65] The huge parishes of the north of England were too large to perform the civil functions conducted by smaller parishes and for those purposes were divided into several (or in Manchester's case thirty) townships.



1.Bolton
2. Salford
3. Manchester
4. Oldham
5. Ashton
6. Stockport

Figure 1.1 A New Map of the Manufacturing Districts … around Manchester J Pigot and W. Dean (1824), Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, (E) C17-3 (1).

[63] Mary B. Rose, *The Lancashire Cotton Industry: a History since 1700* (Preston,1996); Jon Stobart, *The First Industrial Region: North-west England, c.1700-60* (Manchester, 2004).
[64] Arthur Redford, *The History of Local Government in Manchester* (Manchester, 1939).
[65] For example, 32 Geo. III, c. 71 (Bolton Improvement Trust Act, 1792); James Scholes and William Pimblett, *History of Bolton and Parish Church Memorials* (Bolton 1892), p. 465; see also chapter 6.

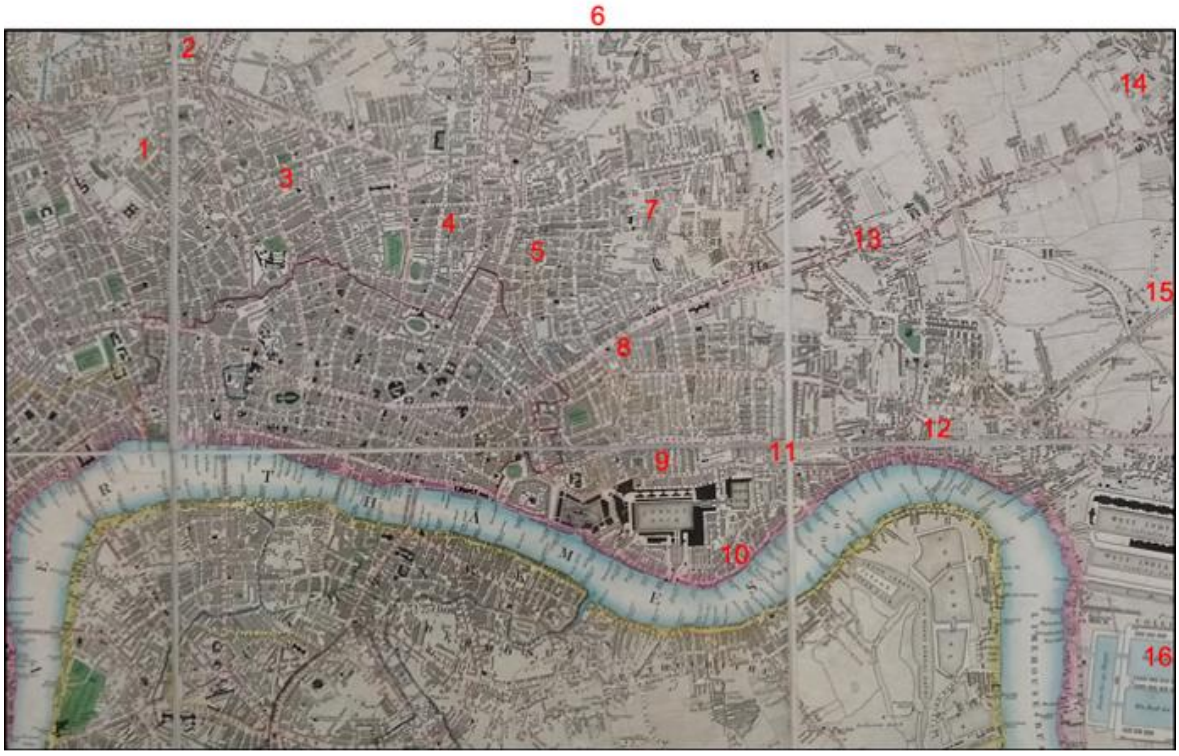
The London study area consists of the parishes in the north and east of the metropolis, from Islington to Poplar.[66] The map at figure 1.2 shows that these parishes lay outside but abutted the City of London on three sides and extended to the London docks in the east. Some parishes had populations that outstripped those of towns in the northern region (e.g., Shoreditch, 52,966) while others remained small (table 1.1). Parish vestries were the main official bodies. Some responsibilities for local administration and infrastructures were hived off to specific bodies (e.g., sewers commissioners) that might cover several parishes, but the vestries generally had some residual involvement. Their varied constitutions are covered in chapter 6. To the west of Spitalfields were two Liberties of the Tower of London — Old Artillery (population 1,487) and Norton Folgate (1,896) —which operated outside the parish system but had responsibility for their own poor.

Table 1.1: Population figures for the London parishes, 1821

Parish	**Population**
Bethnal Green (St Matthew)	45,676
Bromley (St Leonard)	4,360
Clerkenwell (St James and St John)	39,195
Hackney (St John)	22,494
Islington (St Mary)	22,417
Limehouse (St Anne)	9,805
Old Street (St Luke's)	40,876
Shadwell (St Paul)	9,557
Shoreditch (St Leonard)	52,966
Spitalfields (Christ Church)	18,650
St George in the East	32,528
Stepney (St Dunstan All Saints)*	49,163
Stratford Bow (St Mary)	2,349
Wapping (St John)	3,078
Whitechapel (St Mary)	29,407

** including Poplar*

[66] George Rudé, *Hanoverian London, 1714-1808* (London, 1971).



1.Clerkenwell; 2. Islington; 3. Old Street; 4. Shoreditch; 5. Spitalfields; 6. Hackney; 7. Bethnal Green; 8. Whitechapel; 9. St. George; 10. Wapping; 11. Shadwell; 12. Limehouse; 13. Stepney; 14. Bow; 15. Bromley; 16. Poplar.

Figure 1.2: Cary's New Plan of London and its Vicinity (London, 1822), The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, LRO 138.

A common feature of the two study areas is that neither included corporate boroughs, nor did they contain parliamentary boroughs prior to the Reform Act 1832. Lacking traditional representative structures, their inhabitants had to be inventive about finding vehicles for their political engagements. It is impossible to pinpoint when the residents of these outer London parishes first engaged with political issues. Liverymen who had the vote in national elections did not need to be resident within the City to hold and exercise associated rights. Many liverymen active in eighteenth-century City of London politics lived in parishes like Clerkenwell and Wapping.[67] In the eighteenth century a majority of freeholders (voters) of the county of Middlesex came from the outer-London areas that

[67] Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, p.207; Joseph Cozens, 'Thomas Allen' in Sarah Lloyd and Timothy Millett (eds.), *Tokens of Love, Loss and Disrespect, 1700-1850* (London, 2022), pp. 145-7.

included these parishes, and meetings of the freeholders of Middlesex were often held in the Mermaid Inn in Hackney.[68] Nevertheless, the number of freeholders who lived in each parish was small.[69] Clerkenwell and Wapping petitioned about the Two Acts in 1795, but it was in the nineteenth century that we see these inhabitants frequently using their parish structures as a basis for pursuing national issues.[70] County elections were of little relevance in the northern region; indeed, no contested elections were held for the county of Lancaster [sic] between 1811 and 1831.[71] Like other rising towns in the north and Midlands, these cotton towns increasingly intervened in national political issues from the later eighteenth century, albeit local circumstances always influenced their engagements.[72] Manchester and Bolton, for example, expressed opinions about the American war via addresses and petitions to the King in the 1770s and several northern towns engaged in the campaign against the slave trade from the 1780s.[73] The end date for this thesis of 1832 coincides with parliamentary boroughs being formed in both study areas.

The broad similarities identified between the two areas are important, but there were also many differences that affected how their inhabitants organised to campaign and these are returned to throughout the case studies. The Lancashire towns and Stockport (part of Cheshire) were broadly self-contained urban centres, albeit with strong connections to each other and especially to Manchester. Although factory working was at an early stage of development, workers engaged in the same trade often lived close to each other and industrialisation was producing a clearer divide between masters and workers. Some towns also included what were little more than villages, industrialising but still small and with a

[68] Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, p.207. Rude, *Wilkes*; *Morning Post*, 23 Nov. 1795.
[69] Mary O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament and the Vestry: St Leonards Shoreditch, 1793-1833' (M.Res. Dissertation, King's College, London, 2016), p. 86.
[70] *Two Acts*, pp. 356, 552-4.
[71] *PP* (1831), 16 (149), An Account of the Number of Freeholders who have Exercised the Right to Vote … since 1811.
[72] Money, *Experience and Identity*, chapters 7 and 8.
[73] Bradley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 67, 81-3; *Commons Journals* [hereafter *CJ*], 43 (1788), p. 220.

separate identity to the main town. The forces of law and order, often closely connected to or overlapping with the industrial masters, were strongly interventionist in places like Manchester, Bolton and Stockport and weaker in the villages. The village of Royton (strictly a part of Oldham) was, for example, a known centre of radicalism from the eighteenth century.[74] The northern region should be understood, therefore, as patchily urban. By contrast, the London parishes were fully urban, but not self-contained. Inhabitants' sense of connection with their place of residence was diluted by trade, work and other identities that linked them over wide areas of the metropolis. The range of work undertaken was wider and the social divisions less clear than in the north.[75] The concentration of connected trades in the London docks had some similarity to the pattern found in the cotton towns, but most workers in the capital were more dispersed and had self-contained cultures within their trades. The multiple and overlapping authorities of law and order kept a vigilant eye on the capital's activists.[76]

Two themes highlighted in the case studies arise from these differences. Part of the explanation for inhabitant becoming an increasingly important political identity was that the favoured method of organising was to use, and adapt, locality meetings. This posed special challenges for organisers in the metropolis where people could plausibly only be represented as inhabitants of parishes. There were no capital wide governance structures that could be adapted for these purposes. The second theme relates to the different nature of work in the two regions, with London dominated by long-established artisanal trades and Lancashire by the cotton workers. These differences not only affected how the trade

[74] Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp.152-4.
[75] Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 4-5.
[76] Hitchcock and Shoemaker, *London Lives*, pp. 18-19; Elaine Reynolds, *Before the Bobbies: the Night Watch and Police Reform in Metropolitan London, 1720-1830* (Stanford, 1998); Vic Gatrell, *Conspiracy on Cato Street: a Tale of Liberty and Revolution in Regency London* (Cambridge, 2022), chapter 4.

societies operated but also on how working people organised to campaign about non-work issues. It is no coincidence that what may have been the first meeting of the working classes about an issue of general and national interest was held in Manchester.

The different nature of the two areas affects the availability of sources. Detailed vestry minutes have survived for many of the London parishes. Equivalent documents are largely lacking for the northern towns (there are some Manchester township papers), although newspaper coverage is better. Other major sources used were Parliamentary Papers, Home Office and Treasury Solicitor documents, rule books, autobiographies and pamphlets, along with miscellaneous sources in local archives, including manuscript administrative papers, rate books and scrapbooks. Further information about the sources is provided within the case studies. The varying availability of source materials is reflected in some chapters being weighted more towards one area. To mitigate the lack of comparable sources, a common measure of activity was established by compiling from the *Commons Journals* a database of around 1,200 petitions to the House of Commons about public matters submitted from the study areas between 1800 and 1832. The method employed to compile this database is described in chapter 5.

1.4 An outline of the chapters

The first case study is about debating, widely defined (chapter 4). How the forms and purposes of debate morphed and multiplied tell us much about the changing demands of organising in the nineteenth century. While public debating faded away, private and semi-private forms flourished. Debating was essential to the expansion of extra-parliamentary activity. It educated people about the issues and enabled men who were in no way part of the elite to acquire the skill of public speaking. Political societies that organised working people integrated debate into their activities and used structured oral discourse for new

kinds of member-focused purposes. That is one example of a bigger theme: social divisions were increasingly important in shaping how people organised. By the end of our period the variety of options for hearing and being involved in political discussion had greatly expanded and we see how the new nomenclature applied to those activities demonstrates the increased confidence felt by campaigners.

The second case study is about organisation in and of the locality, discussed over three connected chapters. Chapter 5 analyses petitions from the two areas by the petitioning identity adopted and the cause at issue. We find that interest groups defined their concerns narrowly. By contrast, inhabitant was the preferred identity adopted to pursue matters in the public interest and could be employed to campaign about any issue. Reasons for this are suggested. Some diversification of the identities used to campaign was beginning to be evident by the end of the period, but inhabitant remained the main public-interest identity. Chapter 6 supplies a taxonomy of locality-meetings (as they are here collectively termed) as a basis for analysing how the methods of calling meetings of inhabitants were gradually extended over the period and what influenced those changes. Chapter 7 discusses how an ideology of public meetings legitimated the multiplying methods of calling meetings of inhabitants. 'Public meeting' became a term of art that presented meetings as deliberative, open and civic minded and shaped how representations made by inhabitants were expressed. All three chapters consider the challenges that using local identities presented to campaigners in London.

The third case study (chapter 8) investigates trade societies and how working people organised. It is particularly beneficial to contextualise campaigning by trade societies as part of a general system where individuals adopted alternative identities for different causes. Constraints on using trade groups as a basis for campaigning about matters of

wider public interest are identified. However, by adopting identities that used collective categories to describe working people, including the working classes, and by further adapting the forms of locality meetings working people were able to meet and present their collective voice in the public interest. Involvement in trade activities was relevant to campaigning about wider issues both because it provided training in organisational skills and because the culture and practices of the trades influenced those of the societies formed for political purposes by working people.

The final case study (chapter 9) uses the agitation against the corn law from the later 1820s to explore forum selection. Why was one method of organising chosen over another and what were the consequences of those choices? The relationship between the identity adopted, the form of meeting and the representations advanced, together with the role of the organisers are considered. The context of the corn law agitation also usefully illuminates some broader developments in the practices of politically organising at the end of the period.

Before turning to these studies, two nationally focused chapters provide some wider context for our enquiries. Chapter 2 draws together what we know about the process of organising from the existing historiography with two aims. It attempts to contextualise how people organised and compare their methods with both previously adopted practices and those used by other groups at the same time. This sketch of the associational landscape also contributed to the identification of the case studies and of the period studied.

Chapter 3 discusses how the flourishing extra-parliamentary activity of the early nineteenth century was conceptualised. The eighteenth-century meaning of 'politics' was affairs of state, something that ordinary people could observe and discuss, but not do. As will be shown, although in the early nineteenth century the extra-parliamentary nation's

engagements did come to sometimes be termed ‘political’, the preferred conceptualisation was as ‘public’, encapsulated in public meetings and public opinion. An ideology of the public was employed to legitimate generally defined groups (often inhabitants) campaigning about national matters.

2: The associational landscape

The options available for organising should be understood as a whole system, an infrastructure used and adapted by different groups at different times.[1] Change often only becomes evident when placed in the context of how things were done previously. Identifying innovations reveals wider patterns of organisation and allows us to appreciate the reasons why methods developed as they did. Distinguishing the practices employed by different types of bodies allows us to appreciate borrowings, highlights organisers' concerns and the tactics they adopted to address them. Further, the confidence and skills required to extend political engagement were gained from across the associational world, not only in groups formed for political purposes.

Existing work contains much information about how people organised, albeit often incidentally and, therefore, unevenly. We are not concerned here with the approaches that historians used to frame their work, but what can be extracted from their studies about how people organised. First, organisational methods used during the eighteenth century are outlined, some longstanding, others more innovatory. Early nineteenth-century organisational forms are then considered. This survey shows that the historiography about nineteenth-century methods of organising is patchy and diffuse; the four case studies examine practices of organising in this period that have been particularly overlooked or merit re-assessment.

[1] Charlotte Lemanski, 'Infrastructure Citizenship: the Everyday Citizenships of Adapting and/or Destroying Public Infrastructure in Cape Town, South Africa', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 45 (2020), pp. 589-605, p. 591 for how urban geographers use infrastructure to include a 'web of contestations over power and resources'.

2.1. Long-standing forms used in the eighteenth century.

2.1.1. The locality.

The long-established, formal structures of local administration provided a traditional basis for expressing collective grievances. In the middle ages counties petitioned the King and (from at least the fourteenth century) Parliament about diverse matters, including taxation and the effects of war.[2] The City of London, the formation of the enduring structures of which began in the twelfth century, was the oldest and most politically significant corporate 'town', but many other towns petitioned intermittently about national issues from at least the thirteenth century.[3] From the fifteenth century the organising sites for the expression of many towns' opinions were increasingly the institutions that accompanied corporate status (itself obtained by petitioning the King), variously named and constituted but often common councils or similar.[4] Many localities took positions on the issues that divided the nation during the conflicts of the mid seventeenth century. The organising body for county petitions had changed from the county court to the grand jury at the county assizes and the quarter sessions.[5] The first occasion parish structures appear to have been used to express opinions about national, public matters was during the conflicts of the 1640s.[6]

Despite attempts to limit them expressions of collective opinion continued to be made in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Part of the post-restoration efforts to

[2] J. R. Maddicott, 'The County Community and the Making of Public Opinion in Fourteenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (1978), pp. 27-43.
[3] Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government: the Manor and the Borough* (London, 1908), chapter 10.
[4] Gwilym Dodd, *Justice and Grace: Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007), chapter 5; Ian Archer, 'Politics and Government 1540-1700', in Peter Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: volume 2: 1540–1840* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 235-62.
[5] Maddicott, 'County Community', p. 41.
[6] Beat Kümin, *The Shaping of a Community: the Rise and Reformation of the English Parish, c. 1400-1560* (Aldershot, 1996); David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton, 2000).

return to more orderly times included the Tumultuous Petitioning Act 1661 which provided that only counties (and then only with the approval of local authorities, like grand juries), together with the City of London could petition on matters of church or state.[7] Nevertheless, through the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Addresses to the monarch, instructions to MPs and elections (together with much informal activity) provided opportunities for some people to express views on the issues of the day. Most formal activity came from counties and parliamentary boroughs.[8] These bodies had formal status either as constitutional structures (counties) or legal entities (corporate towns) which helped to legitimate petitioning under their auspices. By this time the relevant county body had changed again and become meetings of freeholders. Petitioning about public matters in the later eighteenth century increasingly included the rising towns of the north and Midlands. Those that were neither parliamentary nor corporate boroughs appear to have agreed their statements on national affairs at town meetings. The novelty of using town meetings for political purposes and the uncertain status of those meetings — for they were neither of constitutional nor legal bodies — is not acknowledged in the historiography.[9]

Parishes had long expressed political opinions by celebrating military victories or marking calendrical celebrations but appear not to have resumed petitioning about public matters to any significant extent until the 1790s. Some expressed political opinions in other ways, like the Norwich parish that refused to ring the bells when the Jacobites were defeated in

[7] Joanna Innes, 'Legislation and Public Participation 1760-1830', in David Lemmings (ed.), *The British and Their Laws in the Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 102-32, p. 113.
[8] Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*; Speck, *Tory & Whig*; Langford, *Excise Crisis*; Thomas Perry, *Public Opinion, Propaganda, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century England: a Study of the Jew Bill of 1753* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); Linda Colley, 'Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism before Wilkes', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 31 (1981), pp. 1-19.
[9] James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown, and Public Opinion* (Macon, 1986), chapter 3; Joanna Innes and Nicholas Rogers, 'Politics and Government 1700–1840', in Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, pp. 529-74, pp. 562-4.

1746.[10] During the seventeenth century many vestries, largely but not exclusively in the wider London area, were converted into closed vestries controlled by oligarchic elites. Others became closed without formal authorisation and new parishes were created with closed vestries. From the 1660s vestrymen were encouraged to limit parish agitations on wider issues [11] The main aim of this dampening was to enforce religious conformity, but religion and politics remained closely aligned in the seventeenth century and curtailing low-level popular agitation on political issues was consistent with wider policy.

2.1.2 Interest groups.

Interest groups provided a long-established basis for collective claim-making, but changes in their forms became increasingly evident during the eighteenth century. Craft guilds, present in most major towns from the fifteenth century, represented the interests of trades to King and Parliament and provided some access to the political rights that came with being a burgess or equivalent.[12] In many towns guilds reached a post-restoration membership peak in the early eighteenth century and the rate of their subsequent decline varied by trade and region, with those in Yorkshire and the Midlands lasting longest.[13] Several participated in later eighteenth-century agitations.[14] Beyond the guilds, some groups of merchants lobbied for protections and privileges for their trade. The Merchant

[10] Mark Knights, 'Politics, 1660-1835', in Carole Rawcliffe, Richard Wilson, and Christine Clark (eds.), *Norwich since 1550* (London, 2004), pp. 167-192, p. 174.
[11] Julia Merritt, 'Contested Legitimacy and the Ambiguous Rise of Select Vestries in Early Modern London', *Historical Journal*, 54 (2011), pp. 25-45; Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and John Burns, *English Local Government: the Parish and the County* (London,1906), chapter 5; Steve Hindle, 'The Political Culture of the Middling Sort in English Rural Communities c.1550-1700', in Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 125-52, pp. 131-33.
[12] Ian Archer, 'The London Lobbies in the late Sixteenth Century', *Historical Journal*, 31 (1988); Philip Withington, 'Two Renaissances: Urban Political Culture in Post-Reformation England Reconsidered', *Historical Journal*, 44 (2001), pp. 17-44, p. 251-2.
[13] Michael Berlin, 'Guilds in Decline? London Livery Companies and the Rise of a Liberal Economy, 1600-1800', in Stephan R. Epstein and Maarten Roy Prak (eds.), *Guilds, Innovation & the European Economy, 1400-1800* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 316-342, pp. 322-23.
[14] Thomas Knox, 'Popular Politics and Provincial Radicalism: Newcastle upon Tyne, 1769-1785', *Albion*, 11 (1979), pp. 224-41.

Adventurers, for example, received assistance from the Crown in the mid sixteenth century that strengthened their control of the cloth trade.[15] As guilds slowly faded the space they vacated was gradually filled by other forms of organisation; some took the form of informal and/or temporary groupings of merchants and manufacturers, others had a more sustained existence as lobby groups, like the West India merchants.[16] Institutionalisation became more evident towards the end of the century, with Chambers of Commerce formed in some provincial towns from the 1780s.[17] Several later eighteenth-century causes (including the American conflict, reform of the East India Company and opposition to the slave trade) combined questions of trade with wider public policy issues and blurred the distinction between private and public interests. As the eighteenth century progressed the decline of guilds left space for the growth of journeymen's clubs, friendly societies and more informal temporary groupings. Some trade and friendly societies (loosely defined) were involved in applications to Parliament about working conditions, lobbying for support from both parliamentarians and the public. It was rare for the trades to publicly engage in matters of wider interest, although some Liverpool trades, for example, campaigned in the 1780s for the slave trade to continue.[18]

2.2 New forms used in the eighteenth century.

This institutionalisation of some commercial groups and the development of workers' societies were manifestations of a wider phenomenon — the growth of societies. Some

[15] Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (London, 2003), pp. 54-60 and chapter 5; Perry Gauci, *The Politics of Trade: the Overseas Merchant in State and Society, 1660-1720* (Oxford, 2001).
[16] Perry Gauci, 'Learning the Ropes of Sand: The West India Lobby, 1714-60', in Perry Gauci (ed.), *Regulating the British Economy, 1660-1785* (Abingdon, 2011), pp. 107-21; John Money, *Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760-1800* (Manchester, 1977), pp. 33-47; Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, p.116 for agitation by the leather trade in the 1690s.
[17] R.J. Bennett, *Local Business Voice: the History of Chambers of Commerce in Britain, Ireland and Revolutionary America, 1760-2011* (Oxford, 2011), chapter 3.
[18] Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, chapter 1; John Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth-Century Industry* (London, 1981), chapter 6; Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*, chapter 6; *CJ*, 43 (1788), p. 220.

clubs and societies existed in the seventeenth century but their rise is, and was at the time, viewed as an eighteenth-century development. Their range makes an overall definition difficult but Peter Clark suggested that clubs and societies should be thought of as voluntary, quasi-private and limited in function.[19] Like-minded individuals choosing to gather in varyingly structured circumstances included (in addition to the occupation-based societies mentioned above) tavern drinking societies; various leisure and intellectual groups; the freemasons; gentlemen's clubs; religious and charitable groups; campaigning societies; and election clubs. How societies were used for wider political activities varied by the type, membership and original purpose of the organisation. Categorising societies allows broad themes and influences to be identified, but many of the boundaries delineated below were permeable.

2.2.1 Societies formed for other purposes.

Some clubs that engaged with political causes in the eighteenth century were originally established for other purposes. The tradesmen's clubs that supported John Wilkes were formed to facilitate trade, organise civic improvements or merely for sociability. Their engagement with Wilkes was informal and reactive: similar clubs may have organised support for Admiral Vernon in the 1740s.[20] Early eighteenth-century freemasonry was supportive of the Hanoverian succession. Individual lodges (many of which were short-lived) had much freedom of action: some demonstrated support for Wilkes and later others had Jacobin sympathies. The general trend of freemasonry towards greater central control over lodges and an avoidance of political activity beyond showing support for established

[19] Clark, *British Clubs*, pp. 10-13.
[20] Brewer, 'Commercialization'; Wilson, *Sense of the People*; Money, *Experience and Identity*; Knights, 'Politics'.

institutions was confirmed by their negotiated exclusion, on terms, from the Unlawful Societies Act 1799.[21]

The increasing availability in urban life of public lectures, literary societies and debating societies enabled a wider range of people to access structured, secular oral discourse (some of which related to political subjects) in public or semi-public venues. Lectures, traditionally delivered in universities or churches, from the early eighteenth century were also given in coffee houses and taverns around the capital. Freemasons were at the vanguard of this development. Initially only about science and philosophy, as the century progressed lectures were given on other subjects and in provincial towns.[22] Most book clubs had political works on their lists and the boundaries between book clubs, reading groups and discussion groups were fuzzy.[23] Debating societies existed at least from the early eighteenth century (and probably before) but from the 1760s became a fashionable entertainment with topics ranging from questions about contemporary society (some frivolous, some serious) to matters of national contention. Many, especially in London, were commercial organisations open to any who paid an entrance fee. In the 1790s some London debating societies were closely connected to the radical societies.[24] A few radicals gave lectures on political subjects in London and on provincial tours.[25]

[21] Ric Berman, *Foundations of Modern Freemasonry: Political Change & the Scientific Enlightenment, 1720-1740* (Brighton, 2011); John Money, 'Freemasonry and the Fabric of Loyalism in Hanoverian England', in Eckhart Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 235-71; Andrew Prescott, 'The Unlawful Societies Act of 1799', in M.D.J. Scanlon (ed.), *The Social Impact of Freemasonry on the Modern World* (London, 2002), pp. 116-34.
[22] Larry R. Stewart, *The Rise of Public Science: Rhetoric, Technology, and Natural Philosophy in Newtonian Britain, 1660-1750* (Cambridge, 1992); Jan Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760-1820* (Cambridge, 1992); Nicholas Hans, *New Trends in Education in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1951), chapters 7 and 8.
[23] Christy Lindsay, 'Reading Associations in England and Scotland, c.1760-1830' (D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 2016), chapter 4; Clark, *Clubs and Societies*, p. 118.
[24] See chapter 4, footnotes 9-13, 26-7 for references.
[25] E. P. Thompson, 'Hunting the Jacobin Fox', *Past & Present,* 142 (1994), pp. 94-140.

2.2.2 Religious groups and charities.

Although the heat of religious difference diminished during the eighteenth century religion nevertheless provided both causes for campaigns and the organisational support for campaigning. The Quakers established a pyramidal structure (in 1675) that represented all their congregations and was intended to be used to campaign politically.[26] The Dissenting Deputies, formed in 1732, were drawn from Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Baptist congregations within ten miles of London to coordinate action on matters of common interest.[27] These groups campaigned for legislative changes to the various restrictions under which Dissent operated. Other campaigning by Dissenters was limited to lobbying MPs and publicising their causes until the late 1780s when, at the suggestion of the Dissenting Deputies, provincial Dissenters (briefly) established local committees to support their campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.[28] Although the Methodists did not campaign, their practices, which included dividing into small groups termed classes and field preaching, were enormously influential on later organisations of working people, not least in showing that a national movement could be built from a low social base.[29] The Protestant Association, formed in 1780 to oppose legislation that would grant concessions to Catholics, was closer in kind to a society than were the overarching Dissenter bodies, as it did not represent congregations but had individual members.[30] However, the

[26] N.C. Hunt, *Two Early Political Associations: the Quakers and the Dissenting Deputies in the Age of Sir Robert Walpole* (Oxford, 1961), p. 2.
[27] Hunt, *Two Early Political*.
[28] Ursula Henriques, *Religious Toleration in England, 1787-1833* (London, 1961), chapter 3.
[29] Frank Baker, 'The People Called Methodists: 3, Polity', in Rupert E. Davies, A. Raymond George, and E. Gordon Rupp (eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain,* volume 1 (London, 1965), pp. 216-25; Robert Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Working-Class Movements of England, 1800-1850* (London, 1937).
[30] Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, c. 1714-80: a Political and Social Study* (Manchester, 1993), chapter 6.

Association's self-presentation was that it represented Protestants, in whose name petitions were submitted. Most who signed the petitions were not members of the association.[31]

The influential Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (hereafter SPCK, formed in 1698) was exclusively Anglican and although it described itself as a religious society its aims were pursued by promoting a variety of projects with a secular, public-good dimension, including charity schools and workhouses. The society sometimes promoted new legislation (on blasphemy and duelling, for example) either via members who were MPs or by approaching other sympathetic influential figures. The SPCK's organisational structures remained largely unchanged through the eighteenth century, with subscribing members being those able to attend meetings in London, while corresponding members around the country provided a two-way conduit of information. The Proclamation Society (formed in 1787) promoted bills in a similar manner to the SPCK and included some non-Anglicans in its small, elite membership.[32]

A plethora of other charitable societies were increasingly active during the eighteenth century, some with national profiles, others more local. Although generally they did not campaign on political issues, involvement in their activities provided valuable organising experience.[33] Raising subscriptions for charitable and civic improvement projects involved the mobilisation of local support.[34] Justifying an organisation's existence and activities sometimes required making a case to wider audiences, as did the Foundling Hospital

[31] Mark Knights, 'The 1780 Protestant Petitions and the Culture of Petitioning ', in Ian Haywood and John Seed (eds.), *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 46-68, pp. 51-2.
[32] Joanna Innes, 'Parliament and the Shaping of Eighteenth-Century English Social Policy', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 40 (1990), pp. 63-92, pp. 83-4; Joanna Innes, 'Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth-century England', in Hellmuth (ed.), *Transformation of Political Culture*, pp. 57-118, p. 81.
[33] Roshan Allpress, *British Philanthropy*, pp. 67-70.
[34] Kathleen Wilson, 'Urban Culture and Political Activism in Hanoverian England', in Hellmuth (ed.), *Transformation of Political Culture*, pp. 165-84.

(formed in 1739) which repeatedly needed to refute public criticism.[35] Other charities sought direct action from (usually identified sections of) the public; the Sunday School Society (formed in 1785) encouraged action in localities.[36]

The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (formed in 1787) was the first philanthropic society formed solely to campaign politically and combined the methods of charitable and political campaigning societies.[37] The moral arguments advanced gave it some freedom of action, despite the economic and political implications of the cause. Nevertheless, the society was only semi-formalised, with Wilberforce concerned that parliamentarians might be alienated by 'systematic agitation'. Some individuals were corresponding members of the London committee, while abolition societies and committees were established in various provincial towns that were not formal branches of the society but broadly accepted the London committee's lead.[38]

2.2.3 Societies formed to campaign about parliamentary reform.

Several societies were established to campaign for parliamentary reform in the later eighteenth century. Earlier agitations about placemen, shorter parliaments and similar matters had been pursued either by counties and towns or by groups expressly rooted in specific places, like the Independent Electors of Westminster.[39] The Society of Gentlemen Supporters of the Bill of Rights (hereafter SSBR, formed in 1769 with a rolling membership of around one hundred) raised money and publicised the Wilkesite cause,

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[35] Donna Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, 1989) pp. 60-65, 98-102.
[36] Roberts, *Making English Morals*; Clark, *British Clubs*, pp. 64-66, 81-3, 102-109, 466.
[37] Joanna Innes and Arthur Burns 'Introduction', in Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (eds.), *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1850* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 1-70, p. 10.
[38] Quote David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London,1991), p. 52; Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in a Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1987); J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: the Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Manchester, 1995).
[39] Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: the Tory Party, 1714-60* (Cambridge, 1982), chapter 9; Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, pp. 194-6, 249.

while individual members promoted petitions from constituencies where they were freeholders.[40] The Associated Counties (1780) began with constituency (mostly county) meetings that agreed petitions and appointed committees to manage them, some of which subsequently transformed the committees into Associations.[41] Those Associations co-operated, including by appointing deputies who met to discuss joint strategies, but it proved difficult to hold the movement together or extend it to towns that were not parliamentary boroughs. The Society for Constitutional Information (hereafter the SCI, formed 1780) limited its activities to a supportive role and largely focused on the distribution of publications detailing arguments for constitutional reform.[42]

The use from the 1780s of the word 'association' is noteworthy. Traditionally the term was applied to bodies formed to meet a threat to the state (such as the Jacobites in 1745-1746) or property (game associations were formed from the 1740s to protect stocks and prosecute poachers). Associations for the prosecution of felons were common from the 1780s.[43] The term conveyed a more public-spirited quality than the label 'society', which was more suggestive of a group of private individuals.

The 1790s witnessed the first societies established by workingmen to campaign for constitutional change, including the London Corresponding Society (hereafter LCS) and the Sheffield Constitutional Society. The larger of these divided into small groups that split if they again became too large, with delegates that represented the group at meetings of the general committee of the society.[44] Their inward focus on the education of members was another significant new quality. The various societies established around the country

[40] Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*.
[41] Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill*; Black, *The Association*.
[42] Black, *The Association*.
[43] P. B. Munsche, *Gentlemen and Poachers: the English Game Laws, 1671-1831* (Cambridge, 1981); David Philips, "Good Men to Associate and Bad Men to Conspire', in Douglas Hay and Frances Snyder (eds.), *Policing and Prosecution in Britain 1750-1850* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 113-170.
[44] Barrell, 'London'.

exchanged correspondence discussing strategies and ideas, possibly influenced in this by the practices of the SCI.[45]

Addresses that expressed loyalty to the crown were of long standing, and loyal associations were established during Jacobite risings, but loyalists forming nationwide structures was another new development in the 1790s.[46] The Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, formed in 1792, had a central body in London that provided advice and materials to more than a thousand societies across the country. Technically, the local societies were independent from the centre but this was nevertheless more of a national structure than most organisations achieved at the time. Their adoption of the label association signalled that they believed the radicals presented a threat to the state (and were probably criminals). As well as Addresses to the King, these groups vigorously asserted the loyalist position in their localities (support for church and King and maintenance of the constitutional status quo) with processions, bonfires and the distribution of propaganda. Many members were integrated into local law enforcement systems and sought to impede the activities of radical groups.[47]

2.2.4 Party-political organisations.

Party-political societies developed during the eighteenth century. Elite political clubs facilitated parliamentarians' co-ordination of activities, like the Whig Kit Kat club and the Tory Centenary club, both formed at the end of the seventeenth century. The Half Moon

[45] Edward Royle and James Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (Brighton,1982), chapter 3; A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: the English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1979), chapter 7.
[46] Frank O'Gorman, 'Origins and Trajectories of Loyalism in England', in Allan Blackstock and Frank O'Gorman (eds.), *Loyalism and the Formation of the British World, 1775-1914* (Woodbridge, 2014), pp. 19-42.
[47] Robert Dozier, *For King, Constitution, and Country: the English Loyalists and the French Revolution* (Lexington, 1983), chapter 3 and pp. 175-6; Frank O'Gorman, 'English Loyalism Revisited', in Allan Blackstock and Eoin Magennis (eds.), *Politics and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland, 1750-1850: Essays in Tribute to Peter Jupp* (Belfast, 2007), pp. 223-41; J. E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793-1815* (New York, 1997).

Tavern club, with a more middling membership, organised London opposition to Walpole from the 1730s and some provincial towns also had party clubs. Mug House clubs (based in taverns) expressed views for and against the Hanoverian Succession. From at least the 1740s election clubs in constituencies organised voters during elections, maintained support between elections and occasionally engaged in wider expressions of political opinion.[48] Party-political societies were probably behind some street and other public action which occurred in a variety of circumstances during the eighteenth century including elections; celebrations of battles, royal birthdays and other key historical events; and expressions of support for national figures (including Wilkes and Admiral Vernon).[49] Exuberant street activity and other protests and crowd action are beyond the scope of this thesis.

2.3 Forms of organisation used in the early nineteenth century.

While historians writing about the eighteenth century often noted (if only in passing) the forms of organisation used, as extra-parliamentary activity became more common historians by contrast gave less attention to the bodies through which it was achieved. Obvious developments, such as the rise of the mass platform, were discussed but broadly historians who studied the early nineteenth century were uninterested in organisational forms. The following review of what we know is, therefore, necessarily uneven. The discussion follows the same order as used for eighteenth-century forms, noting along the way what survived, what changed, and what we know little about. As will be seen, most change consisted of innovation within existing forms rather than the creation of new ones.

[48] Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, pp. 276-278, 292-4; Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 64; Dickinson, *Politics of the People*, p. 53. Nicholas Rogers, 'Popular Protest in Early Hanoverian London ', *Past & Present*, 79 (1978), pp. 70-100.
[49] Rogers, *Crowds, Culture*.

The case studies explore methods of organising where the historiographical coverage is particularly thin or outdated.

2.3.1 The locality.

Localities continued to use traditional structures to express opinions on the issues of the day by petitioning, preparing addresses to the King or memorials to ministers, and sometimes by forming committees to organise further agitation. County meetings were called; corporate bodies still represented many towns' interests; and the recently developed form of town meetings continued to be held (although not acknowledged as new by historians).[50] In some places, vestry meetings were used to express political opinions on national matters.[51] Officially recognised bodies were given added utility by their exemption from the legislation restricting meetings that was first imposed in 1795 and re-introduced in 1817 and 1819.[52] Until some very recent work about convening meetings, how these local structures operated in the early nineteenth century has not been studied.[53] One significant nineteenth-century organisational development was what is now known as the mass platform, a term popularised by John Belchem. The mass platform consisted of huge outdoor meetings or rallies of working people, generally in support of parliamentary reform. It perhaps most closely echoed the character of the county meeting, but with a distinct organisational framework: the scale of attendance was intended to demonstrate the level of popular support.[54] The authorities frequently interfered with the proceedings of these meetings and punished participants. Peterloo is the most famous example, but there

[50] John Belchem, *'Orator' Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism* (Oxford, 1985); Navickas, *Protest*.
[51] Webb and Webb, *Parish and the County*, chapter 5.
[52] Innes, 'Legislation', pp. 113-114.
[53] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings'.
[54] Jephson, *Platform*; J.C. Belchem, 'Henry Hunt and the Evolution of the Mass Platform', *English Historical Review*, 93 (1978), pp. 739-77; Tilly, *Popular Contention*; Vernon, *Politics and the People*.

were many others.[55] Katrina Navickas recently explored the right to hold public meetings over the long durée of three hundred years, but otherwise little work has been done on what public meant or to relate public or mass meetings to other types of meeting.[56]

It is a central argument of this thesis that meetings of towns and vestries provided the main organisational forms used to campaign in the public interest in the early nineteenth century. Changes in their form and significance, including the meaning that was attached to the term 'public meeting', have been overlooked.

2.3.2 Interest groups.

Interest groups were increasingly important sites of political organisation, particularly those relating to business and work. More Chambers of Commerce were established in provincial towns and some eighteenth-century Chambers that had lapsed were relaunched, with the new bodies tending to be more stable.[57] In the early years of the century some livery companies still intervened in matters relevant to their trade.[58] Less institutionalised, sometimes temporary, commercial groups continued to be formed around particular types of business or in response to the emergence of relevant issues.[59]

Agricultural Associations of smaller farmers were established from 1819. Previously, the agricultural lobby relied on the influence of the big landlords (many of whom sat in Parliament), county meetings and instructions to MPs.[60] The Association's central body co-

[55] Robert Poole, *Peterloo: the English Uprising* (Oxford, 2019); Lobban, 'Seditious Libel'.
[56] Navickas, 'Contested Right'.
[57] Bennett, *Local Business Voice*, chapter 3.
[58] T. K. Derry, 'The Repeal of the Apprenticeship Clauses of the Statute of Apprentices', *The Economic History Review*, 3 (1931), pp. 67-87.
[59] Peter Jupp, *British Politics on the Eve of Reform: the Duke of Wellington's Administration, 1828-30* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 366.
[60] Patrick Woodward, 'Extra-parliamentary Political Organisation in the Making: Benjamin Heath and the Opposition to the 1763 Cider Excise', *Parliamentary History*, 4 (1985), pp. 115-136; Travis L. Crosby, *English Farmers and the Politics of Protection, 1815-1852* (Hassocks, 1977), chapters 2 and 3; the county agricultural societies established in the eighteenth century were not lobbying bodies, Clark, *British Clubs*, pp. 112-4.

ordinated several petitioning campaigns about the corn law and other agricultural issues and claimed to have over 40 branches organised in counties and towns. Several eighteenth-century organisations had aspired to national structures but generally either judged it unwise or lacked the necessary momentum. The SSBR tried to promote nationwide corresponding societies in 1769; the SCI's suggestion of parochial societies in 1783 never got off the ground; the Association Movement and the Anti Slave-Trade Society had national presences but not hierarchical structures.[61] Although the legislative restrictions on branches introduced in 1799 were tightened in 1817, agriculturalists' generally conservative reputation seemingly reassured the authorities (despite some radicalisation in the early 1820s) and this early example of a nationally networked political campaigning body operated without interference.[62]

Trade societies proliferated during the early decades of the nineteenth century and their public profile increased. The Combination Act 1800 prohibited combinations about the terms and conditions of work but did not ban all worker organisations, and groups of workers were not entirely deterred from either industrial activities or from petitioning Parliament about work-related matters. Nevertheless, repeal in 1824 enhanced trade societies' sense of legitimacy as well as increasing their freedom of action. The most common visible institutions for working people remained friendly societies (which also served some professional and middle-class groups), but there was a general trend towards the establishment of societies with aims beyond the provision of benefits and intended to be permanent. A significant historiographical debate framed by the concept of class consciousness centred on the importance of trade societies for developing wider political engagements of working people. Some historians posited close links between trade

[61] Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*, p. 109; Black, *The Association*, p.193; Clark, *British Clubs*, pp. 99-100.
[62] 39 Geo. III, c. 79; 57 Geo. III, c. 19.

societies and working-class radicalism, while others argued that political and industrial activity could and should be separated. The move away from class analysis and perhaps the declining significance of modern trade unions has contributed to their recent historiographical neglect.[63] The case study of trade societies here provides a new perspective by considering their activities in the context of the generally applicable organisational conventions of the time.

2.3.3 Societies formed for other purposes.

The availability of organised and structured oral discourse continued to increase. Lectures were increasingly attended by more people from a wider range of social groups. Several commercial lecturing institutions were established in the capital with less permanent arrangements elsewhere.[64] Reading groups, newsrooms and mutual improvement societies flourished.[65] More formalised adult education took off, especially with the establishment of Mechanics Institutes from the mid-1820s. The Institutes avoided politics (though not political economy) but nevertheless helped foster a culture of working-class enquiry and self-improvement that easily flowed into wider political engagement.[66] Apart from Iain McCalman's work on how organising tavern debating societies was one of the tactics used by London's ultra-radicals to dodge suppression, discussion of nineteenth-century

[63] See chapter 8 for historiography; Chase, *Early Trade Unionism* is an exception.
[64] Jon P. Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge, 2013); Paul Weindling, 'Science and Sedition: How Effective Were the Acts Licensing Lectures and Meetings, 1795-1819, *British Journal for the History of Science*, 13 (1980), pp. 139-53.
[65] Thompson, *The Making*, p. 788; J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living, 1790-1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (London, 1961).
[66] Gregory Claeys, 'Political Economy and Popular Education: Thomas Hodgskin and the London Mechanics Institute, 1823-8', in Michael T. Davis and Malcolm I. Thomis (eds.), *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775-1848: Essays in Honour of Malcolm Thomis* (Basingstoke 2000), pp. 157-75.

structures of debating is limited and piecemeal.[67] Debating (widely defined) is the subject of the first case study.

The historiographical failure to trace the forms of organisation used means that we can overlook that some eighteenth-century modes fell into disuse. The tradesmen's clubs (and similar bodies) noted by John Brewer and others as being politically active in various contexts in the later eighteenth century are not mentioned in work about the nineteenth century.[68] This may be a question of sources: nineteenth-century newspapers had ample other material and rarely mentioned such clubs.[69] It may also relate to the causes at issue for, as Brewer noted, in the 1760s the political and economic concerns of the tradesmen's clubs were aligned.[70] It is unlikely these clubs disappeared for the commercial pressures that drove their formation continued, and where widespread agreement continued to exist (for example, the early stages of the Reform Agitation in the 1830s) clubs may have expressed support in some way. However, the increased opportunities to take more concrete and public action to further causes made such bodies less significant. The development of several ideological frameworks after the Napoleonic wars — utilitarianism, the cooperative movement, the rise of laissez faire economics and of economic theory more generally — together with a post-1790s wariness about being drawn into questionable activity, may also have contributed to a move away from using bodies established for other purposes to support political causes.[71]

[67] Iain McCalman, 'Ultra-Radicalism and Convivial Debating-Clubs in London, 1795-1838', *English Historical Review*, 102 (1987), pp. 309-33; see also chapter 4, footnotes 39-41.
[68] See for example the discussion of Norwich societies for both centuries in Knights, 'Politics'.
[69] Nor are such tradesmen's clubs mentioned in Emma Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: a People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (London, 2013).
[70] Brewer, 'Commercialization', p. 233.
[71] Innes and Burns, 'Introduction', pp. 30-31, 34.

2.3.4 Religious groups and charities.

Contrary to the trend suggested in the preceding paragraph, the use of religious groups and charities for campaigning purposes increased in the early nineteenth century. Structural changes in religious lobbying organisations during the first three decades of the nineteenth century reflected demand for, and the facilitation of, increased grass-root involvement. When a Bill in the House of Lords in 1811 proposed imposing tougher licensing requirements on Dissenting preachers, the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty organised a successful nationwide petitioning campaign from congregations.[72] In the 1820s petitions submitted by Dissenting congregations widened from their immediate concerns to include matters such as anti-slavery.[73] This political liveliness speaks to the cohesion of Dissenters and their growing assertiveness about their position in society. Although organisation in Ireland is beyond the ambit of this thesis, the famous Catholic Rent was an organisational innovation much admired by campaigners in England. The Catholic Association aimed to mobilise the Catholics of Ireland in a national agitation and from 1824 introduced a reduced membership fee of 1d per month, collected via the parish. The rent provided funds, demonstrated the extent of support (huge) and was the first truly mass political mobilisation in these islands.[74] Anglican resistance to Catholic emancipation was organised through Brunswick Clubs from 1828 (the nineteenth-century version of the Protestant Association), under whose umbrella local members of the central society formed freestanding local clubs.[75]

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[72] Richard W. Davis, *Dissent in Politics, 1780-1830: the Political Life of William Smith, M.P* (London, 1971), pp. 148-159, 224-5.
[73] Civin, 'Slaves, Sati'; the Quakers petitioned against slavery in 1783, Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p. 41.
[74] Fergus O'Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation: Daniel O'Connell and the Birth of Irish democracy 1820-30* (Dublin, 1985); Nancy D. LoPatin, *Political Unions, Popular Politics, and the Great Reform Act of 1832* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 7.
[75] Keisuke Masaki, 'Within the Bounds of Acceptability: Tory Associational Culture in Early-19th-Century Britain', *Parliamentary History*, 37 (2018), pp. 389-414.

Charitable societies also facilitated increased provincial involvement through the development of structures which directly connected local and central bodies. The Sunday School and monitorial school movements spurred the drive for religious projects to organise a national presence.[76] The formation of so-called auxiliary societies was enabled by the establishment in the late eighteenth century of branch banks in various provincial towns, through which subscriptions to central bodies could easily be managed.[77] The further step of forming local branches of societies was not, however, taken until the early nineteenth century, when the SPCK and the British and Foreign Bible Society (hereafter the Bible Society, founded 1804) both developed local bodies at broadly the same time. Because the SPCK was strongly Church of England oriented it had the advantage of being able to use church structures. From 1810 it formed diocesan committees, headed by the Bishop and other senior clergy with some lay members, that provided a focus for local activity and a communication channel with the central society. Committees were later formed within narrower areas, still led by clergymen; there were approximately two hundred committees in England by 1822.[78] The Bible Society established eleven interdenominational auxiliary societies between 1809 and 1811 and other major societies adopted the same approach.[79] The autonomy of auxiliaries was generally limited. They were largely money-raising and information-diffusing bodies, many having low financial entry thresholds that broadened the social groups who could participate. They greatly increased fund-raising capabilities and made provincial involvement with national campaigns more structured and focused. That these national networks might be used for political campaigning is evidenced by the wave of petitions in support of the promotion of

[76] Innes and Burns 'Introduction' pp. 23-4, Arthur Burns, *The Diocesan Revival in the Church of England, c. 1800-1870* (Oxford, 1999).
[77] Allpress, *British Philanthropy*, pp. 88-100.
[78] Nicholas Dixon, 'The Activity and Influence of the Established Church in England, c.1800-1837' (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2018), chapter 5, especially p. 244.
[79] Dixon, 'Activity and Influence', p. 258.

Christianity in India in 1813, probably underpinned by the provincial network of missionary societies.[80]

A comparison between the structures of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery (formed in 1823) and those of the earlier Anti-Slave Trade Society (formed in 1787) demonstrates the increasing formalisation of institutional structures. The eighteenth-century society had a loose relationship with various provincial groups which were formally independent bodies, maintaining, for example, control over their own funds. The Abolition of Slavery Society had rules (unlike the earlier body, which had a central committee but no formal rules), held national general meetings and published a journal that reported campaigning efforts. The nineteenth-century society also took advantage of the organisational development of auxiliary societies to integrate provincial groups more closely into the organisation and have greater control of their activities.[81] Earlier concern that organised agitation might be counter-productive had gone.

The anti-slavery movement also provided the context in which the first female societies were established to campaign politically. In an initiative independent of the main society, a Birmingham female anti-slavery society was formed in 1825 which encouraged the establishment of women-only societies in other towns and eventually led the Anti-Slavery Society to encourage ladies' auxiliary groups of its own.[82] Women had subscribed to moral reform societies in the late eighteenth century (22% of the Philanthropic Society's subscribers in 1790 were women); charitable societies managed solely by women had existed at least since 1795 (the Charity for Female Emigrants); and in the early nineteenth

[80] Innes, 'Legislation', p.120.
[81] London, British Library [hereafter C], Add. MS 21254-6: Minutes of the Anti-Slave Trade Committee; Oxford, Bodleian Library, S.20/E2/1&2: Minutes of the Committee on Slavery; *Anti-Slavery Monthly* Reporter 1825-1828; Turley, *English Antislavery*, pp. 52-66.
[82] Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: the British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London,1992), chapter 3.

century female auxiliary societies of national organisations were formed (the Bible Society was first in 1811).[83] However, the political element of the anti-slavery campaign, seeking to change a national policy with economic implications, marked the women's anti-slavery societies as different.

The areas of engagement targeted by what are often collectively termed philanthropic societies continued to widen in the early nineteenth century, encompassing broad areas of crime, poverty, education and 'improvement' in various forms.[84] The Society for the Encouragement of Industry and Reduction of Poor Rates (founded 1818), for example, campaigned for the release of small plots of land to labourers and for magistrates to again be given wage-fixing powers.[85] The collective support mechanisms of trade or friendly societies provided an ethos that could be extended to campaigning for quasi-charitable causes (some historians include friendly societies in discussions of philanthropy).[86] The Society for the Protection of Children Employed in Cotton Factories (founded 1828) could be seen as a philanthropic society (initially some members were described as 'gentlemen') but also had strong links to trade societies, particularly the Manchester spinners.[87] The co-operative movement and Owenism also had connections with trade societies, as well as sharing the culture of mutual support seen in small tradesmen's clubs.[88] As this plurality

[83] Clare Midgley, 'From Supporting Missions to Petitioning Parliament: Women and the Evangelical Campaign Against Sati' in Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds.), *Women in British Politics, 1760-1860: The Power of the Petticoat* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 74-92; F. K. Prochaska, 'Women in English Philanthropy 1790–1830', *International Review of Social History*, 19 (1974), pp. 426-45; F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1980).
[84] Roberts, *Making English Morals*.
[85] Joanna Innes, 'Seeing like a Surveyor: Imagining Rural Reform in the Early Nineteenth-Century UK', in Bruce L. Kinzer and others (eds.), *Reform and its Complexities in Modern Britain: Essays Inspired by Sir Brian Harrison* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 57-79.
[86] Martin Gorsky, *Patterns of Philanthropy: Charity and Society in Nineteenth-Century Bristol* (Rochester, 1999).
[87] Raymond Kirby and A. E. Musson, *The Voice of the People: John Doherty, 1798-1854; Trade Unionist, Radical and Factory Reformer* (Manchester, 1975), pp. 353-4.
[88] J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: the Quest for the New Moral World* (London, 1969); Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, chapter 13.

indicates, campaigning was familiar to an increasing number of people from varied walks of life and extended beyond the mass causes of the era.

2.3.5 Societies formed to campaign about parliamentary reform.

Societies that campaigned for parliamentary reform in the nineteenth century were significantly different from those of the eighteenth century whilst also displaying some continuities. Elite societies did not lead early nineteenth-century campaigns. The Hampden Club (founded 1812) was so ineffectual that it would merit no more than a footnote but for the various societies established by working people to campaign for parliamentary reform. Although known to posterity as Hampden Clubs, the provincial clubs operated on an entirely different basis to the elite London society. However, the connections those provincial groups made with Sir Francis Burdett and Major Cartwright (both members of the London club) provided them with vital national figureheads, experience and parliamentary connections and the national figures with 'followers' who were really the prime movers.[89] The 'gentleman leader' model, where some mass movements in the nineteenth century were given focus by a national leader of higher social status than most members, was represented especially by Henry Hunt, also involved in the late stages of the Hampden Clubs.[90] Hunt, who became more closely connected to the plebian campaign for parliamentary reform than Burdett or even Cartwright, was a charismatic figure whose presence at meetings drew crowds, but he did not determine policy or the shape of most of the activity. The authorities' anxieties about efforts at provincial networking by local leaders contributed to legislation in 1817 that reinforced the restrictions on branches and

[89] Naomi Miller, 'Major John Cartwright and the Founding of the Hampden Club', *Historical Journal*, 17 (1974), pp. 615-19; H.W.C. Davis, 'Lancashire Reformers, 1816-17 ', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 10 (1926), pp. 47-79; Thompson, *The Making*, pp. 676-78.
[90] John Belchem, and James Epstein, 'The Nineteenth-Century Gentleman Leader Revisited', *Social History*, 22 (1997), pp. 174-93.

committees that communicated with other groups that had been introduced in the 1790s.[91] At the height of the Reform Agitation (1830-1832) a Royal Proclamation reminded campaigners that the prohibitions on branches and similar networks remained in force.[92]

The tendency, first evidenced in the radical societies of the 1790s, for the structures and practices of societies that campaigned for parliamentary reform to be shaped by the social status of the target membership became more marked in the nineteenth century. Although the BPU (established in 1830 by leading commercial gentlemen of the town) intended to attract both the middle and working classes it was clear from the outset that firm control would be exercised from the centre. It was run by a central council that was exclusively middle class, 'selected' at annual meetings.[93] Many organisations called Political Unions were established in subsequent months, but the extent to which similar names adopted by groups reflected shared objectives and methods remains unclear.[94] Some failed to maintain their cross-class nature: Manchester's, for example, split when an explicitly working-class society was formed.[95] In contrast, members of the National Union of the Working Classes (hereafter NUWC, established 1831) were predominately working people and its structures were formally representative, with some members of the general committee elected by branches and others by all present at those general meetings.[96] The extent to which the

[91] 57 Geo. III, c. 19, cl. 26.
[92] LoPatin, *Political Unions*, pp. 65, 126-8.
[93] LoPatin, *Political Unions,* remains the main study of political unions, but see also Clive Behagg, *Politics and Production in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London, 1990), chapter 4; R. J. Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations', in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.) *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950* volume 3 (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 395-443, p. 413.
[94] Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, pp. 136-8 for contemporary understanding of union.
[95] Michael J. Turner, *Reform and Respectability: the Making of Middle-class Liberalism in Early Nineteenth-Century Manchester* (Manchester,1995), p. 301; LoPatin, *Political Unions*, chapter 2.
[96] Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, p. 282; Max Beer, *A History of British Socialism* (London, 1953), p. 303; David Large, 'William Lovett', in Patricia Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from Without in Early Victorian England* (London, 1974), pp. 105-30, p. 123.

structures and practices of societies were affected by the social status of the intended membership has not been fully explored.[97]

Loyalist clubs continued into the nineteenth century though often rebadged, with Orange Lodges (from 1800 in Britain) and Pitt clubs (from 1808) just two examples of loyalist groups whose members included many men who controlled the levers of local authority.[98] Some of these societies maintained complex regional networks, national connections and parliamentary links. Their members were undoubtedly behind many town and parish meetings, but the societies themselves do not appear to have figured formally as vehicles for campaigning.[99]

2.4 European organisational practices.

It is worth briefly noting how different were the practices of organising in France, Italy and Spain. In contrast to the emphasis in this thesis on locality structures, societies had the leading role in mobilisations and agitations on the Continent. Although English societies are said to have been one influence on the formation of the French Jacobin societies of the 1790s, no English societies came close to the Jacobin groups' dominance in mobilising the people, nor the semi-official status some achieved, particularly in towns where local administration was weak.[100] Societies also played a central role in the revolutions across Southern Europe in the 1820s and in both supporting and policing the regimes thereby established.[101] The Italian secret society, the Carbonari, had a membership of around three

[97] Yeo, 'Some Practices and Problems', pp. 362-3 is a rare exception.
[98] Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, chapter 3.
[99] Masaki, 'Within the Bounds'.
[100] Micah Alpaugh, 'The British Origins of the French Jacobins: Radical Sociability and the Development of Political Club Networks, 1787-1793', *European History Quarterly*, 44 (2014), pp. 593-619; Charles Walton, 'Clubs, Parties, Factions', in David Andress (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 362-81; R. B. Rose, *The Making of the Sans-Culottes: Democratic Ideas and the Institutions in Paris, 1789*-92 (Manchester, 1983).
[101] Maurizio Isabella, *Southern Europe in the Age of Revolutions* (Princeton, 2023), especially chapters 1 and 10; Florencia Peyrou and Juan Luis Simal, 'Exile, Secret Societies and the Emergence of an International

hundred thousand by the early 1810s; the society planned the revolution in Naples in 1820 and were influential in other uprisings in the peninsula. In Spain several pronunciamentos (rebellions accompanied by the issuing of manifestos) were planned inside secret societies. The Spanish Comunería, established in 1820, was influenced by the practices of the Carbonari, many of whose members had taken refuge in Spain. Revolution gave secret societies new and more open roles, both military and civic. Although public societies (often termed Patriotic Societies) were also active, there was a strong strand of secret organisation across these countries and elsewhere in Europe. Freemasonry is repeatedly referenced as a major influence on the secret groups, both in their practices and the identity of their members.[102] Yet, as we saw above, the role of freemasonry in English nineteenth-century political organisation was limited. Nor were secret societies a significant element of activity here, although the Orange Order shared some features with these European societies as, perhaps, did the oath-bound bodies that underlay Luddite activities in the 1810s.[103]

The organisational practices of continental Europe remained open to some English influences. From the 1830s it is possible to identify a move towards organising public meetings in various countries. Indeed, the English word 'meeting' began to be used in several European languages.[104] In Belgium 'Jacob Kat's meeting movement' argued for the

Democratic Culture' in Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (eds.), *Re-imagining Democracy in the Mediterranean, 1780 -1860* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 205-29.

[102] Michael Kennedy, 'The Foundation of the Jacobin Clubs and the Development of the Jacobin Club Network, 1789-1791', *Journal of Modern History*, 51 (1979), pp. 701-33, pp. 702-4; Peyroul and Simal, 'Exile, Secret Societies', pp. 212-3; Isabella, *Southern Europe*, pp. 39-56.

[103] Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp. 117-125; Bernadette Turner, 'A Loyal Englishman? John Lloyd and Aspects of Oath Taking in 1812' in Michael Davis (ed.), *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775-1848: Essays in Honour of Malcolm I. Thomis* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 133-42.

[104] Google ngram searches for 'meeting' in various European languages; Widukind de Ridder, 'On the 'Absence of Spirit': the Legacy of Abstinence from Revolution in Belgium', in Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 185-215, p. 197.

right to associate in the late 1830s.[105] Large public meetings were integral to the revolutions of 1848 in Berlin and Paris and popular meetings became an integral part of political organising in many European countries.[106] Although organisational approaches were not always a good fit with other national political cultures, there were broad patterns of similar methods being adopted.[107]

All this should serve to remind us that there was nothing inevitable about the forms that English extra-parliamentary life took. Those forms owed much to local institutional and associational traditions, and to the political milieu, but also something to the specific kind of creativity exercised by English political activists, shaped by the circumstances in which they found themselves and what they were given latitude to do.

2.5 Conclusion.

Against the background of this historiography four ways of organising in the early nineteenth century were chosen as a focus for the case studies that make up the body of this thesis. The above survey highlights organisation in and of the locality (by town or parish meetings, latterly by public meetings); trade societies; and debating societies. These forms of organising are, however, worthy of study for reasons more than just historiographical neglect. Any cursory reader of the newspapers of the period would notice the frequent reports of meetings about the issues of the day, often concluding with

[105] Gita Deneckere, 'The Democratic Framing of Protest in the Age of Revolution: The Language of Civil Rights and the Organization of Petitions and Demonstrations in Belgium, 1830-1848' in Henk te Velde and Maartje Janse (eds.), *Organizing Democracy: Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the Nineteenth Century* (Cham, 2017), pp.127-44.
[106] Geerten Waling, 'Organizing in a Moment of Madness: Political Meetings and Clubs in 1848', pp. 105-126 and Maartje Janse and Henk Te Velde, 'Introduction: Perspectives on Political Organizing', pp. 1-18 both in Velde and Janse (eds.), *Organizing Democracy*.
[107] Maartje Janse, 'Holland as a Little England'? British Anti-Slavery Missionaries and Continental Abolitionist Movements in the Mid Nineteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 229 (2015), pp. 123-60; Benoit Agnes, 'A Chartist Singularity? Mobilizing to Promote Democratic Petitions in Britain and France, 1838-48', *Labour History Review*, 78 (2013), pp. 51-66.

petitions. Yet we know little about how these meetings (most commonly of generally constituted groups such as inhabitants) were arranged. Those newspaper reports make clear that meetings were usually of defined groups and about particular causes, but the significance of organising identities has also received remarkably little attention. The idea that involvement in trade societies and work-related collective activities was key to the political engagement of working people remains highly plausible. No study of how people organised politically in the early nineteenth century could omit these groups, but labour studies have found it difficult to escape from the doldrums of class analysis and trade societies have been relatively neglected for the last forty years. A focus on organising identities provides new ways of thinking about how working people carved out ways to campaign about non-work issues that foregrounded their voices and preoccupations. Debating is, perhaps, a less obvious subject. Yet the gap between the relatively public nature of much eighteenth-century debating and the more private discussions in the nineteenth century is suggestive of a marked change in the purposes and organisation of debate. In the final case study, the process of organising is investigated from a different perspective, that of a cause. The anti-corn law agitation of the 1820s was chosen because so many urban groups felt entitled to express their views on the issue. The investigation of the campaign shows that this too raised organising identities. Forum selection has received such little attention from historians that it was not raised by the above historiographical review.

The title of this thesis refers to ‘Popular Politics’, but it has been suggested that the eighteenth-century understanding of the word was limited to state affairs. Did the people who took part in these activities consider that they were being political? How was extra-parliamentary activity conceptualised in the nineteenth century?

3: Was it politics?

As was noted in chapter 1, from the 1950s, and especially the 1960s, historians began to investigate what came to be termed 'popular politics'.[1] The study of politics in Hanoverian Britain widened from a focus on Parliament and the elite to encompass engagements by wide sections of the population. Mark Philp and Joanna Innes have suggested, however, that in the eighteenth century the word 'politics' did not encompass extra-parliamentary campaigning, even when the subject of that campaigning was the activities of governments and efforts to influence those governments.[2] Their hypothesis is consistent with Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (first published 1755, substantially revised 1773) which defined politics as the 'science of government; the art or practice of administering publick [sic] affairs'.[3] This chapter discusses the changing ways extra-parliamentary activity was conceptualised in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

3.1 Introduction.

Mark Philp argued that events in the 1790s laid the foundations for changes in how popular engagement with matters of state policy was understood.[4] In the 1790s the authorities began penalising what had previously been understood to be private conversations about state affairs. At the same time loyalists were encouraged to present their own activities as public, legitimate and related to the state. Some radicals concluded they ought to present themselves as public actors. Philp argued that this broadening assertion of the right to take

[1] Earlier studies did not use politics as a frame, e.g., Jephson, *Platform;* Simon Maccoby, *English Radicalism, 1853-1886* (London, 1938).
[2] *Re-imagining Democracy, Lisbon 20-21 April 2015, Background Papers,* https://re-imaginingdemocracy.com/re-imagining-democracy-in-the-mediterranean-1750-1860/previous-meetings-2/ (16 June 2022).
[3] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1773).
[4] Mark Philp, *Radical Conduct: Politics, Sociability and Equality in London 1789-1815* (Cambridge, 2020), chapter 1.

part in public activity 'fed into a conceptually revised understanding of what politics should involve and to what it referred'.[5] He suggested this contributed to a shift in the extra-parliamentary nation's relationship to politics so that, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, politics became 'decoupled from parliamentary activity'.[6]

The nature and frequency of the extra-parliamentary nation's engagement with matters of national interest changed markedly over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Talking about politics, reading newspapers and pamphlets, perhaps contributing to their production and, in some places, taking a stance in elections were commonplace throughout the period. Early eighteenth-century agitations, however, were episodic, cohering around particular causes (the Excise Crisis in 1733, the Jewish Naturalization Act in 1753). As the century progressed the gaps between agitations narrowed and some spanned several years (the American conflict beginning in 1775 and abolition, from 1788).[7] By the early nineteenth century extra-parliamentary campaigns were all but continuous, with various issues agitated simultaneously. Broadly, this engagement was driven less by a reaction to specific events and more by views about how the nation's affairs should be conducted, with a huge rise in the volume and intensity of petitioning about affairs of state, public welfare and economic policy.[8] For reasons that were outlined in the introduction, organisers in the early nineteenth century were concerned that meetings of people claiming general identities (usually inhabitants) and the representations they advanced in the public interest should be perceived as legitimate. As we will see in later chapters, ideas about 'public meetings' and 'public opinion' underpinned the construction of that legitimacy.

[5] Philp, *Radical Conduct*, p.49.
[6] Philp, *Radical Conduct*, p. 53.
[7] See chapter 2, footnotes 8-10 and 39 for historiographical references.
[8] Innes, 'Legislation'.

This chapter considers how their activity was conceptualised in contemporary public discourse by investigating the uses of 'politics' (and its cognates) together with that of 'public' to describe extra-parliamentary campaigning. Word counting tools indicate that the use of both terms increased over the period, but do not allow us to isolate usage about English extra-parliamentary activity (figures 3.1 and 3.2). Politics, and especially political, were most used, but these are general terms found in many different contexts; Google ngram, which does not search newspapers, captures less of the language used in and about agitations. [9]

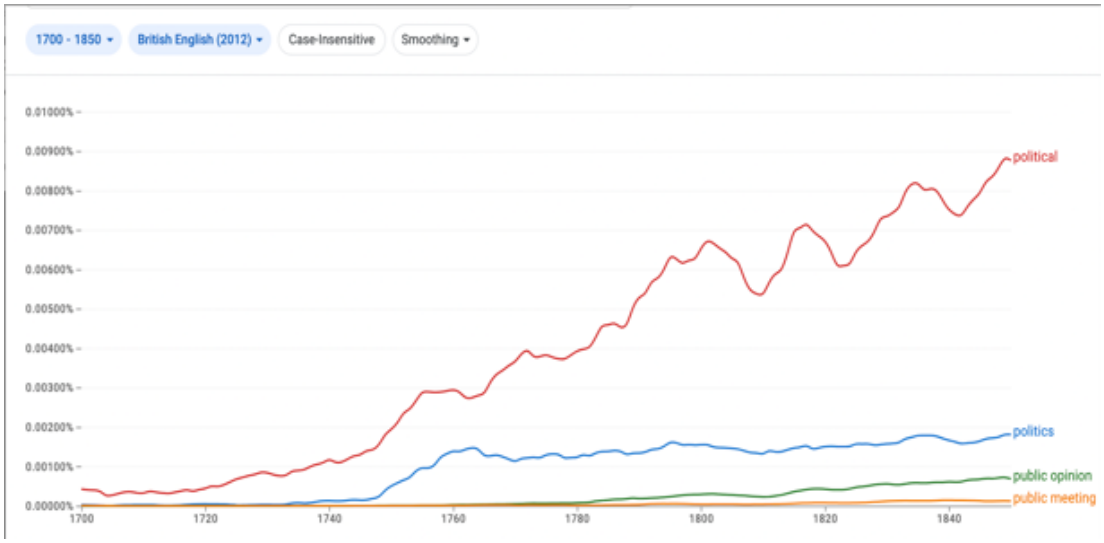

Figure 3.1: Ngram showing incidence of politics, political, public meetings and public opinion, 1700-1850.

[9] Philp, *Radical Conduct*, has similar tables and graphs and a discussion of their drawbacks.

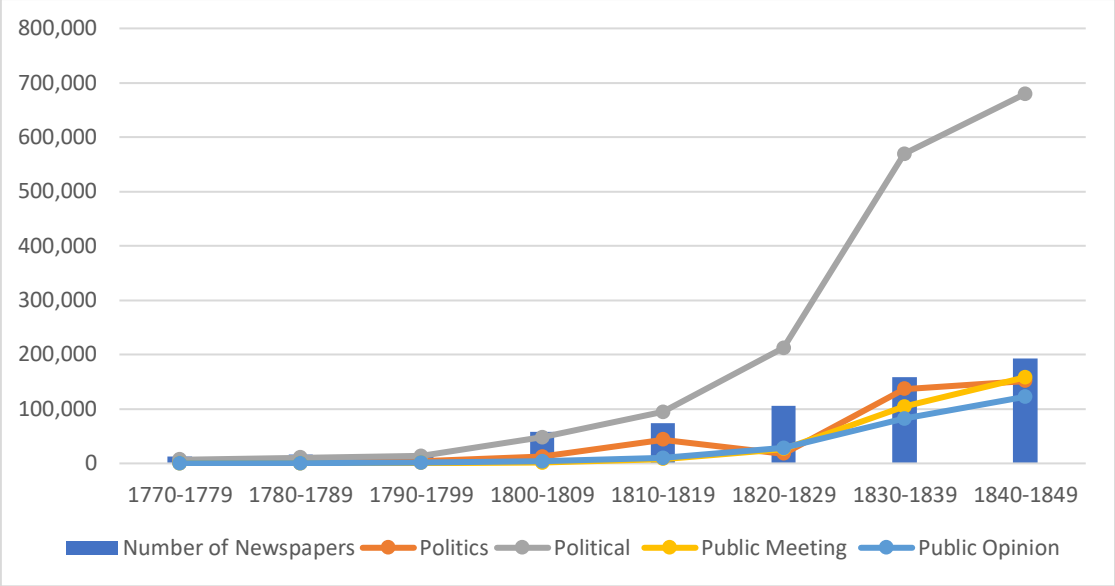

Figure 3.2: Incidence of politics, political, public meetings and public opinion, 1770-1850, in newspapers contained in the British Library Newspaper Archive; the bar lines chart the total newspapers in the database over the same period.

The method employed here was to analyse the language used in periods of extra-parliamentary campaigning during six short periods of high public engagement between 1775 and 1831. Quotidian discourse that was generally accessible is our interest, so the sources used were newspapers published in the six largest towns in England (London, Bristol, Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester) searchable online in the British Library's *17th and 18th Century Burney Collection* and *British Library Newspapers, Parts I-V*.[10] To identify change over time, two periods in the late eighteenth century and four in the early nineteenth century were investigated. Word searches for 'politics', 'political', 'public meeting' and 'public opinion' produced 5755 items. Many were irrelevant to the purposes here: this was particularly the case with politics and its cognates many of which were, for example, references to other countries, electoral affairs in England, advertisements for books and pamphlets, and about political economy. Word searching

[10] John Langton, 'Urban Growth and Economic Change: From the Late Seventeenth Century to 1841' in Clark (ed.), *Urban History Vol. 2*, pp. 451-90, pp. 473-4 for population statistics, 1800-1831.

technology is notoriously inaccurate, so steps were taken to supplement and cross-check the results produced.[11] When searches produced items of interest, the newspaper page was visually surveyed for other reports that might be relevant. As Addresses were often the favoured form of representation sent to the King in 1775, searches were also made using that word. *The History of the Two Acts* provided an additional source for 1795.[12] When researching another chapter, the term 'public meeting' was investigated for the years 1775 to 1795 across all newspapers in both databases, and the results were consistent with what was found here.[13] Three broader searches for limited periods in 1775, 1815 and 1819 produced minimal additional information so the exercise was not extended.[14] Finally, in a small sample when a search term was identified, a check was made whether all instances had been identified. A handful of references had been missed, generally repeat phrases within the same report: none altered the significance of the search.[15]

We begin with the conflict with America in late 1775, already noted as the first occasion on which many towns campaigned about a matter of church or state and which illustrates eighteenth-century usage on the cusp of change. The passage of the first Seditious Meetings Act in 1795 raised as a central issue the status of extra-parliamentary meetings and reveals changes in language use since 1775. Four studies in the early nineteenth century provide more detail for the period covered by this thesis. Agitation against the corn law and the property tax in 1815 allows an assessment of changes in how activity was conceptualised since the 1790s. The months in 1819 when Peterloo and the third Seditious Meetings Bill were much discussed provide a comparison with 1795. Early 1826, when the

[11] Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital: or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot', *Cultural and Social History*, 10, (2013), pp. 9-23.
[12] *Two Acts*.
[13] See chapter 7.1.
[14] One week in: 1775 for meeting; in 1815 and 1819 for public or politic*.
[15] *Leeds Intelligencer*, 13 Mar. 1815; *Morning Chronicle*, 3 Mar. 1815; *Morning Post*, 23 Aug. 1819; *Liverpool Mercury*, 3 Sept. 1819.

legislative restrictions on meetings had elapsed, saw campaigns on several causes, notably the corn law, anti-slavery and Catholic emancipation. Lastly, we look at the language used in early 1831, when parliamentary reform was before Parliament.

This investigation reveals that extra-parliamentary engagements came to be characterised 'political' (less so as 'politics') but that 'public' was the more important term.[16] The use of political was affected by the nature of the causes being agitated, peaking when the rights to meet or vote were at issue and receding when they were not. Nevertheless, by the 1830s there was a wide understanding that such public engagement might be termed political. However, the conceptualisation of the extra-parliamentary nation as public, often embodied in 'public meetings', and the labelling of the collective views of those meetings as 'public opinion', rose more steadily and was unaffected by the issues that were under consideration. This preference for public was a conscious choice on the part of the extra-parliamentary nation, for the terminology of politics was clearly available. As will be shown, public offered positive advantages for by the later 1810s, and especially in the 1820s, an ideology of the public underpinned the representation and legitimation of an increasingly engaged population in ways that a language of politics could not. The broad shape of change in language use in each year is summarised in the table 3.1.

[16] For 17th century developments of the meaning of public see Geoff Baldwin, 'The "Public" as a Rhetorical Community in Early Modern England', in Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington (eds.), *Communities in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 199-215 and Mark Knights, *Trust and Distrust: Corruption in Office in Britain and its Empire, 1600-1850* (Oxford, 2021), chapter 3.

Table 3.1: Summary of how extra-parliamentary engagement was conceptualised in the years analysed, showing uses of political and the main terms used about meetings and extra-parliamentary views.

Year	Political applied to the extra-parliamentary nation	Extra-parliamentary activity	Extra-parliamentary views
1775	N/A	Meetings	Sense of the people
1795	Some use in and out of Parliament -a 1790s moment?	Meetings Public meetings used as general term and about a minority of events	Sense of the people Public opinion beginning to be used as general term
1815	Occasionally used as a general term about the concerns of the people; hint of party	Public meetings in more common use and applied to specific events	Various Public opinion applied to specific events
1819	Widespread use as general term about both the opinions of the people and about the issues	Public meetings dominant, both as a general and a specific term – developing as a term of art	Public opinion
1826	Occasionally used as a general term in connection with the people.	Public meetings dominant	Public opinion a force to which Parliament attends
1831	Extended to specific extra-parliamentary activity	Public meetings Reform meetings Political Unions	Public opinion likened to a physical force

3.2 1775

The King's proclamation in August 1775 that America was in rebellion made it clear that the government intended to pursue its dispute with the colonists by force. Through the autumn numerous addresses and petitions were submitted both favouring and opposing coercion of the Americans.[17]

Newspaper discussion of the dispute conforms to Philp's and Innes' hypothesis that the primary meaning of 'politics' in the late eighteenth century related to statesmen and affairs of state. So, funds had previously been granted to the Americans in accordance with the 'politics of our then statesmen', but even in this context conceptualisations like 'crisis',

[17] Bradley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 10-12.

'affair' and 'measures' were often preferred.[18] When used about individuals, political might have a negative connotation, although not necessarily. The 'wretched political abilities' of Lord Shelburne were criticised, but the Commons' minority who voted against war were of 'unspotted political character'.[19] When politics was a synonym for faction or party, the inference was almost always critical.[20] 'Politician' generally referenced people who read and talked about politics. Although such allusions were not always negative, they were when used about the lower orders: 'every man that drinks his pot of beer is a politician and every labourer passes his opinion on the state of affairs'.[21] Very occasionally political was stretched to include the attitudes of the wider population. It was suggested of a Bristol petition that 'were the political principles of many of the petitioners known they would be found to be hostile to both him [the King] and the constitution'.[22] Three points should be emphasised. First, this was a critical comment. Second, political referenced the contents, not the activity of petitioning. Third, this was unusual; most commentaries on petitions and addresses made no reference to 'politics'.

If the meetings at which petitions and addresses were agreed and the representations advanced were not labelled political, how were they understood? Meetings were described as 'of' the group being mobilised, with common halls, county meetings and meetings of the 'principal inhabitants' held around the country.[23] There was little attempt to otherwise conceptualise meetings, either individually or as a wider phenomenon. There was some fuzziness about whose views petitions claimed to represent, particularly with addresses from non-corporate bodies. Nottingham sent two addresses both making similar arguments

[18] *Middlesex Journal*, 2-5 Sept. 1775.
[19] *Gazetteer*, 11, 16 Sept. 1775.
[20] *Public Advertiser*, 3 Oct. 1775, *Leeds Intelligencer*, 31 Oct. 1775, *Gazetteer*, 9 Oct. 1775.
[21] *Gazetteer*, 20 Oct. 1775; Brewer, *Party Ideology*, p. 140; Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867* (Oxford, 2009), p. 7.
[22] *London Chronicle*, 16-18 Nov. 1775.
[23] Bradley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 61-3.

for conciliation, with that from the 'Mayor and Burgesses in Common Council' reproduced on the same page of the newspaper as one from the 'Gentlemen, Principal Manufacturers and Inhabitants'.[24] We do not know how or why the non-corporate address was organised. Further, several towns produced opposing addresses on what policy should be adopted, undermining any claim to represent more than the views of signatories.[25] The names of those who signed non-corporate addresses were often printed in the newspapers, presumably to indicate they were men of status (probably voters), but also having the effect of making the address more personal, a collection of like-minded individuals. A correspondent to the *General Evening Post* sniped that the habit of signing addresses was merely self-aggrandisement, a desire to be identified in the London press as the principal inhabitants of a town.[26]

Extra-parliamentary opinion was conceptualised by means of the much-used label 'the sense' of some specified group, often a locality.[27] So, the notice calling a county meeting of Berkshire stated it was to 'take the general sense of this county', while in Poole the leading men were criticised for not taking 'the sense of the inhabitants'.[28] It was unclear what weight should be attached to extra-parliamentary expressions of opinion and by whom, with some parliamentarians arguing that Parliament was the guide to the sense of the nation. Simon Temple Luttrell (member for Milborne), for example, argued that it was the duty of 'we who are the deputies of the people' to impart to the King 'the real wishes and dispositions' of his subjects and that from his personal enquiries he was confident that the 'sense of the mass of the people' supported the Americans.[29] The address of the county of

[24] *London Evening Post*, 31 Oct.-2 Nov. 1775.
[25] e.g., Liverpool – *Middlesex Journal*, 16-18 Nov. 1775.
[26] *General Evening Post*, 11-14 Nov. 1775.
[27] Wilson, *Sense of the People*.
[28] *London Evening Post*, 26-28 Sept., 21-23 Nov. 1775.
[29] *London Evening Post*, 31 Oct.-2 Nov.1775; J.A.W Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property: the Process of Self-Recognition in Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Kingston, 1983), p. 274

Berkshire stated that, we 'conceive that the interference of your Majesty's people otherwise than by their representatives in Parliament (though it be their undoubted right) ought to be extremely rare and reserved for occasions of the greatest necessity'.[30]

3.3 1795

By late 1795 Britain had suffered a series of recent defeats in the war with Republican France and, following a bad harvest, many were hungry. The LCS held a large open-air meeting in October which called for peace, famine relief and parliamentary reform. A handbill entitled *King Killing* was sold at the meeting. Three days later stones were thrown at the King's carriage on his journey to open Parliament. Ministers responded by introducing two Bills. The Seditious Meetings Bill sought restrictions on meetings not called by the relevant authorities and proposed that lectures and public debates about 'supposed public grievances' should be licensed. A second Bill proposed an extended definition of treason to include stirring the people to a 'dislike' of the established government.[31]

Although exceptionally, when discussing these Bills some parliamentarians characterised the subject matter of extra-parliamentary engagements as 'political', this proved not to be an indicator of longer-term shifts in usage. In the debates about the Bills the opposition Whigs, opposed to the legislation on principle and probably concerned that their extra-parliamentary supporters might be discouraged by the measures, made wide use of political to characterise extra-parliamentary interest. Government ministers, anxious to downplay the effect of the Bills on the general population and not wanting to appear to be protecting themselves, acknowledged the right to meet to discuss what they also called political

[30] *London Evening Post*, 21-23 Nov. 1775.
[31] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, pp. 384-396; John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 45-59.

topics. The Duke of Bedford (opposing) said that 'it had ever been the … favourite right of Englishmen to meet and discuss political subjects' and the Solicitor General said that the people might 'with great propriety discuss political subjects'.[32] This parliamentary language was possibly influenced by the earlier attendance (mentioned during the debates) of Pitt, Fox and other leading statesmen at meetings about issues like the slave trade or parliamentary reform, issues that were considered political when those same men debated them in Parliament.[33] Parliamentarians in later years were more restrictive in their use of this language and (in the periods studied here) did not again describe the subjects that engaged the extra-parliamentary nation as political until 1819 (and even then used the term less). Their 1795 usage was also anomalous as the only occasion identified when parliamentarians were in the vanguard of language use: later changes in parliamentary usage followed in the wake of the extra-parliamentary discourse.[34] It was perhaps the example set by these parliamentarians that led newspapers on both sides of the argument to make frequent use of political when editorialising; the *Whitehall Evening Post* reported the vote on the first reading of the Bill under the heading 'Mr Pitt's motion for a Bill to prevent all … meetings for political discussion', while the *Manchester Mercury* argued that the Bill did not 'preclude fair political discussion'.[35]

The only circumstance where specific activities were sometimes labelled 'political' was in relation to the radical clubs, debating societies and lectures — that is, it was not usually applied to the more traditional county and town meetings.[36] Parliamentarians and petitions that favoured the legislation used the word negatively about the radicals: the petition from

[32] *Courier*, 14 Nov. 1795; *Morning Post*, 18 Nov. 1795.
[33] *Two Acts*, pp. 284-5, 474, 664.
[34] Willibald Steinmetz, 'A Code of its Own: Rhetoric and Logic of Parliamentary Debate in Modern Britain', *Redescriptions*, 6 (2002), pp. 84-104 for a discussion of changes in language used in parliament.
[35] *Whitehall Evening Post*, 14-17 Nov. 1795; *Manchester Mercury*, 17 Nov. 1795.
[36] A rare exception, Charles Fox referred to 'political meetings' during the American war, *Two Acts*, p. 288.

Colchester, for example, blamed the attack on the King on the 'associations for political debates, lectures and clubs'.[37] Some of these groups applied political to their own activities, at least in the pressured days of late 1795. John Thelwall's famous lectures, at which the legislation was directly aimed, were held in the 'political lecture-room' and the radical debating society, the Westminster Forum, advertised in the days before the Bills became law that 'this will be the last political question that can be debated'.[38] It is not until 1831 that we again encounter the label political applied by extra-parliamentary actors to their own activities. The LCS also made some limited use of the label of politics at their open meetings; at the meeting in October 1795 many argued that the society should not send an Address to the King but limit itself to 'the dissemination of political knowledge', while a petition against the Bills organised by the society in November cited the 'rights of political discussion'.[39]

Despite these uses of 'political', it was more common to characterise the extra-parliamentary nation's engagement as 'public' (also not found in 1775). Lord Grenville, when introducing the Bill in the Lords, referred to the 'right of public discussion'; John Stanley (member for Wootton Bassett) argued that Englishmen were entitled to 'meet when and where they pleased for the discussion of public affairs'.[40] In meetings around the country, critics of the Bills also made wide use of public: a Manchester meeting complained that the Bills infringed 'freedom of public discussion', one in Norwich that the Bills prohibited meetings 'for public purposes'.[41] Publicness, which would later become closely connected to the legitimation of extra-parliamentary activities, was generally avoided by supporters of the Bills who focused on the dangers of sedition and often

[37] *Two Acts*, p. 118.
[38] *Morning Chronicle*, 9 Nov., 12 Dec. 1795.
[39] *Two Acts*, pp. 95, 131.
[40] *Two Acts*, pp. 664, 154.
[41] *Manchester Mercury*, 15 Dec. 1795; *Two Acts*, pp.320.

expressed hostility to what Pitt termed 'self-created meetings … unknown to our ancestors' (presumably meaning any not called by the relevant authorities).[42]

The term 'public meeting' was sometimes used about extra-parliamentary assemblies. Throughout the period studied it was common to find that language was applied to general practices or phenomena before being used to refer to specific actions or behaviours. The phrase public meeting was used quite frequently in 1795 about the phenomenon of extra-parliamentary meetings, illustrated by a Bristol meeting that claimed that 'should these Bills pass, all public meetings will be under the absolute, though indirect, control of the governing power'.[43] Parliamentarians also used the term occasionally: Charles (later Earl) Grey described the Bill as preventing public meetings.[44] Few specific events were labelled as public meetings. *The History of the Two Acts* interspersed reports of parliamentary debates with accounts of what it called 'Popular Meetings', most of which were self-described as meetings of the county, freeholders, electors or similar. A small minority were termed public meetings by their organisers, such as the county meetings of Surrey and Somerset and the open meetings arranged by the Sheffield radical societies.[45] Even when the term was used, it was often applied unevenly for its meaning was not yet fixed. Thus, in response to a request for 'a meeting' to address the King, the Manchester authorities called a 'public meeting', which when it was held was termed 'a meeting of the inhabitants'.[46] Some newspapers reported parliamentarians saying that petitions they presented had been agreed at public meetings, but the events may not have been so described by their organisers. *The Oracle* quoted Sheridan as describing a petition from

[42] *Morning Post*, 25 Nov. 1795; Navickas, 'Contested Right', p. 7.
[43] *Two Acts*, pp. 362.
[44] *Two Acts*, p. 140.
[45] *Two Acts*, p. 244; Star, 20 Nov. 1795; *Proceedings of the Public Meeting Held… 1795* (Sheffield, 1795).
[46] *Manchester Mercury*, 10, 17 Nov. 1795.

Newcastle-under-Lyne as 'agreed at a public meeting', but other newspapers did not, nor did the *Commons Journals*.[47]

The preferred description of extra-parliamentary views continued to be 'the sense of the people' with multiple meetings claiming to represent it.[48] Parliamentarians on all sides used the term liberally but, unlike in 1775, there was no suggestion it was their exclusive role to divine what it was. There was a shift from the earlier understanding that sense carried the 'suggestions of a rough, not a mechanical or exact summation of views'.[49] Opposing petitions from the same locality led some parliamentarians to offer convoluted calculations as to why petitions they agreed with more accurately represented the sense of the people than conflicting representations from the same, or overlapping areas.[50] Other parliamentarians queried the standing of the signatories to one or other petition. Lord Sheffield, challenged by Sheridan for failing to acknowledge that a Bristol petition with four thousand signatures expressed the 'general sense of the inhabitants', responded that he believed that it did not for it 'came neither from the corporation, nor from a body of merchants but from the people indiscriminately'.[51] A magistrate (whose views were amplified by being quoted in Parliament by Sheridan) questioned whether large meetings in London like those of the Common Council and of the inhabitants of Westminster could truly represent the sense of the inhabitants, which he suggested would be more appropriately obtained at smaller meetings of wards and parishes.[52] This argument may

[47] *Oracle*, *Morning Chronicle*, *Star*, 28 Nov. 1795; *Whitehall Evening Post*, 26-28 Nov. 1795; *CJ* 50 (1795), p. 134.
[48] *Two Acts*, pp. 194, 306, 325, 346 468; *Morning Chronicle*, 21 Nov, 3 Dec 1795.
[49] J.A.W. Gunn 'Public Opinion' in Terence Ball and James Farr (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 247-65, p. 257.
[50] *Two Acts*, pp. 543-4 for an example.
[51] *Two Acts*, p. 366.
[52] *Two Acts*, p. 476.

have inspired petitions about the Bills from many wards in the City of London and parishes in the metropolis.

Occasionally 'the sense of the public' was used (rather than that of the people) and there were a few uses of 'public opinion'. Like other new usages, these generally referenced the phenomenon, not views on a particular issue, with a speaker at London's Common Hall citing the 'freedom of constitutionally expressing the public opinion'.[53] This limited usage might appear inconsistent with J.A.W. Gunn's argument that the term public opinion was in common use by the 1790s (in an earlier work he had suggested the 1780s).[54] However, analyses of changes in language usage are shaped by the question being investigated: within broad timelines of change, historians' different emphases are not necessarily contradictory. Broadly, Gunn was interested in the changing relationship between Parliament and the electorate and he suggested that public opinion was understood to be embodied by the Commons, save when elections were held. It is unsurprising that the views of the electorate, more closely connected to Parliament, might be labelled public opinion before the term was used about the nation at large. Similarly, Dror Wahrman, analysing political thinkers of varying stature, discussed scepticism about the significance of public opinion in the 1790s. His point was that this contrasted with attitudes in the 1810s, rather than with how extra-parliamentary activity was generally characterised in the 1790s.[55]

[53] *Two Acts*, pp. 747, 316 - 746 for a rare reference to public opinion.
[54] Gunn, 'Public Opinion', p. 258; Gunn, *Beyond Liberty*, p. 281.
[55] Dror Wahrman, 'Public Opinion, Violence and the Limits of Constitutional Politics', in James Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 83-122; see also J.W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1988), chapter 3.

3.4 An interlude.

Further repressive legislation and more diffuse interference by local authorities, combined with anxiety about the war and reaction against events in France to limit campaigning on national issues for some years. That which did occur tended to relate to the war, which perhaps discouraged wider conceptualisations of extra-parliamentary engagements. There was a 'well-concerted push' for peace in 1797 and more limited similar activity in 1801.[56] In late 1807 and early 1808 another campaign for peace from Yorkshire and Lancashire generally avoided using 'political', 'the sense of the people' or 'public opinion' and made only minimal use of the term 'public meeting'.[57] Their rhetoric focused on patriotism and they were countered by loyal addresses.[58] The Orders in Council passed in late 1807 to restrict neutral trade with Europe were the subject of limited agitation in 1808 and more vigorous campaigning in 1812, which overlapped with petitioning against the renewal of the East India Company's monopoly of trade with the east.[59] Again, the meetings through which this 1812 agitation was organised made only limited use of the public as a rhetorical tool and none of politics or the political; the parliamentary discussion focused on questions of economics and geopolitics, not the views of the people.[60]

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[56] Goodwin, *Friends of* Liberty, chapters 10 and 12; J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (Cambridge, 1982), pp.157-158, 186.
[57] Peter Spence, *The Birth of Romantic Radicalism: War, Popular, Politics, and English Radical Reformism, 1800-1815* (Aldershot, 1996); Philip Harling, 'A Tale of Two Conflicts: Critiques of the British War Effort, 1793-1815' in Mark Philp (ed.), *Resisting Napoleon: the British Response to the Threat of Invasion* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 19-40.
[58] Cookson, *Friends of Peace*, chapter 8; Navickas, *Loyalism and* Radicalism, pp. 210-230; *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 28 Nov. 12 Dec. 1807, 16 Jan. 1808; *Leeds Mercury*, 2 Jan. 1808; for an unusual use of public meeting see, *Leeds Mercury*, 23 Jan. and 3 Mar. 1808.
[59] Cookson, *Friends of Peace*, chapter 9.
[60] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 29 Feb., 4, 11 Apr. 1812; *Liverpool Mercury*, 20 Mar. 1812; *Leeds Mercury*, 21 Mar. 1812; exceptionally a Birmingham meeting chaired by Thomas Attwood referred to their right to petition about 'political measures' - *Liverpool Mercury* 10 Apr. 1812.

One exception was the 1809 scandal surrounding the 'sale' of army commissions by the mistress of the Duke of York (commander in chief of the army).[61] It was accepted that the sacrifices necessitated by the war meant that the nation was entitled to be concerned about army corruption at the highest level and in this context 'the public' was frequently mentioned both inside and outside of Parliament. Wilberforce, for example, stated that 'the scrutinising tribunal of public opinion' would judge the Commons' investigation of the affair and Spencer Perceval (leading the government's defence of the Duke) acknowledged that the house 'should diligently watch and respectfully attend to public opinion' (but not slavishly follow it).[62] Other formulations relating to extra-parliamentary opinion were also used by parliamentarians, but variations on the public were the most common. Meetings held in many towns and counties which passed votes of thanks to Colonel Wardle (who had first raised the matter in the Commons) and censured the majority of the Commons (who supported the Duke) made less use of the public in relation to their own proceedings, although it was, for example, noted in the Middlesex meeting that ministers now described the nation's views as 'popular clamour' which if it had 'agreed with their own would have been denominated public opinion'.[63]

The rate of change accelerated after the war with marked developments taking place over little more than fifteen years. As will be shown, uses of 'public' grew steadily and were dominant by 1826. 'Political' was used more unevenly but did become available as a description of the people's interest in state affairs. Some changes in its usage were a matter of emphasis and degree.

[61] Philip Harling, 'The Duke of York Affair (1809) and the Complexities of War-Time Patriotism', *The Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), pp. 963-84.
[62] *Morning Chronicle*, 28 Jan., 10 Mar. 1809.
[63] Spence, *Romantic Radicalism*, pp. 123-4; *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 15 Apr. 1809.

3.5 1815

In early 1815 there was widespread campaigning against the property tax and the corn law. Introduced in 1799, the property (or income) tax was deeply unpopular and when, in 1814, the war was first thought to have ended the nation considered its renewal inappropriate. Both Houses had investigated the corn law for some years, but a national campaign in June 1814 against the imposition of significant import duties on corn until the domestic price had reached 84 shillings a bushel succeeded in getting the issue deferred. It returned to the Commons with the opening of a new session in February 1815 and despite another vigorous extra-parliamentary campaign the revised corn law was passed on 24 March, by which date attention was focused on Bonaparte's escape from Elba.[64]

'Political' was occasionally used as an umbrella term to describe the kind of matters in which the extra-parliamentary nation was interested, but it was not applied to specific issues. The corn law and the property tax were not directly characterised as political issues either in meetings or by newspapers. Nor was there any repetition of parliamentarians referring to the people discussing political subjects, as had occurred in 1795 (confirmed by a word search of Hansard). When it was used, political often carried a hint of party. A speaker at a meeting in Rochester (a parliamentary borough) noted that he had frequently addressed them about petitions which 'had generally been of a political nature' when the 'conflicting opinions attached to political subjects rendered unanimity' unattainable, but he knew that opinion was united against the property tax.[65]

The conceptualisation of extra-parliamentary organisation as taking the form of 'public meetings' had developed beyond the level of 1795: it was now common to use public

[64] Donald Barnes, *A History of the English Corn Laws, from 1660-1846* (London, 1930), chapter 7; O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament'.
[65] *Morning Chronicle*, 10 Jan. 1815.

meetings as a generic term and no longer unusual for specific meetings to be so labelled.[66] A 'Public Meeting of the inhabitants' was called by the Manchester authorities to oppose the corn law.[67] The term was still used inconsistently, so although the mayor in Liverpool called a 'general meeting of the inhabitants', that meeting's resolutions were published as agreed at 'a public meeting'.[68] It is unclear whether a 'great meeting of the inhabitants of Westminster' was formally called as a public meeting, but it was widely described as such by newspapers.[69] Many meetings, nevertheless, continued to be labelled only by the traditional terms of county or town meetings.[70] Although the question of what weight should be attached to petitions remained, those calling meetings and drafting the petitions agreed at them were beginning to claim that the views expressed in public meetings represented the views of the locality.[71] The parliamentary discussion largely avoided the term public meetings and claims by those meeting to embody a locality's views were ignored.

Several phrases were employed to conjure the collective views of the people. The 'sense of the people' was still used, as was 'popular sentiment'.[72] Several speeches at meetings referred to 'the voice of the country', often now accompanied by an assertion that attention ought to be paid to their views.[73] The concept of 'public opinion' was on the rise but did not yet have the status it would later achieve. It was now sometimes applied to specific causes; at the Rochester meeting mentioned above, it was hoped that 'public opinion would be generally expressed' against the property tax.[74] Broadly, such language was used

[66] *Morning Chronicle*, 9 Feb. 1815.
[67] *Manchester Mercury*, 7 Mar. 1815.
[68] *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 Mar. 1815.
[69] *Morning Chronicle* and *Morning Post*, 8 Mar. 1815.
[70] *Morning Post*, 31 Jan., 9 Feb. 1815; *Examiner*, 12 Feb. 1815.
[71] See chapter 7.
[72] *Cobbett's Political Register*, 11 Mar. 1815; *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 Mar. 1815.
[73] *Morning Post*, 21 Mar. 1815; see also *Liverpool Mercury*, 20 Jan. 1815.
[74] *Examiner*, 12 Feb. 1815.

outside parliament, and not inside. When introducing the Corn Bill to the Commons, Frederick Robinson was reported in the *Morning Chronicle* as having referred to public opinion on the issue, but neither the *Morning Post* nor Hansard included that phrase in their reports of his speech, although Hansard records two other members using the term during the debate.[75]

3.6 1819

From 1816 campaigns for parliamentary reform involving working people were common. Through the summer of 1819 numerous meetings were held, particularly in the north of England, culminating in the monster rally in Manchester in August 1819 where eleven peaceful demonstrators were killed and many more injured.[76] The government resolved to introduce another Seditious Meetings Act, together with five other acts, to deter popular engagement of this kind.

In 1819 the general population's engagement with national issues was frequently described as 'political' and sometimes as 'politics'. There were, for example, numerous statements in newspapers and meetings along the lines that parliamentary reform was prominent in the 'politics of the day'.[77] This 1819 discourse went further than that of 1795: then political was used to characterise the subject matters discussed, now it referred to people's views. Ordinary people were routinely described as having political opinions of their own. Recognising that the general population had opinions about national matters was not new; what was new was labelling those opinions as political without reference to parties or to

[75] *Morning Chronicle* and *Morning Post*, 18 Feb. 1815; Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates* [hereafter, Hansard], 1st Series, vol. 29, cc.792-842; see Dror Wahrman, 'Virtual Representation: Parliamentary Reporting and Languages of Class in the 1790s', *Past & Present,* 136 (1992), pp. 83-113 for the unreliability of newspaper coverage of parliamentary debates.
[76] Poole, *Peterloo*.
[77] *Leeds Mercury*, 3 July 1819.

elections. People's interest in politics was now treated as an expression of their own thinking about the issues, rather than as a discussion of the activities of statesmen. The 'political creeds' of individuals, groups and inhabitants were commonly mentioned, often by themselves and without negative undertones. Provincial actors giving speeches mentioned their political beliefs, while those arrested at Peterloo were imprisoned 'on account of their political principles'.[78] '[P]olitical feelings all men had, more or less' but these should not interfere with public duties.[79] Thus, it was said that judges and juries ought to be uninfluenced by their political views and there was much discussion about the Lord Mayor's refusal to summon meetings of Common Hall in the City of London because of his personal political beliefs.[80]

Extra-parliamentary activity was still not labelled 'political': people met to discuss political topics, but their act of meeting was not itself described as political. When the Ward of Farringdon asserted that the people had a 'right to assemble to discuss their political grievances', neither they nor anyone else described that meeting at which their resolution was agreed as political.[81] On the rare occasions where activity was termed political the term conveyed some negativity. The *Morning Post*, unsympathetic to radicalism and concerned that attendees were said to be armed, asserted that this was 'a fearful novelty in the composition of political assemblies in this country'.[82] Although political was used in a context hostile to those meeting, it did not reference what was being criticised — the bearing of arms.

[78] *Liverpool Mercury*, 6 Aug. 1819; *Morning Chronicle*, 26 Aug. 1819.
[79] *Morning Post*, 22 Oct. 1819.
[80] *Bristol Merc*ury, 11 Oct. 1819; *Morning Chronicle*, 25 Nov. 1819.
[81] *Morning Chronicle*, 23 Sept. 1819.
[82] *Morning Post*, 27 Sept. 1819.

The most common conceptualisation of extra-parliamentary activity was 'public'. Public meetings were now so common that many newspapers collected reports of minor meetings about a variety of issues together under the heading 'Public Meetings'.[83] *The Manchester Mercury*, a Tory newspaper which defended the authorities' activities at Peterloo, wrote a critical editorial on 'The Present System of Public Meetings'.[84] 'Politician' was still applied to an individual interested in state affairs, but not to people who took part in discussions at public meetings. The collective activity of refining and expressing a joint opinion about an issue, often extending to proposing action by Parliament or government, was generically accepted as potentially worthy of respect.

In another marked change since 1815, 'public opinion' had become the favoured term to describe the balance of extra-parliamentary views about an issue.[85] Opinion had once meant a view held without proof: attached to public it now asserted an exercise of reason without the emotional undertones carried by sentiment and feeling.[86] It sought to evoke something more concrete than its predecessor, the sense of the people. Public opinion denoted more than just the views expressed in public meetings (or any type of meeting) but there was a conceptual overlap between public opinion and public meetings: as later chapters will show, both were presented as determining a question by reasoned argument and with reference to the public good. Many speeches in 1819 mentioned public opinion. A speaker in Leeds claimed that 'a revolution has taken place in public opinion' while, at a meeting at the Crown and Anchor, it was declared 'impossible to wait any longer for an expression of public opinion' about Peterloo.[87] The strength of public opinion as a concept

[83] e.g., *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 Oct. 1819.
[84] *Manchester Mercury*, 26 Oct. 1819.
[85] Wahrman, 'Limits of Constitutional', pp. 92-3.
[86] Philp, *Radical Conduct*, p. 37; Johnson, *Dictionary*, 'opinion'; Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 167.
[87] *Morning Post*, 23 Aug. 1819; *Morning Chronicle*, 23 Sept. 1819.

was such that all sides recognised it, with loyalists claiming 'public opinion now begins to right itself about Manchester events' (meaning that it had become less critical of the authorities).[88] A speaker at a meeting in Lancashire that agreed a loyal declaration said 'let anyone, if he can, point out in our history at what time public opinion was so much expressed on every occasion and when it possessed so much sway; for public opinion is a shrine at which all must bow; and by which every government must be tried'.[89]

Parliamentarians made less use than the extra-parliamentary nation of the language of either 'politics' or the 'public'. In the Lords, both Lord Erskine and Lord Darnley opposed the Bills without recourse to either concept, but the Earl of Harrowby accepted that the 'people had the right to meet and discuss political matters' (a rare echo of 1795).[90] Political was too useful a shorthand to avoid when discussing the Bill which sought to extend stamp duty to new categories of publications (so that the price of radical newspapers would be beyond the reach of most working people) and both the Solicitor-General and Lord Castlereagh referred to 'political subjects' during that debate.[91] Several members of the Commons referenced 'public meetings', but 'public opinion' was used more frequently and by parliamentarians who supported the legislation as well as those who opposed it.[92] William Plunket supported the Bills, denied there was an ancient right to meet, but still referred to the importance of a 'true expression of public opinion', which he thought was more accurately obtained in smaller meetings.[93] The statutes also used public to capture contentious subject matter, probably because political seemed too partisan: the Newspaper Stamp Act applied to newspapers containing any 'Public News, Intelligence or

[88] *Leeds Intelligencer*, 8 Nov. 1819
[89] *Morning Post*, 21 Sept. 1819.
[90] *Morning Chronicle*, 18 Dec. 1819.
[91] *Morning Post*, 3 Dec. 1819; *Morning Chronicle*, 16 Dec. 1819.
[92] *Morning Chronicle*, 3, 18, 22 Dec. 1819.
[93] *Morning Chronicle*, 14 Dec. 1819.

Occurrences', while the new Seditious Meetings Act extended the matters about which meetings were restricted from those about 'church and state' (as had the acts of 1795 and 1817) to meetings on 'any public grievance'.[94]

Events at Manchester ignited a national debate in which people arrayed across a spectrum of opinion acknowledged the right to meet in varied language, sometimes without reference to either 'politics' or 'public'.[95] A Sheffield public meeting referred to 'the inalienable right of Englishmen to assemble for the purpose of deliberating upon and discussing their grievances', but implicitly endorsed publicness by being itself labelled as a 'public meeting'.[96] A diatribe in *The Morning Post* against a speech given by the 'arch-demagogue' Hunt illustrates that even conservative opinion accepted that political was now appropriately used in connection with extra-parliamentary engagements: it proclaimed that 'all honest Britons, of all parties, must of course concede' Hunt's claim that the people had 'the right to meet and express their opinions upon the political state of the country'.[97] Many asserted that the right to meet was unaffected by party alignments. A speaker at a Nottingham town meeting argued that 'it was the duty of everyone, let his politics or opinions be what they might' to prevent events in Manchester from establishing a precedent (note the reference to the 'politics' — shorthand for the political opinions — of ordinary people). That meeting relied on publicness, resolving that 'it is the undoubted privilege of Englishmen publicly to assemble for the purpose of deliberating upon what they conceive to be public grievances'.[98] In contrast, a Norfolk County Meeting largely avoided public, asserting the right to meet to discuss 'any political question': perhaps those attending a county meeting of recognised status and led by peers had less need for, or were

[94] 60 Geo. III, c. 9 and c. 6.
[95] Navickas, 'Contested Right', p. 6.
[96] *Morning Chronicle*, 1 Nov. 1819
[97] *Morning Post*, 15 Sept. 1819.
[98] *Morning Chronicle*, 30 Sept. 1819.

less comfortable with, the concept of the public?[99] An editorial in *The Liverpool Mercury* (anti-ministry, borderline radical) argued that 'public meetings … must add to the political importance and, therefore, the political independence of the people at large'; here, political referenced the system and the people's place in it, while publicness gave their opinions weight.[100]

3.7 1826

The last Seditious Meetings Act expired in 1825. Corn-law campaigning resumed late that year and picked up pace in the new year, along with several other issues. As the *Leeds Mercury* commented when Parliament returned at the beginning of February 'many great questions await a decision', listing slavery, the banking system and Catholic emancipation as well as the corn law.[101] Each of those causes was the focus of extra-parliamentary agitation that year.

What is noteworthy about the language used in 1826 is that this wide-ranging agitation was rarely termed 'political'. The frequent use of political in 1819 was shaped by the controversy about whether there was a right to meet, fundamental to the ability to campaign. That debate coloured the discourse more widely. In 1826, when the causes at issue did not raise such questions, the language of politics receded. That the underlying understandings had not changed is demonstrated by occasional uses of political, even in Parliament: Robert Peel, for example, referred to the huge interest in the 'political topics' of slavery and the corn law.[102]

[99] *Morning Chronicle*, 1 Nov. 1819.
[100] *Liverpool Mercury*, 13 Aug. 1819.
[101] *Leeds Mercury*, 28 Jan. 1826.
[102] *Manchester Courier*, 4 Feb. 1826; *Morning Post*, 9 Feb., 10 Mar. 1826.

The dominant designation of the extra-parliamentary nation's engagement with national issues in 1826 was 'public'. Public meetings were held almost daily and in every corner of the land.[103] Public opinion was now almost the only expression used to describe the views of the people and was increasingly recognised as a force to which parliamentarians attended. Representatives had been trusted to throw out the Catholic Emancipation Bill but when they did not 'the current of public opinion' asserted itself and 'in one week 574 petitions were presented against it'. The bill was dropped.[104] That public opinion could be proactive was illustrated not only by what was said about the anti-slavery campaign (on which 'the public has formed an [sic] unanimous and well-founded opinion') but also by the *Bristol Mercury* which, writing about assessed taxes, reminded its readers that the 'people must not forget the lesson they have been taught. If they expect to receive, they must ask ... Let not ministers have it to say on account of the supineness of the people, that such a sacrifice is not required by public opinion'.[105]

3.8 1831

When the Duke of Wellington lost a confidence vote on 30 November 1830 and a coalition ministry led by Earl Grey took office, it was understood that a parliamentary reform measure would be introduced after the Christmas recess. The Reform Bill was introduced on 1 March and survived the second reading by one vote, but when a damaging amendment was passed Parliament was dissolved on 21 April, setting the scene for a general election. The months from the beginning of 1831 to that dissolution provide our final window into the conceptualisation of extra-parliamentary engagements.

[103] *Manchester Courier*, 21 Jan. 1826; *Birmingham Gazette*, 23 Jan. 1826; *Morning Chronicle*, 21 Jan. 1826; *Leeds Mercury*, 4 Feb. 1826; *Birmingham Gazette*, 20 Mar. 1826.
[104] *Morning Post*, 6 Jan. 1826.
[105] *Leeds Mercury*, 21 Jan. 1826; *Bristol Mercury*, 23 Jan. 1826.

In an advance even on the last highpoint in 1819, 'political' and even 'politics' were now both regularly applied to extra-parliamentary activity. At a reform meeting in Bilston the resolutions were moved by men described as 'not in the habit of attending political meetings'.[106] When law students at the Inns of Court petitioned in favour of reform it was noted that this was the first time that they 'had taken part in politics distinct from the profession itself'.[107] Such language was used not only by newspapers in comment pieces, but was reported as being used by members of the public; thus, at a meeting in Bradford, a Baptist minister was said to have apologised for 'his appearance at a political meeting' but he paid taxes like any man.[108] Similar uses of political remained rare inside Parliament.

That many societies that campaigned for parliamentary reform were called Political Unions illustrates how mainstream the discourse had become. What was meant by 'political' in their names is complex, as the nomenclature was adopted by groups whose aims and structures were not identical.[109] The Birmingham Political Union (BPU) was organisationally highly influential, so the focus here is on what political meant to the BPU. It did not limit its activities to parliamentary reform. The ten objects specified in its first declaration and rule book included reform and taxation, but also several objects of a general nature such as 'to collect and organise the peaceful expression of the PUBLIC OPINION, so as to bring it to act upon the legislative functions in a just, legal and effectual way' (original capitalisation).[110] Moreover, political in their name appears to have encompassed not only the subject matter but the activity, for the union was a joint enterprise between the lower and middle classes to form a council to 'represent the true

[106] *Birmingham Gazette*, 7 Feb. 1831.
[107] *Morning Chronicle*, 7 Mar. 1831.
[108] *Leeds Intelligencer*, 3 Mar. 1831.
[109] LoPatin, *Political Unions*.
[110] *Resolutions… together with the Declaration, Rules and Regulations of the Political Union for the Protection of Public Rights* (Birmingham, 1830), p15; Joseph Hamburger, *James Mill and the Art of Revolution* (London, 1963), p. 74.

interests of the people' to the legislature.[111] This adoption of political was a major shift from how earlier societies had presented their activities.

Despite increased references to 'politics', publicness was paramount. Many Political Unions were launched and petitions agreed at 'public meetings'.[112] The concept of the 'public opinion' was, if anything, even more dominant than in 1826. Not only was the phrase almost universally used about extra-parliamentary opinion (remember the BPU's reliance on it), but associated language often endowed it with a kind of physical strength. Public opinion was a 'tide', a 'current' a 'force', a 'power' that swept all before it.[113] Palmerston taunted the benches opposite him in the Commons, arguing that 'the besetting sin of the last Administration was a disregard of public opinion'.[114] Public opinion was used inside and outside Parliament to make the case for the necessity of parliamentary reform and ministers were said to need evidence that it supported their measure. A meeting at Ashton resolved ministers had little hope of carrying their bill without 'an unequivocal expression of the public opinion', while a Halifax meeting resolved that ministers would not succeed 'unless supported by the cordial and general expression of public opinion'.[115] Earl Grey himself cited public opinion as overwhelmingly in favour of the Reform Bill.[116]

Those who opposed reform were forced to address this ideology of the public. The organisers of a petition against reform from the Livery of London said they had avoided calling a public meeting where 'our voices would have been drowned, according to the present system of public meetings, by a numerical majority'.[117] Some questioned whether

[111] *Resolutions… together with the Declaration*, p. 14.
[112] e.g., *Bristol Mercury*, 11 Jan. 1831; *Leeds Mercury*, 15 Jan. 1831; *Manchester Times*, 22 Jan. 1831.
[113] *Morning Post*, 24 Feb., 1, 18 Mar. 1831; *Bristol Mercury*, 11 Jan., 22 Feb. 1831.
[114] *Morning Chronicle*, 4 Mar. 1831.
[115] *Manchester Times*, 29 Jan. 1831; *Birmingham Gazette*, 7 Feb. 1831.
[116] *Morning Chronicle*, 25 Mar. 1831.
[117] *Morning Post*, 30 Mar. 1831; James Thompson, *British Political Culture and 'Public Opinion'* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 18 for Tocqueville on the 'tyranny of the majority'.

public meetings could in practice embody the deliberative quality claimed for them. Petitions that opposed reform from Doncaster and Barnsley were challenged in the Commons as not representing the views of the inhabitants for they had not been agreed at public meetings. In response, it was said a public meeting had been avoided because the organisers were 'convinced that they should be defeated not by argument but by clamour'.[118] Participants in a (private) Leeds meeting that opposed the measure attempted to clothe themselves in an alternative (traditional) justifying ideology, describing their meeting as of the 'friends of sound constitutional principles'.[119] Parliamentarians who opposed the bill also had to position themselves in relation to public opinion. In the Commons Robert Inglis argued that the very vigour of public opinion, which expressed itself so readily to Parliament, indicated that reform was unnecessary for, though unreformed, Parliament was 'alive to all that the people felt upon any matter'.[120] Other parliamentarians argued it was their duty to distinguish 'transitory gusts of popular feeling' (emotion) from the real manifestations of popular opinion.[121] Lord Calthorpe suggested that the speed with which the detailed plan for reform was proceeding meant few understood it and there was no opportunity for 'the formation of deliberative public opinion … a greater wrong than this could not be done to public opinion'.[122]

3.9 Conclusion.

While inevitably providing only part of the picture, these snapshots identify the broad direction and character of change in the conceptualisation of extra-parliamentary activity. The use of 'politics' and 'public' did not change in parallel. Publicness, represented by

[118] *Leeds Intelligencer*, 21 Apr. 1831.
[119] *Leeds Intelligencer*, 14 Apr. 1831.
[120] *Morning Chronicle*, 2 Mar. 1831; Wahrman, 'Limits of Constitutional', p. 105.
[121] *Morning Post*, 8 Mar. 1831.
[122] *Morning Post*, 19 Apr. 1831.

public meetings and public opinion, grew steadily, from the small beginnings identified in 1795 to be generally used to describe extra-parliamentary activity and opinion by the mid 1820s. The path of politics and its cognates was more complex. Broadly, issues of national concern and the nation's views about those issues came sometimes to be labelled political, but only in 1831 was extra-parliamentary activity so described and further research is necessary to determine whether this was a lasting development. The recourse to political depended on the issues of the day: it rose when the right to meet or vote was debated and receded when it was not. As late as 1826 (when such issues were not agitated) the use of political about extra-parliamentary interest was muted. Such ebbing and flowing suggests that while by the late 1820s the underlying meaning of political encompassed extra-parliamentary nation activity and views, that discourse was not always felt to be useful. Furthermore, even in those periods when the use of political peaked (1819 and 1831), the conceptualisation of activity as public remained more prominent.

How can the changing meaning and use of 'political' charted here be explained? Perhaps ideas generated by and connected to the French Revolution played a part in the changing relationship between nation and Parliament, but there is little evidence that those ideas affected the language used to describe that relationship. However, language also adjusts to reflect the context in which it is employed. The combination of more information being released about parliamentary business, increased 'interference' by Parliament in day-to-day life and the multiplying issues with which the wider nation sought to engage led to a 'shift in the perception of the people's role'.[123] This extension of politics to the extra-

[123] Joanna Innes, 'People and Power in British Politics to 1850', in Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (eds.), *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750-1850* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 129-46; p. 130; Joanna Innes, 'Central Government 'interference': Changing Conceptions, Practices, and Concerns, c.1750-1850', in Jose Harris (ed.), *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 40-66; Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695-1855* (Harlow, 2000), chapter 2.

parliamentary nation was not inevitable. Remieg Aerts argued that the post-Napoleonic Netherlands avoided a discourse of politics as part of efforts to repair divisions caused by Dutch inclusion in the French empire (the term public opinion also disappeared).[124] However, in England there were no such reasons to avoid political, which was in many ways the obvious word to use when the need arose to describe extra-parliamentary engagements. The term was familiar and served a purpose.

The preference for 'public' should be understood, therefore, as an active choice, influenced by the advantages it offered. Politics suggested party, and Tory and Whig were not always useful labels, partly because many issues did not obviously fall into either camp (slavery or the East India monopoly), but also because party labels and affiliations were unattractive to that majority of the nation that felt unrepresented. This distancing suggests why publicness proved more attractive. Public contrasted the nation to Parliament in a way that politics could not. It embodied the nation as separate from parliamentarians and gave the nation agency, leaving parliamentarians to catch up.[125] Publicness presented the nation uniformly, regardless of where people were located and who they were — particularly useful in the years running up to the Reform Act when the distribution of parliamentary boroughs was so inequitable — and encompassed both meetings and opinions. As will be shown by the case studies, an ideology of the public was constructed that legitimated campaigning in the national interest by generally identified groups (often inhabitants). That discourse reflected the practice and, by justifying activity, drew more people into campaigning.[126] Public opinion was a capacious and flexible concept and different ideas of whose views it

[124] Remieg Aerts, 'The Demise of Dutch Republicanism in the Nineteenth Century ', in Joris Oddens, Mart Rutjes and Arthur Weststeijn (eds.), *Discourses of Decline: Essays on Republicanism in Honor of Wyger R.E. Velema* (Leiden, 2022), pp. 135-52; see also Bertel Nygard, 'Anti-Politics: Modern Politics and its Critics in Denmark, 1830-1848', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 36 (2011), pp. 419-42.
[125] See Steinmetz, 'A Code of its Own', pp. 93-95 for a related argument.
[126] Contra the linguistic approach, exemplified by Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*.

encompassed could be held at the same time. It was easy to imagine oneself as contributing to it if your views coincided with what was claimed to be the public opinion. It was widely recognised that there was a strong female element in public opinion on several topics, including Queen Caroline, anti-slavery and some religious questions. The use of public in preference to politics was one of the ways, therefore, in which Kathryn Gleadle's 'Borderline Citizens' sometimes managed to have their views included in the national voice.[127] Kathleen Wilson argued that in the mid eighteenth century 'the sense of the people … created an idiom of discourse that could be used by a wide range of groups to claim a stake in national affairs'.[128] The increased agitation of the early nineteenth century, much of which emanated from meetings arranged in new ways and involving a wider range of society, was associated with concerns to present that activity as legitimate. These circumstances called for a stronger and more structured label than the sense of the people: for the extra-parliamentary nation publicness, embodied in public meetings and public opinion, served those purposes better than that of politics.

The remainder of this thesis examines how this flourishing extra-parliamentary activity was achieved through four case studies of associational forms focusing on areas of London and Lancashire. We begin with debating which, although not necessarily political, was nevertheless integral to much extra-parliamentary activity.

[127] Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*; Matthew McCormack, 'Men, "the Public" and Political History', in Matthew McCormack (ed.) *Public Men: Masculinity and Politics in Modern Britain* (Basingstoke, 2007), pp. 13-32.
[128] Wilson, *Sense of the People*, pp. 3-4.

4: Debating society

The significance that the authorities attached to debating is evidenced by the restrictions repeatedly imposed thereon by the Seditious Meetings Acts. In addition to educating audiences about the issues of the day, debates allowed people to hear speeches and gain experience in how to assess and absorb oral arguments. For some, debating also provided an opportunity to learn how to make speeches. In 1824 *The Philomathic Journal* (the organ of a literary and debating society) published an article arguing why acquiring that skill was now so important. Having suggested that oral discussion facilitated the practice of public speaking, the article continued:

> There are few who have not occasion, at some period, to deliver their sentiments in a public manner. We may refer to the frequency of public meetings upon almost every subject of human interest … Men do not now content themselves with merely writing in the seclusion of their closets; they come forth to promulgate their sentiments in person, amongst those whom they wish to influence or direct. Meetings are constantly assembled almost daily, to consider and promote the various objects of political and social welfare ...[1]

Adopting a wide definition of debating, including the activities of societies that debated as well as those self-describing as 'debating societies', this chapter considers some of the organisational forms within which debate was practised in the early nineteenth century. Changes in that practice — the who, how, where and when — and in how activities were labelled, both affected and reflected changes in campaigning methods. To assist us to identify those changes we commence with a sketch of the landscape of orality in the eighteenth century, including the opportunities the extra-parliamentary nation then had to hear political speeches.

[1] *Philomathic Journal and Literary Review* (1824), pp. 5-7.

4.1 Orality and political speech in the eighteenth century.

The eighteenth century saw an extension of oral discourse, as the space between what was public and formal and what was private and conversational was colonised by a variety of initiatives.[2] The range of performative orality expanded and diversified through the century. Societies were formed for literary conversation, governed by conventions of informality and spontaneity. More formal Literary and Philosophical Societies were established in several provincial towns and book clubs proliferated.[3] Lectures on non-religious topics began to be available outside of the universities.[4] An interest in elocution developed and, in the 1750s and 1760s, Thomas Sheridan delivered (expensive) elocution lectures in major towns around the country.[5] Young lawyers, wanting to develop their court-room oratory, studied elocution and established spouting clubs. Clerics, increasingly aware their style would be critically assessed, were also consumers of the elocution guides marketed from the mid-century.[6] One of the earliest, James Burgh's *Art of Speaking* (1761), defined its prospective market as men who needed to acquit themselves 'when called to speak … at meetings of merchants, in committees for managing public affairs, in large societies'.[7] This was a society in which oral skill was something people might be moved to acquire for a variety of aspirational reasons, amongst which was an increasing interest in equipping themselves to take part in diversifying political arenas.

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[2] Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford, 2011) for eighteenth-century ideas about conservation.
[3] Clark, *British* Clubs, p. 229; Mee, *Conversable* Worlds, pp. 81-82; Lindsay, 'Reading Associations'.
[4] See chapter 2.1.2.1.
[5] Paula McDowell, *The Invention of the Oral: Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2018), pp. 175-6.
[6] Jennifer Farooq, *Preaching in Eighteenth-Century London* (Woodbridge, 2013), p. 110; McDowell, *Invention of the Oral*, pp. 164-171; Abigail Williams, *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home* (London, 2017), pp. 14-15.
[7] James Burgh, *The Art of Speaking* (London, 1761), p. 5; Carla Hay 'Burgh, James (1714-1775)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [hereafter *ODNB*] (Oxford, 2004), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3992 (27 May 2019).

Debating societies were one element in this developing landscape of orality and probably began with relatively small and informal bodies. Some grew larger and then commercial, open to any who paid the entrance fee.[8] John Money noted that the emergence of debating societies in the Midlands (from 1774) occurred before 'the day of the association and the public meeting', when the desire to discuss political questions in public lacked other outlets.[9] Religious issues were another focus of debates, particularly with the development of Methodism, which attracted both advocates and critics.[10] The commercial societies reached a peak of fashion in the early 1780s but continued to function in large towns until the 1790s.[11] The public aspect of these debating organisations was multi-faceted: they were open to any who paid; strangers not only discussed topics but also formed a collective opinion thereon; debates and conclusions were reported in newspaper advertisements. While an element of their appeal was fashion, Donna Andrew argued that the commercial societies were part of a wider popular 'fight for mastery and control of the spoken tongue'.[12]

Extra-parliamentary speeches that advanced substantive arguments were rare. Oral argument intended to persuade must occasionally have been delivered at civic and associated bodies around the country — common councils, corporations and the governing bodies of companies.[13] Geoffrey Holmes noted that the Court of Aldermen in the City of

[8] *The History of the Robinhood Society …* (London, 1764), p.118; Mary Thale, 'The Robin Hood Society: Debating in Eighteenth-Century London ', *The London Journal,* 22 (1997), pp. 33-50, pp. 36-7; Money, *Experience and Identity*, chapter 5; Brewer, 'Commercialization', p. 236; Barbara Whittingham-Jones, 'Liverpool's Political Clubs, 1812-1830', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* (1959), pp. 117-38, pp.133-4; Wilson, *Sense of the People*, pp. 47, 68-9.
[9] Money, *Experience and Identity*, p. 98.
[10] Mary Thale, 'Deists, Papists and Methodists at London Debating Societies, 1749-1799', *History*, 86 (2001), pp. 328-47.
[11] Donna Andrew, 'Introduction', *London Debating Societies, 1776-1799*, ed. Donna Andrew, London Record Society, vol. 30, (London, 1994), pp. vii-xiii, p .ix.
[12] Donna Andrew, 'Popular Culture and Public Debate: London 1780', *Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), pp. 405-23, p. 422.
[13] Phil Withington, *The Politics of the Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 72, 74 for a couple of examples from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth

London was persuaded to censure Doctor Sacheverell in 1709 by speeches from two Aldermen (both MPs).[14] There was a heated discussion about imperial policy in London's Common Council in 1769.[15] Evidence is scarce, but real and deep disagreements must sometimes have brought forth impassioned speeches, albeit in closed bodies to limited audiences. Election speeches seem to move beyond formulaic acknowledgements and responses to opponents only from around the 1770s.[16] Although issues of policy and principle might sometimes be raised thereafter, most examples cited are from the early nineteenth century.[17] Furthermore, parliamentary elections generally only occurred every seven years and, even then, few people experienced active electioneering. The possibility of hearing significant speeches at more open meetings increased when extra-parliamentary agitation resumed from the 1760s. Some earlier county and borough meetings must have involved speeches that aimed to persuade or inspire, but the occasions were few.[18] At a meeting to rally support for the government in Norwich in 1778 a 'forceful anti-war speech' marked the public political debut of William Windham (later MP for the town).[19] Charles Fox 'found his talent for popular oratory' before a meeting of several thousand at Westminster Hall in 1780.[20] It is easier to find examples from the 1780s onwards, as campaigning became more common. In general, the audiences who heard these speeches

centuries; Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation* for the late Stuart practice of sending addresses to the monarch which probably involved some persuasive speeches.
[14] Geoffrey Holmes, *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell* (London, 1973), p. 72.
[15] John Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America, 1769-1782* (Kingston, 1987), p. 25.
[16] Speck, *Tory & Whig*; Jephson, *Platform*, pp. 15-16, 69-72.
[17] Frank O'Gorman, 'Campaigns, Rituals and Ceremonies: the Social Meaning of Elections in England, 1780-1860', *Past and Present*, 135 (1992), pp. 79-115, pp. 86-88; Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009) chapter 1; Meisel, *Public Speech*, chapter 5. Harriet Guest, 'Speech and Noise at Westminster Elections', *Republic of Letters*, 5 (2017), pp. 1-17.
[18] Christopher Wyvill, *Political Papers* (London, 1794), volume 1, paper II for a 1745 example; Barnes, *Corn Laws*, p. 26 cites a speech by Henry Pelham at a Sussex County meeting in 1753.
[19] Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 419; see also Minnie Yarborough, *John Horne Tooke* (New York, 1926), p. 45 for 1770 Middlesex Oration; *Two Speeches of Thomas Day* (1780).
[20] Loren Reid, *Charles James Fox: A Man for the People* (London, 1969), p. 103; see John Wolffe, 'Wilberforce, William (1759-1833)' *ODNB* (Oxford, 2018), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29386 (22 Nov. 2023) for a 'powerfully effective' speech by William Wilberforce to a Yorkshire meeting.

were dominated by voters and they remained, even in the later eighteenth century, relatively infrequent events.

The leaders of eighteenth-century political societies generally preferred to employ other kinds of orality to bolster the cohesion of supporters: dinners that provided occasions for multiple toasts, cheering and songs were common.[21] Elite societies formed to campaign for specific causes consisted of relatively small groups of men who, if not already acquainted, moved in similar circles. Members understood their societies' first role was to publicise their cause and to mobilise opinion.[22] There were exceptions. The Protestant Association (1780), for example, sought to involve the non-elite in its widely advertised meetings where, although not directly evidenced, rousing speeches may have been employed to drum up support for their petition and its mass presentation.[23] A substantive speech given by John Horne Tooke at a public dinner of the SCI attended by around four hundred in 1794 was clearly planned.[24]

Societies established by working people in the 1790s to campaign for parliamentary reform largely left speech-making to other bodies. The LCS was closely connected to some of the commercial debating societies that operated in London, with overlapping attendance and leadership.[25] At the debating societies and at lectures given by John Thelwall speeches publicised the case for parliamentary reform and responded to criticism.[26] Mark Philp's

[21] Marc Baer, 'Political Dinners in Whig, Radical and Tory Westminster, 1780-1880', *Parliamentary History*, 24 (2008), pp. 183-206; Rémy Duthille, 'Political Toasting in the Age of Revolutions: Britain, America and France, 1765-1800' in Gordon Pentland (ed.), *Liberty, Property and Popular Politics: England and Scotland, 1688-1815* (Edinburgh, 2022), pp. 73-86.
[22] Black, *The Association*.
[23] *Morning Chronicle*, 2 Feb., 20 Apr. 1780; *Trial of George Gordon… for High Treason* (London, 1781), pp. 22-23, 39-40.
[24] Sharon Turner attended specifically to hear Tooke, *The Diary of Sharon Turner, 1793-1795*, trans. and ed. Mark Philp and Clare Clarke (Coventry, 2023), pp. 35-40.
[25] Mary Thale, 'London Debating Societies in the 1790s', *Historical Journal*, 32 (1989), pp. 57-86, pp. 62-3.
[26] Thale, 'London Debating', p. 62; *London Debating*, nos. 1918, 1951, 1953, 1977, 1984 all in 1795; Thompson, 'Hunting the Jacobin'.

argument that the aim of the 1790s societies was as much to generate discussion across the nation as to promote a clearly defined ideological cause is consistent with these radical societies' limited engagement in speech-giving.[27] General, or what were occasionally termed public, meetings organised by the societies in London and other towns were widely accessible events that included speeches, but these were relatively rare.[28] Henry Redhead Yorke and John Gale Jones probably gave speeches on their tours of the country.[29] Internally, speeches must have been given at meetings of the general committees of the radical societies that made decisions on policy or tactics.[30] Delegates to the conventions held in Scotland in 1792 and 1793 discussed parliamentary reform and an anti-war petition in a 'free spirit of enquiry'.[31] Such speeches were not, however, widely heard.

In one new manifestation of orality, however, those societies for working people added an inward facing element — educating their own members — to the outward facing education-and-conversion practices of the more elite societies that campaigned for parliamentary reform (like the SCI). In the industrialising villages surrounding Manchester (like Royton and Middleton) it seems that informal reading groups in people's homes were the preferred form, without the involvement of an overarching body.[32] There was, briefly, a

[27] Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 292-6.
[28] *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799* ed. Mary Thale (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 75, 81, 87, 107, 133; *Proceedings of the Public Meeting held at Sheffield… 7 April 1794* (Sheffield, 1794).
[29] John Gale Jones, *Sketch of a Political Tour* (London, 1796); Amanda Goodrich, '"Radical Citizen of the World" 1790-1795: the Early Career of Henry Redhead York', *Journal of British Studies*, (53, 2014), pp. 611-35, p. 628.
[30] See for example, Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, pp. 275-78.
[31] Bob Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (London, 2008), pp. 95-6, quote p. 96; Micah Alpaugh, *Friends of Freedom: the Rise of Social Movements in the Age of Atlantic Revolution* (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 334-5.
[32] Samuel Bamford, *Early Days* (London, 1849), p. 42; Katrina Navickas, 'Knight, John (1762-1838)' *ODNB* (Oxford, 2018), http://www.oxfordnb.com.view/article/48758 1 Nov. 2018; Harold Silver, *English Education and the Radicals, 1780-1850* (London, 1975), pp. 53-6.

more structured offering in Manchester but detail is scanty.[33] In London, weekly meetings of the LCS divisions were supposed to include readings from pamphlets and newspapers, although Mary Thale suggested that often there was insufficient time. In addition, discussion groups were held in people's homes; fixed readings were circulated in advance, everyone was required to contribute to the discussion and none could speak for a second time until all others had contributed. As Thale emphasised the only evidence of these discussion groups is from Francis Place; they may not have been as common as he implies.[34] Restrictions imposed by the Seditious Meetings Act 1795 (and then the Unlawful Societies Act 1799) severely impeded the operation of the political societies and forced the closure of the commercial debating societies and lecturing institutions.[35]

4.2 An introduction to early-nineteenth century debating.

As extra-parliamentary engagement began to revive in the early nineteenth century the practices of orality burgeoned, accompanied by a diversification of the venues and forms within which it was displayed. Many eighteenth-century developments continued apace through the period. For example, the market for public lectures flourished, providing recreational activity for the middle-classes in both London, where dedicated lecturing institutions opened, and large provincial towns where the provision was more *ad hoc*. Topics of lectures frequently included literature and elocution.[36] The self-improvement culture manifested in the radical societies for working people of the 1790s became visible again from the late 1810s and, particularly, the 1820s. Edward Thompson's argument that

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[33] *The Whole Proceedings of the Trial of Indictment Against Thomas Walker…* (Philadelphia, 1794), pp. 14-15, 21; Michael T. Davis 'Walker, Thomas' (1749-1817), *ODNB* (Oxford, 2009), http://www.oxfordnb.com.view/article/63603 (4 Mar. 2019).
[34] Mary Thale, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society, 1792-1790* ed., Mary Thale (Cambridge, 1983), p. xxv; *The Autobiography of Francis Place* ed., Mary Thale (London, 1972), p. 131.
[35] 36 Geo. III, c. 8; 39 Geo. III, c. 79.
[36] Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts*; Russell, 'Spouters or Washerwomen'.

the vigour of this culture gave a distinctive colouring to early nineteenth-century radicalism remains apt, although its impact was wider than the campaign for parliamentary reform.[37] Knowledge came to be presented as inherently good, independent of any instrumental benefits that might be obtained: the Baconian motto 'knowledge is power' became a popular slogan.[38] Mechanics Institutes, established from 1823, formed an institutionalised part of this culture. The growth in the study of political economy (of interest to both middling and working people) was another manifestation of the self-improvement culture.[39] Listening, learning, discussing — the extent of the change from even the mid eighteenth century, when the only structured oral discourse available to most people was religious, should not be underestimated.

We know surprisingly little about debating in the nineteenth century. Iain McCalman gave it a central role in his study of the radical underworld, where he argued that the use of tavern debating clubs represented a 'distinctive political structure, strategy and culture' that allowed London's ultra-radicals to circumvent the authorities' efforts at suppression.[40] Much of the work that touches on nineteenth-century debating is by literary scholars interested (like McCalman) in Romanticism and focused on language and style.[41] Although several historians have noted that organising to campaign was an oral process, what that orality involved remains largely unexplored, particularly for this period.[42] Janette Martin's

[37] Thompson, *The* Making, p. 788; David Magee, 'Popular Periodicals, Common Readers and the "Grand March of Intellect" in London, 1819-1834', (D.Phil, thesis, University of Oxford, 2016).
[38] Magee, 'Popular Periodicals', p. 55.
[39] See chapter 9.
[40] McCalman, 'Ultra-Radicalism', p. 311; McCalman, *Radical Underworld*.
[41] David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820* (London, 1992); Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, a recent exception is Poole, *Peterloo*, chapter 4.
[42] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, pp. 117-126; Navickas, *Protest*, p. 4.

study of Chartist and other early Victorian professional campaigning lecturers came closest but was limited to people who did so to earn a living.[43]

Presenting a broadly chronological story of change, this chapter illuminates the ways in which the practice of debate underpinned political organisation in the early nineteenth century. It tells a story of shifting purposes and altering social attitudes, the significance of the differing social backgrounds and culture of those involved and the role of location. We begin by considering three loosely connected changes in the early years of the century, broadly from 1800 to the passage of the second Seditious Meetings Act in 1817. These were the travails and ultimate decline of commercial debating; the growth of private or semi-private societies; and the use of debate within political societies established for working people. The following section explores the rise of what was generally termed 'public speaking'. Contrasting discourses centred on the terms public speaking and oratory reflected different responses to the widened practice of public political speeches. That a wide range of people had the ability to speak in public was a pre-condition for the expansion in extra-parliamentary activity and debating societies were a prime location for the acquisition of that skill. The opportunities of hearing or being involved in debate widened in the 1820s. The chapter ends with a discussion of women's opportunities to access debate.

Two themes recur throughout. First, the manner or form in which debate occurred mattered; it had to be adjusted to the specific context and to the political and social atmosphere of the time. Related to this was the changing nomenclature applied to activities. Early in the period debate was used as a catch-all. As confidence grew activities

[43] Martin, 'Popular Political Oratory'; Janette Martin, 'Oratory, Itinerant Lecturing and Victorian Popular Politics: a Case Study of James Acland (1799-1876)' *Historical Research*, 86 (2013), pp. 30-52; for a later period see Joseph S Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York, 2001).

crystallised into separate forms with their own labels, and the terms political meetings and lectures came into use by the early 1830s. Second, the social status of participants was central to how and for what purposes discussions were organised and how they were viewed by outsiders.

4.3 1800 - 1817: changing times.

4.3.1 Debating in public and private, 1806-1817.

1806 may have seemed an opportune time to relaunch commercial debating societies. Fear of invasion by the French had receded, Pitt was dead and the Ministry of All the Talents unlikely to interfere. When another Seditious Meeting Act was passed in 1817 the societies then functioning all closed.[44] That legislation does not, however, explain their weakness prior to 1817 compared with what (at least in London) had been a buoyant late eighteenth-century scene, nor their failure to regain a significant presence after the legislation expired and when other forms of debating flourished. Their difficulties illuminate changes in the environment for oral political discourse from the late eighteenth century.

The revival of commercial societies was weaker than is suggested by the illustrative lists of names provided by some historians.[45] John Gale Jones (veteran of the 1790s Westminster Forum and the LCS) led the way, opening the British Forum in London in April 1806. At times he struggled to maintain the Forum, and other societies were (in some cases very) short-lived.[46] Details of all the public debates identified in London from 1806 to 1819 can be found in tables 4.1 and 4.2. The new Robin Hood, managed by the Irish radical, Peter

[44] 57 Geo. III, c. 19.
[45] J. Ann Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London 1796-1821* (Oxford, 1982), p. 147; McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 89.
[46] *An Address Delivered April 3 1806 at the Great Room in Poland Street on the Opening of the British Forum* etc., (London, 1808); W.P. Courtney, revised by Peter Spence, 'Jones, John Gale (1769-1838)', *ODNB* (Oxford, 2008), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15050 (14 May 2018).

Finnerty, was advertised only by bill post and whilst contemporary comment suggests that its activities extended beyond the two debates identified, we have no further details.[47]

Table 4.1: Identified British Forum Debates, 1806-1819 [48]

Year	First meeting	Last meeting	Number of debates identified	Comments
1806	3 April	13 November	33	
1807	8 January	19 November	45	
1808	7 January (probably)	31 December	40	
1809	7 January	20 November	24	Patchy through the year
1810	29 January	30 November	45	At times meeting in two locations
1811				Gale Jones in prison
1812	17 January	2 April	6	
1813				None identified
1814				None identified
1815	26 January	4 December	14	Patchy through the year
1816	26 January	27 December	49	Two locations during the summer
1817	3 January	21 March	11	Seditious Meetings Act 1817 passed in March
1818	11 December	18 December	2	
1819	11 March	14 May	5	Plus, one debate about Peterloo in October

[47] *A Full and Accurate Report of the Trial of the Action brought by Peter Finnerty against Samuel Tipper, Publisher of The Satirist, for a Libel*, (London, 1809), p. 43; *Memoirs of the Political and Literary life of Robert Plumer Ward, esq.*, ed. Edmund Phipps (London, 1850), p. 273.
[48] Identified from advertisements in the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Independent Whig*, with a handful from other sources.

Table 4.2 : Other London commercial debates identified, 1806-1819 [49]

Years	Name	First meeting	Last meeting	Number of debates identified	Comments
1806-1808	Athenian Lyceum	Nov. 1806	May 1808	92	Met twice a week for a period
1808-1809	Robin Hood	July 1808	Oct. or Dec. 1809	2	Advertised by bill post
1808	Temple of debate	Aug. 1808	Nov. 1808	2	
1809	Aegis	17 Feb.1809		1	'For one night only'
1816	Westminster Forum /London Forum	April 1816	May 1816	11	Connected societies
1819	Athenaeum	May 1819		1	

It is unclear whether there were any commercial debating societies in the north-west in the eighteenth century, but three have been identified in the early nineteenth.[50] The Manchester Forum (opened late 1807) expressly avoided all political topics and lasted a year.[51] Its manager, S.W. Ryley (an actor) tried again, opening the Liverpool Forum in September 1812. Although Liverpool is outside the northern study area, including the Liverpool societies allows us to contrast the kind of activities available in the capital with those of smaller provincial towns. Ryley was gradually displaced in his managerial role of the Liverpool Forum by John Wright (a local schoolmaster and radical) and John Smith (a leading journalist on *The Liverpool Mercury*). The new managers increasingly arranged debates about politics and religion. In 1813 the Mayor expressed disapproval of the contentious topics discussed at the Liverpool Forum, prompting it to restructure as a membership organisation (the Independent Debating Society) open to any who paid.[52] The society continued to advertise its debates in the same manner. In May 1816 a third society,

[49] *Morning Chronicle*, save for the Robin Hood.
[50] Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 69 mentions a 'conversation society' that met at a Manchester inn in 1771.
[51] *Manchester Mercury*, 17 Nov. 1807, 29 Nov. 1808.
[52] *Liverpool Mercury*, 26 Mar., 15 Apr. 1813; Whittingham-Jones, 'Liverpool's Political Clubs.

the Independent Debating Association, was established in Liverpool (the president was John Wright, who continued to be involved in the earlier society).[53]

Unlike their 1790s predecessors, the London societies struggled to connect to a political base. The redrawing of the line between public and private by the authorities in the 1790s made people careful about the circumstances in which they discussed politics.[54] Even the radicals seem to have offered limited support, with only Jones and Finnerty mentioned by contemporaries.[55] The need to make a profit necessitated that non-political topics were also debated, diluting the societies' political effectiveness. Only in the brief period labelled by Peter Spence as 'romantic radicalism', roughly late 1808 through 1810, were even half of the Forum's debates about political topics and there was still no evidence of known radicals attending.[56] The politically committed may have distanced themselves because they disapproved of the entertainment aspects of commercial debating (as John Thelwall had in the 1790s).[57] Some will have preferred bodies which did not just sustain talk but planned action, or private societies where members could choose the topics discussed. As we will see below, the political societies established for working people in the 1810s operated separately from the commercial debating societies.

The Liverpool societies had the advantage of being closely connected to *The Liverpool Mercury* and to the Concentrics, a society established in 1812 to sustain Whig interests in the town, in which the journalist John Smith was active.[58] The debating societies met

[53] *Liverpool Mercury*, 3 May 1816.
[54] Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism*; Philp, *Radical Conduct*, chapter 1.
[55] *The Satirist*, Mar. 1808, pp. 35-42, July 1809, pp. 15-21, Aug. 1810, pp. 273-287.
[56] Calculated from advertisements in the *Morning Chronicle* and *Independent Whig*; Spence, *Romantic Radicalism*.
[57] Thale, 'London Debating', pp. 61-2 for Thelwall and percentages of political topics in the 1790s.
[58] *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 Sept. 1812; Whittingham-Jones, 'Liverpool's Political Clubs', pp. 134-5.

fortnightly and faced no local competition, but even so political topics only made up roughly 40% of debates.[59]

Changed attitudes to social mixing may also have adversely affected the business model of commercial societies. It has been argued that the elite and middling sorts became increasingly uncomfortable with mixed social spaces and withdrew from popular culture in the period.[60] The public discussion of issues in contemporary life, including gender relations (believed to encourage female attendance) may have been vulnerable to these trends for, as we will see later in this chapter, separation by social status was a growing trend of nineteenth-century debating. Jones made frequent pitches about the respectability of his audiences and rooms.[61] This positioning of his product was undermined by attacks on the Forum by hostile newspapers, journals and pamphlets, particularly those suggesting that attendees were vulgar, if not criminal.[62] The status of attendees at the commercial societies had probably not significantly altered since the eighteenth century but post-1790s caution may have given these attacks greater purchase than similar jibes aimed at their predecessors.[63] Criticism came not only from political opponents. *The Examiner*, a journal considered to have radical sympathies, published a series of letters in 1810 in which most correspondents were critical of the societies — a disquiet that was based on their experience of attending. Several negatively connected the quality of debate to the social status of participants.[64] Francis Place also claimed that the societies had fallen into disrepute.[65] The second society opened in Liverpool in 1816 by the same managers charged

[59] Calculated from advertisements in *Liverpool Mercury*.
[60] Clark, *British Clubs*, pp. 189-190; Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, pp. 132-3; Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society, 1793-1815* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 122-124.
[61] For example, *Morning Chronicle*, 17 Sept. 1807.
[62] *Sun*, 2 Nov. 1808; *Satirist*, Jan. 1809 for James Gillray cartoon, 'Robbing Hood Society'; *A Warning to the Frequenters of Debating Clubs* (London, 1810).
[63] Thale, 'London Debating', p. 59.
[64] *The Examiner*, 9, 19 Aug., 7, 14, 21, 28 Oct., 4, 11 Nov. 1810.
[65] BL, Add MS. 27850, f.156: Francis Place Papers.

lower entrance fees, both facilitating the attendance of working people, and most likely offering reassurance to the wealthier about who they might rub shoulders with at the more expensive society.[66]

As the public staging of debate ceased to be a novelty, the very popularity of debating posed another problem for the commercial societies. Non-commercial debating flourished in a variety of forms. Many societies were small private clubs that facilitated the de facto separation of the classes and could regulate their proceedings as they chose. Similar societies existed in the eighteenth century but, while it cannot be empirically quantified, the many casual references suggest that private societies multiplied in the early nineteenth century. The Philomathic Institution (the source of the quote above about public speaking) was established in Bloomsbury in 1807; the Socratic Institution, which met in Hackney, was established in March 1811 by Jonathan Wooler (later editor of the *Black Dwarf*).[67] Archibald Prentice (a middle-class Manchester activist) was a member of a small debating society in 1817.[68]

There is some evidence that the leaders of the political societies established for working people in the later 1810s in London and the northern region (discussed below) also attended debating societies which, if not strictly private, were not commercial institutions. A Home Office informant stated that the idea of forming the Lancashire societies first arose at a general-purpose debating society, one of several regularly held in the villages around Manchester. This is a rare glimpse of organisations — village debating societies — generally obscured from view. It is difficult to be sure what the phrase debating society

[66] 7d a month in contrast to £1 p.a.
[67] London, London Metropolitan Archive [hereafter LMA], MR/S/L/017: *Plan and Regulations of the Philomathic Institution* (London, 1814), pp.11-12; Epstein, *Radical Expression*, chapter 2; *The Republican,* 6 Jan. 1813.
[68] Archibald Prentice, *Historical Sketches and Personal Recollections of Manchester Intended to Illustrate the Progress of Public Opinion from 1792 to 1832* (London, 1851), pp. 112-113.

precisely connoted in this context, but the informant stated that when religious topics were discussed the Deists would travel to dispute with the Christians, which suggests structured discussion that tested opposing ideas.[69] Iain McCalman also showed how London's ultra-radicals were embedded in the culture of debating in the capital.[70] The Polemic debating club, for example, was a front for the Spenceans and other radicals in the early 1810s and included 'some notable radical debaters, including Jonathan Wooler'.[71]

Private, or semi-private debating societies were a highly flexible form. Prentice reported that his society suspended its meetings when the 1817 Seditious Meetings Act was passed and agreed to 'discuss questions of literature and political economy by our own firesides'.[72] The increased political activism of the early nineteenth century was not limited to significant urban centres and the practice of debate was one of the foundations of this activism. It was a big advantage, therefore, that such societies could be formed anywhere, unlike commercial societies which relied on the infrastructure and population of large towns. Furthermore, private societies were less likely to attract attention from the authorities.

4.3.2 Debate and political societies, 1816-1817.

We have seen that in the early years of the century commercial debating societies lost the connection with a radical base some had enjoyed in the 1790s. By contrast, private or semi-private debating societies could educate, provide training in the presentation and comprehension of oral arguments and furnish some with opportunities to politically

[69] Manchester, Manchester Archives and Local History [hereafter MALH], GB127.BR F 363 Di: 'Hamden clubs'; Donald Read, 'The Hampden Clubs: a Lancashire spy's narrative', *Manchester Guardian,* 2 Oct. 1956.
[70] McCalman, 'Ultra-Radicalism'.
[71] McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, pp. 18-19 William Reid, *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies* (London, 1800).
[72] Prentice, *Historical Sketches*, pp. 112-113.

network. We now turn to how in the 1810s debate and discussion was embedded in the activities of the Hampden Clubs of Lancashire and the radical groups of London, especially the Spenceans (a further diversion of the potential audiences for commercial societies). The offerings of these political societies were more structured and self-contained than those of similar societies in the 1790s. They also adopted new practices that extended the functions undertaken by campaigning societies.

Activities in both regions were reported to the Home Office, often by paid informers. While those reports are unreliable and correspondence from magistrates and other authority-figures exaggerated the dangers posed by the radicals, much of the detail about how discussion was organised was incidental to the correspondents' main purposes and likely to be broadly accurate. Reports prompted by their anxieties shed a shaft of light on what are otherwise rarely documented organisational practices. Societies were established in the autumn of 1816 to campaign for parliamentary reform in all the northern towns investigated here (Manchester, Ashton, Bolton, Oldham and Stockport) and in several smaller places in the region.[73] Many called themselves Union Societies but from an early date were collectively termed Hampden Clubs. This reflected their connections with Sir Frances Burdett and Major Cartwright and linked them to groups that were called Hampden Clubs in other parts of the country, as well as distinguishing them from the Union Societies formed in the region from 1818.[74] The detailed research of Iain McCalman

[73] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 29 Sept. 7, 12 Oct., 2 Nov 1816; London, The National Archive [hereafter TNA], HO 42/153/486: 7 Oct. 1816, letter from Fletcher.
[74] Poole, *Peterloo*, p. 78.

and David Worrall into contemporaneous radical groups in London allows similarities between Lancashire and London practices to be highlighted.[75]

Debating societies, discussion groups, book clubs and reading rooms were related but separate institutional forms that these groups conflated for two broad purposes that were complementary and overlapping.[76] The first was educating local people about current issues, the second inspiring a collective endeavour. Similarities between the two regions suggest that some of the activities described by McCalman were fairly common amongst working people in the early nineteenth century, albeit other activities may, as he argued, have been confined to the underworld fringe.

Educating participants through reading and discussion about the causes they were disposed to support was a key aim. At the launch meeting of the Manchester Hampden Club, attendees were encouraged to 'meet together … for the purpose of discussion and consequently of instructing each other'.[77] Discussion was intended to further the organisation's chief purpose (the campaign for parliamentary reform) but another speaker articulated the idea that knowledge was inherently beneficial: 'every man should be thoroughly acquainted with the science of general politics; indeed, it is the most important branch of moral philosophy, and without which no man can know either his true worth, his duty or his rights'.[78] Discussion groups were formed across the region. It was a significant advantage to the Lancashire reformers that such groups could be maintained in village environments, convenient to people's homes. Reformers held 'weekly readings and discussions' in Middleton and a network of similar occasions seems to have existed across

[75] McCalman, *Radical Underworld*; Worrall, *Radical Culture*; H.T. Dickinson, 'Spence, Thomas (1750-1814)', *ODNB* (Oxford, 2004), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/226112 (11 May 2019).
[76] Lindsay, 'Reading Associations'.
[77] TNA, HO 42/157/169-18: 28 Oct. 1816, 'Report of the proceedings of the public meeting, Manchester Monday,'.
[78] Ibid.

the region.[79] In London, there were fixed evenings in several taverns for reading out loud and then discussing *Cobbett's Political Register* and *The Independent Whig*. These readings suggest they were not strictly Spencean groups, although the attendees probably overlapped.[80]

Reformers' organisational choices were shaped by what felt appropriate and by the available material and cultural resources.[81] As discussed above, the leaders in both London and Lancashire probably had personal experience of more formal debating societies and consciously chose a different format for their societies. The educative purposes of these discussion groups in 1816 and 1817 were best served by their informal character; they required attention from those present, but not pre-existing knowledge and were intended to be approachable. Leadership was provided by someone from the milieu, with a shared sense of the challenges life presented and a common cultural hinterland.[82] At the Hampden Clubs it was 'customary upon such occasion for one of the orators to read the work and to comment as he goes on upon such passages as require explanation'.[83] In London a nominated reader stood at a desk and shaped his comments on the text to how knowledgeable his audience seemed.[84] The advantages of this blending of reading and discussing were many. There was a limited supply of material. Reading out loud to the group communicated one pamphlet to many, while sharing the same pamphlet between different groups further multiplied the benefit of scarce resources. Those who could not

[79] Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (Oxford, 1984, first published 1841), p. 14; TNA, HO 42/158/155: 29 Dec. 1816, letter from Chippendale; TNA, HO 422/156/22: 2 Dec. 1816, letter from Chippendale; Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 60-62
[80] Worrall, *Radical Culture*, pp. 95-6; TNA, HO 40/3/part3/42-3.
[81] Richard Johnson, ' "Really Useful Knowledge": Radical Education and Working-Class Culture, 1790-1848', in John Clarke, C. Critcher and Richard Johnson (eds.), *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London, 2007), pp. 75-102.
[82] Bamford, *Passages*, p. 14.
[83] TNA, HO 42/158/155: 29 Dec. 1816, letter from Chippendale; see also TNA, HO 42/156/22: 2 Dec. 1816, letter from Chippendale.
[84] TNA, HO 40/3/part3/42-3: Information of William Davies; Worrall, *Radical Culture*, p. 95.

read could still benefit. For those unfamiliar with the process of assimilating political argument explanations could be given and elaboration, with examples familiar to the group, could drive a point home. Discussion could flow more easily from the prompt provided by the reading.[85] Participation in the group activity would also foster a sense of unity and shared purpose. The self-discipline required by both the London and northern approaches in the 1790s had softened. Activities were now more accommodating to those less educated and committed and were regularly organised.

Formal debating practices were not suitable for these ends. The reformers in Bolton sought advice about opening rooms to hold discussions from John Smith (the journalist member of the Concentric and leader in the Liverpool debating societies, discussed above). Smith extolled the value of debating, sent the rules of the Liverpool society and explained that payments were made monthly when tickets were distributed, together with questions and notes for each debate.[86] The Liverpool debating societies, like the British Forum, were regulated by rules which specified who could speak, for how long and how often: the approach assumed two opposing arguments.[87] The well-meaning Smith did not appreciate that the form was unsuited to the educational purposes and environment of these reformers. The recent failure in nearby Wigan of a formal debating society, whose organisers had been directly advised on its conduct by articles in the *Liverpool Mercury* (probably written by Smith), did not seem to have discouraged him.[88]

In late 1816 and early 1817 both the Hampden Clubs and the Spenceans also staged what were sometimes termed debates, sometimes discussions, which sought to form and direct a

[85] Thompson, *The Making*, p. 817.
[86] TNA, HO 42/155/11: 27 Nov. 1816, letter from John Smith; TNA, HO 40/3/part II, doc. 10: 21 Nov. 1816, letter from Knight; Navickas, *Protest*, p. 58.
[87] *An Address… British Forum*, pp. 33-36.
[88] *Liverpool Mercury*, 9 Aug., 6 Sept. 1816; TNA, HO 42/153/221: 29 Sept. 1816, letter from Marron; TNA, HO 42/155/105: 30 Nov. 1816, letter from Fletcher.

sense of collective endeavour. These provided a different experience from the discussion groups and operated in a different atmosphere — one conducive to inspiration and which required larger audiences. In the north these rallying meetings probably occurred only in Manchester, where the movement had access to space and a big pool of possible attendees. The Manchester rooms could hold one thousand and were intended as a collective resource for the region. Meetings were held in these rooms twice a week for several months.[89] They were in New Islington in the east of Manchester, five miles from Middleton and Ashton, six from Stockport and Oldham, all of which had their own societies. Although the Middleton Hampden Society had their own rooms where they held their educative discussions as well as delegate meetings of the region's societies, there is no reference to rallying meetings occurring there.[90] The necessary volume of people was lacking (Middleton's population was circa 5,800) and perhaps the presence of speakers was more difficult to achieve.[91] We do not know whether people from the wider region did attend the Manchester rooms, but certainly handloom weavers (the largest group of industrial workers at the time) came regularly to Manchester from the surrounding villages to collect and deliver their work.[92] In London, the Spenceans had ready access to potential audiences. Spencean debates were held weekly, on different days of the week, in four taverns around London (including The Mulberry Tree, Moorfields, run by a Shoreditch vestryman). These were conducted in large enough groups to sustain a rallying atmosphere, with generally between a hundred and a hundred and fifty in attendance.[93] In both Manchester and

[89] TNA, HO 40/3/part II, doc. 10: 21 Nov. 1816, letter from Knight; TNA, HO 42/157/645: 24 Dec. 1816, letter from Lloyd; *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 15 Mar. 1817; Navickas, *Protest*, p. 60; Poole, *Peterloo*, p. 102.
[90] Bamford, *Passages*, pp. 14-5.
[91] *PP* (1822), 15 (502), Abstract of the Answers …Population, p. 157.
[92] Samuel Bamford, *Early Days*, (London,1849), p. 115-8; Poole, *Peterloo*, pp. 40-41.
[93] TNA, HO 42/3/part3/42-4; HO 42/158/13; McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, pp. 108, 117.

London, non-members could attend, encouraging new recruits who might be attracted by the display of collective engagement.

In both regions the events were arranged around a question for discussion. Generally, two or three of the leaders gave speeches using the question of the evening as a hook, but although their activities were sometimes described as debating, they rarely presented opposing views and there were only occasional differences of opinion. In some ways they were like lectures, albeit given by several speakers and with attendees encouraged to contribute.[94] Prior to the formation of the Mechanics Institutes, exposure to lectures was most likely to have been limited to the afternoon lecture given at many churches on a Sunday, not an ideal comparator.[95] The label 'lecture' also suggests a gap between speaker and audience, in expertise if nothing else, unsuited to the creation of a collective enterprise. Later similar occasions might have been termed 'political meetings', but that was not a term used by these reformers. The northern gatherings allowed their leaders to speak about why parliamentary reform was needed and how the working people of the area could achieve it, despite the obstacles in their way. For example, the topic 'ought religion [sic] be inimical to parliamentary reform?' was a response to attempts by various religious leaders to discourage their flocks from attending reform meetings, some going so far as to threaten to expel attendees.[96] The Spencean debates were consciously 'didactic', laying out the principles of Spence's theory as elaborated by Thomas Evans, who became their leader on Spence's death. They discussed why other causes should be disregarded — 'Do the

[94] TNA, HO 40/3/part 1/138: 18 Dec. 1816, statement.
[95] Farooq, *Preaching*.
[96] TNA, HO 40/3/part1/137: 1 Dec. 1816, statement

meetings for parliamentary reform mislead or inform?' — as well as why Spence's plan offered the only solution to their miseries.[97]

These larger meetings familiarised attendees with the men who aspired to lead them and aimed to create political communities that could be mobilised. The effect of listening with large numbers of others to speeches full of rhetorical flourishes, collectively responding with cheers and boos, created a sense of joint endeavour (perhaps particularly attractive to those less interested in study).[98] The contemporary strength of Methodism, known for working on the emotions of attendees and many of whose preachers came from lower social levels, may have provided an exemplar.[99] In contrast, the discussion groups had an atmosphere conducive to education. Both types of meeting might inspire, but they did so in different ways. These rallying meetings usefully kept followers engaged between public meetings of the locality, which could only be organised infrequently.

By the 1810s there were many opportunities to hear substantive speeches at gatherings of various types. There were more town and other locality meetings, often held in spaces that could accommodate greater numbers than in the eighteenth century, thereby increasing the accessibility of political speech.[100] Two things were distinctive about the speeches delivered in the Hampden and Spencean Clubs. First, it was a new function for societies, reflecting their changing purposes in the nineteenth century. Prior to this, inspirational speeches directed towards members had not generally been part of the repertoire of political societies. Second, these speeches were delivered by working people, to working people. That speech-giving was no longer limited to semi-professionals like Gale Jones,

[97] McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 108; Worrall, *Radical Culture*, pp. 95, 114, TNA, HO 42/158/13, 202, 218, 277, 368.
[98] For example, TNA HO 40/4/Part 2/110: Feb. 1817, extract of report to Lord Sidmouth.
[99] Mark Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society: Oldham and Saddleworth, 1740-1865* (Oxford, 1994), chapter 5; Joseph Barker, *The Life of Joseph Barker, Written by Himself* (London, 1880), chapters 7-9.
[100] See chapter 5.

Thelwall and Yorke illustrates how widely diffused the skill of public speaking was becoming.

4.4 The art of public speaking.

The town meeting at which the Bolton Hampden Club was launched in 1816 opened with a speaker declaring, 'I am no orator, plain language is all I can give you. It is not fine speaking that is wanted on this important occasion but the truth in plain language.'[101] Examples of such self-presentation can be found in many reports of meetings in the early nineteenth century. 'Public speaking' connoted a calm, business-like quality, suited to its increasingly quotidian practice. In contrast to parrhesia (the technical term in rhetoric for plain speaking), public speaking was a transparent English phrase, but it bore more than just its most obvious meaning.[102] It was one approach to validating the practice of ordinary men giving political speeches.

Oratory was traditionally an elite activity for men educated at public schools and the universities: with its Latinate roots it was a consciously exclusionary word. That the appropriate locations of oratory were judged to be Parliament, the pulpit and the bar defined its boundaries in terms of the social status of both speakers and (to an extent) auditors. It was intended to stir the passions. Only the elite were fit to hear political oratory, for only the elite had the education and independence to filter its impassioning effects. Oratory addressed to crowds of working people was inherently dangerous.

Mary Fairclough interrogated contemporary understandings of sympathy as a collective response, a medium for spreading emotions and ideas. Crowds where sympathy might

[101] TNA, HO 42/153/484: 28 Sept. 1816, letter from informer.
[102] David Colclough, *Freedom of Speech in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2005), chapter 1; thanks to Mark Knights for the reference.

spread uncontrollably were a source of anxiety, even to some radicals.[103] The dominant metaphor used by the writers that Fairclough analysed was electricity, but they also referred to contagion, with 'descriptions of audiences addressed by an orator in which a contagious transmission of emotion and opinion seems to occur'.[104] Contagion was the metaphor applied to the Hampden Clubs and the Spenceans (probably influenced by the typhus epidemic in 1816). The Oldham magistrate William Chippendale, for example, in a letter to the Home Office claimed, 'the contagion of all their vile opinions … is spread through the community.'[105] George Canning had a reputation as an orator and had read the Home Office reports about the societies. In the parliamentary debates about the 1817 Seditious Meetings Bill, which sought to reimpose restrictions on meetings and so prevent such activities, Canning spoke of the need to draw 'a line of demarcation between the sound and the infected, to stop the ravages of the most malignant pestilence that ever threatened to spread havoc through the land … to interpose a bar against the spreading of the contagion'.[106]

It is noteworthy that informers' reports on meetings organised by the Lancashire radicals assessed the speakers' abilities to stir their audiences. A report of a meeting at Miles Platting (near Manchester) in September 1816 noted 'a person then spoke … to recommend [the] mode of petition … not much of a speaker and was cut short by a genteel looking man who stood near him. This person then spoke very fluently.'[107] Analysing the quality of speeches became more common the longer the movement lasted. The chairman

[103] Victoria Myers, 'William Godwin and the "Ars Rhetorica" ', *Studies in Romanticism*, 41 (2002), pp.415-44.
[104] Mary Fairclough, *The Romantic Crowd: Sympathy, Controversy and Print Culture* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 118, 154, 60; Alvar Blomgren, *The Hurricane of Passion: Popular Poltics and Emotion in Late Georgian England, 1792-1812* (Stockholm, 2022).
[105] TNA, HO 42/152/637: 14 Aug. 1816, letter from Chippendale.
[106] Hansard, 1St series, vol. 35, col. 1116, Commons, 14 March 1817); Gordon Pentland, *The Spirit of the Union: Popular Politics in Scotland, 1815-1820* (London, 1820), pp. 74-76.
[107] TNA, HO, 42/153/371: 4 Sept 1816, letter from Chippendale.

of a meeting on 3 January 1817 was 'no speaker at all', Haigh was also 'a very indifferent speaker and not at all gifted like Kay … Browne was the next … he spoke at some length and very fluently'.[108] At a meeting on 15 January, Batersley 'opposed the first resolution in a learned and energetic speech'; of the four who spoke from the platform 'Wm Browe [sic] a journeyman machine maker, had the best ability as an orator'.[109] Reports to the Home Office in early 1817 referred to 'Orator Bagguley', 'Orator Benbow' and 'Orator Bradbury'.[110] The labelling of these men as orators signalled that their conduct was deviant. The earliest reference to Henry Hunt as 'Orator Hunt' appeared in the *Quarterly Review* of October 1816.[111] If Hunt's social status as a gentleman-farmer made his assumption of this role borderline appropriate, that of his audiences made his speech-making unacceptable. In the cases of 'Orator Bagguley' and 'Orator Benbow' both sides of the equation offended.

The use of classical references to criticise political speech by the lower orders was not new. In 1809 *The Sun* had written of a debate 'by half-starved reformers … these twelve-penny Tully's, these shirtless Cicero's, these invisible Isocrates', but the word 'orator' was clearer, simpler and endlessly repeatable.[112] It made more effective propaganda. In June 1817 an article in the tory *Anti-Jacobin Review* complained of 'penny-orators', 'tavern-orators and mob-orators', the dissonant conjunctions underlining their offence.[113] In September William Cobbett, in the process of writing his grammar book, revisited a controversial attack he had made in 1807 on the so-called 'learned languages'(which had then been debated over two evenings at the British Forum).[114] His themes were connected,

[108] TNA, HO 40/4/part 2/72: 4. Jan.1816 letter from Chippendale.
[109] TNA, HO 42/158/151:15 Jan. 1817 letter from 'AB'; TNA HO 42/158/162: 4 Jan. 1817, letter from Lloyd.
[110] TNA, HO 42/158/87: 28 Jan 1817, information of Peter Campbell; TNA HO 40/5/4A/12-13: deposition of John Livsey.
[111] Belchem, *'Orator' Hunt*, p. 59.
[112] *Sun*, 24 Nov. 1809.
[113] *Anti-Jacobin Review*, vol. 52, June 1817, pp. 352, 360.
[114] *Morning Chronicle*, 2, 9 Apr. 1807.

for in schools grammar was often learnt only when studying Latin and Greek. In a letter to 'Mr Benbow', published in the *Political Register*, Cobbett argued that Latin and Greek were used by the elite to 'make a mystery out of what ought to be clearly and universally understood'.[115] The next month, an article in *The Anti-Jacobin* stated:

> that a thorough knowledge of Greek and Latin prosody is so intimately connected with elegance of English composition, that I confess I have no idea how a person could have any pretensions to the one without the aid of the other … it is my humble opinion that the chief reason why so very few of our public speakers are eloquent and agreeable orators, is the almost total neglect into which ancient prosody has been permitted to fall.[116]

Cobbett and *The Anti-Jacobin* were articulating opposing arguments in a class struggle about public speech. Cobbett's subsequent dedication of his *Grammar* to 'Mr Benbow, shoemaker' (although by that date he was a dissenting preacher) and praising his 'eloquence' was an ideological statement, underlined by the respectful 'Mr'.[117]

The radical press in turn adopted 'orator' to criticise elite political opponents, whilst also using it positively of those they favoured. *The Black Dwarf* wrote, 'Mr Canning is an orator … a sneaking enemy' and 'when our parliamentary orators again prate of the prosperity of the country'. Conversely, it also wrote that 'it was by the radical press and the demagogue orators that the necessity for parliamentary reform was made manifest' — the term 'demagogue orator' employed two potentially negative terms ironically, to positive effect.[118] *The Gorgon* similarly used the word to criticise Canning ('a fine, gay flashy orator … it has always seemed a surprising thing to us that Liverpool … should be gulled and charmed by the very foolish … speeches of George Canning'), but equally used it favourably of an approved candidate at the Westminster election in 1818.[119] Negative

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[115] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register,* 25 Sept. 1817.
[116] *Anti-Jacobin Review*, vol. 53, Oct. 1817 pp. 149-156.
[117] William Cobbett, *A Grammar of the English Language etc.* (London, 1819), 'Dedication'; Malcolm Chase, 'Benbow, William, (1787-1864), *ODNB* (Oxford, 2004) http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/47096 (28 Feb. 2019).
[118] *The Black Dwarf*, 14 July 1818, 1 May 1824, 20 June 1820.
[119] *The Gorgon*, 11, 18 July 1818.

uses of the term declined in the radical press in the 1820s, although it continued occasionally to be deployed in elite criticism of popular speech.[120] For years to come, speakers on platforms would continue to declare 'I am no orator' and while this may have been part of the modesty trope, it also disavowed a label that speakers did not want.

The rising frequency of meetings about myriad causes gave men who were not members of the elite the opportunity to speak at public events. They did not aspire to office or national influence but still might wish to be able to address a meeting. Private debating societies provided a safe and comfortable environment in which to learn the skill of public speaking and their popularity probably owed something to this quality. Some societies that specifically aimed to facilitate the acquisition of this skill felt that audiences were a necessary part of the experience and adopted semi-private formats for that purpose. The Philomathic Institution encouraged members' friends to attend some debates explicitly to provide speakers with larger audiences, whilst excluding them from others to allow novices to learn.[121] The Socratic Institution started as a private debating club but restructured because 'the leading feature of their union is the cultivation of public speaking' which required large audiences. Accordingly, membership was increased (possibly becoming open to any) and members' friends were also encouraged to attend.[122] Various radical autobiographers describe how attendance at discussion groups enabled workingmen to practice giving speeches.[123]

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[120] *Manchester Courier*, 1 Oct. 1825; *The Times* 3 Jan. 1831.
[121] LMA, S/L/017: *Plan and Regulations of the Philomathic Institution* (London, 1814), pp. 11-12,
[122] *The Republican*, 6 Jan. 1813; *Gentleman's Magazine*, 29 Oct. 1853, pp. 647-8; *The Reasoner*, Aug. 1813, p. 1; Epstein, *Radical Expression*, chapter 2.
[123] William Lovett, *The Life and Struggles of William Lovett in his Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom* (London, 1876), p. 34; Allen Davenport, *The Life and Literary Pursuits of Allen Davenport* (London, 1986), p. 18; Thomas Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1872), p. 47; *Robert Lowery: Radical and Chartist*, eds., Brian Harrison and Patricia Hollis (London, 1979), p. 72; Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, chapter 7.

This democratisation of public speech was enabled and validated by print resources, their selling pitch revealing the widening social compass of the activity. In 1813 John Rippingham published *The Art of Public Speaking*, his title echoing that of James Burgh's 1760s work (but note the addition of the word public).[124] Rippingham was a print entrepreneur who gave elocution lectures in which he was probably emulating John Thelwall's successful business.[125] His pitch was to vestry men, arguing that, '[p]arochial meetings, and other local assemblies, are frequently convened to decide on subjects materially affecting general interests. On these occasions, artifice can be exposed, or prejudice successfully encountered, only by the aid of ready elucidation'.[126] Clearly, the need to address vestry meetings was not new and Rippingham probably had two aims in referencing them. First, parish meetings signalled a target market well below elite level (or Burgh's merchants, attending 'big societies'), but above that of working people. Second, it indicated an occasion for speaking unlikely to be deemed seditious. Nevertheless, the interest in public speaking of which he hoped to take advantage was generated by the increased activism of the period. The book's contemporary relevance is suggested by a lengthy review in a journal which suggested improvements to it that would, in the opinion of the reviewer, make the work more useful.[127] The introduction to the twenty-ninth edition of Lindley Murray's *English Grammar Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners* published in 1817 (first edition 1795) emphasised that the need to think and speak clearly went beyond the personal and was necessary to resolve 'differences of opinion amongst

[124] John Rippingham, *The Art of Public Speaking, Ex-tempore* (London, 1814).
[125] Nicholas Roe, 'Thelwall, John (1784-1834)', *ODNB* (Oxford 2012), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27167 (19 Feb.2018); Judith Thompson, 'Resounding Romanticism: John Thelwall and the Science and Practice of Elocution', in Alexander Dick, Angela Esterhammer, (eds.), *Spheres of Action: Speech and Performance in Romantic Culture* (Toronto, 2009), pp. 21-40, p. 24.
[126] Rippingham, *Art of Public*, p. xviii; Johanna Seibert, *Early African Caribbean Newspapers as Archipelagic Media in the Emancipation Age* (Boston, 2022), p. 144.
[127] *Monthly Review* (1814), p. 390.

men'.[128] William Cobbett explained in his *Political Register* that he intended his grammar book (published in Britain in 1819) to empower working people and demystify elite knowledge so that the 'weaver Boys of Lancashire' would be able to prevail over the 'order of the pigtail'.[129] As the leading purveyor of radical print, Cobbett's acknowledgement that political organisation required speech was telling.

4.5 1820 - 1832: a range of possibilities.

In the context of rising popular activism, further Seditious Meetings Acts in 1817 and 1819 once again inhibited the public display of orality: for a time even science lecturers felt vulnerable, but soon opportunities were flourishing.[130] This section considers the varied opportunities which existed to access debate (broadly defined) in the 1820s. Two themes are highlighted: the relevance of social status and the emergence of new forms and new labels to replace the catch-all label of debate. The main sources are the newspapers produced for working people. Their increased number in the 1820s raises the question — was it the coverage that was new or did those reports reflect substantive change?[131] Probably both, and the reporting must also have encouraged emulation. Although arguably themselves part of the phenomenon to be explored, reports in these papers allow broad patterns of change to be identified and they are supplemented where possible by other sources.

Private debating and discussion groups remained popular through the 1820s and as membership organisations could naturally filter who participated. Societies established for

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[128] Lindley Murray, *English Grammar Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners*, 29th edition (London, 1817), p. 6.
[129] Cobbett, *Grammar*, p. 9; *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 25 Sept. 1817; Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 239-48.
[130] 57 Geo. III, c. 19; 60 Geo. III & 1 Geo. IV, c. 6; Ian Inkster and Jack Morrell, (eds.) *Metropolis and Province: Science in British Culture, 1780-1850* (London, 1983).
[131] Magee, 'Popular Periodicals'.

what might loosely be described as middle-class members seem to have favoured the traditional form of debating, where opposing arguments were presented about an issue.[132] However, Samuel Bailey's *Questions in Political Economy* (published in 1823) suggests that the activities of reading and debating were sometimes combined. The book was intended to assist young professional men who met 'for the purpose of intellectual improvement' in societies which (Bailey remarked) 'are now become numerous'.[133] It identified debating topics largely, but by no means exclusively, focused on political economy, together with introductory notes for each topic and suggestions for further reading.

The small self-improvement societies of working people that were the spine of Thompson's working-class culture of enquiry proliferated in the 1820s. They generally adopted informal modes, often blending discussion with features of reading societies.[134] The authorities in both regions may have been less oppressive than the Seditious Meetings Act 1819 authorised. Some Union Societies in the north-west established for working people in 1818 and 1819 had reading rooms and classes that still existed in the mid-1820s; a list of licences granted under the legislation in London in 1820 included several unnamed clubs meeting in 'curtain rooms' in pubs.[135] With the legislation due to expire in late 1824, the atmosphere relaxed and references to such discussion groups became more frequent. This probably reflected a further relaxation of the authorities' attitudes, enabling groups to

[132] *Laws and Transactions of the London Debating Society* (London, 1826); Joseph Hamburger, *James Mill and the Art of Revolution* (London, 1963), pp. 27-8; see also the Philomathic Society, above.
[133] Samuel Bailey, *Questions in Political Economy, Politics, Morals… for Discussion in Literary Societies or for Private Study* (London 1823), pp. v-vi; T.A.B. Corley, 'Bailey, Samuel (bap.1791-1870)', *ODNB* (Oxford, 2013) http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1056 (17 May 2018).
[134] For example, *Trades Newspaper*, 12 Feb. 1825.
[135] *Republican*, 4 Aug. 1826; LMA, MR/S/L/020: List of Licences (probably 1820-1821); Gatrell, *Conspiracy* p. 102.

be more open about their activities, more societies to be formed and coverage in the newspapers to increase.[136]

One new development was the formation of working-class discussion groups under the aegis of bodies primarily established for other purposes for the same audience. Several Mechanics Institutes organised discussion groups on general topics, in addition to lectures on practical subjects. That the impetus to form such groups often came from the attendees speaks to widespread enthusiasm for discussing topics of public interest.[137] In both study regions some individual trade societies established their own mutual improvement societies, especially after the 1824 repeal of the Combination Acts.[138] The *Trades Newspaper* reporting a debate held by a London carpenters' society in 1825 — who was most useful, the man who lives on his property, employs his property in trade to accumulate wealth or the man who lives on his industry? — commented 'such associations cannot be too much commended; we hope that ere long there will be many of them'.[139] The National Association for the Protection of Labour (hereafter NAPL), established as a general trade union in the northern study area from 1829, organised debates in Manchester and encouraged branches in other towns to discuss 'such subjects as may be important or interesting to the working classes'.[140]

Contrary to general trends, two commercial institutions were established in London that aimed to attract audiences of working people. No similar body has been identified in Manchester or Liverpool, nor equivalent commercial bodies offering public political

[136] For Zetetic Societies established from 1822 see Epstein, *Radical* Expression, p. 113; Gordon Pentland, 'The Freethinkers' Zetetic Society: an Edinburgh Radical Underworld in the Eighteen-Twenties', *Historical Research*, 91 (2018), pp. 314-32.
[137] Tylecote, *Mechanics' Institutes*, p. 242; *Rules and Orders of the Hackney Literary and Mechanic Institution* (Hackney, 1825); *The First Year's Report of the Hackney Literary and Mechanic Institution* (Hackney, 1826); *Bolton Chronicle*, 2 Aug. 1828, 22 Aug. 1829, 8 Jan. 1831.
[138] BL, Add MS. 27803, f.207: Francis Place Papers for a ship caulkers' society.
[139] *Trades Newspaper*, 4 Sept. 1825.
[140] *United Trades Journal*, 24 July, 4 Sept. 1830.

discourse to middle-class audiences.[141] Their appearance probably had much to do with the identity of their managers. Gale Jones opened what he again named the British Forum in Clerkenwell, probably in 1823 (another indication of the authorities' relaxed attitudes). This iteration of the Forum had moved from West End elegance not only geographically, but structurally and culturally. It now adopted the practices of societies established for working people and was open through the week, offering reading on two nights, discussion on two others, music on the fifth.[142] In May 1830 Richard Carlile opened a 'general lecturing and discussion establishment' at the Rotunda which was capable of accommodating one thousand.[143] Carlile had criticised Mechanics Institutes for excluding politics from their formal offerings and at the Rotunda he consciously aimed to inform and motivate a working-class audience.[144]

That Carlile arranged 'political lectures' at the Rotunda was more of an innovation than has been recognised. Historians sometimes give the impression that political lectures were an established form from the late eighteenth century, but this is not so. It is often stated that Thomas Clarkson gave lectures during his national tours between 1787 and 1794 in support of the abolition of the slave trade, but by his own account he only once spoke publicly, when he gave, on request, a sermon in a Manchester church.[145] His famous chest, containing specimens of African produce that supported the argument for mercantile trade with Africa, was used when presenting evidence to a parliamentary committee. No

[141] Whittingham-Jones, 'Liverpool Clubs', p. 136 for a non-political society in the 1820s.
[142] J.W. Hudson, *The History of Adult Education* (London, 1851), p. 49.
[143] *The Prompter* (London 1830), 30 Nov. 1830, p. 8; Joel H. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: the Life of Richard Carlile* (Westport, 1983), chapter 9; Christina Parolin, *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London, 1790 – 1845* (Canberra, 2010), chapter 7; Max Beer, *A History of British Socialism* (London, 1953), p. 303.
[144] *The Lion*, 4 Jan. 1828; no doubt for commercial reasons he tried to also attract the middle classes through varying prices for access to different parts, Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, p. 207.
[145] Thomas Clarkson, *History of... Abolition of the African Slave Tread etc.* (London, 1839) p. 244; James Walvin, 'The Propaganda of Anti-Slavery' in James Walvin (ed.), *Slavery and British Society, 1776-1846* (London, 1982), pp. 49-68, p. 52, citing Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (London, 1975), p. 265 – who does not say Clarkson lectured.

occasion when he used the chest in lectures or public meetings has been cited and he probably only produced it at private discussions.[146] Political lectures were given by leading radicals like John Thelwall during the 1790s, but there is little evidence of similar activity in the following years.[147] When John Cartwright toured in 1813-1815 to encourage petitioning for parliamentary reform he generally liaised with local activists. Only in Edinburgh in 1815 (as he wrote to his wife) having 'perceived that nothing would be done unless I personally broke the ice, I determined to deliver a lecture on the constitution of England'. That he added 'I shall become a *field preacher'* indicates this was unusual, although he asked that lectures be continued by an unnamed other after his departure.[148] Clarkson again toured in 1823, now campaigning for the abolition of slavery, but the suggestion that he delivered lectures on this occasion is also unevidenced.[149]

However, as Henry Jephson noted, the difference between platform speeches and political lectures was 'more one of the manner and circumstances of the delivery than of matter'.[150] The increased frequency in the early nineteenth century of meetings about the issues of the day offered opportunities for informative speeches akin to lectures. When Robert Owen presented his 'Plan for the Employment, Instruction and Remoralization of the Poor' in 1817 he did so at public meetings that were also addressed by other speakers.[151] In the late 1810s and the 1820s Henry Hunt and William Cobbett employed their fame and abilities to

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[146] Jane Webster, 'Collecting for the Cabinet of Freedom: the Parliamentary History of Thomas Clarkson's Chest', *Slavery & Abolition*, 38 (2017), pp. 135-154, p. 139 and footnote 11.
[147] Thompson, 'Hunting the Jacobin Fox'; John Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats: Sheffield and the French Revolution, 1789-97* (London, 1989), doc.11, p. 63; Goodrich, *Redhead Yorke*, p. 215.
[148] *The Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright*, vol. 2, ed. F.D. Cartwright (London, 1826), pp. 114-7; Naomi Miller, 'John Cartwright and Radical Parliamentary Reform, 1808-1819', *English Historical Review*, 83 (1968).
[149] James Walvin, 'The Public Campaign in England against Slavery, 1787-1834, in David Elits and James Walvin (eds.), *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Origins and Effects in Europe, Africa and the Americas* (Madison, 1981), pp. 63-79, p. 70, citing R Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London, 1933) pp. 121-132, and Ernest Howse, *Saints in Politics: The 'Clapham Sect' and the Growth of Freedom* (Toronto, 1952), p. 155, neither of whom mention lectures.
[150] Jephson, *Platform*, pp. xix.

[151] *Morning Chronicle*, 15, 19, 22 May 1817.

make complex arguments at meetings, that included elements of instruction about political economy and about the constitution.[152] Less famous men must have delivered speeches of a similar nature.

As the possibilities offered by such opportunities for public instruction became increasingly evident, the free-standing form of lecture came to be seen to allow individuals of sufficient celebrity to expound their political views without a public meeting or an election: they might even make money in the process. Between 1827 and 1829 Carlile undertook four provincial tours where he spoke about his beliefs to miscellaneous groups at both *ad hoc* and organised events. These were not termed lectures but were close in nature.[153] Cobbett's first events called 'lectures' were delivered in London in November and December 1829, followed by a provincial tour.[154] At the Rotunda the attraction was as much the speaker as the topic, with lectures by Hunt and Cobbett both drawing large audiences. The latter gave eleven lectures 'to the working classes on … recent events in France and … advice' as to how they could obtain parliamentary reform.[155] The next stage in the evolution of political lectures was their integration into the activities offered by campaigning bodies. The Anti-Slavery Society employed teams of inhouse lecturers, not celebrities but specially trained experts, who toured the country. The Anti-Corn Law League and the Chartists would follow suit.[156]

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[152] Belchem, *Orator Hunt*, pp. 172-7; George Spater, *William Cobbett, the Poor Man's* Friend, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 414-421.
[153] Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought*, chapter 8; *The Lion* (London, 1828) reported through the year on Carlile's tour.
[154] Spater, *William Cobbett*, p. 491.
[155] *The Prompter*, pp. 89, 8-9; Spater, *Cobbett*, pp. 493-4.
[156] Martin, 'Popular Political Oratory', pp. 21-26; Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: the British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (London, 2005), p. 336 made the unreferenced claim that the Birmingham Ladies Society in 1829 were the first to employ lecturers.

Carlile also organised what were advertised as 'political meetings' at the Rotunda that were unconnected to any organisation. Advertised topics for discussion at these meetings included 'Taxes upon Knowledge' and the Reform Bill.[157] A chairman ran the proceedings, several of London's leading radicals (including William Lovett, Henry Hetherington and William Carpenter) spoke, following which members of the paying audience could contribute.[158] These occasions were framed (if not labelled) as debates, but the organisers sometimes struggled to obtain opposing opinions: in a discussion about whether France ought to re-establish a monarchy 'calls were repeated for opposing sentiment; but nothing decidedly Monarchical presented itself'.[159] Carlile's application of the adjective 'political' to these events is consistent with the wider usage discussed in chapter 3.

The practices of London's ultra-radical body the NUWC (formed in 1831) which also met at the Rotunda, reflected this trend towards more defined offerings, whilst also showing some continuity with the activities of the Hampden Clubs and the Spenceans. What the NUWC termed 'meetings' were like the debates and discussions of those societies in the 1810s; the subject was advertised in advance and at each event several of the leaders would speak.[160] NUWC events were similarly open to members and non-members (paying differential entrance fees). Like the societies of the 1810s the NUWC was self-sufficient and addressed the needs of members through a variety of offerings. Instruction was provided to members through small discussion groups organised in the branches which met around London (another instance of the self-improvement culture).[161] Weekly lectures were provided from 1832, when the NUWC had moved to Theobalds Road.[162] Societies run by

[157] *Penny Papers for the Poor*, 18, 26 Feb., 4 Mar. 1831.
[158] *Penny Papers for the Poor*, 26 Mar., 21 May 1831.
[159] *Weekly Free Press*, 14 Aug. 1830.
[160] See for example, *Poor Man's Guardian*, 8 Oct. 1831; see Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, pp. 283-4 for attendance by some Lancashire delegates appointed at public meetings in May 1831.
[161] See chapter 8; Yeo, *Some Practices*, p. 352 for similar Chartist practices.
[162] *Poor Man's Guardian,* 2 June 1832.

the middle classes (such as the BPU) do not appear to have organised similar internal discussions or instruction.[163]

This adoption of new practices and labels, settling (at least sometimes) into more distinct forms with clearer, explicitly political, functions reflected increased confidence about and familiarity with the processes of organising. The Hampdens and Spenceans, operating in the early years of the post-war revival of campaigning and already pushing organisational boundaries with their internally directed inspirational meetings, used the familiar language of 'debate' and 'discussion' to encompass a variety of activities. In the more relaxed atmosphere of the 1830s the terms 'political lectures' and 'political meetings' could be applied, moving away from debate as a generic term. Differentiating the nature of the experiences offered suggests that organisers believed audiences were increasingly discriminating. There was, perhaps, also a move against 'debate' amongst working people. The formality associated with debating may have been off-putting. Some negativity was expressed by the radical press about 'talking' as opposed to 'acting' as well as about the style encouraged by debating.[164] *The Lion* (edited by Carlile) scorned the 'British Forum system' preferring 'men who can enter critically with us into all the merits of the question proposed, and who do not come merely to make a speech'.[165]

Lastly, in a further example of the hybridisation of debating with other activities, discussions might now conclude with a decision to petition. In 1832 'operative workmen and others who frequently meet for edification' in Oldham (another chance glimpse) petitioned Parliament about Mr and Mrs Deacle, who had been wrongfully arrested after encouraging farmers to increase labourers' wages and whose case was drawn to wide

[163] See chapter 8.
[164] *The Examiner*, 25 July 1830.
[165] *The Lion*, 10 Apr. 1829, pp. 476-7.

attention by William Cobbett.[166] Political meetings at the Rotunda sometimes also concluded by agreeing to submit a petition to Parliament.[167] Nineteenth-century extensions to what were considered appropriate petitioning bodies are discussed in chapter 5. The point here is to illustrate how naturally debating led to other activities.

4.6 Women and debating.

It was difficult for women to access these flourishing opportunities of debate and discussion. Counter-intuitively, the decline of public debating may have reduced the possibility that women (at least those who lived in big urban centres) might attend and even participate in debates.[168] The limited evidence of private debating societies is of male groups, although we cannot exclude the possibility that there were some female groups. Generally, women interested in exploring the issues of the day were limited to informed and serious discussions within the domestic milieu, whether their own or that of friends.[169] So far as can be discerned the internal events of the Hampdens and Spenceans were men-only occasions. The famous female reform societies that were formed in the northern region in 1819 were exceptional and short-lived: they were not replicated in the later Reform Agitation.[170] A suggestion that NUWC members should bring their wives to meetings for free, so that they would be converted (from 'being the Tories that most women' were) and rear the next generation as republicans, indicates men were the primary audience.[171] Women's anti-slavery societies (from 1825) must have provided sites for

[166] Ian Dyck, 'William Cobbett and the Rural Radical Platform', *Social History*, 18 (1993), p.198; *CJ*, 87 (1832), pp. 185-204, p. 139.
[167] *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 754.
[168] Andrew, 'Popular Culture'.
[169] Kathryn Gleadle, ' "Opinions Deliver'd in Conversation": Conversation, Politics, and Gender in the Late Eighteenth Century', in Harris (ed.), *Civil Society*; Sarah Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 2015), pp. 61-78, p. 66. Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, p. 253.
[170] Poole, *Peterloo*, pp. 159-61, 237-46.
[171] *Poor Man's Guardian*, 29 Oct. 1831.

discussions, together with opportunities to formally address groups, mirroring experiences that could also be obtained in female philanthropic societies.[172] The now established practice of political lectures also provided women, who had long attended lectures on other subjects, with new opportunities to hear structured political discourse. Many women were reported as present at the Rotunda, even before Eliza Sharp (billed as the first woman to publicly lecture on politics) took to the stage.[173] That the form was female-friendly probably contributed to the popularity of lectures in the later campaigns against slavery and the corn law.[174]

4.7 Conclusion.

Evidence about debating that allows activities to be detailed and contextualised can only occasionally be located but piecing together the disparate examples discussed here shows how essential the practice of debate in its broad sense was to the process of politically organising. It has long been recognised that debate helped to inform people about political issues. Here we have seen how the style and form of debating was adapted to meet the changing needs of those who sought to organise campaigns and those whom they hoped to mobilise. The expansion of extra-parliamentary activity required that shopkeepers, small businessmen and workers could construct arguments and present them in speeches that might attract others, often their neighbours, to support their causes. The valorisation of the more accessible skill of public speaking over that of oratory was one element of efforts to legitimise this extension of political campaigning to broader sections of society. By the end of the period there were more opportunities for women to hear structured discourse about contemporary issues, but few for them to acquire organisational skills. As Kathryn Gleadle

[172] See chapter 2.1.3.4.
[173] Parolin, *Radical Spaces*, pp. 244, 247; Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 72.
[174] Russell, 'Spouters or Washerwomen'.

noted, public speaking was almost entirely confined to men.[175] The relevance of social status for methods of organising, the changing repertoire of behaviours undertaken by societies and the increased confidence of campaigners by the later 1820s — identified here as influencing the shape of debating in these decades — are themes that recur in the following chapters.

[175] Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, p. 65, see pp. 70-7 for a few occasions after the period covered here.

5: Locality and identity

This is the first of three chapters that discuss organisation in and of the locality. In this chapter analysis of the identities adopted to petition about public matters demonstrates that inhabitant of a locality was the main identity adopted to campaign in the public interest. Chapter 6 explores the changing methods of arranging inhabitant-meetings that extended how and, importantly, by whom they could be called. Chapter 7 argues that ideas that were developed about public meetings shaped both conduct and the rhetorical presentation of that conduct to legitimate the engagement of generally defined groups (usually inhabitants) in national political issues as public-interest groups.

Themes explored in these three chapters overlap with work published by Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller during the late stages of research on this thesis.[1] Their Leverhulme funded project, *Re-thinking Petitions, Parliament and People in the Long Nineteenth Century,* has revived the study of petitioning in Britain in this period. Their recent work has begun to explore the possibilities the project offers to revise our understanding of nineteenth-century extra-parliamentary activity. Although this case study of organising in the locality discusses some of the same phenomena, this thesis has different aims and a different scope to that of the work of Huzzey and Miller. Their studies are broader in chronological and geographical range and chiefly concerned to demonstrate the extent of popular participation in politics beyond elections. Whilst endorsing their emphasis on the importance of investigating practice, this thesis is concerned with a different issue that arises within a narrower period: how activists navigated the transition from late-eighteenth century methods of organising to construct over the first three decades of the nineteenth

[1] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings'; Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*.

century new, more accessible ways of proceeding that were broadly accepted as legitimate. It documents a process of experimentation that laid the foundations for later activity.[2]

5.1 Introduction and overview.

This chapter examines the recitals of petitions to Parliament to reveal evolving and rarely mentioned conventions that governed who was entitled to petition and about what. Again, there is some overlap with the work of Miller but with key differences. Miller also emphasised the significance of self-labelling by petitioners and described the growth of inhabitant as a petitioning identity from the late eighteenth century as part of a 'broadening of the petitioning public'. He suggested that advantages the identity offered were that it was inclusive and able to claim to be expressing the views of the people, but also imprecise; none of the alternative general identities were as suitable.[3] The analysis here looks at what petitioning identities did *not* petition about as well as what they did. It is shown that in the three decades immediately prior to the Reform Act, inhabitant was *the* identity that could be employed to express the public's opinions on any matter. Other identities, whether religious or economic in nature, were adopted to petition only about causes in which those sharing that identity had a direct interest. In addition to the reasons suggested by Miller, this development can be explained in other terms: the changing practices of urban campaigning in the late eighteenth century; the decline of corporate bodies; the legitimating ideology of the public that developed in the nineteenth century; and limits on what interest groups felt that they could and should do.

[2] For other work connected to their project see; Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller, 'Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780-1918', *Past and Present*, 248 (2020), pp. 123-64; Henry Miller, 'Petition! Petition!! Petition!!!: Petitioning and the Organisation of Public Opinion in Britain, 1800–1850', in Velde and Janse (eds.), *Organizing Democracy*, pp. 43-61; Richard Huzzey (ed.), *Pressure and Parliament: From Civil War to Civil Society* (Chichester, 2018); *Social Sciences History*, 43 (2019) with articles about Britain, Netherlands, Spain, Canada and India as well as those by Huzzey and Miller.
[3] Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, chapter 5, especially pp. 132-9.

This argument connects two bodies of work: studies of petitioning and of urban politics. Rosemary Sweet highlighted the significance of urban centres in petitioning, arguing that 'locally defined identities' complicate our appreciation of the centralising role of the national parliament.[4] Joanna Innes and Nicholas Rogers noted the rise of contentious gatherings and the involvement from the 1770s onwards of towns that were neither corporate nor parliamentary boroughs.[5] More detailed urban discussions have focused on campaigns for and within the locality rather than those about national political questions. Even Derek Fraser's layered analysis of urban politics in the 1830s and 1840s did not connect wider agitations with the local identities and structures that he also discussed.[6] Earlier work about petitioning identified reasons for its expansion from the late eighteenth century.[7] Joshua Civin provided valuable insight into the drivers behind petitions and the identities and organising structures used in Liverpool over sixty years that are consistent with patterns found here.[8] Philip Loft's analysis of eighteenth-century petitioning identities is discussed further below.[9]

The main source for this chapter is petitions about public matters from the study areas recorded in the *Journals of the House of Commons* from 1800 to 1832.[10] In a change that reveals the shifting practices of petitioning and attitudes towards those petitions, the index to the *Journals* began in 1803 to list 'matters of a public nature' on which petitions had

[4] Rosemary Sweet, 'Local Identities and a National Parliament, c.1688-1835', in Julian Hoppit (ed.), *Parliaments, Nations and Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660-1860* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 48-63.
[5] Innes and Rogers, 'Politics and Government', pp. 562-565; see also Peter Fraser, 'Public Petitioning and Parliament before 1832', *History*, 46 (1961), pp. 195-211.
[6] A. Temple Patterson, *Radical Leicester: a History of Leicester, 1780-1850* (Leicester, 1954); Peter Taylor, *Popular Politics in Early Industrial Britain: Bolton, 1825-1850* (Staffordshire, 1995); Derek Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England: the Structure of Politics in Victorian Cities* (Leicester, 1976).
[7] Colin Leys, 'Petitioning in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *Political Studies*, 3 (1955), pp. 45-64, pp. 47-8; Innes, 'Legislation', pp. 117-120; Innes, 'People and Power', pp. 138-140.
[8] Civin, 'Slaves, Sati'.
[9] Loft, 'Petitioning and Petitioners'.
[10] *CJ*, 55 to 87 (1799-1832).

been received and that categorisation is used here to identify relevant petitions.[11] The category was interpreted widely and included work and trade matters but excluded local and personal matters. (The logic of this categorisation of work and trade matters is discussed in chapter 8). The categories employed in this indexing were superseded when a revised system for dealing with public petitions was introduced in 1833. In their project Huzzey and Miller retrospectively applied the 1833 system to categorise petitions from 1780 to 1832. The list of causes petitioned about will probably emerge as similar from the two approaches, but Huzzey and Miller did not survey petitions so thoroughly for this early period as they did for that after 1833.[12] Not only does this thesis draw on more detail for petitions from the study localities, but also a search on the main causes agitated each year in the indexes to the *Commons Journals* revealed some petitions from areas wider than, but encompassing, the study localities. Though House of Lords data has not been surveyed in similar detail, a check on petitions to the Lords from two active locations in each region (Oldham, Stockport, Clerkenwell and Shoreditch) for the busy years of 1814-1817 and 1825-1828 confirmed that the many petitions submitted to the upper house were not qualitatively different from those submitted to the Commons.[13]

The 1,217 petitions identified as emerging from the study areas in the period were broken down by the place from which they originated, the subject matter and the self-identification of the petitioners. 96.7% of petitions were submitted from five categories: religious groups; commercial or trade groups; workers, including friendly societies (those whose members were not workers cannot be distinguished); inhabitants (including what

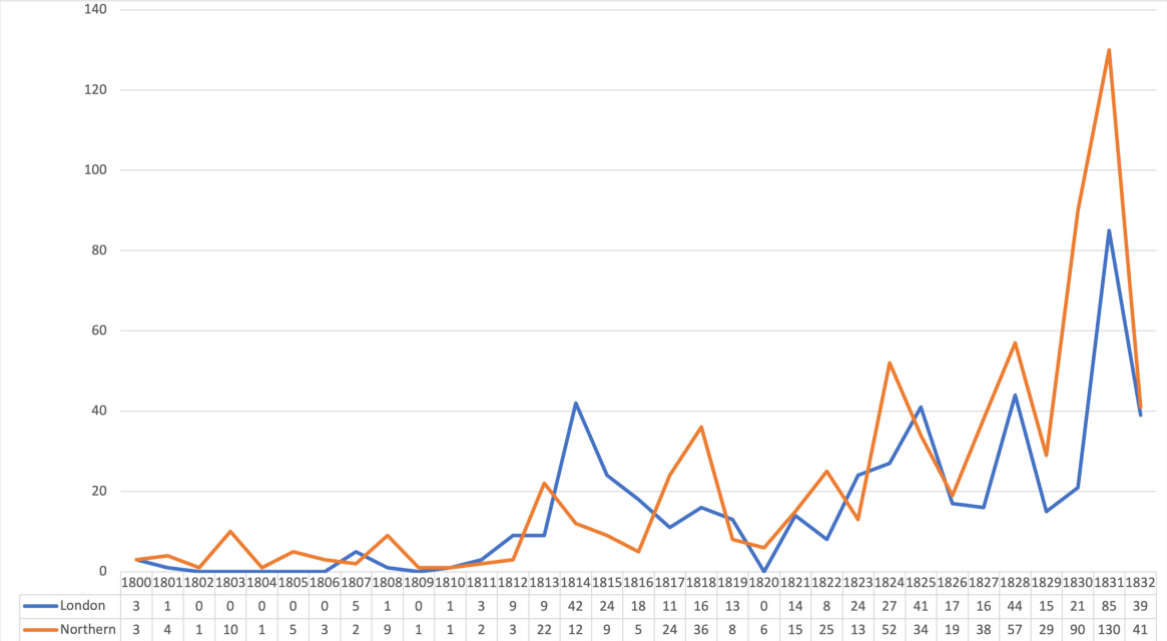
[11] *CJ*, 58 (1803), 'Index - Petitions; Matters of a public nature'.
[12] Huzzey and Miller, 'Petitions, Parliament', pp. 132-4; their dataset will not identify the petitioners' identity or the place from which it was submitted prior to 1832. They did some additional work to identify place and identity for some years prior to 1833 but will not deposit that detail. Thanks to Henry Miller for this information.
[13] *Journals of the House of Lords*, 49-52 (1814-1817) and 58-6 (1825-1832).

are here termed worker-inhabitants, discussed below); and 'other' (petitions largely submitted after 1830 from societies and new types of meetings). The remaining 3.3% were from miscellaneous groups of petitioners in both regions who described themselves as vestrymen, ley payers or varied officials (boroughreeve, churchwardens); six were from the freeholders of Middlesex (the county of which the London study area was part).

There was limited petitioning on public matters at the beginning of the century, with activity picking up from the early 1810s, echoing the national pattern.[14] The renewal of the East India Company's charter in 1812 caused interested parties north and south to express their views and thereafter petitioning continued apace in both regions, with some variations in the peaks and troughs of activity.[15] The graph at figure 5.1 details the number of petitions by year from each region, comprising in total 710 petitions from the north, 507 from the London area. The number of petitions in any given year was influenced not just by the issues, but also by the mobilisation method employed to agitate a particular issue. For example, the nature of the 1828 Friendly Societies Bill inspired many individual societies to petition.[16] The involvement of dissenting congregations in anti-slavery petitioning in 1830 significantly increased the number of petitions (if not necessarily petitioners).[17] *The Manchester Courier's* report that over six thousand abolition petitions were under preparation by the Methodist congregations in 1830 was probably an exaggeration but is indicative of the volume of petitions produced by the method.[18] This is consistent with Civin's argument that the increase in anti-slavery and anti-sati petitions from Liverpool from the late 1820s was driven as much by mobilisation tactics as by their

[14] For earlier petitions see for example, *CJ*, 60 (1805), pp. 83,97; 63 (1808), pp. 89, 92, 123.
[15] *CJ*, 67 (1812), pp. 239, 264, 308, 321, 322, 353, 358.
[16] Index to *CJ*, 83 (1828), 'Friendly Societies'.
[17] Index to *CJ*, 86 (1831), 'Slavery'.
[18] *Manchester Courier*, 23 Oct. 1830.

inherent popularity.[19] Figures 5.2 and 5.3 provide a breakdown by petitioning identity for each region by year.



	1800	1801	1802	1803	1804	1805	1806	1807	1808	1809	1810	1811	1812	1813	1814	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824	1825	1826	1827	1828	1829	1830	1831	1832
London	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	5	1	0	1	3	9	9	42	24	18	11	16	13	0	14	8	24	27	41	17	16	44	15	21	85	39
Northern	3	4	1	10	1	5	3	2	9	1	1	2	3	22	12	9	5	24	36	8	6	15	25	13	52	34	19	38	57	29	90	130	41

Figure 5.1: Total petitions to the House of Commons by year and region, 1800 - 1832

[19] Civin, 'Slaves, Sati', p. 198; Innes 'Legislation', pp. 120-2.

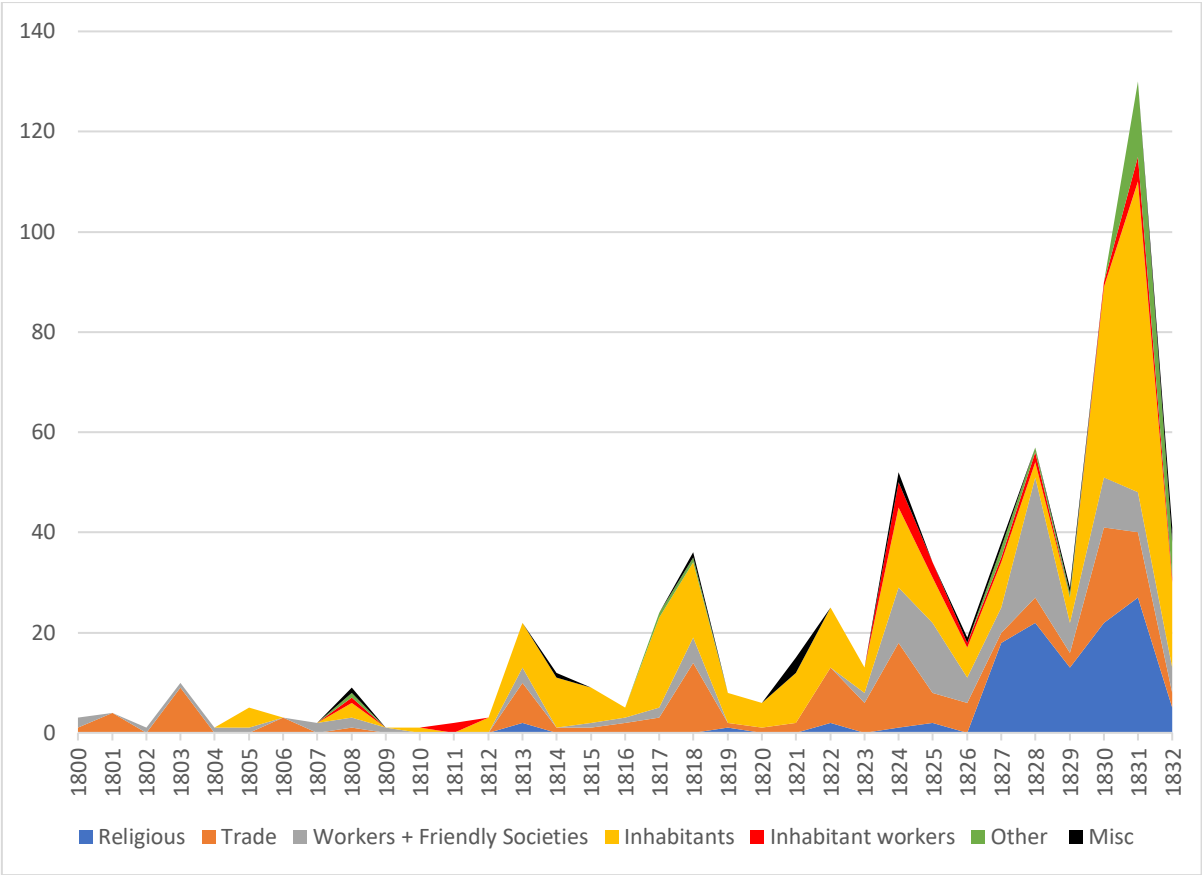


Figure 5.2: Petitions to the Commons by year and petitioning group from the northern study area

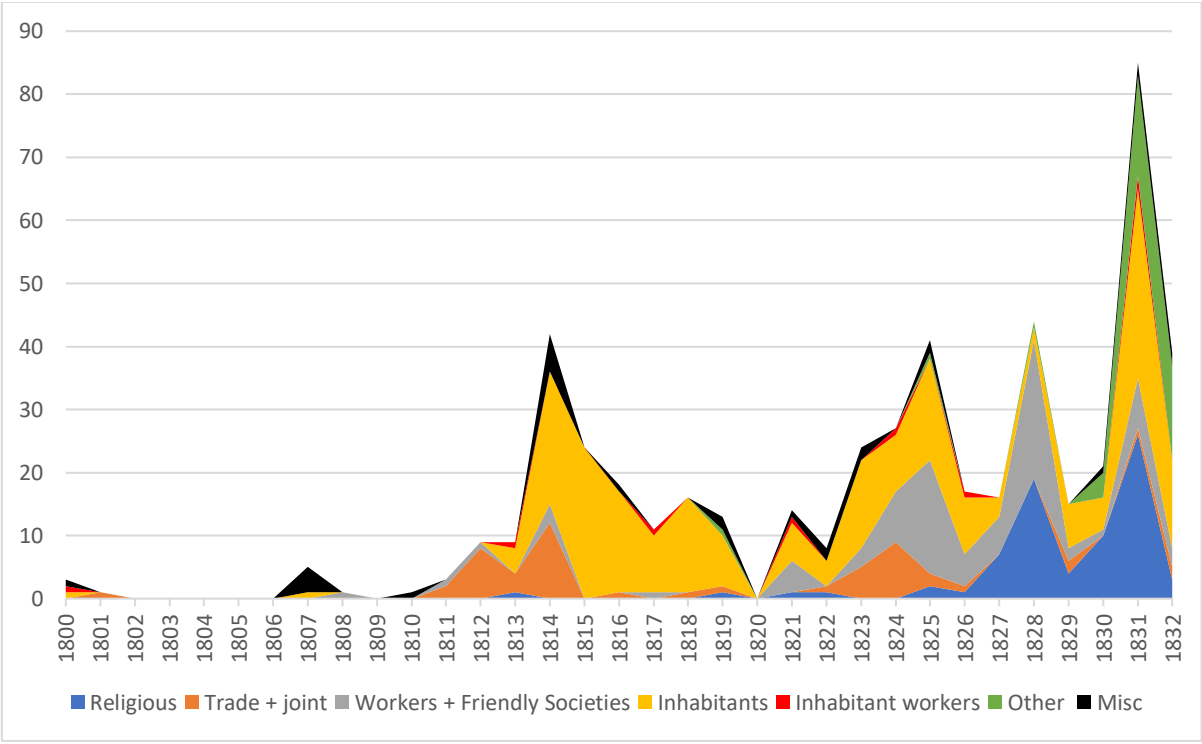


Figure 5.3: Petitions to the Commons by year and petitioning group from the London study area

It is notable that people in the study regions had opinions and felt entitled to organise to express them about remarkably varied causes.[20] For analytical purposes, petitions are categorised into twenty-one subject areas: some were limited in ambit (the corn and combination laws, debtors, distress, the East India Company, emigration, Friendly Societies, parliamentary reform, peace, poor relief (national), Queen Caroline, religion, vestry law); other categories encompass disparate issues (criminal laws, duties, various 'rights', taxation, work regulation, wage regulation and Ireland); and a catch all 'miscellaneous' category. Miller calculated that nationally the volume of petitioning about public matters increased (in proportion to population) forty-four-fold between 1801 and 1831, with a 'critical breakthrough in terms of volume' in the late 1820s; these two study areas contributed to that increase.[21] Some causes were the subject of repeated petitioning, others aroused limited interest. The intensity of activity in particular categories varied between the regions. London, for example was more exercised about taxation and duties (see table 5.3 for the geographical distribution of petitions by topic). The broad pattern was, however, similar in both regions.

The discussion begins by considering petitions from wider areas that encompassed the locality. These were most significant in London. Otherwise, the high degree of similarity in the identities adopted to petition for different causes in the two areas, despite the various ways in which they differed outlined in chapter 1, suggests that their practices reflect patterns of the period more generally.[22] Section three of this chapter analyses what sectional (or interest) groups did and did not campaign about, a particularly important topic given the historiographical emphasis on the political liveliness of dissenters and workers.

[20] Huzzey and Miller 'Petitions, Parliament', pp. 25-26.
[21] Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, pp. 36 and 40; Innes, 'Legislation', p. 118; *PP* (1832), 5 (639), Report from Select Committee on Public Petitions, p. 10.
[22] Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, pp. 159-160.

As we will see, in these decades, the activities of those so identifying were limited in scope. Section four discusses the role of inhabitants as the identity under which almost any campaign could be conducted. Section five explores some diversification in the available public-interest identities that occurred towards the end of the period.

5.2 Place.

Although the towns and parishes where people lived supplied the main geographical identities presented to Parliament, a minority of petitions came from wider areas, with marked differences in this regard between the two regions. The towns in the northern study area had stronger identities which their inhabitants rarely looked beyond: only 3% (23) of northern petitions referenced a wider area. Those that did were generally from workers, about work-related issues, and were either joint petitions from two or more towns ('the wool hatters of Manchester, Oldham and Stockport') or cross-county petitions (like that from the weavers in several northern counties).[23] Given that these were relatively poor people petitioning about their work the logic of an extended base was probably in part to spread the cost. In London, however, the parish where people lived determined their main but only their relatively dominant petitioning identity, with 25% of petitions (127) from wider areas. These parishes lacked the full characteristics of towns and did not offer self-contained economic identities. They were places where people lived but only sometimes worked. Still, they were units within which it was feasible to organise, whereas a metropolis with a population of more than one and half million in 1821 presented significant practical problems to organisers. The lack of overarching structures of

[23] *CJ*, 62 (1807), p. 169; 79 (1824), p. 161.

governance in the capital and the patchwork of different bodies that did exist was reflected in the identities sometimes adopted to campaign about public matters.[24]

The wider identities adopted by Londoners reveal the strategies they employed in attempting to bridge the gap between parish and city and how these changed over the period. Joint parish petitions (9) were rare after 1825. A couple of petitions in 1831 and 1832 used soon-to-be-created constituency identities (the parliamentary boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Finsbury that were established in 1832 included the parishes of the London study area).[25] An approach available to some was to identify around the Port of London (26), favoured largely by work or trade groups. That the capital was in several counties, each encompassing rural areas, discouraged the use of county identities. Middlesex (15) was most frequently referenced only as a geographical area, localizing other identities: so, the 'artizans and mechanics of the County of Middlesex' petitioned about the combination law.[26] This approach connected petitioners to a traditional petitioning body, without claiming to represent that body, while also providing an identity that could extend across much of the metropolis (outside of the City of London). Only about a third (6) of those petitions mentioned freeholder status. That only one petition appears to have been submitted by the county of Middlesex for parliamentary reform during the agitation of 1830 - 1831 (that signed by the sheriff in December 1830, referencing a meeting in the Mermaid, Hackney) indicates the diminished significance of that county as a leading voice of the extra-parliamentary nation.[27] Miller suggests that the identity of freeholder became less important partly because it was not inclusive.[28] The most popular approach (59) was to

[24] Joanna Innes, 'Managing the Metropolis: London's Social Problems and their Control', in Peter Clark and Raymond Gillespie (eds.), *Two Capitals: London and Dublin, 1500-1840* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 53-79.
[25] *CJ*, 86, (1831), p. 407; 87 (1832), p. 487; 2 Will. IV, c. 45, 2 & 3 Will. IV, c. 64.
[26] *CJ*, 79 (1824), p. 217.
[27] *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 195.
[28] Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, p. 138.

offer an enveloping description like the metropolis or London (petitions referencing the City of London were only included in this exercise when the phrasing incorporated the study area, such as 'in and about the City of London'). The use of identities like London and the metropolis became more common from 1814, beginning with the campaign about the repeal of Elizabethan apprenticeship laws.[29] As the examples given above suggest, these wider areas were invoked most frequently by work and trade groups, which accounted for almost 70%; under 20% were described as emanating from inhabitants.

An innovation from 1830 was to submit petitions from meetings that did not claim to be from any locality: for example, a petition about stamp duty on newspapers from a meeting at the Rotunda on 4 July 1831.[30] Categorising such petitions (17) was difficult. The meetings were open to all Londoners and petitioners did not define themselves in relation to a recognised locality. One such meeting in March 1831 concluded with a petition about parliamentary reform that recited it was agreed at 'a Public Meeting of the inhabitants of the Metropolis' but was recorded in the *Commons Journals* as from 'Julian Hibbert, chairman of a Public Meeting held at the Rotunda': the place associated with the petition was thereby reduced from the whole capital to one building.[31] These petitions are discussed here as part of the strategy for dealing with the scale of London, but their lack of connection to a place was part of their innovatory nature. No similar petitioning groups were identified in the northern region.

Despite this practice of petitioning from wide areas of the capital, 75% (380) of London petitions, and almost all (97%, 687) of northern petitions came from the more immediate locality — the parish or town. Figures 5.4 and 5.5 break these petitions down by locality

[29] *CJ*, 69 (1814), pp .213, 257, 262, 328.
[30] *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 754.
[31] *The Prompter*, 12 Mar. 1831; *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 405.

and by petitioning group. The northern towns were also parishes, sub-divided into townships. Petitions from the townships of Failsworth and Pilkington have been included in their parish of Manchester. Many Manchester petitions were joint from Manchester and Salford; on the few occasions that Salford petitioned alone (most frequently about religious matters) they have been counted with Manchester. Similarly, petitions from Lees were included in Ashton; those from Royton in Oldham. There were a handful of petitions from other townships in these parishes. For London, the chart also includes the wider geographical area; the height of this compared to the other columns shows how significant supra-parochial petitioning was for trade and work issues.

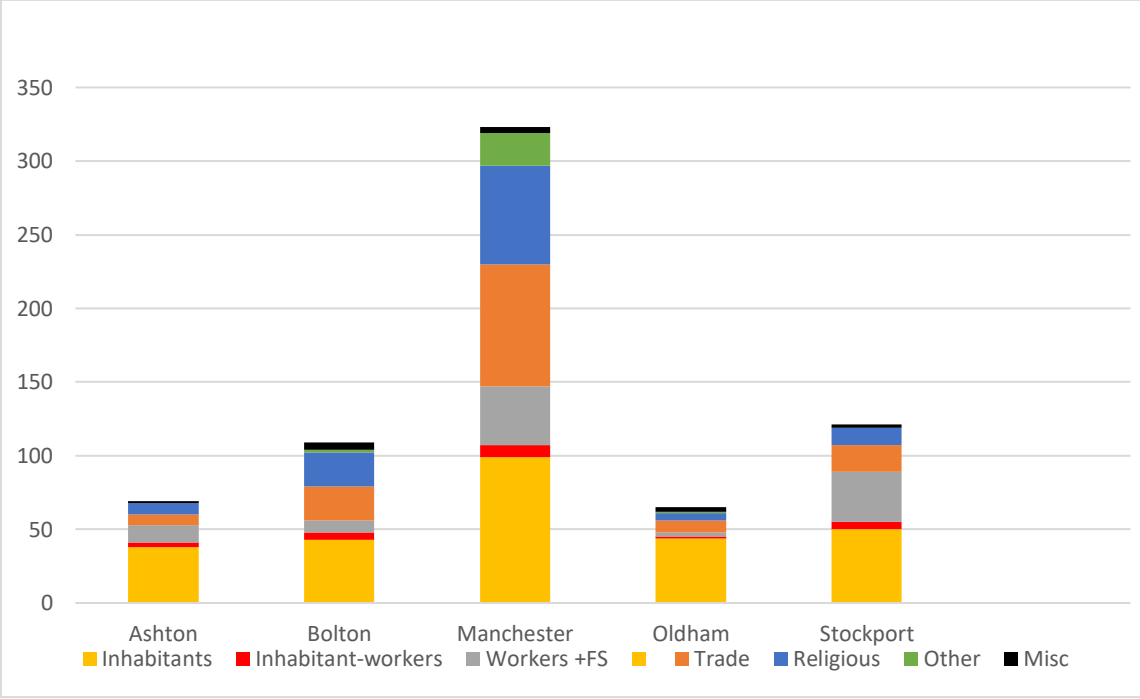
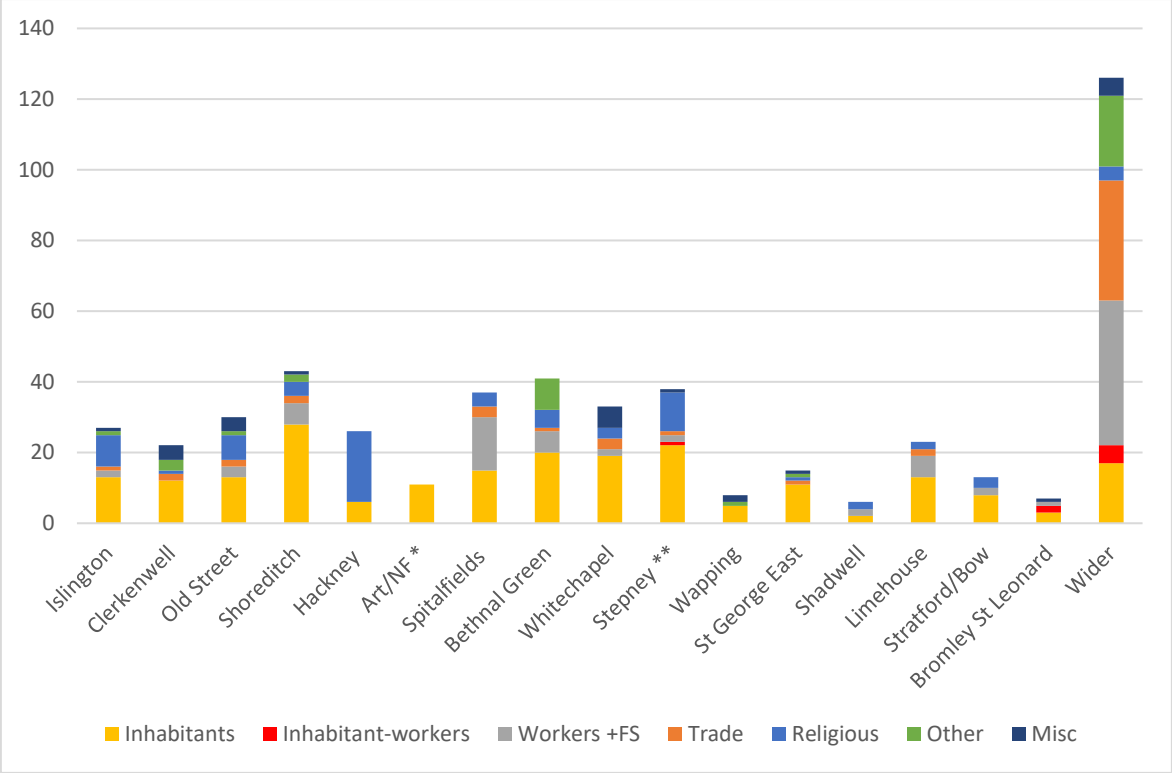


Figure 5.4: Northern petitions to the Commons broken down by town and petitioning group



**Old Artillery, Norton Folgate, ** Stepney inc. Mile End, Poplar and Ratcliff.*

Figure 5.5: London petitions to the Commons broken down by parish (or liberty) and petitioning group

5.3 Sectional interests.

Connecting the identities assumed by petitioners to the subject of their petitions reveals who they considered to have standing to petition on different issues. As will be shown in these decades sectional groups interpreted what their interests encompassed narrowly and generally limited their campaigning to issues that concerned their members *qua* members. This left a wide range of issues to be addressed by general, rather than sectional, identities, usually inhabitants. Religious groups, trade groups and workers are discussed in turn.

Petitioning by religious groups in both study areas was dominated by Dissenters, but, although believed by contemporaries and historians to be a politically engaged group, throughout this period they only petitioned as Dissenters on a limited range of causes. Petitioning by other religious groups (Anglicans, Catholics and Jews) was rarer and even

more restricted in subject matter.[32] One change was that in the 1810s Dissenters began petitioning using the identity of their congregations, thus connecting themselves to their localities. The 1730s campaign for repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts had been channelled through the committee of the Dissenting Deputies.[33] In the similarly directed campaign in 1789, for the first time Dissenters formed committees in localities to campaign for repeal, but the bill was lost before they could petition. Anglicans in the localities, inspired by this innovation of the Dissenters, also campaigned against repeal.[34] After the 1789 Bill was lost, some Anglican groups rebadged as Church and King clubs and became active centres of loyalism and repression in the localities.[35] This perhaps influenced the approach Dissenters adopted in the early nineteenth century of using their congregations as petitioning identities (and organising bases) rather than forming separate local bodies. The first local petitions from Dissenters were against an 1811 Bill in the House of Lords that proposed to tighten up licensing of Dissenting preachers. The campaign was galvanised by a new body, the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty.[36] Its secretary, John Wilks, who had been an active Shoreditch vestryman, had recently become an influential vestry clerk for the parish of Old Street. This may explain why several dissenting chapels in the London study area petitioned the House of Lords against the Bill (there were none from any place further north than the Midlands).[37] The first petitions to the House of Commons from Dissenting congregations

[32] In the north all petitioning by other religious groups prior to 1831 was for/against Catholic emancipation, see: *CJ*, 74 (1819), p. 387; 82 (1827), p. 285; 83 (1828), pp. 264, 277, 332; 84 (1829), pp. 8, 114, 145. In 1831 there was one Anglican and one Catholic anti-slavery petitions, *CJ*, 86 (1831), pp. 444, 445. The Jews petitioned on their own behalf *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 487. In London, there was one Catholic petition *CJ*, 80 (1825), p. 319 and from the Jews opposing emancipation, 84 (1829), p. 115; Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, pp. 143-146 for dissenter petitioning.
[33] N.C. Hunt, *Two Early Political Associations: the Quakers and the Dissenting Deputies in the Age of Sir Robert Walpole* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 152-3, 158-9.
[34] Henriques, *Religious Toleration*, pp. 61-67.
[35] Thomas Walker, *A Review of the Some of the Political Events in Manchester…* (London, 1794), pp. 11-16.
[36] Davis, *Dissent in Politics*, pp. 155-169; the Methodists also organised petitions, Michael A. Rutz, 'The Politicizing of Evangelical Dissent, 1811-1813', *Parliamentary History*, 20 (2001), p. 197.
[37] *Journals of the House of Lords*, 48 (1811), pp. 298-320.

in the study areas were from Hackney in 1819 and Manchester in 1822, but the vast majority (around 95%) occurred from 1825 onwards, as illustrated by figures 5.2 and 5.3.[38]

Religious groups did not petition about wider issues, such as taxation or parliamentary reform. Prior to the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828, Dissenter congregational petitioning from the study areas was limited to matters concerning themselves, Catholic emancipation and anti-slavery (one petition). After repeal, they were active petitioners about Catholics, Jews, slavery, sati, the death penalty and education in Ireland. Such activity 'strengthened their own claim to equitable treatment', reflected their increased confidence following repeal and, probably, a more general loosening of petitioning identities that occurred towards the end of the period studied here.[39] That Dissenters did not before that time push their religious identity to the fore in wider causes is nicely exemplified by Cross Street, Unitarian Chapel in Manchester whose members included some of the main movers in Manchester's commercial and political circles and which was an important site of political networking.[40] Several members of the congregation organised and spoke at many of the town's public meetings.[41] The four identified petitions from Cross Street were, nevertheless, confined to matters of religion or morality.[42]

Commercial groups also only petitioned about matters they saw as relating to their business (which included the corn law). Their petitioning was mostly organised by *ad hoc* groups that assembled those practising one trade, such as cotton manufacturers,

[38] *CJ*, 74 (1819), p. 497; 77 (1822), p. 250; Innes, 'Legislation', p. 120; 1824 anti-slavery petitioning included several petitions from Dissenting congregations in other parts of the country.
[39] Civin, 'Slaves, Sati', p. 198.
[40] John, Seed 'Theologies of Power: Unitarianism and the Social Relations of Religious Discourse, 1800-50', in R. J. Morris (ed.), *Class, Power and Social Structure in British Nineteenth-Century Towns* (Leicester, 1986), pp. 108-56.
[41] Turner, *Reform and* Respectability, chapter 1.
[42] *CJ*, 77 (1822), p. 275; 83 (1828), p. 87; 84 (1829), p. 121; 86 (1830), p. 161.

ropemakers or butchers. On issues like the East India Company's charter some more widely constituted groups petitioned, like the 'merchants, traders and others interested in the East India and China trade'.[43] There were significantly more commercial petitions from the northern study region (142, including those from the Manchester Chamber of Commerce); only 52 came from the London study area. (Any petitions that included inhabitants alongside others in the recitals have been categorised as inhabitant-petitions.)

Commercial and other work-related groups seemed to have pulled back from the kind of wider matters with which some (though only ever a minority) had engaged in the late eighteenth century. In 1788 manufacturers of earthenware from Staffordshire and workers from Liverpool petitioned about the slave trade.[44] Petitioners for and against the Two Acts in 1795 included the East India Company and some workers.[45] Such petitioning rarely re-occurred in the early nineteenth century. Even an 1817 petition from 'the occupiers of warehouses' about the House and Windows tax (a public matter that garnered wide attention) limited its complaints to the impact on Manchester warehouse owners.[46] In 1831 the Manchester Chamber of Commerce resolved that the Reform Bill was not within their remit of promoting and protecting the town's trading interests. Only when it was noted that as most masters did not reside near their work premises they would not have a vote for the new Manchester MPs, was it agreed that the chamber should memorialise government on the question of limiting the franchise to householders.[47] (The Scottish Chambers, particularly Edinburgh's, took a different approach and petitioned about several general

[43] *CJ*, 67 (1812), p. 356.
[44] Civin, 'Slaves, Sati', p. 191; *CJ*, 43 (1788), p. 220.
[45] *Two Acts*, pp. 306 (publicans), 310 (booksellers), 334 (journeymen from various trades), 504 (shipwrights), 506 directors of the East India Company.
[46] *CJ*, 72 (1817), p. 146.
[47] MALH, GB.127.M8/2/2/305: Proceedings of the Chamber of Commerce and Manufactures of Manchester, 18 Apr. 1831.

issues, including reform and slavery.[48]) Petitions from Chambers are discussed further below.

Campaigning about non-work matters by trades was also limited in extent, even after the repeal of the Combination Act in 1824. Although there were more exceptions than those identified in relation to the interest groups already discussed, nonetheless 94% of northern and around 83% of London trade petitions were about work-related issues. How workers organised in this period is the subject of chapter 8, but the point here can be illustrated by the few petitions submitted by the trades seeking parliamentary reform. From the northern region, there was only one, that from the cabinet makers in 1831. That the textile workers of Lancashire did not petition about parliamentary reform as textile workers tells us much about the conventions of petitioning at this time. (In London there were five petitions about reform from the trades, three of which were from the carpenters.[49]) Only petitions from groups defined by their trade (weavers, shipbuilders) are here defined as worker-petitions. Petitions that described workers in language that referenced their status (mechanics and artisans) are categorised as from worker-inhabitants and are discussed below.

5.4 Inhabitants.

In these early decades of the nineteenth century inhabitant was the main identity used to express opinions in the public interest and could be adopted about all matters, regardless of the nature of the topic. In the study areas, inhabitants were the largest petitioning group by number of petitions, but the significance of the identity becomes clearer when causes that were also promoted under the identities of the sectional groups discussed above are excluded. The tables 5.1 and 5.2 provide the totals of petitions broken down by petitioning

[48] *CJ*, 86 (1831), pp. 371, 408.
[49] *CJ*, 72 (1817), p. 144; 86 (1831), pp. 310, 408, 415 ,534.

group. The third column shows the outcome when matters that related to trade and work were excluded. The number of inhabitant-petitions falls (inhabitants also petitioned about trade and work questions) but increases as a proportion of the total numbers of petitions. The fourth column also excludes religious matters and slavery. These were central questions that exercised the nation over the period and not sectional causes, but the number of petitions from dissenting congregations in the later years of the period studied obscures the significance of the identity of inhabitant. The absolute number of inhabitant-petitions again falls but represents an increased proportion of the total (note also how the gap in the number of petitions for the two study areas narrows with each exclusion). The 'other' category, which is the next biggest group, largely consists of new petitioning identities that appeared from 1830 (and is discussed below).

Table 5.1: Northern petitions by petitioning identity

Petitioning Group	**All petitions**	**Excluding work and trade ***	**Also excluding religion/slavery**
Inhabitants	275 (38.7%)	221 (54.8%)	176 (69.3%)
Inhabitant-workers	22 (3.1%)	8 (2%)	8 (3.15%)
Trade	142 (20%)	17 (4.21%)	17 (6.7%)
Workers and FS	113 (16%)	7 (1.73%)	7 (2.7%)
Religious	115 (16.2%)	115 (28.53%)	11 (4.35%)
Other	29 (4.1%)	24 (6%)	24 (9.45%)
Miscellaneous	14 (1.9%)	11 (2.73%)	11 (4.35%)
TOTALS	**710 (100%)**	**403 (100%)**	**254 (100%)**

Table 5.2: London petitions by petitioning identity

Petitioning Group	All petitions	Excluding work and trade	Also excluding religion/slavery
Inhabitants	218 (43%)	181 (53.55%)	148 (63.8%)
Inhabitant-workers	8 (1.5%)	4 (1.18%)	4 (1.7%)
Trade	40 (7.9%)	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.43%)
Workers and FS	100 (19.8%)	13 (3.84%)	13 (5.6%)
Religious	76 (15%)	76 (22.48%)	7 (3.02%)
Other	38 (7.5%)	37 (10.95%)	36 (15.55%)
Miscellaneous	27 (5.3%)	26 (7.7%)	23 (9.9%)
TOTALS	**507 (100%)**	**338 (100%)**	**232 (100%**

* Excluded topics were assorted trade matters, duties, the East India Company, combination laws, work and wage regulation and friendly societies.

The significance of inhabitant-petitions lies not just in their volume and variety of subject matter, but also that they were *the* way to express opinions as members of the public. Miller noted that the proportion that inhabitant-petitions bore to annual totals varied depending on the causes at issue in any year (60% in 1813-1814, but only 25% in the previous parliamentary session).[50] The phenomenon of expressing opinions in the public interest is, however, lost in comprehensive counting exercises. Petitions to the House of Commons between 1800 and 1832 submitted by inhabitants and inhabitant-workers (184 petitions from the northern area and 152 from the London — see the fourth columns of tables 5.1 and 5.2) expressed petitioners' views as members of the public on a wide range of matters: the corn law, income tax, house and window tax, parliamentary reform, the Queen, criminal laws, Ireland, debtors, suspension of habeas corpus, Peterloo, the Seditious Meetings legislation, newspapers, sati, cruelty to animals, children climbing

[50] Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, pp. 137-8.

chimneys, emigration, the Greeks, theatres and issues about royalty. Table 5.3 details the geographical spread of involvement in these causes. Only a few — the corn law for example — were also campaigned for using other identities and then the content of those representations was shaped by having been advanced by private-interest groups.[51] If people wanted to present arguments as being in the public interest, it was necessary to adopt a general identity and inhabitant was the most accessible and suitable.

Table 5.3: Numbers of petitions from inhabitants, by locality, on the main topics of national interest, 1814 - 1832 (for what is included in rights and miscellaneous see the description in the paragraph above).

	Corn Laws	Taxation and duties	Parl. reform	Religion	Slavery	Criminal laws + debtors	QC	Rights	Misc.
Manchester	8	9	19	8	10	5	1	9	6
Ashton	5		18	4	1	1		2	1
Bolton	6	1	9	6	2	2	1		2
Oldham	3	1	20	2	7			3	1
Stockport	5	2	17	1	4	1		2	5
Clerkenwell	1	5	1	1	2				1
Islington	2	3	2		2				1
Old Street	2	6	2	1			1		
Shoreditch	3	6	4	2	3		1		
Hackney	1	1	1		1				1
Spitalfields	1	4	5	2	1				
Bethnal Green	2	4	4	1			1	1	2
Whitechapel	2	6	1	2	2	1			1
St George	2	4	2			2	1		
Wapping	1	2	1			1			
Shadwell	1		1						
Limehouse	3	5	2			1	1		
Stepney inc. Mile End and Ratcliff	3	4	4		2				
Bow	1		2	1	1				
Bromley			1		1		1		1
Poplar	2	1	1	2	1				

[51] See chapter 9.

The changing ways inhabitant was presented in the recitals of petitions reveal efforts made to claim that the views expressed represented the collective views of the locality. Technically, if several individuals petitioned together what they said amounted to no more than the representations of the signatories. This was explicit in many of the early nineteenth-century petitions from the study areas. Petitions about the corn law in 1805 from Bolton, Stockport and Manchester were from 'several manufacturers, tradesmen, labourers and other inhabitants' and petitions for peace from several towns in the region in 1808 were from the 'undersigned inhabitants'.[52] From the later 1810s, however, petitions were more frequently expressed as being from 'the inhabitants', without limitation. This was chiefly evident in petitions to the Commons, which was more accepting of the formulations that petitioners chose for themselves than was the House of Lords.[53] (Other efforts to claim that petitions represented the views of the community are discussed in chapter 7).

Inhabitant might seem an obvious petitioning identity — that was part of its attraction — but understanding how and why it became so central is connected to other changes in the practices of organising. In a recent analysis of petitioning from 1660 to 1788, Philip Loft also found analysing petitions by subject and the identity of petitioners revealing. He noted that what he termed 'initiatory petitioning' (not responding to a parliamentary Bill) 'remained the preserve of members of corporations and the electorate in many petitioning campaigns to 1780' and only occasionally specified the support of inhabitants within boroughs (not in county petitions).[54] At least three strands of change from the later eighteenth century drove the trend of inhabitant being more frequently employed as a

[52] *CJ*, 60 (1805), pp. 83, 97, 176; *CJ*, 63 (1808), pp. 88, 92, 109.
[53] Compare Whitechapel's petitions to both houses against Catholic relief in Mar. 1821; *Journals of the House of Lords*, 54 (1821), p. 125; *CJ*, 76, p. 172; *Manchester Mercury*, 16 Feb. 1813 mentions the strictness of the House of Lords.
[54] Loft, 'Petitioning and Petitioners', p. 350; Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, p. 136.

petitioning identity: non-voters started signing petitions from parliamentary boroughs; petitions came from towns that were corporate boroughs but the petition did not emanate from their corporate body; and petitions came from towns that lacked those structures. To illustrate these general trends, we will enlarge the scope of the discussion to England at large.

When the residents of towns that were neither parliamentary nor corporate boroughs began to express their views about matters of national concern in the eighteenth century, they generally did so as inhabitants. So, in 1775 Manchester submitted an address about the conflict with America from the 'gentlemen, clergy, merchants, manufacturers and principal inhabitants' of the town.[55] These towns lacked corporate bodies or electoral identities. Their residents could (and often did) express opinions on the same issues under the identity of men of business.[56] However, if they wanted to present their views as not just those of an interest but of the place, inhabitant was a general identity with some inherent legitimacy that could be readily adopted.

A second development was that representations from towns that were corporate boroughs sometimes emanated from inhabitants instead of, or in addition to, an expression of opinion from the official corporate body. For example (as was noted in chapter 3), Nottingham sent two addresses in favour of conciliation of America, one from the corporate body and one from the inhabitants, both making similar arguments.[57] Petitions against the slave trade in 1788 and 1792 came from inhabitants not only from towns like Manchester and Bolton, but also from some corporate boroughs.[58] Again, some corporate

[55] *General Evening Post*, 12 Sept. 1775; Innes and Rogers, 'Politics and Government', p. 562 and table at p. 564.
[56] See the petition of the merchants and manufacturers of Birmingham about America, *CJ*, 30 (1766), p. 465; Loft, 'Petitioning and Petitioners', p. 358 noted that Manchester petitioned 150 times about parliamentary bills during the eighteenth century but does not breakdown the identities adopted.
[57] *London Evening Post*, 31 Oct.- 2 Nov. 1775.
[58] *CJ*, 43 (1788), p. 250 (Coventry); 47 (1792) p. 479 (Colchester).

towns sent two petitions, one from the corporate body and one from inhabitants (for example, Coventry in 1792).[59]

This practice probably owed much to the declining status of and respect for corporate bodies over the course of the eighteenth century. The increasing value placed on a seat in the Commons after 1689 undermined the perceived integrity of municipal structures which were increasingly seen as either partisan or corrupt (if not both).[60] Many corporate bodies acquired stable party allegiances that tainted their ability to claim to represent a locality's opinion about national matters — to distance themselves from party and represent their views as those of the public. The fading importance of the freedom of towns, guilds and apprenticeships also undermined corporate bodies. The proportion and sometimes the numbers of freemen tended to diminish, so that they became increasingly unrepresentative of the strata of society who had previously identified with them.[61] In the words of the Webbs:

> we see, in all but half a dozen exceptional Corporations, the Freemen gradually passing out of the life of the town; in all cases declining relatively to the population; usually steadily sinking in absolute numbers, sometimes down to an insignificant handful; often becoming largely non-resident and interested merely in returning to Parliament the nominee of the patron of the borough.[62]

A third strand of change throughout the eighteenth century, but particularly from mid-century, was that numerous statutory and voluntary bodies increasingly took on the management of the infrastructure and other services in towns. These many voluntary endeavours were generally subscribed to and managed by prominent inhabitants; many

[59] *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 9-12 Mar. 1792.
[60] Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman* (Oxford, 1991), p. 215-21 and chapter 4 generally; H. T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 1994, chapter 3.
[61] Withington, *Politics of Commonwealth*, especially pp. 34-5.
[62] Webb and Webb, *Manor and the Borough*, pp. 390-6, quote, p. 396.

were funded by rates payable by householding inhabitants.[63] These developments, relevant to both the decline of corporate bodies and the forging of urban identities in non-corporate towns, amplified inhabitant as an identity and enhanced its status.[64] The practice of non-voters signing petitions from parliamentary boroughs, identified by John Phillips and discussed in the introductory chapter, was probably similarly influenced.[65] Lastly, a process of emulation must have assisted to spread the use of the identity of inhabitant.

Reasons why inhabitant became so popular as a political identity can also be found in the practices and rhetoric of early nineteenth-century organising. Arranging meetings to discuss and agree representations could be based around established methods of calling inhabitant-meetings that existed across the country (see chapter 6). Inhabitant was a unifying identity that allowed those who lived in localities with disparate governance structures to make common cause. A legitimising rhetoric of civic mindedness that was presented as the motivation for interventions in the public interest could most appropriately be constructed around a neutral identity like inhabitant, rather than one that could be perceived as having been confected for partisan ends, or as embodying some specific interest (chapter 7). Sectional groups might have both internal reasons not to engage in activity beyond their core purposes (it could be divisive and open to challenge by members) and sometimes external; legislative restrictions continued to affect trade

[63] Wilson, 'Urban Culture'.
[64] Rosemary Sweet, *The English Town, 1680-1840: Government, Society and Culture* (Harlow, 1999), pp. 40-52; Jonathan Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism? Urban Association and the Middling Sorts' in Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (eds.) *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 84-112.
[65] Phillips, 'Popular Politics'.

societies' campaigning activities even after repeal of the combination acts in 1824 (chapter 8).

It might be suggested that the prominence of inhabitant as a petitioning identity arises here from the circumstances that the two study areas did not contain boroughs. What has been said already suggests this trend was more general and why. Some more evidence can be adduced to indicate that parliamentary and corporate boroughs in the early nineteenth century also favoured using the identity of inhabitant for collective representations. First, table 5.4 details the general identities adopted in petitions to the Commons from ten of the larger, well-known parliamentary (and corporate) boroughs in several major causes over the period. Inhabitant was the most deployed identity, sometimes wrapped up with other identities, often on its own. It is striking how little use was made of electoral identities given that all these boroughs had what were for the period significant electorates, ranging from 1,300 in Exeter, to Bristol's 7,000.[66] York appears from this sample to have continued to use corporate and electoral identities more than other places. Only Worcester's corporation petitioned in its own name. As a second test, the identities adopted in petitions from all English parliamentary and corporate boroughs were considered for three periods of agitation. Only a handful of petitions from such towns against the Corn Bill in 1815 mentioned freeholders or freemen; references to corporate structures were even rarer and tended to also mention inhabitants. Many borough petitions used only the identity of inhabitant.[67] Inhabitant was also the generally preferred identity in the 1824 petitions that opposed slavery: limited use was made of borough structures and almost none of voters.[68] In 1828 repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and opposition to Catholic relief raised

[66] Voter figures from History of Parliament website, 1820-1832, http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/research/constituencies-1820-1832 (10 Jan. 2014).
[67] 'Petitions against any Alterations of the Corn Law', *CJ*, 70 (1814-1815), Index.
[68] 'Petitions for the Abolition of Slavery', *CJ*, 79 (1824), Index.

long-standing issues that affected the established religion and might have been expected to bring corporate bodies and voters to the fore. However only a handful of corporations petitioned: a few petitions included freeholders in the petitioning identity (invariably also including inhabitants) but these were a small minority.[69]

Table 5.4: Sample of general petitioning identities used by selected parliamentary boroughs.

Boroughs	1815 corn	1816 property tax	1821 QC	1824 slavery	1827 corn
Bristol	Householders and other inhabitants	/	/	Gentlemen, clergy, bankers and others	Inhabitants
Colchester	Inhabitants	/	/	Inhabitants	Inhabitants
Coventry	Several inhabitants	Inhabitants	/	/	/
Exeter	Clergy, gentlemen, freemen, freeholders and inhabitants	Inhabitants	/	Inhabitants	/
Leicester	Manufacturers, traders and other inhabitants	/	Inhabitants	Inhabitants	Manufacturers and others
Liverpool	Inhabitants	Inhabitants	Inhabitants	/	Gentlemen, clergy, merchants and other inhabitants
Newcastle	Manufacturers, traders and other inhabitants	/	/	/	/
Norwich	/	Inhabitants	Inhabitants	Inhabitants	/
Worcester	/	/	/	Corporation	/
York	Citizens and inhabitants	Mayor and commonalty in common council	Freemen and inhabitants	/	/

5.5 Some diversifications.

This section explores the changing repertoire of behaviours adopted by societies, together with some fracturing of the identity of inhabitant, in the final years of the period studied. Both developments established new petitioning, and therefore organising, identities. Once

[69] 'Petitions for and against repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts' and 'Petitions about Roman Catholic Claims', *CJ*, 83 (1828), Index.

again, to appreciate what was new we need to begin with an outline of eighteenth-century practices.

The famous eighteenth-century societies did not petition directly. The SSBR played only an indirect role in the 1769 Wilkite petitions from counties and parliamentary boroughs, with some individual members of the society using their influence to help secure petitions from places where they were freeholders.[70] The bodies formed during the Association Movement (from 1779) developed from and remained closely connected to traditional petitioning bodies: county or parliamentary borough meetings agreed petitions and established Associations to co-ordinate further activity. Exceptionally, in 1781 a group of delegates from some of the Associations petitioned the Commons. Following debate about whether their petition should be seen as emanating from the thirty-two freeholders of several counties who had signed it or from the delegates of the counties, the Commons deemed both inappropriate and rejected the petition.[71] Nor was petitioning for parliamentary reform a core activity of the radical societies established in the 1790s. In the words of Thomas Hardy, in 1793 petitions were 'promoted' by the different societies in their localities, 'not in their capacities of members of the societies but as members of the community'.[72] Exceptionally, in November 1795 at what was termed a General Meeting of the LCS attended by tens of thousands, petitions to both Houses were agreed from 'nearly four hundred thousand Britons, inhabitants of London and its Environs' (around fifteen thousand signed).[73] By adopting the identity of inhabitants, albeit not linking this to a recognised locality, the petitioners sought to distract attention from what was otherwise

[70] Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*, chapter 7 and appendix 7.
[71] *Parliamentary Register (1780-1796)*, 3 (1781) pp. 95-166; Black, *The Association*, chapter 2.
[72] Thomas Hardy, 'Memoir of Thomas Hardy', ed. David Vincent, *Testaments of Radicalism: Memoirs of Working-Class Politicians, 1790-1885* (London, 1977), p. 55.
[73] *Selections*, pp. 322-7.

unprecedented; a meeting without official sanction, called by a society, attended by multitudes and agreeing a petition.

Trade provided a safe context for experimenting with extending the acceptable approaches, with commercial societies early exponents of petitioning using the identity of a society. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce led the way in direct petitioning in the 1780s but, as noted above, seem to have operated on a slightly different basis to the English Chambers.[74] The Liverpool Chamber (one of the earliest established) preferred the traditional route of memorials to ministers or for its members to pursue town petitions.[75] The first English Chamber to petition as such seems to have been that of Birmingham in 1815 about the corn laws.[76] The Manchester Chamber, founded in 1820 petitioned from its inception, but sometimes judged a meeting of inhabitants preferable; the 1829 town meeting about the East India Company, for example, was called at the request of the Chamber.[77]

Societies became more rooted in the locality, mirroring the increased grass roots involvement that was previously noted in religious and philanthropic bodies.[78] The formation of the Lancashire Hampden Clubs in 1816 was announced at town meetings.[79] This was a public act confirmatory of what had already occurred. These town meetings advertised the Clubs' cause and made clear they were not clandestine or seditious but open, campaigning bodies. After their launch the Clubs operated independently from the locality, but when petitions for parliamentary reform were submitted these largely came from

[74] The Glasgow Chamber petitioned about the fustian duty, *CJ*, 40 (1785), p. 835; the Edinburgh Chamber about the slave trade, *CJ*, 43 (1788), p. 243.
[75] R. J., Bennett, *The Voice of Liverpool Business: the first Chamber of Commerce and the Atlantic Economy, 1774 - c.1796* (Liverpool, 2010), pp. 119-120.
[76] *CJ*, 70 (1815), p. 146.
[77] *CJ*, 76 (1821), p. 221; MALH, GB.127.M8/2/2/136: *Proceedings of the Chamber*, 25 Apr. 1829.
[78] See 2.3.4.
[79] For example, *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 29 Sept. 12 Oct. 1816; TNA, HO 42/154/162.

another round of town meetings; it is highly likely that those petitions were pre-drafted by leaders of the Clubs.[80]

A broad progression towards societies becoming more institutionalised and understood as having a continuous identity separate from their (changing) membership became evident in the early 1820s. Across the associational landscape, similar processes can be observed in the founding of societies formed for varied campaigning purposes that suggest a changing conception of their relationship to the public.[81] One practice that developed was to first announce the formation of a provisional committee whose role was to form the society, echoing the establishment of provisional governments after constitutional upheavals (as seen during the French Revolution and in post-Napoleonic re-arrangements). Only when those provisional committees had agreed rules and governance systems was the society formally established. This had the effect of suggesting that societies were somehow more than groups of private individuals and more like chartered bodies. The Manchester Chamber of Commerce was launched at a town meeting in 1820, with a provisional committee authorised to devise rules and appoint directors; in the interim, however, a petition to Parliament was submitted by the provisional committee.[82] The Manchester Political Union (established late 1830) began with a provisional committee with an executive council to be formed when there were five hundred members.[83]

In the 1820s the practice whereby Chambers of Commerce petitioned Parliament using their own identity was adopted by some other societies. The nature of the causes involved and the gradual approach taken demonstrates once again how cautiously activists extended

[80] *CJ*, 72 (1817) p. 128 (Manchester and Salford, Ashton, Oldham, Stockport, Failsworth); *CJ*, 72 (1817) pp. 117, 124; Poole, *Peterloo*, chapter 5.
[81] Allpress, *British Philanthropy*, identified a similar transition in philanthropic societies, p. 2.
[82] Arthur Redford, *Manchester Merchants and Foreign Trade, 1794-1858* (Manchester, 1934), pp. 69-70.
[83] Turner, *Reform and Respectability*, p. 300.

methods of campaigning. 'Loyal and Constitutional' Agricultural Associations (established from 1819) were presided over by a general committee that encouraged the formation of county societies, which in turn formed branch bodies. Drafts prepared by the general committee were adopted by the branches in their meetings but expressed as being from 'several occupiers of land in …', rebranding what were in substance petitions from the society.[84] The preparation of petitions by a specialist group was not new: what was new was not only that a formal body took on the drafting and diffusing, but it publicised reports that made this explicit. Agriculture was considered a conservative business, with which many parliamentarians had personal connections, and this probably helped these bodies escape scrutiny. Other societies began to submit petitions in the name of their secretary or chairman, as though from an individual but stating their relationship to the society. The Society for the Encouragement of Industry and the Reduction of Poor Rates which also concerned itself especially though not exclusively with rural problems (notably promoting allotments) and too unimportant to attract criticism, petitioned in this manner from around 1820.[85] The society also organised petitions that were left for signature in a public place, in other words not just by members. A petition about the industrious poor presented as being from the inhabitants of Middlesex in 1823 was one such.[86] These activities demonstrate how, especially in London, organisations might exist without a well-defined geographical base, spanning (and sometimes representing themselves as spanning) several localities. Finally, the breakthrough that established petitioning in a society's name more firmly came during the abolition campaign in late 1826 when a few anti-slavery societies petitioned

[84] Crosby, *English Farmers*, chapters 2 and 3; *Origins and Proceedings of the Agricultural Associations... for the Use of Both Houses…* (London, 1820); 'Agricultural Distress', *CJ*, 75 (1819-20), Index; *Northampton Mercury*, 13, 20 Nov. 1819.
[85] Innes, 'Seeing Like a Surveyor', pp. 71-4.
[86] *Northampton Mercury*, 1 Feb. 1823; *CJ*, 78 (1823), p. 124; a joint petition with Surrey probably also originated with the society, 83 (1828), p. 121; included here in the 'wider' category discussed in section 2.

using their own identities.[87] Combining both moral and economic questions, the abolition campaigns generally enjoyed more latitude than was accorded to other causes. This extension of the repertoire of behaviours available to societies enabled women to participate more fully in some campaigns.[88]

In a further extension to petitioning practices, in the 1830s petitions were submitted from some societies established to campaign for parliamentary reform — and were accepted by the Commons. This practice warrants being described as an extension because of the nature of the cause: an attempt to alter how the House of Commons was constituted represented something more challenging than the issues on which societies had directly petitioned previously. Many of the Political Unions in the big towns did not themselves petition and, like that of Birmingham, continued mainly to rely on petitions from inhabitants.[89] Several small unions, however, petitioned as such, including that of Cropper Street, Manchester and unions in Clerkenwell, Shoreditch and Bethnal Green.[90] Although information is limited, these appear to have been formally constituted bodies (not merely a loose group present at a meeting who adopted a fashionable label).

There were also important changes during the later 1820s to the identities that working people might adopt to petition. The categorisation here of petitions as from inhabitant-workers refers to petitioning identities that referenced workers not by their specific trade but by collective descriptions (like artisans). It attempts to capture a petitioning identity that bridged trades and inhabitants. The majority (76%) were from 1824 onwards (beginning when the repeal of the Combination Laws was under discussion); seven were

[87] *CJ*, 82 (1826), p. 116.
[88] See Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, Richardson, *Political Worlds* and Midgley, *Women Against Slavery* for women's involvement in campaigning societies from the later 1820s onwards.
[89] LoPatin, *Political Unions*, chapter 1 and 2; the BPU appears to have only petitioned once, *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 933 (to request the King made more peers; the urgency may explain the petitioning identity.)
[90] *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 820; 87 (1832), pp. 251, 417, 513; *The Ballot* (1831) reported the activities of several parochial unions.

from the London region, twenty-two from the northern region. At first these identities were used for work related matters (like the combination laws or distress suffered by cotton workers).[91] It was not until the anti-corn law campaign in 1826 that petitions from generally defined groups of workers touched on matters of wide public interest, and not until 1831 was parliamentary reform pursued using such identities.[92] The self-description used by this category of petitioners also showed a marked progression away from earlier formulations like artisans, journeymen and mechanics towards descriptions like 'the working community of Manchester' (1826) and then 'the working classes of Manchester' (1827).[93] This self-presentation as a public-interest group and a sub-set of the locality amounted to a fracturing of the identity of inhabitant, an explicit admission of representing only a part, defined by social status. The shift in self-perception reflected in their public representation — from 'journeymen and workmen residing in and about London' who complained about the combination laws in 1800, to the 'working classes of the metropolis' who petitioned for parliamentary reform in 1831 — was accompanied by changes in techniques of organisation that are explored in later chapters.[94]

Following years of striving to present one voice from the locality, we find late in our period groups that made no attempt to suggest they represented more than one strand of opinion or a kind of sub-identity. In that process, they either abandoned the identity of inhabitant for a partisan one (not meaning a party-partisan one, but that of a cause-specific society) or fractured the representation of the locality. Petitions that used these identities account for the majority of those classified here as 'other' and included not only petitions emanating from the Political Unions and other societies established to campaign for

[91] *CJ*, 66 (1811), p. 383; 79 (1824), p. 217.
[92] *CJ*, 81 (1826), p. 107; 86 (1831), p. 645; see chapter 8.
[93] *CJ*, 66 (1811), p. 383; 79 (1824), pp. 211, 217, 265; 80 (1825), pp. 461, 605; 81 (1826), p. 107; 82 (1827), p. 233.
[94] *CJ*, 55 (1800), p. 645; 86 (1831), p. 645.

reform, but also some arising from *ad hoc* meetings unconnected to any locality. The phenomenon was clearest in London, but the approach was evident in both study areas (table 5.5). That the identity of inhabitant made it difficult for Londoners to organise outside their parishes was touched on in the discussion about place at the beginning of this chapter and is returned to in the next two chapters. New petitioning identities late in the period provided a partial solution to this challenge. As was noted earlier, meetings at the Rotunda in London that agreed several petitions abandoned all connection to a locality or to the identity of inhabitant, submitting petitions in the name of their chair.[95] In the northern region, particularly Manchester, there were petitions from small parts of the town. Cropper St (identified by Katrina Navickas as a radical locale of eighty-three houses) not only had its own Political Union but also petitioned as the inhabitants of Cropper Street about slavery, parliamentary reform, the corn law and Peterloo; additionally, the single and married women of the street petitioned about a collection of issues that included trade with China, slavery and the price of provisions; the street's Welsh Calvinists petitioned against slavery and the street's Protestant inhabitants about education in Ireland.[96] Also in Manchester, the inhabitants of London Road, and of districts two and four (the numbers probably refer to rating divisions) petitioned about parliamentary reform and district six about the corn laws.[97] That such activity seems to have occurred especially in Manchester suggests that the town, which by 1831 had a population of 700,000, was experiencing some of the challenges that had long been grappled with in London.

[95] *CJ*, 86, (1831), p. 686.
[96] Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 111-14; *CJ*, 86 (1831), pp. 209, 444, 592, 660; 87 (1832), pp. 90, 333, 513, 650.
[97] *CJ*, 85 (1830), p. 149; 86 (1831), pp. 817, 831, 838.

Table 5.5: 1830 and later petitions from groups classified as ‘other’ in the two regions.

London		**Northern**	
Reform Association	4	Reform Association	2
NUWC	5		
Political Unions	12	Political Unions	6
Rotunda meetings	7	Parts of Manchester	5
Chair	4	Chair	2
Various others	2	Various others	7
Total	34		22

5.6 Conclusion.

The changes outlined in this chapter occurred unevenly and sometimes inconsistently. It is, nevertheless, possible to trace a line of progression in ideas — on the part of both Parliament and the public — about the identities deemed appropriate for public-interest petitioning: from counties, corporate bodies and voters in the 1760s and following decades; to inhabitants of towns (and smaller localities); and then ultimately a burgeoning of identities — parts of localities, societies and *ad hoc* meetings. The ultimate expression of the extent of this diversification in petitioning identities were petitions from individuals about constitutional reform; in 1781 the Commons rejected the petition of 32 freeholders of the major counties of England as inappropriate; in 1831 it accepted one from Thomas Walker of Old Street, requesting election by ballot.[98]

By the end of the period societies were beginning to offer new possibilities as petitioning vehicles but were far from replacing inhabitants as the preferred public-interest identity. The abolition campaign, for example, backed by what was probably the most extensive and active network of all the cause-specific campaigning societies of the period, rarely took advantage of the newly available opportunity to petition as a society. Rather, as the

[98] *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 310.

secretary of the local anti-slavery society wrote to the Clerkenwell vestry in October 1830 'it is most desirable that the petition should emanate from a public meeting' (in other words of inhabitants).[99] That continued to be the opinion of most who campaigned about political questions at this time. Inhabitant was, however, an identity that presented challenges to those seeking to organise in the capital.

[99] London, Islington Local History Centre [hereafter ILHC], LBI/PVM/1, St James Clerkenwell Vestry Minutes [hereafter CVM], 17 Oct. 1830.

6: Locality meetings

The pre-eminence of inhabitant as a political identity was underpinned by the advantages, but also the challenges, that accompanied the use of locality meetings to campaign in the public interest. This chapter explores the changing methods of organising meetings of the towns and parishes where people lived in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, especially between 1810 and 1830. How meetings were called affected not only where they were held and other practical questions, but also who counted — and felt they counted — as an inhabitant.

6.1 Introduction.

1795 provides a starting point from which to assess late eighteenth-century approaches to inhabitant-meetings and look forward to those of the early nineteenth century. Meetings of counties and of corporate towns, called by their appropriate officers, were the only meetings excluded from the Seditious Meetings Act 1795. This reflected an understanding that only they were the appropriate bodies to advance collective representations in the public interest, but nevertheless wider than the permitted groups defined by the Tumultuous Petitioning Act 1661, so also illustrative of a shift in attitudes.[1] Even by the late eighteenth century the rise of inhabitant as a political identity strained this understanding, for in recent decades many inhabitant-petitions had been agreed at meetings that fell outside these categories. Lord Sheffield's scepticism in 1795 about a Bristol petition that 'came neither from the corporation, nor from a body of merchants but from the people indiscriminately' captured the discomfort felt by many in authority at public-interest petitions from *ad hoc* groups.[2]

[1] 36 Geo. III, c. 8; 13 Car. II, c. 4; Fraser, 'Public Petitioning', p. 200.
[2] *Two Acts*, p. 366.

There was no right to meet, but that some organisers asserted that there was a traditional right has obscured the process whereby, partly by organic development and partly (from the 1790s) in response to the authorities, an approach was developed whereby most such meetings were gradually accepted as legitimate and even appropriate.[3] Meetings of inhabitants to discuss issues that affected the internal management of villages and towns had a long, fuzzy history. Local meetings were probably part of the response to the challenges of urban growth in the eighteenth century. Improvements to infrastructure could be expected to impact on current usage and might entail local taxation. Applications to Parliament for local acts needed to demonstrate community consultation and, if possible, wide support. These broad trends applied across most urban centres, including corporate towns.[4] In smaller localities, meetings of the parish and vestry were used for similar consultative purposes (local acts in the metropolis were often parish-specific). The need for wide buy-in meant that meetings were advertised around the locality. The system was customary and largely taken for granted. These meetings had legitimacy in the eyes of inhabitants (the identity that was generally assembled) and local and national authorities. When a desire arose to campaign in the public interest, they offered a familiar and seemingly acceptable method of organising. That this was largely uncontroversial means that its relative novelty can be overlooked.

Events of the 1790s led many campaigners to reappraise how they should proceed. So far as the wider public was concerned, political societies became less attractive. Even the radicals came to appreciate the possible advantages of campaigning through other forms. John Baxter, the ultra-radical member of the LCS (and Shoreditch vestryman) captured this when, in 1795, he wrote that societies ‘are not a body recognised by the law, neither are

[3] Navickas, 'Contested Right’
[4] For example, *St James Chronicle*, 14 Feb. 1778 (Reading); *Stamford Mercury*, 13 May 1785 (Hull); *Manchester Mercury*, 12 Dec. 1775 (Manchester); Sweet, 'Local Identities’.

they so well calculated to express the public mind as parish meetings, because there are many men, who though their sentiments are the same, will not join the one, who would attend the other'.[5]

Baxter's point illustrates the wider move towards using generally defined identities like inhabitant to campaign in the public interest, but there were other challenges. Parish meetings were not exempted from the 1795 Act nor, strictly speaking, were even officially called town meetings in the northern towns, for they were not corporate towns. A Bolton magistrate's complaint to the Home Office in 1816 that local officers had called a town meeting, which he argued only magistrates could authorise, illustrates the uncertain status of inhabitant-meetings.[6] As enforcement was in the hands of the same local authorities that called town meetings, the meetings were not in practice threatened. Nevertheless, their ambiguous standing shows that the system of local meetings was still in the process of creation. In a separate development (discussed in chapter 3), during the later eighteenth century competing petitions to Parliament from the same place that took opposing views increasingly cancelled each other out, with parliamentarians emphasising whichever they preferred.[7] The desire to claim that petitions authentically represented the views of the locality was a further impetus to establish the pre-eminence and legitimacy of inhabitant-meetings. These drivers meant that for groups who could not access officially called meetings, there was taken to be merit in getting as close to that model as possible, so that their meetings could claim to be *the* locality meeting.

Richard Huzzey recently explored the mechanics of how meetings were arranged.[8] Gradually, through the eighteenth century, requests for meetings to discuss specified

[5] John Baxter, *Resistance to Oppression, the Constitutional Rights of Britons* (London, 1795), p. 5.
[6] TNA, HO 42/153/497-8: 28 Sept. 1816, letter from Fletcher; Poole, *Peterloo*, pp. 92, 94.
[7] Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp. 215-7; Huzzey, 'Public Meetings' p. 193.
[8] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings'.

questions that were submitted to local officials became formalised as a standard type of document: the requisition. These set out the matter on which a meeting was sought and why it was needed and were signed by (often hundreds of) local men. In the later years of the century such requests were increasingly made public, often in newspapers. Whether officials were obliged to call meetings in response to requisitions was a matter of debate. If requisitions were refused, organisers sometimes proceeded to meet without official sanction. Huzzey suggests that requisitioning faded in significance after 1850 but left long-lasting 'imprints on the legal and political culture of the United Kingdom'.[9] He argues that requisitions provided a basis for contesting elite control of extra-parliamentary politics, *contra* James Vernon's argument that popular politics was increasingly 'disciplined' in the nineteenth century.[10] Although Huzzey's article overlaps with the arguments of this chapter, the narrower focus here, together with the method of connecting meetings and identities, reveals key changes between 1810 and 1830 that Huzzey did not identify.

That changes in the form gradually evolved is evidenced by the broadly chronological changes that can be tracked in the methods of organising meetings. The emergence of defined types of meetings distinguished by how they were convened can be identified, together with some less successful experiments. These organisational developments allowed the political identity of inhabitant to be appropriated by a broader range of people, contributing to the growing status and utility of that identity. The type of meeting arranged had consequences for who might and did play an active part. Discussions of the two regions explore differences between and within them, underlining the significance of local circumstances and highlighting the special problems of organising in the metropolis.

[9] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', p. 196
[10] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', p. 220.

Developing a taxonomy of inhabitant-meetings will help us to track changes in the methods of calling meetings in the public interest. Meetings called by local officials, generally having accepted a requisition but sometimes of their own volition, are here termed 'official meetings'. On occasion, local officers rejected requests, whereupon requisitionists might proceed to organise meetings themselves, usually publicising both the meeting and the rejection of their requisition. Such meetings are here, termed 'unofficial meetings'. The Seditious Meetings Act 1795 (and the subsequent 1817 and 1819 Acts) laid down procedures for calling all meetings of more than fifty people, other than those explicitly excluded from the ambit of the Acts. Meetings called using those procedures while those Acts were in force (the provisions were time-limited) are here termed 'statutory meetings'. Meetings called by advertisement without a prior request to the authorities are here termed 'advertised meetings'. Collectively the various inhabitant-meetings defined above are referred to as 'locality meetings'.

6.2 The northern study area.

Evidence about how locality meetings were organised in the northern area is uneven. Many sources evidence activity in Manchester, where several newspapers of varying political stamp were published and there are some extant official papers. Sources are more limited for Bolton and Stockport: they only acquired newspapers in the early 1820s, although events in the towns were sometimes reported in the Manchester papers; there are no surviving official files about these towns' meetings.[11] The sources for Oldham and Ashton are even thinner; they were mentioned less frequently in the Manchester newspapers, did not have their own newspapers within the period and there are no surviving official files about meetings.[12] Radical newspapers intermittently published in the region occasionally

[11] *Bolton Express*, 1823 to 1824; *Bolton Chronicle* from 1825; *Stockport Advertiser* from 1824.
[12] The papers of the Oldham journalist Edwin Butterworth begin only mid-1829.

provide details of meetings in all of the localities and the Home Office files contain some information.

6.2.1 Official meetings.

Official meetings in the northern towns were called by officers who were appointed by and operated within the residual medieval structures of administration: Manchester and Bolton each had a boroughreeve and constables; Stockport had a mayor, whilst both Ashton and Oldham had only constables.[13] The towns increasingly acquired additional structures to manage their growing urban centres. For example, the Manchester Police commissioners (established 1792) nominally included among their number the owners of any property rated at £30 p.a. or over and became the focus of administration for the town.[14] When organising to express opinions about national matters in these (and other) towns, meetings of inhabitants were nevertheless the preferred forum. Attempting to adapt statutorily formed bodies for these purposes would probably have been more controversial. Nor would meetings have been 'of inhabitants' which for reasons already outlined was the most suitable general campaigning identity. Furthermore, it assisted in establishing the legitimacy of interventions in the public interest that they came from occasions organised and constituted on a broadly similar basis across the nation.

Both the organisation and the conduct of official meetings were dominated by the leading men of these towns, but some working people attended and occasionally actively participated. The custom appeared to be that requisitions could be signed by any ley (rates)

[13] Poole, *Peterloo*, chapter 2 for a lucid description of Manchester's complex local government system; James Scholes, *History of Bolton* (Bolton, 1892), p. 470; Peter Arrowsmith, *Stockport a History* (Stockport, 1997), pp. 83,186. Winifred Bowman, *England in Ashton-under-Lyne* (Altringham, 1960), p. 634; John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London, 1974), pp. 56-59.
[14] Poole, *Peterloo*, p. 31; Scholes, *Bolton*, p. 465.

payer. Manchester rate books indicate that rates were collected on properties rated as low as £3, making many working people eligible to sign their own requisitions (as some did for the Peterloo meeting).[15] However, repeated emphasis on the status of requisitionists suggests that most came from the upper echelons of the towns. Edwin Butterworth, the Oldham-based journalist, described requisitionists there as 'respectable owners of property'.[16] Those who led meetings were often physically separated from attendees. Thus, at an official Manchester meeting 'the boroughreeve and constables appeared on the platform accompanied by a number of the principal requistionists'.[17] Occasional contributions from the floor began 'can a working man speak?' This was reported only from the later 1820s and we do not know whether the involvement of working people was new or whether it was the self-labelling and assertion of identity that had not occurred before.[18] Furthermore, by that date newspapers provided more frequent detailed reports of meetings. No mention was made in these of women attending official town meetings.

Official meetings came with a panoply of advantages. Not only were they the most secure legally and probably endowed in the public mind (and by Parliament) with the greatest legitimacy but official sanction also brought practical benefits. Space was readily available. The Manchester authorities' insisted that official meetings be held indoors, influenced probably first by the 1812 Exchange Riot and reinforced by Peterloo.[19] In 1831 the boroughreeve told the organisers of an official reform meeting that they could choose the biggest indoor space they could find, but he would not chair outdoors.[20] Several civic or commercial buildings in the town could accommodate large meetings: the Manor Court

[15] TNA, HO 42/154/429: October 1816, Manchester Bill Post; Poole, *Peterloo*, pp. 253-5; *PP* (1834), 10 (556), Select Committee on Hand Loom Weavers, pp. 501-2 for weavers as Manchester ratepayers.
[16] Oldham, Oldham Local Studies and Archives [hereafter OLSA], BUT/F/3, 9 Feb. 1831: Butterworth Papers.
[17] *Manchester Courier*, 27 Feb. 1830.
[18] *Manchester Gazette*, 19 Aug. 1826; *Manchester Times*,12 Mar., 2 July 1831.
[19] Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp. 241-2.
[20] *Morning Chronicle*, 15 Oct. 1831.

Room had a capacity of two thousand; the large room of the Exchange Building (opened in 1809) measured ten yards by thirty (which should have accommodated 600 or more); the Town Hall (opened 1825) held perhaps three thousand.[21] Bolton's indoor venues included the town's theatre (which could hold one thousand), the sessions room and the assembly room; in Oldham, the grammar school was used.[22] Officials in these towns did not share the Manchester authorities' aversion to outdoor meetings and, when the numbers attending required, would adjourn outside. Bellmen and town criers reminded inhabitants about official meetings. A further advantage of official meetings was that the town paid the expenses consequent on meeting (including advertising) and the costs associated with petitioning. The deliberations of the official 1816 Bolton reform meeting, for example, were extensively advertised at the expense of the town. [23]

6.2.2 Unofficial meetings.

What are here termed 'unofficial' meetings (organised after the rejection of a requisition) were rare in the later eighteenth century. A few requisitions for county meetings in the context of the Association Movement were rejected, with the meetings nevertheless proceeding without official sanction.[24] To have a peer of the realm ready to call a meeting was, however, a limited precedent. It has not been possible to identify further unofficial meetings until 1795 (nor does Huzzey seem to reference any).[25] A counter-requisition that unsuccessfully opposed a 1788 Manchester meeting suggests that requisitions were

[21] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 9 Dec. 1820; *The New Manchester Guide* (Manchester, 1815), p. 178; *Manchester Times*, 27 Feb. 1830; *Bolton Chronicle*, 12 Mar. 1830.
[22] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 7 Mar. 1812; TNA, HO 42/153/499: 26 Sept. 1816, letter, Lloyd; *Bolton Chronicle*, 23 Oct. 1827 & 23 Oct. 1830; OLSA, BUT/F/3, 14 Mar. 1831 and BUT/F/S, 5 Nov. 1831: Butterworth Papers.
[23] TNA, HO 42/153/496, Bill Post, 25 Sept. 1816; *Bolton Chronicle*, 26 May 1827; OLSA, BUT/F/9, August 1832; BUT/F/S, Feb. 1833: Butterworth Papers.
[24] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', p. 6.
[25] Word searches for 'requisition' in 17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers and British Library Newspapers, Parts I-V (1732-1950) for 1780 to 1795 produced circa 1400 hits, most in a military context; Huzzey, 'Public Meetings'.

occasionally rejected, but does not evidence a practice of meeting after rejection.[26] Newspaper reports in that century often paid more attention to petitions than to the meetings from which they emanated and (save for county meetings) it can be unclear how meetings had been arranged. The occasions for calling these kinds of locality meetings were not yet common. Furthermore, as Huzzey showed, the practice of making requisitions in the form of written, signed documents was relatively new.[27] That there was a lag, therefore, before a general practice developed of organising meetings after requisitions had been rejected is unsurprising. Nevertheless, it does seem that in 1795 the idea of holding an unofficial meeting was familiar. That year a Liverpool requisition for a meeting of inhabitants to discuss peace was rejected; the requisitionists decided not to oppose the decision by meeting anyway (indicating that the possibility had occurred to them) and instead prepared a petition to be left about the town. These events were widely reported, including in the London press.[28] Later that year when the Mayor of Northampton refused a requisition for a meeting to discuss a proposed new charter, the inhabitants organised their own meeting.[29] The rejection of a Manchester requisition in November 1795 for a meeting to oppose the Two Acts formed the background to the unofficial meeting then held.[30] Possibly, newspaper coverage of rejected requisitions was because of rising interest in how meetings might be organised.

Unofficial meetings became an established form only when petitioning and other extra-parliamentary activity resumed at scale in the 1810s. Several drivers already identified influenced this rise of unofficial meetings: post 1790s concerns to appear lawful and legitimate; the rise of inhabitants as a political identity; and the desire to be able to claim to

[26] *Manchester Mercury*, 30 Dec. 1788; 6, 13, 20 Jan. 1789.
[27] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', p. 189.
[28] *Sun* and *Courier*, 9 Feb. 1795.
[29] *Northampton Mercury*, 30 May 1795.
[30] *True Briton*, 20 Dec. 1795.

represent the views of the locality. Unofficial meetings became commonplace, with organisers generally reporting the rejection of their requisition when calling their meeting. In Manchester, unofficial meetings were held about Colonel Wardle in 1809, about the property tax in 1816, Queen Caroline in 1820 and on other occasions.[31] In what was probably a new development, we also find working people submitting requisitions for official town meetings. Meetings called by the radical societies in the 1790s had not used that approach, nor does it appear that the meetings for peace held in 1808 were so organised.[32] John Dinwiddy noted that a requisition from working people had been contemplated in Manchester in November 1810 and that one was submitted in Bolton in 1812; the rejection of the latter led to an unofficial meeting for peace and parliamentary reform being organised in that town.[33] When the working people of the region formed Hampden Clubs in 1816 to campaign for parliamentary reform, requisitions for official meetings were submitted in several towns — Manchester, Bolton, Oldham and Stockport at the least — and in Manchester and Stockport unofficial meetings were organised when these were rejected.[34] (The constables in Oldham seem to have often accepted requests for meetings, even those about parliamentary reform.[35])

Because the practice of local officials calling meetings after the receipt of requisitions developed organically, there was no guidance on the obligations of local officials or on the consequences of refusal. As Huzzey noted, the rejection of requisitions became common across the country, but Manchester's officials were notorious for rejecting requisitions

[31] MALH, GB127.Broadsides/F1809: Scrapbook of Broadsides, 1808-1844; *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 9 Mar. 1816, 16 Dec. 1820.
[32] *Proceedings of the Public Meeting Held… 1795*; *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette,* 16 Jan., 12 Mar. 1808; *Leeds Mercury* 2 Jan., 27 Feb. 1808.
[33] John Dinwiddy, 'Luddism and Politics in the Northern Counties', *Social History*, 4 (1979), pp. 33-63, p. 39; *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 7 Mar. 1812.
[34] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette,* 2 Nov. 1816; TNA, HO 42/152/645: 27 Aug. 1816, letter from Lloyd; TNA, HO 42/153/496: Notice of Bolton Meeting; TNA, HO 42/153/497: 26 Sept. 1816, letter from Fletcher.
[35] Sarah Price 'Governing Community: the Rise of Radical Politics in Oldham, Lancashire, 1790-1837', *Family and Community History*, 4 (2015), pp. 125-37.

when they did not support agitation on an issue. When even Manchester held an official meeting to oppose the corn law, it was mentioned in Parliament as evidencing the strength of national feeling.[36] The boroughreeve and constables of Manchester were appointed annually by a jury empanelled by the Lord of the Manor's steward and were usually chosen to align with the town's high church, loyalists. Many members of an opposing group of reformers from the middle-classes (who would later be termed liberals) were Dissenters, particularly Unitarians and several were leading commercial men in Manchester. They included Archibald Prentice, editor of *The Manchester Gazette* (from 1824) and *The Manchester Times* (from 1828), and James Edward Taylor, the first editor of *The Guardian* (established 1821). While many requisitions for official Manchester meetings were accepted, particularly those about trade or matters of local significance, those about more contentious matters often became a battle front between these opposing political camps.[37] The Manchester authorities' increasingly chose not to give reasons for their rejections (apart from mentioning that opposition had been expressed in counter-requisitions) perhaps wisely as there were no established grounds for refusal. An extensive Manchester discussion about rejected requisitions, much of it published by newspaper editors who were personally involved and keen to make the case for then proceeding to call unofficial meetings, provides a useful guide to the arguments advanced.

Until the 1820s when requests for official meetings were contested, both sides employed legal arguments to bolster their position. In exchanges in 1809 about whether an official meeting should be held to congratulate Colonel Wardle for bringing the Duke of York scandal to public attention, the counter-requisitionists argued (mistakenly) that

[36] *Manchester Mercury*, 14 Mar. 1815.
[37] MALH, GB127.M91/33/1 & 2: Proceedings of Public Meetings Appointed by the Boroughreeve and Constables (from 1821); for camps, see V.A.C. Gatrell, 'Incorporation and the Pursuit of Liberal Hegemony in Manchester 1790-1839 ', in Derek Fraser (ed.), *Municipal Reform and the Industrial City* (Leicester, 1982), pp. 15-60, pp. 24-36; Turner, *Reform and Respectability*, chapter 3.

parliamentary proceedings could not be questioned elsewhere.[38] In response, the requistionists pointed out their error and asserted a right to meet by citing De Lolme's *Constitution of England* and Blackstone (although the detail of these works did not support their position).[39] In the 1810s the favoured (slightly tenuous) argument that a right to meet derived from the right to petition, while making sensible use of an established constitutional principle, implicitly accepted that there was no free-standing right to meet.[40] The care taken to follow legal advice by the organisers of the 1819 meeting later known as Peterloo, together with the authorities' own uncertainty about whether that meeting was lawful, underlines how ambiguous the legal position was.[41] The national debate that followed Peterloo demonstrated that a broad body of opinion considered unofficial meetings to be both acceptable and appropriate. That some of the meetings that discussed Peterloo reflected on their own status indicates, however, that the issue remained contentious.[42] The expiration of the last of three Seditious Meetings Acts in 1825 contributed to the eventual broad acceptance of unofficial meetings as lawful by default, in part because the ending of the statutory restrictions on meetings could reasonably be taken as conceding freedom to meet.[43] The development in the 1820s of the law of unlawful assembly, which allowed meetings to be prevented or dispersed if they created 'public order apprehensions in the neighbourhood' made meetings of working-people vulnerable

[38] Spence, *Romantic Radicalism*, chapter 6; MALH, GB127.Broadsides/F1809, 24 Apr. 1809: Scrapbook of Broadsides, 1808-1844.
[39]Jean Louis De Lolme, *The Constitution of England; an Account of the English Government in Which it is Compared with both the Republican Form of Government and the Other Monarchies in Europe* (London, 1800), p. 423; W.M. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, vol. 4 (London, 1807), p. 88.
[40] For example, *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette,* 2 Nov. 1816.
[41] Poole, *Peterloo*, pp. 253-259.
[42] See chapter 3.6; *Morning Chronicle*, 13 Nov. 1819; *Morning Advertiser*, 8 Oct. 1819; *The Times*, 8 Oct. 1819 *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette,* 25 Sept. 1819; O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament', p. 52.
[43] Innes, 'Legislation', p. 114.

but also reflected the widespread view that generally unofficial meetings of the locality were *de facto* lawful and legitimate.[44]

Those who sought official meetings sometimes argued that rejecting requisitions was a breach of officials' obligations of office. One letter to a newspaper traced the boroughreeve's duties back to the Anglo-Saxons, with all the resonance that pre-Norman rights had at that time.[45] When a requisition for a meeting about parliamentary reform was rejected in Stockport, the organisers stated that they 'deem it our duty' to call the meeting anyway.[46] In Manchester, the town's officials having failed in the 'bounden duty of public officers to comply with the wishes of their townsmen when (appropriately) expressed', the obligation was said to fall to others to perform.[47] This employment of the concept of civic responsibility to legitimise inhabitants' interventions is discussed further in the next chapter. Criticising the rejection of requisitions as a breach of duty not only justified the ensuing unofficial meeting but, when reported in the newspapers, created a wider discourse that encouraged others to stand up to similar rebuffs. Many requisitions submitted around the country for meetings about the Queen Caroline affair were rejected, including some seeking county meetings. Elite men, unaccustomed to such peremptory treatment, discussed officials' obligations in universal terms and, whilst they may not have intended their arguments to apply to less elevated meetings, their reasoning was widely reported and eminently transferable.[48] Their arguments probably had little effect on officials who had their own motivations for refusing to call meetings, but allowed those who went on to hold

[44] Lobban, 'Seditious Libel'; Robin Handley, 'Public Order, Petitioning and Freedom of Assembly', *Journal of Legal History*, 7 (1986), pp. 123-155; Navickas, Protest, pp. 84-87, 96.
[45] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette,* 20 Apr. 1816.
[46] *Manchester Observer*, 20 June 1818.
[47] *Manchester Gazette*, 5 Aug. 1826.
[48] *A Selection of Speeches Delivered at Several County Meetings in the Years 1820 & 1821* (London, 1823); *Morning Chronicle*, 19 Jan., 27 Feb. 1821; Hansard, 2nd Series, vol. 4, cc. 555-562, 9 Feb. 1821, see also cc. 281-283, cc. 668-670, 1, 14 Feb. 1821; Huzzey 'Public Meetings', pp. 16-17.

unofficial meetings to claim that they were just as legitimate as official meetings, official status being denied only by what they asserted were arbitrary breaches of duty.

Nonetheless, there remained some sense that official meetings were preferable, which is why arguments that officials failed in their duties by rejecting requisitions continued to be made after the legal concerns diminished. At the Manchester unofficial meeting about the Queen, the absence of the boroughreeve was regretted, because 'the custom of our country has in general given a superior degree of importance to those meetings at which the head of the municipal power has presided'.[49] These arguments were connected to wider battles for power in the town and the position was probably similar in other places. It is interesting that opposing camps thought it worthwhile to organise counter-requisitions (sometimes signed by many hundreds) — suggesting that they thought there was something to be gained by denying a meeting official status.

Questions about the status of representations issued by meetings were entangled with practical considerations. In 1826 it was reported that the organisers of a Manchester anti-slavery meeting were minded not to submit requisitions in the future, so 'divesting these officers of the fictitious consequence with which this courtesy has invested them'. The newspaper considered this an empty threat, suggesting that the organisers preferred official meetings, for then the town was responsible for the expenses and petitions could be described as representing the views of the inhabitants.[50] Resources were a significant problem. In Manchester the middle-class reformers included several commercial men which probably explains how they were able to hold the unofficial 1816 property tax meeting in the Exchange Room.[51] The Lord of the Manor (Sir Oswald Mosley) could grant

[49] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette,* 2, 9, 16 Dec. 1820.
[50] *Manchester Courier*, 25 Feb. 1826; for a discussion of representation see chapter 7.
[51] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 9 Mar. 1816.

use of the Manor Court Room and did not always take the same view about meetings as the town's officers. Several unofficial meetings organised by the middle-class reformers, including that about Queen Caroline in 1820 and those about the corn law and slavery in 1826, were held in the Manor Court Room with Mosley's consent.[52] In 1831 a big reform meeting organised after the rejection of a requisition signed by many of 'the first merchants' of the town, met in the Town Hall with the consent of the town's police commissioners.[53] That the group included newspaper editors probably eased the expense of advertising. Still, suggestions in 1826 from several members of the group that unofficial meetings (at least those organised by men like themselves) should be put on a more equal footing with official meetings, indicates they felt disadvantaged. They proposed (without success) that control of access to the new town hall should be greatly widened and that the expenses of all meetings deemed appropriate by a 'number of influential individuals' should be met by the town, subject to the meeting deciding otherwise.[54]

The motivations of those working people who submitted requisitions before organising unofficial meetings overlapped with, but were not identical to, those we might label middle-class reformers. Working people also found it useful to claim the legitimacy of official meetings that was denied them by the town's officials. In addition, their submission of requisitions demonstrated openness about their proceedings and a lack of seditious intent, a bigger problem for them than the middle-class organisers. This is why they were used by the radicals in the region in 1816. The organisers of Peterloo, another unofficial meeting of inhabitants, surely relied on their requisition being rejected, for it is unlikely that they wanted the boroughreeve to chair. Henry Hunt described an earlier

[52] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 9 Dec. 1820; *Manchester Courier*, 11, 25 Feb. 1826; *Manchester Gazette*, 12, 19 Aug. 1826.
[53] *Manchester Times*, 22 Jan. 1831.
[54] *Manchester Courier*, 4 and 11 Nov. 1831.

Manchester requisition as a 'mere matter of form'.[55] In 1827 unofficial meetings about the corn law were held in both Oldham and Ashton, organised by radicals in those towns.[56] That working people could organise unofficial locality meetings was key to undermining elite control of the political sphere.[57] As we will see below, new forms of advertised meetings gave working people even greater flexibility in how they organised.

Some women are occasionally recorded as present at unofficial meetings in Manchester: there is insufficient evidence to comment on other places. It was the subject of meetings, rather than that they were unofficial, that was key with women recorded as present at two types of meeting. They were, for example, a 'large portion' of those at the (indoor) unofficial anti-slavery meeting in 1826: indeed the women were expected for a seated area was marked out for them.[58] Yet the extent of their 'citizenship' was finely delineated for they were explicitly prevented from signing the resulting petition.[59] *The Manchester Gazette* noted that many women objected to this and that 'we' (presumably the editor) might have pleaded 'for a deviation from the general rule' but that petition was 'more severely scrutinized' than any other from the town.[60] There is evidence that women signed some petitions on other subjects. Nevertheless, as Sarah Richardson showed, the practice was contested and not, therefore, necessarily of assistance to a cause.[61] The second type of meeting was when working women attended outdoor meetings organised for parliamentary reform, most notably Peterloo. Reports of the processions from the surrounding towns to join that 1819 meeting make clear that women were an integral part of the occasion.[62]

[55] *Manchester Observer*, 23 Jan. 1819.
[56] *Bolton Chronicle*, 24 Mar., 21 Apr. 1827.
[57] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', p. 220.
[58] *Manchester Gazette*, 18 Mar. 1826.
[59] Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*, p. 63 for women only beginning to sign general (as opposed to those from women alone) anti-slavery petitions in 1833; Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, chapter 2.
[60] *Manchester Gazette*, 22 Apr. 1826.
[61] Richardson, *Political Worlds of Women*, pp. 115-8; Midgley, 'From Supporting Missions'.
[62] Poole, 'March to Peterloo'.

Working women probably also attended some of the big outdoor meetings about reform in 1831.[63] Similar patterns can be identified in London meetings held outside of parish structures.[64]

6.2.3 Advertised meetings.

A third type of locality meeting were those called without any requisition but merely advertised. Although details are scant, it seems this approach was occasionally used in the late eighteenth century but was then largely superseded in the early nineteenth century by unofficial meetings: in other words, it became standard to try a requisition first. In the early nineteenth century, two types of advertised meetings can be distinguished.

First, even after the various Seditious Meetings Acts expired, working people occasionally followed the notice procedures those acts had specified, which required that the organisers' personal details be included in an advertisement of the meeting.[65] This practice presumably signalled a desire to be seen as open (not clandestine) and lawful. Some of the meetings for peace in 1808 (when the legislation had ceased to apply) may have been organised on this basis.[66] The small townships around Manchester (for example, Newton and Failsworth) probably called advertised meetings in favour of parliamentary reform in 1816.[67] The approach seemed to have been used where the structures of authority were limited or weak and no great challenge was implied in bypassing them, and not in towns like Manchester, Bolton or Stockport, which had strong, interventionist authorities. That the meetings called about parliamentary reform in the region in 1816 used all the then available methods of

[63] *Morning Chronicle*, 15 Oct. 1831.
[64] e.g., *Morning Chronicle*, 3 Sept. 1819; *Report of a Committee Appointed by a Public Meeting … The Queen etc* (London, 1820), p. 6.
[65] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', pp. 203-4.
[66] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 2 Jan. 1808; *Leeds Mercury*, 5 Mar. 1808.
[67] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 5, 12 Oct. 1816.

calling meetings, with official, unofficial and advertised meetings arranged in different places, illustrates how local circumstances shaped methods of organising.[68]

In the mid-1820s advertised meetings began to be called in a novel fashion. The organisers of these meetings did not follow the (lapsed) statutory method, but merely advertised the meeting without providing their personal details. In 1825 such a meeting of the working classes was held in Stockport about the combination law, an issue connected directly to working people's interests.[69] Then, in January 1826, an advertised meeting was called 'of the working classes' of Manchester about a public matter of general interest — the corn law.[70] This new approach put the seditious meetings legislation, and all that signified, in the past. It also circumvented what for working people in Manchester was always a charade of making requisitions that were inevitably rejected. No requisition to the boroughreeve and constables could have been framed for a meeting of the working classes. How could the boroughreeve have chaired such a meeting?

A further advantage of avoiding a requisition was that it allowed the meeting to be called for a section of the inhabitants — the working classes — whilst locality meetings in the region were of the inhabitants at large. Technically, meetings remained open to all: an 1826 corn law meeting was advertised as of 'the working classes and others of Manchester'.[71] Nevertheless, the prime constituency was clearly identified and was in fact mobilised. At the same time, 'the working classes' embraced a broader local identity than previous formulations like 'artisans and mechanics' (used, for example, for a Manchester statutory meeting about Queen Caroline).[72] The working classes presented themselves as

[68] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', p. 217.
[69] *Stockport Advertiser*, 4 Feb. 1825.
[70] *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Jan., 5 Feb. 1826.
[71] *Manchester Gazette*, 21 Oct. 1826.
[72] *Black Dwarf*, 13 Sept. 1820.

part of the community and as a public-interest group (rather than a private one), allowing them to access the legitimacy attached to locality meetings. The designated identity for this new kind of advertised meetings was subsequently extended to inhabitant districts without any formal status; so, for example in the early 1830s meetings were called of the inhabitants of Ridgeway Row and Commission Street, Bolton and of Cropper Street, Manchester.[73] The capacity to organise locality meetings had reached people who were far from being the leading men of the town.

Working people who organised both unofficial and advertised meetings faced the greatest practical difficulties. Many of their meetings were held outside, making them particularly vulnerable to suggestions that public order was threatened and, more prosaically, to poor weather diminishing attendance.[74] Interestingly, in the later 1820s Mosely agreed to several advertised meetings of the Manchester working classes being held in the Manor Court Room.[75] That the Seditious Meetings Act 1819 exempted indoor meetings from its restrictions may have continued to influence behaviours after the act expired. [76] (The exemption for indoor meetings was presumably prompted by the widening of issues to which the act applied to 'any public grievance', including matters concerning trade and business, which would have caught meetings of commercial-interest groups.) Factory hours, combined with lower visibility in the evening, also encouraged indoor meetings. Some working people objected, for by this time outdoor meetings with unlimited access were acquiring iconic status for many. At a corn law meeting of the working classes in 1826, one attendee complained about meeting 'in a room by candlelight' and not in the 'open air and in such a place as Peterloo'; another responded that his working hours and

[73] *Bolton Chronicle*, 6 June 1829; *Manchester Times*, 9 July 1831; *CJ*, 86 (1931) p.650; Navickas, *Protest*, pp. 111-5 discusses Cropper Street as a radical locale.
[74] For example, *Bolton Chronicle*, 24 Mar. 1827.
[75] *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Jan. 1826, 24 Feb. 1827.
[76] 60 Geo. III, c. 9 and 1 Geo IV, c. 6, sections 1, 16.

those of many others would not allow them to attend an outdoor meeting.[77] The financing of advertisements and petitions also presented challenges for these working people. The logistical difficulties of signing petitions perhaps contributed to the occasional practice of petitions about minor causes being submitted in the name of the chair of the meeting, like the 1827 petition from 'Thomas Foster, chairman of a meeting of the working classes of Manchester' about funds provided for the Duke of Clarence.[78]

6.3 The London study area.

A similar taxonomy and line of development of locality meetings can be identified in London, but there were marked differences from the north that reflected both the structures of local government and the scale of the metropolis. These differences make it sensible to divide the London discussion into two. The first part discusses meetings in the parishes where detailed parish records allow the fluidity of the identity of inhabitant to be interrogated in a way that is not usually possible. The second part considers efforts to organise meetings in the wider capital.

6.3.1 The parishes.

The harnessing of the inherent legitimacy of vestries to discuss public matters in the early nineteenth century has received little historiographical attention.[79] The parish vestry was the only official structure below the county of Middlesex available to those metropolitan inhabitants who lived neither in the City of London, nor the boroughs of Westminster or Southwark. As the main body carrying out the work of local governance, meetings of the vestry were assumed to be lawful, albeit not specifically protected under the seditious

[77] *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Oct. 1826.
[78] *CJ*, 82 (1827), p. 233.
[79] Webb and Webb, *The Parish*, pp. 107-110.

meetings legislation.[80] When the 1819 Seditious Meetings Act limited meetings of more than fifty to inhabitants of the parish or township where it was held, it 'reflected and reinforced the rise of the parish as a political forum'.[81] (Although the Act still did not exclude vestry meetings from its operation, those meetings were almost invariably protected by the exclusion of indoor meetings mentioned above.)

Vestry constitutions were highly varied, although there were three broad types: vestries open to all or a defined section of ratepayers; select vestries where ratepayers (or a defined section thereof) elected a specified number to run some or all parish affairs; and closed vestries consisting of a limited group with vacancies filled by nomination by that group.[82] In the parishes studied here, several changed their constitution during the period, always at the instigation of the locality, but no general trend can be identified. While in 1823 Bethnal Green changed from an open to a select vestry, Old Street was closed until 1808 and then opened to all whose properties were rated at least £30 p.a. Table 6.1 provides details of the parishes' constitutions where known and their populations.[83] Common vestry responsibilities included poor relief, maintaining lighting and watch forces and financial responsibility for sewers.[84] The parishes whose vestry minutes for the period are at least partially extant are Bethnal Green, Bromley, Clerkenwell, Islington, Old Street, Poplar,

[80] A contrary view is given in David Green *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law, 1790-1870* (Farnham, 2010), pp. 85-7.
[81] Innes, 'Legislation', p. 114.
[82] Webb and Webb, *The Parish* for a discussion of varied parish structures.
[83] Bethnal Green: 13 Geo. III, c. 53; 53 Geo. III, c. 113; 4 Geo. IV, c. 21; Bromley: Webbs, *The Parish*, p. 52; Clerkenwell: *ibid.*, p. 199; Hackney: *ibid.*, p. 103; Islington: *ibid.*, p. 263, 5 Geo. IV, c. 125; Limehouse: London, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives [hereafter THLHLA], Catalogue https://www.thcatalogue.org.uk/calmview/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=L%2fSAL&pos=5 (9 June 2023); Old Street: ILHC, LBI/PVM/3 St Luke's, Old Street Vestry Minutes [hereafter OSVM],1807-1808; 48 Geo. III, c. 97; Shoreditch: O'Connor, 'Shoreditch', p.21; Spitalfields: *PP* (1830), 4 (215), Report from the Select Committee on Vestries, pp. 102-3; St George-in-the-East: Webbs, *The Parish*, p. 150; Stepney: LMA, P/93/DUN/237, St Dunstan's Stepney Vestry Minutes, 5 May 1788; Stratford: 9 Geo. IV, c. 7; Wapping; Webb and Webb, *The Parish*, p. 203; Whitechapel: Webb and Webb, *The Parish*, p. 150; chapter 1.3 for population reference.
[84] Innes, 'Managing the Metropolis'.

Shoreditch, St George-in-the-East, Stepney and Stratford. Newspapers occasionally reported parish activities or advertised their resolutions, but such reports were rare and scant.

Table 6.1: Constitutions and populations of the London Parishes

Parish	**Population (1821)**	**Status**
Bethnal Green (St Matthew)	45,676	Open to all ratepayers who occupied premises rated at least £15 p.a.; changed in 1823 to select vestry where all such individuals were eligible to select from their number a vestry of sixty, a third replaced each year.
Bromley (St Leonard)	4,360	(Probably) open to all ratepayers.
Clerkenwell (St James and St John)	39,195	Open to all ratepayers. Weighted voting post-1818.
Hackney (St John)	22,494	Closed vestry.
Islington (St Mary)	22,417	Open until 1824, after which only those rated at least £20p.a. were eligible to attend.
Limehouse (St Anne)	9,805	Open to all ratepayers who paid 48s a year in poor rates.
Old Street (St Luke's)	40,876	Closed until 1808; thereafter open to those rated at least £30 p.a.
Shadwell (St Paul)	9,557	Unknown.
Shoreditch (St Leonard)	52,966	Open to all ratepayers.
Spitalfields, Christ Church	18,650	Closed vestry.
St George in the East	32,528	Open (from 1806) to all paying 2s a month in poor rates.
Stepney (St Dunstan All Saints)	49,163	Open to all ratepayers. Separate hamlets of Mile End, Poplar and Ratcliff exercised some responsibilities. Poplar (population 12223) became an independent parish in 1817, with a vestry of those rated at more than £18 p.a.
Stratford Bow (St Mary)	2,349	Select Vestry of 12 , increased to 24 in 1829, new appointments elected by inhabitants rated at least £15 p.a.
Wapping (St John)	3,078	Select vestry (probably).
Whitechapel (St Mary)	29,407	Open to all paying 5s, 6d a quarter in poor rates.

Many London parishes had participated in the national agitations of the 1640s but, having been discouraged by the authorities from further engagement, do not seem to have done so again until the 1790s.[85] In late 1792 and early 1793 there was a flurry of locality meetings in which several London parishes participated at which expressions of loyalty were agreed in response to the King's proclamation against seditious writings.[86] Wapping and Clerkenwell petitioned about the 1795 Bills (as did other London parishes outside the study area).[87] Shoreditch opposed the introduction of income tax in 1797.[88]

These parishes' engagements with public matters increased markedly from the post-war corn and property tax agitations onwards. Benjamin Weinstein argued that the Select Vestry Act 1831 (which enabled select and closed vestries to be replaced by elected ratepayers if a two-thirds majority of ratepayers voted in favour of the change) laid the foundations for London vestry radicalism in the later 1830s.[89] He suggested that most of the parishes studied here 'lacked the social and administrative structures that enabled vestry radicalism to flourish in other parts of London' and that most were closed and corrupt.[90] The parishes studied here may not have been not prominent in metropolitan resistance to Whig centralisation policies after the Reform Act 1832, but as we will see they did express inhabitants' opinions on national matters in the preceding decades.

Vestry meetings about public matters in the early nineteenth century were called by notice from the church wardens, following their receipt of what was termed a 'requisition' in the minutes. Submitting requisitions for parish meetings about public matters seems to have

[85] See chapters 2.1.1 and 3.3.
[86] *Morning Chronicle*, 8 Dec. 1792
[87] *Two Acts*, pp. 336-7, 552-4.
[88] London, Hackney Archive Department [hereafter HAD], P/L2, St Leonard's Shoreditch Vestry Minutes [hereafter SVM], 12 Dec. 1797.
[89] 1 & 2 Will. IV, c. 50.
[90] Benjamin Weinstein, *Liberalism and Local Government in Early Victorian London* (London, 2011), quote p. 54; his comments relate to the parishes in the new borough of Tower Hamlets (not Islington, Clerkenwell and Old Street) and he excepted Shoreditch.

taken off in the 1810s.[91] It appears that in the eighteenth century the relatively rare process of requesting parish meetings for internal or external reasons was not described as requisitioning and these parishes' adoption of that term in the nineteenth century was probably in emulation of the many newspapers' reports of requisitions for meetings that were submitted around the country. When some vestries obtained local acts in the early nineteenth century, those statutes sometimes codified the procedure for calling meetings that previously was simply the accepted practice. The local acts did not refer to requisitions but stated that notices calling meetings could be signed by the churchwardens or by nine vestrymen (or defined groups thereof).[92] These provisions allowing ratepayers to call meetings echoed the Seditious Meetings Acts (first passed in 1795) which provided householders with the ability to call meetings by signed notices. The parishes had significant say in the contents of their local acts, so both the silence of earlier statutes about how meetings might be called and later statements that ratepayers had the right to do so are telling of their alertness to the larger regulatory environment. Hobhouse's Vestry Act 1831 provided that the process for replacing a select vestry with an elected one should begin with the delivery of what that act termed a requisition to the churchwardens.[93]

Churchwardens (there were often two, one more senior), who in these parishes were elected annually by ratepayers, generally accepted requisitions. No practice of counter-requisitions was evident and it was left to the meeting to decide if the parish should be involved in the cause (as Manchester's middle-class reforms argued should have been the practice there). In 1822 an official Shoreditch meeting decided that a petition against

[91] *Two Acts* reported various parish interventions in 1795 but not that they were arranged by requisition; the Shoreditch minutes of their meeting that agreed a 1797 petition against income tax does not say it was called by requisition; their 1813 anti-Catholic meeting was – HAD, P/L/2, SVM, 2 Nov. 1797; P/L/3, SVM, 21 Jan. 1813.
[92] 48 Geo. III, c. 97 clause 19 (St Luke's, 1808); 53 Geo. III, c. 112, clause 105, (Shoreditch, 1813).
[93] 1 & 2 Will. IV, c. 50, s. 2.

Catholic emancipation was 'unnecessary' and in 1830 that a petition against slavery was 'inexpedient'; Stratford abandoned an anti-slavery petition due to lack of interest.[94] That rejected requisitions were not recorded in vestry minutes and newspaper coverage was rare makes unofficial meetings hard to identify, but it is possible that in these parishes they were limited to the highly divisive issues of the Queen and Catholic Emancipation. Advertised meetings organised by people who for one reason or another decided that vestry meetings were not for them were possibly more common. An 1818 parliamentary reform petition from the inhabitants of Shoreditch, for example, did not emanate from an official meeting (although one in 1817 did).[95]

The Webbs believed that only open vestries operated as 'channels for the voice of the people' but, in a further manifestation of the rise of inhabitant as a political identity, parish meetings were also convened in parishes that had closed or select vestries.[96] Between 1813 and 1830, at least eight petitions on public matters were agreed at officially called parish meetings in Spitalfields (closed throughout). The 'rector, churchwardens, overseers and inhabitants' petitioned against the corn law in 1814, the property tax in 1815 and 1816, Catholic Relief in 1825 and 1829 and (without the rector) for repeal of the house and windows tax in 1825; 'the vestrymen and inhabitants' petitioned for parliamentary reform in 1817; and 'the parish' about duties on publicans' licences in 1824.[97] These meetings were not minuted (they were not, after all, meetings of the vestry) but appear to have complied with the procedures for calling vestry meetings followed in other parishes, with

[94] HAD, P/L/4, SVM, 6 June 1822; 16 Nov. 1830; THLHLA, L/SMS/A/1/2, St Mary Stratford Vestry minutes [hereafter SMVM], 11, 18 Nov. 1830.
[95] HAD, P/L/3, SVM, 13 Feb. 1817; *CJ*, 73 (1818), p. 369; *Morning Advertiser*, 4 May 1818 for advertised Spitalfields meeting.
[96] Webb and Webb, *The Parish*, p. 107.
[97] *CJ*, 69 (1814), p. 327; 70 (1815), p. 70; 72 (1817), p. 63; 79 (1824), p. 185; 80 (1825), pp. 315, 343; 84 (1829), p. 141.

requisitions and publicised notices of meetings.[98] The Spitalfields' vestrymen were highly defensive of their control of local matters and in the 1820s resisted a parish movement for the vestry to be opened, but co-operated with, indeed led, these parish meetings.[99] Other parishes with closed or select vestries also held official parish meetings. St Mary Stratford (select vestry of twelve) agreed petitions opposing the corn law and the property tax at officially called parish meetings of inhabitants; their other petitions may well have been similarly organised.[100] There are clear parallels with the inhabitant-meetings organised by some officials in corporate towns.

Space was symbolically and practically significant for these parish meetings.[101] The vestry was a room as well as a body, part of the fabric of the church; Spitalfields' was in the gallery, Clerkenwell's to one side of the main body of the church. The rooms had fireplaces and were furnished.[102] Bethnal Green's vestry room comfortably held seventy to eighty people; on one occasion it was 'crammed' with over one hundred.[103] Spitalfields' parish meetings were also held in their vestry room.[104] When attendance was too great, meetings adjourned to the church where the whole structure might be used, with spectators in the galleries and opposing sides separating into the aisles on disputed votes.[105] The church symbolised community, for parish belonging was a key identity of the period.[106] That it also represented the state, being both where local taxes were set and part of the

[98] See THLHLA, L/CCS/2/8, Minutes of the Spitalfields Vestry, 24 Feb. 1814 for an exceptional reference; *Morning Chronicle*, 24 Dec. 1814, 10 Feb. 1817; *Morning Post*, 13 Apr. 1825.
[99] *Morning Chronicle*, 20 June 1826; *Morning Advertiser*, 30 Aug. 1826.
[100] *CJ*, 69 (1814) p. 327; 70 (1815) p. 74; *Morning Chronicle*, 31 Jan. 1815.
[101] See Navickas, *Protest*, for the practicalities and resonances of space.
[102] Philip Temple (ed.), *Survey of London: Vol.46: South and East Clerkenwell* (London, 2008), pp. 39-54; F.H.W. Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London: Vol. 27 Spitalfields and Mile End New Town* (London, 1957), figure 16.
[103] THLHLA, L/MBG/A/1/5, St Matthews, Bethnal Green vestry minutes [hereafter BGVM], 6 Feb. 1823.
[104] *Morning Post*, 13 Apr. 1825.
[105] HAD, P/L/3, SVM, 18 Oct. 1819; ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 21 Nov. 1830.
[106] K. D. M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950*. (Cambridge, 2006); Steve Hindle, *On the Parish?: the Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England*, c.1550-1750 (Oxford, 2004); Steven King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor 1750s to 1830s* (Montreal, 2019).

established church, did not prevent Dissenters who lived in these parishes from being active vestrymen.[107]

Arguments about where to meet sometimes acted as a proxy for wider disputes. Catholic emancipation and support for Queen Caroline both led to heated debates, the unusual rejection of requisitions and meetings organised outside of official structures. A Bethnal Green meeting about the Queen that wanted to adjourn to the church out of 'respect' for her was denied use of the church by the vicar.[108] Clerkenwell's churchwardens refused to allow either the vestry room or the church to be used for a meeting about the Queen, which met instead at the workhouse.[109] In Islington a requisition for a meeting about the Queen was rejected and an unofficial meeting organised in a local pub. It was reported in the newspaper that the intended chair, unable to attend because of ill health, had confirmed he would nevertheless bear his share of the expense which illustrates that the cost of meetings was a consideration.[110] In 1825 the Clerkenwell churchwardens rejected three requisitions for meetings to oppose Catholic emancipation. When a meeting then arranged in the Sunday school room sank into confusion the organisers claimed it was intended to be a private meeting, not of the parish, which they asserted could only take place in the vestry room or church.[111] Intended to deflect criticism, this inaccurate claim nonetheless suggests the significance attached by the inhabitants of these parishes to where they met.

One consequence of most parish requisitions being accepted was that there were more arguments about matters consequential to meetings than in the northern region. Apart from

[107] O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament,' pp. 45-6; Richard & John Burn, *The Justice of the Peace, and Parish Officer* (London, 1797), p. 394.
[108] THLHLA, L/MBG/A/1/4, BGVM, 22 Nov. 1820.
[109] *Morning Chronicle*, 23 Dec. 1820.
[110] *Morning Chronicle*, 18 Dec. 1820; Francis Place complained three Westminster meetings he helped to arrange cost him nearly £25; *"The Affairs of Others": the Diaries of Francis Place, 1825-1836*, ed. James Jaffe (Cambridge, 2007), p. 185.
[111] *Morning Post*, 25 Nov. 1825.

space, charging the expenses of petitioning to the parish was particularly contested, as illustrated by Shoreditch. An 1819 meeting about an internal parish matter decided that the vestry had absolute power to authorise expenditure. This principle was applied to interventions on public matters and the minutes invariably recited that the churchwardens could claim the expenses incurred.[112] In 1820 when the churchwardens refused to be responsible for the expense of publicising resolutions about the Queen, a committee was formed to seek legal advice about defraying such matters from the rates (and never mentioned again).[113] Complaints at the size of invoices connected with petitioning were brushed aside in 1831.[114] Other parishes probably experienced similar disputes. An Old Street meeting to oppose Catholic emancipation rejected by a 'great majority' a motion that the expenses of the petition should not be charged to the poor rates.[115] In 1832 Clerkenwell resolved that in future 'no expenses on any question of a political nature be allowed' from the churchwardens' accounts and a notice to that effect was to hang in the vestry room (note the use of political).[116]

The meaning of 'inhabitants' was open to several interpretations: resident, individual with settlement, ratepayer, resident householder. The detail contained in some parish sources about who arranged and attended meetings and who should sign petitions provides a fuller picture of who was considered an inhabitant than is available in the northern area. The parish, the role played by an individual and the issue at hand all affected who fell within that category.

[112] O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament', p. 58.
[113] HAD, P/L/4, SVM, 16 Nov. 1820.
[114] O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament', p. 63.
[115] ILHC, LBA/PVM/3, OSVM, 21 May 1822.
[116] ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 17 May 1832.

The most common description of requisitionists in the minutes was as inhabitants which probably meant ratepayers (resident in the parish) in fully open parishes and sub-sets thereof in parishes which operated qualifying rating levels to be vestrymen. In practice, it is likely that local status of some sort was needed, if only to draw attendance. The minutes of Old Street (vestrymen rated at over £30) named requisitionists and where these can be identified they were small businessmen and tradesmen with some capital, such as watchmakers, dyers and brewers.[117]

In most parishes the meetings convened were also described as 'of inhabitants' which again probably meant ratepayers: no distinction was apparent between being eligible to requisition and to attend. At an 1830 Select Committee about vestries, witnesses from London parishes were grilled about who could attend their vestry meetings and those from open vestries responded by discussing the rates.[118] A witness from Clerkenwell (open to all ratepayers) when asked if those attending vestry meetings were 'a low class of people', responded a 'great many are. The rental of the parish would be the best answer to that. The persons rated … are 6,317 and those of 20£ p.a. and upwards, 3,695 only'.[119] The general practice in London in this period was to assess rates even on properties of low value. The poor rate books for Shoreditch, Old Street, Clerkenwell and Islington show these parishes collected rates on some rated under ten pounds (the incidence of such properties varied by parish).[120] Vestry meetings in the more open parishes were, therefore, accessible to thousands of inhabitants and the remark quoted above suggests that those with lower-rated

[117] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM, 1815 undated corn meeting; *Post Office Directory* (London, 1815) pp. 148, 263; *Holdens* vol.1 (London, 1808), Norman Street (Harrington).
[118] *PP* (1830), 4 (215), Minutes of Evidence from the Select Committee on… Select and Other Vestries, pp. 135, 138-9, 142.
[119] *PP* (1830), 4 (25), Report from the Select Committee on… Select and Other Vestries, p. 138.
[120] LMA, P91/LEN/0146,150, 154, 158, 318, 322, 330, 334, Shoreditch Rate Books,1814 & 1825; ILHC, LBI/RB/1/1, Clerkenwell Rate Books, 1816 & 1824 and LBI/RB/1/2, Islington Rate Books 1816 & 1824; and LBI/RB/1/3, Old Street Rate Books 1816 & 1824; Birmingham only collected rates at properties assessed at over £12, Smith "Propertied Society', p. 57.

properties did attend. Although the parishes studied were in a continuous band only a few miles wide and none were wealthy, the accessibility of their meetings varied significantly. Shoreditch (open) had almost 8,000 ratepayers, more than 80% of whom were rated at less than £20 (a few properties in the parish were rated as low as three pounds).[121] Clerkenwell (open) had 6,300 ratepayers, with more than 40% rated at under £20. The qualifying limits operated by some parishes had a marked effect on eligibility to attend their vestry meetings. Islington had about 3,500 vestrymen (rated at over £20) in 1833, whereas Old Street only had 1,200 vestrymen (rated at over £30) from a population almost double that of Islington.[122]

There is limited evidence that attendance at meetings about public matters was policed, with attitudes probably varying between parishes and possibly with the subject of the meeting. Given that the aim was to draw attention to the cause and that meetings rarely faced internal opposition, there may have been little desire to restrict attendance to those who were technically eligible. A rare surviving placard urged Shoreditch 'inhabitants' to attend a meeting about the Queen: how would that have been understood by those who saw it?[123] Only 45 attended Islington's 1815 corn law meeting; some 3-400 hundred were at a Shoreditch meeting about the Queen in 1821; 200 were at an Old Street meeting about the house and windows tax in 1830.[124] When parochial elections were held, careful checks were often made that those voting were up to date with their rates.[125] Did this mean that on other occasions it was considered less important if attendance included ineligible people, or that the desire to participate in elections was more easily exploited to extract money

[121] Shoreditch statistics from 1817, O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament', p. 22; e.g., LMA, P91/LEN/0150, p. 16.
[122] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM, 19 Mar. 1833 and LBI/PVM/2 Minutes of St Mary Islington Vestry [hereafter IVM], 10 Jan. 1833.
[123] TNA, HO 44/9/314: Shoreditch placard
[124] ILHC, LBI/PVM/2, IVM, 5 Mar. 1815; TNA, HO 44/9/313, 3 Aug. 1821, letter; ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM, 30 Mar. 1830.
[125] See for example, HAD, P/L/3 SVM, 21 Oct. 1814.

due? In Shoreditch, it was decided that in future 'non-parishioners' were to be restricted to the galleries and unable to vote. Parishioners appeared to equate to ratepayers (it was the term used in the Shoreditch parish statute) and the discussion suggests that non-ratepayers had been attending vestry meetings.[126] The decision was to be enforced by beadles checking poor receipts, although there is no subsequent mention of any checks. The Clerkenwell meeting about Queen Caroline (held in the workhouse) had rate collectors on the doors to prevent 'strangers' from attending and entrance was refused to any who were not 'parishioners'; did this mean ratepayers or would rate collectors have recognised and allowed entrance to non-ratepaying inhabitants?[127] Old Street rejected a motion in 1832 that rate-paying, non-vestry men be allowed to sit in the gallery for a meeting about changing the vestry constitution, but as the discussion was about broadening the category of vestrymen that may not have been indicative of their usual practice.[128] Spitalfields (a closed vestry) invited inhabitants of the neighbouring liberty, Old Artillery, to attend their meetings (who declined and held their own).[129] Perhaps, once vestryman was no longer a criterion, there was less desire to impose any limit?

Overall, the evidence does not support James Vernon's view that in this period parish meetings that discussed public matters allowed the 'participation of all the inhabitants of the community, irrespective of their gender or status'.[130] The position was complex and more restricted. There is no reference to women attending these parish meetings about national issues, although those who were ratepayers should have been eligible to do so and it is always dangerous to place too much weight on silence.[131] On the many occasions that

[126] HAD, P/L/3, SVM, 26 Oct. 1819.
[127] *Morning Chronicle*, 23 Dec. 1820.
[128] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM, 13 Nov. 1832.
[129] THLHLA, OAG/1/2, Old Artillery Ground Minutes, 22 Dec. 1814, 3 Mar. 1815.
[130] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, p. 69.
[131] Richardson, *Political Worlds*, p. 89.

requistionists, speakers and committee members were identified in the minutes they were always men.[132] When the parish of Bethnal Green applied to Parliament to change their vestry eligibility requirements in 1823, they successfully requested that it be limited to 'every male person' who occupied property of £15 rateable value.[133]

The majority of those who actively participated in these parish engagements with public matters seem to have been shopkeepers, tradesmen and lesser professionals. In 1816, the candidates to be sidesman in Spitalfields were a cabinetmaker, coal merchant, tallow chandler, butcher and printer; the printer was elected and later chaired a meeting on parliamentary reform.[134] Committees were often established to deal with the arrangements for petitioning and analysis of the committeemen of the Shoreditch vestry showed that almost 70% of those that could be identified were shopkeepers (grocers, cheesemongers, bakers, tobacconists etc.) and artisans (upholsterers, cabinetmakers, hatters, weavers, tailors etc.).[135] Almost a quarter resided on Shoreditch High Street where the rateable value of properties in 1814 ranged from £9 to £30, most in the high teens or low twenties.[136] Committeemen in Old Street (who include a glazier and a paper hanger) may have been a social cut below requisitionists in that parish, but these are fine distinctions drawn on limited information.[137] Despite efforts made by some parishes, most meetings were held during the working day which would have made attendance difficult for men who did not

[132] e.g., ILHC, LBI/PVM/2, IVM, 9 Aug. 1804; Richardson, *Political Worlds*, chapter 4; Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*, chapter 4.
[133] THLHLA, MBG/A/1/4, BGVM, 30 Jan. 1823; 4 Geo. IV, c. 29.
[134] THLHLA, CCS/2/9, Spitalfields Vestry Minutes, 15 Apr. 1816.
[135] O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament', pp. 27-32; *Trades Newspaper*, 31 Mar. 1828.
[136] e.g., LMA, P91/LEN/0158, p. 3: Shoreditch Rate Book, 1814.
[137] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM 27 Feb.1815; *Triennial Directory of London …* (London, 1817) Providence Row (Hart), Bunhill Road (Buckingham).

control their working hours (busy professional men as well as those of lower social status) and probably particularly suited shopkeepers and tradesmen.[138]

Who could sign petitions was shaped not only by vestry constitutions but by what was decided case-by-case. The first decision was whether petitioners should be described as inhabitant householders or inhabitants, with most parishes using both formulations, depending on the issue (table 6.2 below). That petitions about the house and windows tax were largely from inhabitant householders, whilst almost all corn petitions were from inhabitants, is unsurprising. That many 1831-32 parliamentary reform petitions from these parishes came from inhabitant householders, presenting an identity appropriate to be enfranchised, is more interesting (although Clerkenwell's was signed only by the churchwarden).[139]

[138] ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 23 Jan., 9 May 1814; ILHC, LBI/PVM/2, IVM, 7 Mar. 1815; HAD, P/L6, SVM, 27 Dec. 1831; PP (1830) 4 (25), p. 142.
[139] ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 22 Sept. 1831.

Table 6.2: The use of inhabitant, inhabitant householder or other formulations in official petitions from the London parishes on the specified causes, based on the Commons Journals.

	Corn 1814-15	Property tax	Parl. Reform 1817-18	QC	Slavery	Catholics	House and windows tax	Parl. reform 1830-32
Bethnal Green	Inhab.	Inhab.	Inhab.	Inhab.		Inhab. Household.		Both
Clerkenwell	Inhab. and parishioners	Inhab.			Inhab.	Inhab.	Inhab. Household.	Inhab. Household.
Islington	Inhab.	Inhab.				Inhab.	Inhab.	Inhab. Household.
Limehouse	Inhab.			Inhab.				Vestry
Old Street	Inhab.	Inhab. Household.				Inhab.	Inhab. Household.	Inhab. Household.
Shadwell	Inhab.							Inhab. Household.
Shoreditch	Inhab.	Inhab.	Inhab.	Inhab. Household.	Inhab. Household.	Inhab.	Inhab. Household.	Inhab. Household.
Spitalfields	Inhab.	Inhab.	Vestrymen and Inhab.			Inhab.	Inhab. Household.	
St George-in-the-East	Inhab.	Inhab.		Inhab.				Inhab. Household.
Stepney	Inhab.	Inhab.						Inhab. Household.
Stratford	Inhab.	Inhab.			Inhab.	Inhab.		
Wapping	Inhab.	Inhab.						Inhab.
Whitechapel	Inhab.	Inhab.				Inhab.		Inhab. Household.

Even when petitions were expressed as being from inhabitants, who could sign the petition varied. Old Street's petitions about Catholics were described as from inhabitants but, broadly, only vestrymen (rated at over £30) signed.[140] Corn law petitions, by contrast, were made widely available in several parishes. Clerkenwell circulated four thousand handbills (1:10 for its population) and one hundred posting bills detailing where the petitions lay for signature.[141] The arrangements for signing some petitions made it impracticable to impose

[140] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM 16 Apr. 1821, 21 May 1822.
[141] ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 26 May 1814.

eligibility qualifications. Shoreditch's corn-law petitions were left at the houses of several vestrymen, with handbills again distributed around the parish.[142] Their 1814 corn law petition had 7,000 signatures; 18,000 signed that in 1815 (in a parish of about 50,000, of whom some 8,000 were ratepayers).[143] Old Street's corn law petition of 1814 had 5,000 signatures, more than 20% of its population and significantly more than the number of vestrymen (c.1,200).[144] It is likely, given the arrangements and level of signatures, that women signed these petitions. The best evidence that they were permitted to is from Clerkenwell; their corn law petition could be signed by 'all persons who reside in the parish of twenty-one years or upwards, whether housekeeper or not' and their property-tax petition by 'all liable to pay the tax, whether or not they were householders'.[145] As these careful formulations suggest, it was far from transparent who had signed inhabitant petitions.

6.3.2 The wider capital.

Aside from the practical challenges of organising in the capital, the problems that place and identity presented in London (discussed in chapter 5) also affected meetings. Meetings were called 'of' defined groups, from a place and about a specified issue. The natural understanding of 'inhabitant' in the capital connected it to a parish or ward, but the pronouncements of a parish were not comparable with those of a town.[146] To have more weight it was necessary to organise across a wider area, but this was challenging. County identities did not represent an intuitively natural way of mobilising the wider populace of

[142] HAD, P/L3, SVM, 1 June, 22 Dec. 1814, see also, 19 Apr.1819.
[143] O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament', p. 90.
[144] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM, 31 May 1814.
[145] Richardson, *Political Worlds*, chapter 5 discusses women and petitioning; ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM 28 Feb. 1815, 20 Feb. 1816.
[146] Compare Bolton, which was made a two-member parliamentary borough in 1832 with Shoreditch, which had a similar population but was included in the borough of Tower Hamlets that encompassed a population of over 400,000; 2 Will. IV, c. 45, section 2 and 3; 2 & 3 Will. IV, c. 64, schedule O.

the capital, even if inhabitants were now generally allowed to attend county meetings.[147] The county of Middlesex potentially encompassed much of the metropolis, but as the county also contained rural areas it did not straightforwardly connote the metropolitan districts.[148] The borough of Westminster had provided a basis for agitation in the capital for decades. However, while in practice Westminster meetings were often open, not only did the core identity explicitly mobilise voters, but residents of the outer parishes were not even inhabitants of the borough. At an 1819 Westminster meeting it was requested that none but inhabitant householders of Westminster should address the meeting.[149] People from these outer parishes might attend but it was not a meeting for them, or of them. Moreover, there was increasing unhappiness with the managed culture of that borough and the lack of open discussion or accountability.[150] Any meeting in the capital that aimed to transcend these traditional units faced the problem that there was no official body with remit over the whole metropolis. There was no obvious structure to organise within, or to adapt, which in turn meant that there was no easy way to evoke either the identity of inhabitant or an equivalent public-interest identity. London lost its status as the nation's leader of extra-parliamentary opinion for several reasons but the lack of an appropriate public-interest identity for the metropolis contributed.

One approach used in the 1810s was to organise advertised meetings for categories of aggrieved people, mostly about parliamentary reform. This method was adopted by the ultra-radicals in London, but similar efforts made at the time in the northern region suggest that people were experimenting with how to organise without reference to locality structures at a time when the convening of unofficial meetings was not fully established.

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[147] *Morning Chronicle*, 21 Dec. 1819 and Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', pp. 215-7.
[148] See chapter 5.2.
[149] *Morning Chronicle*, 9 Dec. 1819.
[150] Weinstein, *Liberalism and Local Government*, pp. 34 -7.

The presentation of those being mobilised as a group defined by a shared grievance was inconsistent with the practice of arranging meetings of an identity, be that a general identity like inhabitants or a sectional interest. The London meetings were advertised with minimal efforts to connect to existing structures. Those in Spa Fields, Clerkenwell, in late 1816 (identified by John Belchem as the first mass platform events) were of 'distressed manufacturers, mariners, artisans and others of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark and parts adjacent' — language that suggests a male target audience, although given it was in the open women probably attended.[151] Several meetings in 1818 and 1819 were of the 'unrepresented'.[152] That an 1818 meeting described as being for the 'non-represented inhabitants of the county of Middlesex', agreed a remonstrance to the Prince Regent from the 'inhabitants of London and Westminster' indicates, in the inconsistency of wording employed, a lack of clear identity or geographical attachment.[153] Statutory meetings in the northern region in late 1819 called using proforma notices were similarly called of the 'non-represented' and other formulations around causes were also tried.[154] An 1819 meeting in Ashton was not called 'of' anyone, but its proceedings were reported as being of the 'friends to freedom'.[155] Some London meetings organised immediately post-Peterloo used more general descriptions, like 'the people' or 'the public' and claimed to speak on behalf of the British people, or even the Empire.[156] The authorities tended to view these irregular meetings with suspicion but generally allowed them to proceed. Nevertheless, the meetings lacked, and indeed their organisers often seemed

[151] *Morning Chronicle*, 6 Nov. 1816; Belchem, *Orator Hunt*, p. *58.*
[152] *British Press*, 5 May 1818; TNA, HO 42/182/635, *Shamrock, Thistle and the Rose*, 29 Aug. 1819.
[153] *Morning Post*, 8 Sept. 1818; *Sherwin's Weekly Register*, 12 Sept. 1818.
[154] TNA, HO 42/200/174-6; *Manchester Observer*, 17 Apr. 1819; *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 29 Apr. 1809 for Liverpool Meeting for 'the friends of constitutional freedom and enemies of political corruption'.
[155] *Manchester Observer*, 5 & 19 June 1819.
[156] *Morning Chronicle*, 21 Aug. 1819; *Morning Post*, 23 Aug.1819.

unconcerned about, the appearance of legitimacy. These methods were not widely emulated and did not last, even in the capital.

In the early 1830s the new form of advertised meetings eased some of the practical problems of organising in the metropolis. The ability to meet without seeking the sanction of local officials was particularly useful where there were no appropriate officials. As we saw in chapter 4, what were termed 'political meetings' at the Rotunda were advertised weekly and sometimes concluded by agreeing to petition, creating a new petitioning identity. This approach was an extension of the form of advertised meeting that we saw in the northern region, for in London those attending the meetings had no proclaimed collective identity, beyond being present. The NUWC also called what it termed 'public meetings of the working classes of the metropolis' which agreed petitions on various topics.[157] These were like the northern meetings of the working classes but were of a geographical area with no formal definition. It says much about how attitudes had changed that these petitions were accepted by the Commons.[158] The NUWC had limited success as a society, but the model of a central body with local branches, previously employed by other campaigning societies as well as by philanthropic and religious societies, offered one solution to the challenge of organising in London.[159] Nevertheless, these general, loosely defined meetings described here remained peripheral to the main forms of organising employed at this time.

6.4 Conclusion.

At an unofficial Stockport reform meeting in 1819 one of the organisers, having referred to the rejection of their requisition, continued, 'no matter; here we are assembled by

[157] *Poor Man's* Guardian, 13 Aug. 1831, p. 46.
[158] See chapter 5.
[159] The NUWC is discussed further in chapter 8.

legitimate means, for a legitimate object.'[160] Historians have tended to concentrate on disputes about legality but, in this period when who could meet to make collective pronouncements in the public interest was being actively extended, broader and less formally defined legitimacy was also a vital quality. Changes over a relatively short period in the methods of calling locality meetings show how people moved on from the anxieties of the 1790s and devised new ways of organising to present collective opinions to Parliament and the nation. Locality meetings were the vehicle most suitable to these ends. A degree of trial and error is evident, particularly on the part of working people, but the new form of advertised meetings in the later 1820s made the ability to call and attend such meetings widely accessible. Official meetings remained hybrid bodies, for that form of meeting was often used to address matters of purely local concern: that is, they continued to have important non-political (as defined in this thesis) uses. By contrast, unofficial and especially advertised meetings were more political forms of associating, rarely used for locality affairs.

Parish sources allow us to see just how flexible and variable the label inhabitant was, even when not qualified by adjectives such as 'leading' or 'respectable'. The conscious crafting of the identity is particularly evident in decisions about who could sign petitions. At times the signatories of petitions from these parishes embodied a restrictive interpretation of inhabitants as ratepayers or something still narrower. On other occasions those in control of these decisions, by making petitions widely available for signature, chose to present inhabitants as synonymous with the people. Those two interpretations set parameters to the political identity of inhabitant. The new forms of advertised meetings in the 1820s, which allowed the mobilisation either of the working classes or of the inhabitants of a part of a

[160] *Manchester Observer*, 3 July 1819.

locality (generally, a part where working people lived) presented alternative interpretations.

Sarah Richardson quoted Lord Suffield in 1832 querying whether a petition could be described as from inhabitants, when the majority of those who had attended the meeting (about education) were women.[161] We know that women did sign petitions, and that there were women-only petitions. Nevertheless, the suggestion that they were not within the leading political identity of the day reflects how women were perceived as (at best) marginal to political organisation. The system of inhabitant-meetings described here did little to accommodate their involvement.

[161] Richardson, *Political Worlds*, p.116.

7: ‘Public meetings’

The term ‘public meeting’ acquired a particular meaning and significance in the early nineteenth century. The desire to present public meetings as open, deliberative and concerned for the general good shaped how they were arranged and conducted. Those qualities also served important rhetorical purposes in legitimating expressions of opinion on matters of national controversy by groups with general identities (usually inhabitants). This third chapter about organising in the locality draws together themes identified in chapters 5 and 6 and builds on the discussion in chapter 3 about the contemporary conceptualisation of extra-parliamentary agitation.

7.1 Introduction.

‘Public meeting’ was applied to extra-parliamentary gatherings about national issues to only a limited extent in the eighteenth century, and even then did not have the resonances it later gained.[1] Some historians describe eighteenth-century meetings that were neither of corporate, closed bodies nor of interest groups as public meetings.[2] This usage captures a qualitative difference between the meetings of closed bodies and the more open events increasingly organised from the 1760s. However, the general practice at the time was to label those more open meetings not as ‘public meetings’, but as meetings of the county, or of inhabitants of a place, or similar formulations.[3] In the 1770s, if used at all, the term ‘public meeting’ was appended to meetings about selecting candidates for elections; local

[1] One source for this and the next paragraph was searches for ‘public meeting’ in the 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection Database and British Library Newspapers, Parts I-V (1732-1950) for 1775 to 1795.
[2] For example, Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 426; John Bohstedt, *Riot and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790-1810* (London, 1983) p. 104; Drescher, *Capitalism and Anti-Slavery* repeatedly; Charles Tilly, ‘The Rise of the Public Meeting in Great Britain, 1758-1834’, *Social Science History*, 34 (2010), pp. 291-99, p. 293 defined a public meeting as ‘ten or more people gathered in publicly accessible places’ making collective claims.
[3] See chapter 3.2 and 3.3

amenity projects and subscriptions; and by financial bodies, including when calling meetings of creditors.[4] It seemed to mean advertised and open, possibly encouraging wide attendance at, and certainly awareness of, the event. The handful of occasions when the term referenced interventions on national issues were generally contained in comment pieces or letters and did not reflect how the organisers described the event.[5] However, meetings of the Protestant Association in London in 1779 and 1780 were interchangeably labelled by their organisers as 'general meetings' and 'public meetings'.[6] There, public seemed to mean open to any (Protestant) who wished to attend. Only a small minority of the many meetings that were part of the Association movement were called as 'public meetings' (that of Derby was an example); on a couple of occasions when requisitions were rejected, it was stated that the sheriff had refused to call a 'public meeting'.[7] The general election in 1784 was dominated by the fall of the Fox-North government and the King's appointment of Pitt. There was a burst of loyal addresses to the King and several of the meetings at which these were agreed were described by their organisers as 'public meetings'.[8] Thereafter, use of the term for specific events receded again and was rarely used, for example about anti-slave trade meetings in 1788.[9]

As was discussed in chapter 3, during the 1790s 'public meeting' began to be used more as a general label for the phenomenon of extra-parliamentary meetings. Traditional terms for specific events continued to be preferred but some were described by their organisers as 'public meetings'. There was another surge in that usage around the many loyal addresses in late 1792 and early 1793, responding to the King's proclamation against seditious

[4] *Morning Chronicle*, 8 Mar. 1775; *London Evening Post*, 11-15 Apr. 1775; *Public Advertiser*, 8 Feb. 1776; *Morning Post*, 10 Apr. 1779.
[5] *London Evening Post*, 26-28 Sept. 1775; *Public Advertiser*, 21 Sept. 1779; for an exception see, *Gazeteer*, 17 Jan. 1778.
[6] *Gazeteer* and *General Advertiser*, both 1 Jan. 1780.
[7] *Courant*, 27 Mar. 1780; *Gazeteer*, 29 Jan. 1780.
[8] *Leeds Intelligencer*, 3 Feb. 1784; *Northampton Mercury*, 16 Feb. 1784.
[9] For example, *Manchester Mercury*, 1 Jan. 1788.

writings.[10] There were obvious reasons why organisers would desire that statements of loyalty should be expressed as agreed at widely accessible meetings. This loyalist adoption of the term accords with Mark Philp's argument that the radicals' understanding of their own activities was influenced by how loyalists presented theirs.[11] In Sheffield some open meetings were called by the radicals as 'public meetings of the Constitutional Society' and many contemporaries used the term about the outdoor meetings organised by the LCS.[12] In 1794 Thomas Walker (the Manchester reformer and former boroughreeve) wrote a pamphlet following his acquittal for sedition. In this he referred to a 'public meeting' that had been held in the town in 1790 to oppose repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.[13] At the time, however, the meeting had been described as a meeting of the 'town and neighbourhood of Manchester'.[14] Walker's retrospective application of the label 'public meeting' reflected a developing sense that the term could be employed to attach weight to a meeting's deliberations. His substantive complaint was that the 1790 meeting was partial, being in substance a meeting of the established church and, therefore, contrary to the resolution of a 1788 Manchester meeting that the 'boroughreeve and constables had no right to call any meeting of the inhabitants, except a general one'.[15] Walker was pressing a point that would later become established: 'public meetings' could not cater for only one body of opinion.

Historians' description of eighteenth-century meetings as public meetings has obscured significant changes in the early nineteenth century and the reasons behind those changes. 'Public meeting' came to be understood as meaning assemblies of people of a generally

[10] *Manchester Mercury*, 4, 11 Dec. 1792; *Morning Herald*, 10 Dec. 1792; *Star and Evening Advertiser*, 11 Dec. 1792.
[11] Philp, *Radical Conduct*, chapter 1.
[12] *Sheffield Register*, 15 Mar. 1793; Goodrich, *Redhead Yorke*, p. 114; chapter 3.3.
[13] Walker, *Review*, p. 12.
[14] *St James Chronicle*, 4 Feb. 1790.
[15] *Manchester Mercury*, 15 July 1788.

defined identity, most commonly inhabitants of a locality, called together by public advertisement to discuss a specific issue. These meetings were presented as open and deliberative and those attending claimed to be concerned for the public good. When analysed together, the qualities of publicness — open, deliberative and civic minded — reveal 'public meetings' as an early-nineteenth century development that served ideological and practical needs of that time. Publicness reinforced the presentation of locality meetings as legitimate. It allowed campaigners to claim that resolutions agreed at those meetings represented the views of the locality. Publicness resulted from strategic decisions made by campaigners and commentators and was key to the conceptualisation of extra-parliamentary agitations as something separate from politics; both 'public opinion' and 'public meetings' employed similar ideas in ways that could be understood across the nation. Richard Huzzey's recent article discusses 'open deliberation' and mentions several of the behaviours analysed in this chapter.[16] David Knott also explored the emphasis placed by the middle-class reformers in Manchester on the role of deliberative public meetings in forming public opinion, which they considered to be the province of the educated middle classes.[17] However, it is only when all the behaviours are considered together that the role of publicness becomes clear.

The adoption of inhabitants as an identity under which all causes could be pursued was associated with the presentation of interventions as in the national interest and as motivated by duty and not self-interest. This approach drew on the early modern rediscovery of classical civic ideals and employed republican ideas to legitimise activity as members of the public, rather than under a sectional identity that was affected by the issue. Phil Withington argued that responsibility and duty informed how early modern urban

[16] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', part 3.
[17] David Knott, 'The Little Circle and Manchester Politics, 1812-1846' (PhD. Thesis, University of Manchester, 2018).

communities (in his work, corporate towns) legitimated the exercise of power.[18] He also emphasised the 'rise of the bourgeois town at the expense of the corporate citizens' (in other words, a shift in favour of the more general involvement of inhabitants) and the significance of this for the 'dissemination of civic humanist notions of citizenship'.[19] Mark Philp noted that a growth of a language of public utility and the common good in the late eighteenth century was a way of 'reconciling all in a harmonious polity'.[20] Rosemary Sweet showed that when pursuing legislation for local improvements, localities presented the measures they sought either in terms of local rights and privileges or as a 'common understanding of the public good'.[21] As we will see, inhabitants also legitimated their interventions in national matters as being concerned for the general good: they portrayed themselves as representing the public interest. Although this argument has some resonances with elements of Habermas' theory of the public sphere, there are fundamental differences. It is not suggested here that these discussions were rational or that they involved people debating an issue on equal terms: rather, activities were *presented* as being open and deliberating in the public good to legitimate the expression by inhabitants of opinions on current affairs as members of the public.

The shift (discussed in chapter 3) from parliamentarians interpreting the 'sense of the people' to the increased assertion of the people's right to express the 'public opinion' sharpened activists' desire to present the views of a meeting as representing those of the locality.[22] That change made more acute the question of how to deal with conflicting views from the same place. It was not unprecedented for a locality to send conflicting petitions or

[18] Phil Withington, 'Citizens, Community and Political Culture in Restoration England' in Phil Withington and Alexandra Shepard, *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 134-55; Phil Withington, 'Public Discourse, Corporate Citizenship, and State Formation in Early Modern England', *American Historical Review*, 112 (2007), pp. 1016-38.
[19] Withington, 'Public Discourse', pp. 1020.
[20] Philp, *Radical Conduct*, p. 33.
[21] Sweet, 'Local Identities', pp. 50-51.
[22] See the comparison in chapter 3 between 1775 and 1795.

addresses. It certainly occurred during the American conflict, but then more ambiguity surrounded the status of those representations and what contribution they made to the sense of the people.[23] As the expression of opinions in petitions to parliament became more frequent, what weight should be attached to conflicting representations from the same place came into sharper focus. The conventions that governed 'public meetings' in the early nineteenth century attempted to address this question. The theory was that once organisers had been open about the meeting and its subject, allowed wide attendance and made it possible for opposing opinions to be heard and discussed, all with the object of fostering the public good, it was unlikely that another 'public meeting' of the same locality would reach a different view. Of course, parliamentarians remained adept at discounting opinions that did not suit them, but a direct set-off was less likely in this relatively open context.

Although the ideal of 'public meetings' was often imperfectly realised, the concept strongly influenced the conduct of, and rhetoric about, meetings. The qualities of publicness overlapped and were cumulative in effect, but it is possible to isolate different contributions each made to the idea of what should constitute a public meeting. How meetings were called and who could attend were affected by their claims to be open and deliberative. The conduct of meetings was influenced by their presentation as deliberative and civic minded, while civic mindedness shaped the expression of the representations that emanated from them. These qualities of publicness were not equally applied or valued by all groups. Furthermore, it was challenging for some organisers in the capital to make their meetings fully conform to the preferred modes. After exploring how these qualities affected meetings, the relationship between 'public meetings' and 'public opinion' is

[23] Bradley, *Popular Politics*, pp. 69, 77, 80-82.

discussed. Finally, we consider some events labelled as public meetings by their organisers that fall outside the parameters identified here.

7.2 The practice and ideology of 'public meetings'.

One interpretation of the requirement of openness was that public meetings were open to anyone who could claim a generally defined identity (most commonly inhabitant) without qualification. This principle of wide accessibility was also manifested in the extension of attendance at county meetings beyond the traditional freeholders, to include inhabitants (acknowledged by Lord Liverpool in 1819 to be the 'modern' practice).[24] In the northern towns open attendance was respected in theory, if rarely practised.[25] The London parishes found it more difficult to make their official meetings open to all inhabitants because their constitutions defined who could attend vestry meetings and it was those structures that gave their meetings legitimacy. Even vestries open to all ratepayers like Clerkenwell, Shoreditch and (until 1824) Islington had, in principle at least, more restricted attendance than public meetings in the northern towns.[26] Occasionally, the minutes of some vestries described their meetings as 'public vestries' (for example, Clerkenwell's 1815 meeting about the corn law).[27] While little pattern can be discerned in this application of public, or what it signified on the day, it suggests a desire to connect with the wider phenomenon of public meetings. By contrast, unofficial and advertised meetings in London, whether in the parishes or the wider metropolitan area, were generally open to all who wished to attend.

Openness also dictated that sufficient advance information of a public meeting be provided to allow anyone who was interested in the issue to attend. Publicity was necessary for a

[24] *Morning Chronicle*, 21 Dec. 1819; Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', pp. 215-6.
[25] Chapter 6.2.1.
[26] Chapter 6.3.1.
[27] ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 28 Feb. 1815.

meeting to be successful and assisted in demonstrating a lack of seditious intent, but advertising went beyond these practical objectives. Wide advance publicity supported the assertion that the conclusions reached at the subsequent meetings represented the views of the place. Legally, ratepayers who did not attend vestry meetings were bound by decisions made in their absence.[28] This principle ensured they could not refuse to pay rates for expenses agreed at meetings when they were not present. Public meetings that adopted positions on matters of public interest did not legally bind anyone, but the principle that everyone should know a meeting was to be held relied on similar reasoning to claim that the resulting views represented those of the locality. As Earl Grey commented in 1821, 'if those who differ in sentiment do not attend, it is a fair inference that they feel that the general sense of the country is against them'.[29]

There were long-standing notice procedures for meetings in both regions. For the London parishes, notice was integral to their formation as a collective, with a common recital in the minutes being '[at] a meeting of the inhabitants in vestry assembled, pursuant to notice given'.[30] Even Spitalfields, which held parish (not vestry) meetings about public matters, recited that they met 'pursuant to notice'.[31] In Shoreditch the organisers went so far as to cancel a meeting to discuss Peterloo when it was realised the notice was defective. It was felt that a meeting held on inadequate notice would represent only the views of those present, while 'a public vestry' of which due notice had been given 'ought to be regarded as embodying the opinions of the majority of the parishioners, amounting in number to about 50,000'.[32] This Shoreditch assertion of the representative power of properly called

[28] Richard Burn, Montague Bere, and Thomas Chitty, *The Justice of the Peace, and Parish Officer* (London, 1837), p. 136.
[29] *Selection of Speeches*, p. 114.
[30] For example, ILHC, LBI/PVM/2, IVM, 31 May 1814.
[31] *Morning Chronicle*, 10 Feb. 1817.
[32] O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament', pp. 51-52; *Morning Advertiser* and *The Times*, 8 Oct. 1819.

meetings was made in the context of the post-Peterloo debate about the appropriateness of meetings to discuss public matters and was widely and uncritically reported in the national press. Generally, notice of a meeting was read in church on the preceding Sunday, posted on the church door and often advertised around the parish by supplementary notices and bill posts. Some parishes enhanced their notice procedures during this period and while strictly only applicable to general parish business, they were used for all meetings.[33] In the northern region meetings were advertised in newspapers or by placards, bill posts and town criers.[34] That the Seditious Meetings Acts of 1795 and 1817 required meetings organised under their authorisation to be advertised in 'some public newspaper usually circulated' in the area, further cemented the practice of giving notice.[35] (The same provision was not included in the 1819 act, presumably because requiring newspaper advertisements might have undermined that statute's aim of restricting meetings to the inhabitants of narrowly defined areas.[36])

The notice or advertisement defined the subject of the public meeting. To discuss matters that had not been advertised ran the risk of undermining the claim that the meeting represented the locality's views, as those who had not attended could validly complain they would have done so if they had known the full extent of the discussion. This was why it was common for the chair to open a meeting by emphasising that the discussion must stick to the advertised subject. The chair of the unofficial Manchester public meeting about Queen Caroline, for example, requested that all who addressed the meeting 'confine themselves strictly to the subjects for which it is convened.'[37] Topics were usually

[33] ILHC, LBI/PVM/2, IVM, 26 Oct. 1813, 7 June 1814.
[34] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 16 Oct. 1819; *Manchester Courier*, 24 Mar. 1827; *Bolton Chronicle*, 26 May 1827.
[35] 36 Geo. III, c. 8. and 57 Geo. III, c. 19; see also 58 Geo. III, c. 64. The Sturges Bourne (Vestries) Act also required notice be given; Samantha Shave, 'The impact of Sturges Bourne's Poor Law Reforms in Rural England', *Historical Journal*, 56 (2013), pp. 399-429.
[36] 60 Geo. III, c. 9 and 1 Geo IV, c. 6.
[37] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 9 Dec. 1820.

expressed in an open-ended form so that deliberative debate might conclude something different to what the organisers (who almost invariably desired a particular outcome) hoped.[38] William Cobbett and Henry Hunt both made a practice of attending public meetings (generally of counties) and attempting to radicalise the resolutions or divert the purpose of the meeting.[39] Even they sometimes failed, if the chair retained sufficient control of the meeting to rule their amendments outside the requisition.[40] That notices were largely abided by did not ensure that the organisers' goals were met. An 1808 Bolton meeting called to consider a loyal address to the sovereign decided on a petition for peace in direct opposition to the organisers' intentions.[41] As Huzzey comments, 'what constituted digression … was itself a question of political judgement'.[42]

The emphasis on being deliberative also influenced the presentation of public meetings as orderly and open to all opinion. Orderliness served practical purposes, both in deterring the authorities from interfering with proceedings and allowing meetings to consider the matter for which they were convened. However, order also had a legitimising role. Listening calmly to all the speakers aided the presentation of meetings as trying an issue, weighing all the arguments, before reaching a conclusion in the national interest.[43] The skills required to deliver a persuasive speech and deal with opposing arguments were one reason for the contemporary popularity of debating societies. Even vestry meetings that were restricted to ratepayers of a defined financial level did not limit the opinions that could be heard or the conclusions that might be reached. In practice, there was often limited tolerance for opposing views with those who spoke against the majority opinion frequently

[38] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 16 Jan. 1819.
[39] *Black Dwarf*, 8 Jan. 1823; Innes, 'People and Power', p. 140; Belchem, *'Orator' Hunt*, pp. 172-202.
[40] *The Sun*, 24 Apr. 1824.
[41] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette,* 20 Feb. 1808.
[42] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', p. 212.
[43] For example, *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 9 Dec. 1820.

harassed into silence. A speaker at a Shoreditch meeting was hissed at when he suggested that newspaper reports of Peterloo might be inaccurate.[44] At an unofficial corn law meeting in Manchester in 1826, a gentlemen who opposed petitioning and regretted that the boroughreeve was not in the chair was greeted by 'loud and continued laughter, followed by hisses' and, although the chairman 'procured' him a hearing, he was so frequently interrupted that he abandoned his speech.[45]

There was some tension between being deliberative and being open. Once meetings reached a certain scale their deliberative character diminished. The mass platform, identified by historians as a significant organisational development of this period, involved meetings that prioritised openness over being deliberative.[46] The huge numbers that attended some meetings meant that not everyone could hear what was said. Those who could hear might be reluctant to listen to unpopular opinions (more likely over tactics than principle).[47] While the orderliness of these meetings was often emphasised, at the same time the volume of people attending carried an implicit threat of physical force.[48] The purpose of gathering huge crowds was less to deliberate on a policy (generally, radical parliamentary reform) which most attendees already endorsed and more to demonstrate the strength of support for their cause. They were rallies, more than meetings, and their legitimacy was founded in the numbers attending. For coherent campaigning reasons, therefore, the organisers of mass platform events were less concerned to present their meetings as deliberative, but very keen that they were open to all.

[44] O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament', p. 59.
[45] *Manchester Gazette*, 19 Aug. 1826.
[46] Belchem, 'Hunt and the Evolution'.
[47] Dave Steele, 'Reputational Power of English Reform Crowds, 1816-1848' (PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2023), pp. 226-233.
[48] Poole, *Peterloo*, chapter 10.

The combined effect of the requirements to be open and to allow deliberative discussion made it challenging to organise meetings about unpopular positions. The tradition that the leading men of a place might represent its views was at times under severe pressure.[49] When conservative and loyalist opinion felt their views would not be in the majority at a public meeting, they sometimes resorted to arranging private meetings by invitation. This was particularly evident in both regions in relation to the Queen Caroline affair and on Catholic emancipation. If it was attempted to claim that the views expressed in those private meetings represented the views of the locality, they were castigated for holding 'hole in the corner' meetings. A secret Shoreditch meeting held in the vestry that agreed a loyal address to the King in 1820 was condemned in a full vestry meeting as the 'unconstitutional' act of a group 'too ashamed or afraid to meet in public'.[50] A similar meeting in Clerkenwell was described as of a 'few comfortable gentlemen cooped up in private' attempting to 'monopolise the loyalty of the parish'.[51] Criticisms of this nature were, of course, not new. They were, for example, made in the context of the American conflict where opinion in many localities was divided on how Britain should respond to the colonists.[52] However, in the early nineteenth century the insult 'hole in the corner' acquired ideological force for failing to comply with the qualities of publicness. A meeting of the 'principal inhabitants' of Oldham about concerns over public order in the town during the reform agitation was attended by the radical, John Knight. When challenged about his attendance, he responded 'if this be a public meeting … any inhabitant has a right to come or else it is a hole-in-the-corner like the rest of your proceedings'.[53] Given its claimed subject, Knight's criticism that the meeting ought to have been public was probably

[49] See chapter 3.8.
[50] HAD, P/L/4, SVM, 28 Dec. 1820; O'Connor, 'Politics, Parliament', p. 60.
[51] *Morning Chronicle*, 23 Dec. 1820.
[52] *London Evening Post*, 26-8 Sept. 1775; Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 358.
[53] OSLA, BUT/F/5, 5 Nov. 1831: Butterworth Papers.

misplaced. He did, however, make a clear statement of the dichotomy frequently applied at the time to meetings of inhabitants: public and legitimate or private and improper.[54] A similar discourse was employed in local campaigns against closed and select vestries and can be seen in the use of 'select vestry' as an undesirable comparator (see for example, 'we are not a select vestry' in a discussion about whether representatives of the press should be present at a meeting of friendly societies).[55]

One consequence of some of the middle-class reformers in Manchester being newspaper editors was that the town's newspapers carried extended discussions about private versus public meetings.[56] Meetings about the Queen evidence the ways in which these principles were articulated and disseminated. The Manchester boroughreeve, having refused to call a public meeting about the Queen, organised a private meeting to agree a loyal address. An article in the *Manchester Gazette* analysed the many ways in which this private meeting failed to meet the standards of the day. It was not called by requisition. There had been no public notice of the meeting. The room could hold little more than one hundred, when claiming to represent the views of Manchester required more substantial numbers to attend. The private meeting had no 'deliberative quality' and allowed only one conclusion. The address agreed at this private meeting was expressed as being from the 'Boroughreeves and Constables of Manchester and Salford, together with the Magistrates, Clergy, Merchants, Traders and Householders', implying that it represented the views of the town. However, only an address agreed at an open and deliberative public meeting could make such a claim. The unofficial public meeting about the Queen organised following the rejection of its organisers' requisition was, by contrast, held in the largest room in the town

[54] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 21 Aug. 1819, Poole, *Peterloo*, pp. 343-4; Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', p. 29.
[55] *Trades Newspaper*, 12 Apr. 1828.
[56] Knott, 'Little Circle', chapter 3.

so that the numbers attending might justify the description as 'emanating from the inhabitants'. All who 'felt an interest in the subject' could participate and conclude whatever 'might be most in unison with the sentiments of the great body' gathered.[57] A letter in another newspaper was more sympathetic to the private meeting which was, it claimed, attended by 'almost all the respectability of the town'. Nevertheless, the writer continued, it was unfortunate that the meeting had been called in a clandestine way, which amounted to 'a tacit confession that the sentiments … were not the approved opinion of the majority of the inhabitants'.[58]

The expression of collective opinions about matters of national contention that did not come from voters in constituencies was still relatively novel, certainly on the kind of scale seen in these early decades of the nineteenth century. This engagement by inhabitants was given added legitimacy by being framed around concern for the public good. Notwithstanding the varied emphases and presentations, the regularity with which civic mindedness was employed suggests that the rhetorical strategy served to justify inhabitants' interventions in matters of national significance in which they had no specific personal interest.

Organising and actively participating in meetings was often described as a duty or moral obligation. Requisitionists were thanked for their 'zeal' in promoting the public welfare and national interest. It was a common trope for speakers at meetings to claim they had overcome their reluctance to speak out of a sense of duty, while regretting that someone more able had not taken on the task.[59] When Sir Oswald Mosley, the Lord of the Manor, chaired a Manchester anti-slavery meeting in 1826, he said he had thought of declining the

[57] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 16 Dec. 1820.
[58] *Exchange Herald*, 12 Dec. 1820.
[59] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM, 27 Feb. 1815, 20 Feb. 1816.

request but felt that he 'had yet a higher duty to perform, feelings of humanity and still more the feelings of Christianity, urged him to obey that call'. At the same meeting, the Reverend Remington said he could 'not allow the sense of his own deficiency to cause him altogether to shrink from the performance of a duty, the discharge of which would at least be a satisfaction to his own conscience'.[60] Although such statements tend to only be evidenced when detailed reports of meetings were published, the practice of self-deprecation was sufficiently common for it to be referred to as a phenomenon.[61] While the evidence is patchy, it seems that similar performative apologies were not deployed in meetings of interest groups which, gathered to further their organisation's explicit concerns, needed no further legitimation.

Petitioners claimed to be impelled by a sense of duty or morality. In an 1812 petition for peace, Bolton's inhabitants claimed it was 'the bounden duty of the people of this country to make known their distresses and wishes … a duty we owe to ourselves, our country, and posterity'.[62] The inhabitants of Poplar felt it their duty to petition against the property tax in 1816.[63] During the parliamentary reform agitation it was frequently claimed that the people had a duty to express their support for the ministerial measure.[64] Some causes were particularly associated with moral obligation. In 1813 many of the petitions about allowing missionaries to go to India adopted the language developed in the petition from Maldon, which had asserted that it was the 'bounden duty of the legislature to promote … the interest and happiness of the' Indians.[65] Clerkenwell's inhabitants felt that the parish should petition for the abolition of slavery so 'the inhabitants of this parish can be free

[60] *Manchester Courier*, 25 Mar. 1826.
[61] *Manchester Courier*, 27 Feb. 1830, speech of Potter.
[62] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 7 Mar. 1812.
[63] THLHLA, ASP/A/5, Poplar Meetings of Inhabitants, 7 Mar. 1816.
[64] e.g., ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 23 Dec. 1830; chapter 3.8.
[65] *CJ*, 68 (1813), p. 403.

from the guilt of tacit participation in a system offensive to God' (1824).[66] A Manchester anti-sati meeting (1827) was 'deeply impressed by the obligation of the inhabitants of Britain to promote the civilization and improvements of their fellow citizens in India'.[67] When Dissenting congregations began petitioning about similar issues in the later 1820s this morally-driven justification could easily be adopted.[68]

An alternative method of displaying civic mindedness was to express patriotic feeling and concern for the good of the nation. Petitions opposing the property tax in 1816 are a useful source because, unusually, many were printed in full in the *Commons Journals*; they show that the approach taken in petitions from the two study areas reflected that adopted nationally.[69] Many petitioners emphasised that their patriotism, manifested in their acceptance of the original imposition of the tax, was undimmed despite their objections to its continuance. The inhabitants of St George-in-the-East argued that they accepted the tax to maintain 'our national honour and independence' and they continued to be ready to 'contribute in concurrence with their fellow subjects in the ordinary and more constitutional channels of taxation'.[70] The constitution was frequently referenced, whether in relation to the method of assessing the tax (which many felt infringed their liberties) or in relation to using its continuance to fund a standing army (as rumoured). Manchester's petitioners argued that the tax was 'repugnant to their habits and feelings as Englishmen ... uncalled for by the circumstances of the country and dangerous to the principles of the constitution'.[71] Many referred to the promise that the tax would be a temporary, war-time measure, arguing that its continuance in peacetime would (in the words of Shoreditch)

[66] ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 28 Mar. 1824.
[67] *Manchester Courier*, 12 May 1827.
[68] Civin, 'Slaves, Sati', pp. 198-9, Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, p. 145.
[69] *CJ*, 71 (1816) Feb. and Mar. 1816.
[70] *CJ*, 71 (1816) p. 155.
[71] *CJ*, 71 (1816) p. 184.

'destroy that confidence in public men and measures so essential to the well-being of every government'.[72] The handful of petitions against the property tax from farmers (an interest group) were in revealingly different language for they presented arguments about the effect of the tax on them. The landowners of Princes Risborough complained that crops were insufficient to pay taxes, wages and their own living expenses, with many reduced to 'absolute ruin'. The landowners of Royston claimed that many faced the 'workhouse or prison'. Neither made any reference to the wider good.[73] To complete the comparison, the inhabitants of King's Lynn noted the 'depressed state of agricultural interests' but also that 'manufacturing and trading interests are almost equally depressed'.[74] Despite the local importance of farming, they felt obliged to incorporate the perspectives of other sectors because they presented themselves as inhabitants.

Arguments addressing the good of the nation, patriotism and the constitution were advanced in support of numerous other causes. When opposing the corn law Islington's inhabitants sought to 'protect the nation against the unjust attempt of one class to enrich itself at the expense' of the others (1815).[75] Old Street's inhabitants desired prosperity for both manufacturing and agriculture, but argued that the proposed laws would bring 'misery to the state'.[76] Islington's inhabitants considered climbing boys 'disgraceful to our national character' (1817).[77] Those of Clerkenwell argued that slavery was 'repugnant to the free spirit of the British constitution and its abolition would 'preserve the liberties and best interests of people and promote the true glory of the Empire'(1824).[78] Bolton's inhabitants argued that Catholic efforts to obtain emancipation were 'dangerous to the well-being of

[72] *CJ*, 71 (1816) p. 77.
[73] *CJ*, 71 (1816), pp. 164,101.
[74] *CJ*, 71 (1816), p. 76.
[75] *Morning Chronicle*, 8 Mar. 1815.
[76] *Morning Chronicle*, 1 Mar. 1815.
[77] ILHC, LBI/PVM/2, IVM, [no day] Dec. 1817.
[78] ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 31 Mar. 1824.

the community' (1825).[79] Manchester's inhabitants asserted that 'the public welfare' required that the corn law be altered (1827).[80]

Radicals also presented their arguments for parliamentary reform as motivated by civic mindedness, whether these emanated from meetings attended by huge crowds or from smaller events. Quite apart from the conventions of publicness, there were good reasons to present interventions in this style because showing that a cause was in the national interest made a case for why it should be adopted. Nevertheless, the common references to duty suggest that these radical groups shared the contemporary view that asserting civic mindedness helped to legitimise their expressions of opinion. The 1816 Spa Fields meeting, organised by London's ultra-radicals, glossed its demands for parliamentary reform as expressing 'the prayers of the nation' to be relieved from the 'unparalleled distress and misery felt by all classes' (except those who lived off taxes). Hunt told the meeting it was their 'peculiar duty' to petition.[81] The organisers of an 1818 public meeting for reform in Ashton stated that they were 'desirous to promote the peace and happiness of our country'.[82] An 1830 petition from Manchester's (radical) inhabitants argued that shorter parliaments and the ballot were 'essential to the welfare of the country'.[83] A petition agreed by a meeting at the Rotunda in 1831 stated that it was their 'duty' to acknowledge that the Reform Bill so exceeded their expectations that they would support it.[84]

Despite the patina of civic mindedness, the underlying interests of petitioners often came through. The inhabitants of Bethnal Green complained in their property tax petition that

[79] *CJ*, 80 (1825), p. 308.
[80] *Manchester Courier*, 7 July 1827.
[81] *Morning Chronicle*, 16 Nov. 1816; *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 21 Nov. 1816.
[82] *Manchester Observer*, 9 May 1818.
[83] *Manchester Times*, 25 Sept. 1830.
[84] *Prompter*, 12 Mar. 1831 p. 304.

the silk trade was depressed and their poor house full.[85] The extent to which civic mindedness was expressed was also affected by the issue. The petition of Clerkenwell's inhabitants about coal duties (1819) briefly weighed the interests of the metropolis against the coal-producing areas, before rapidly concluding that the national good required cheaper coal in the capital.[86] An 1830 Manchester petition about the duty on printed calicos was agreed at a public meeting and formally came from inhabitants, but in substance was a commercial petition that made arguments about the town's interests.[87] Manchester's petitioners also developed an approach which involved asserting that as a town of such importance, 'the second in the kingdom, for its wealth, the number of its inhabitants and its extensive commerce', they had a duty to express opinions, neatly re-branding local interests as in the public good.[88] The contrast with the views expressed in the town in the 1780s — that the town should only express its opinion on matters that were of 'general importance' or particularly relevant to the town — underlines how much attitudes had changed.[89]

Interest groups, such as commercial or trade societies, could not hold public meetings. Their meetings were, by definition, restricted to their own members and, therefore, not open. Neither could they be fully deliberative, nor purport to deliberate in the public good, for their purpose was to pursue the interests of their group. Some might assert that whatever they sought was consistent with the public interest, but it was not their main argument.[90] Interest groups are discussed further below in section four and in chapters 8 (trade societies) and 9 (forum selection).

[85] *CJ*, 71 (1816), p. 101.
[86] ILHC, LBI/PVM/1, CVM, 18 Feb. 1819.
[87] *Manchester Courier*, 27 Nov. 1830.
[88] *Manchester Gazette*, 19 Aug. & 9 Sept. 1826.
[89] See the opening paragraph of this thesis.
[90] Brewer, *Sinews of Power*, pp. 201-4.

7.3 ‘Public Opinion’.

These qualities of publicness — being open, deliberative and civic minded — were also integral to the concept of the public opinion. A meeting about Catholic Emancipation in Manchester in 1825 that attempted to restrict attendance only to those who opposed Emancipation was lambasted by several Manchester newspapers. At a subsequent public meeting on the same issue, it was resolved that:

> Private and exclusive meetings, whether for promoting or opposing great public measures, are objectionable, in as much as from their want of deliberative character, they fail to call forth the independent collision of argument, and to manifest the true state of public opinion ... those objections are strengthened … when efforts are made to swell the list of signatures to petitions by resorting to means which are inconsistent with a desire to collect the deliberative and settled opinion of the … community. [91]

It was argued against the Reform Bill that the speed with which the complex matter was being progressed meant there was no time for the ‘formation of deliberative public opinion’ founded on a full understanding of its provisions.[92] The suggestion in 1828 that ‘public virtue seems a necessary requisite to render public opinion of importance’ mirrors the civic-minded rhetoric in which the resolutions and petitions of public meeting were wrapped.[93] The connection between the two concepts shows that public opinion was formed not only by pronouncements by leading activists or positions taken in the press but also by what was said by actual people who bothered to attend meetings. The almost invariable final resolution of meetings — that their conclusions be advertised — demonstrates that those attending were conscious of contributing to public opinion. Old Street vestry, for example, decided to advertise their property tax resolutions in three morning and three evening newspapers and authorised the managing committee to ‘use any

[91] *Manchester Gazette*, 7 May 1825.
[92] *Morning Post*, 19 Apr. 1831; chapter 3.8.
[93] MacKinnon, *On the Rise, Progress*, p. 8.

other means which they deem expedient to increase their circulation and effect'.[94] When the Shoreditch vestry met about events at Peterloo they did not agree a petition to Parliament, nor an address to the Prince Regent. The sole purpose of their meeting was to be known to concur with criticism of the Manchester authorities, which they aimed to achieve by advertising their resolutions in *The Times*, *Morning Chronicle* and *The British Press*.[95] Often advertisements of resolutions were in fact not published, presumably because they were rejected by the newspapers which must on occasions have been swamped by them, particularly in London where there were many small meetings in parishes and wards. Nevertheless, the repeated resolutions to advertise speaks to awareness of and a desire to contribute to the national debate. The historian James Thompson similarly noted the importance of the platform and the petition (in addition to the press) in his analysis of public opinion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[96]

To recap on the discussion in chapter 3, the generally preferred conceptualisation of extra-parliamentary engagements was as 'public' rather than as 'political'. Dror Wahrman's argument that language should be analysed for its contemporary rhetorical functions can assist us here.[97] Public avoided the negative connotations still sometimes associated with politics. Politics suggested elections and constituencies; public was more inclusive. It gathered the multitude of local statements, made in a variety of circumstances, into a unity without introducing irrelevant or unhelpful party allegiances. Furthermore, the concept of publicness expressed the agency of the extra-parliamentary nation, reflecting the increased propensity to campaign without waiting for parliamentarians to take the lead.

[94] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OVM, 3 Jan. 1815.
[95] HAD, P/L/4, SVM, 18 Oct. 1819.
[96] Thompson, *British Political Culture*.
[97] Wahrman, 'Public Opinion', pp. 83-122; see also Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*.

Wahrman discussed public opinion in the context of his linguistic analysis of how early-nineteenth century Britons came to believe they lived in a middle-class society. He argued, *contra* Habermas, that public opinion was not inherently 'bourgeois'.[98] Rather, he suggests that during the 1810s and 1820s it came to be thought necessary for protagonists to show 'they were not representing merely a narrow interested group but rather an inclusive social range, indeed a universal alignment'.[99] Wahrman suggested that all groups appealed to the 'middle class' to join in the expression of public opinion so as to demonstrate broad support for a cause. Much contemporary commentary extolled the role of the middle classes in the formation of public opinion. William Mackinnon's 1828 book on the subject emphasised the significance of the middle classes on almost every page.[100] As Knott demonstrated, the middle-class reformers in Manchester believed that deliberative meetings and public opinion were the realm of the educated and reflective middle classes.[101] However, such contemporary statements were produced by or for the middle class and, as Wahrman argued, should not be taken at face value.[102] It is evident that several issues which marked peaks of public opinion in the early-nineteenth century, including the response to Peterloo, Queen Caroline, the anti-corn law agitation of the later 1820s and the parliamentary reform campaign of the early 1830s were supported by people from both the middle and working classes. The methods of organising explored here show that the qualities of publicness were considered rhetorically and practically relevant by all those engaged in extra-parliamentary campaigning, regardless of their social status.

[98] Wahrman, *Imagining*, p. 193.
[99] Warhman, *Imagining*, p. 196.
[100] Mackinnon, *Rise of Public Opinion*.
[101] Knott, 'Little Circle'.
[102] Wahrman, *Imagining*, chapter 6.

7.4 Other public meetings.

Many meetings labelled as public meetings in the early nineteenth century did not conform to the conventions of publicness just outlined. It was noted in the introduction to this chapter that in the later eighteenth century the term was used to describe meetings not called about issues of national contention and those practices continued into the nineteenth century. Some occasions when organisers had reasons to use the label are discussed below. These exceptions do not undermine the broader argument that if a generally defined group (such as inhabitants) wanted to present their opinions on an issue to Parliament and the nation, most would try so far as was practical in their circumstances to comply with the principles of publicness.

One reason to describe a meeting as public was when it was desirable for their proceedings to be open to all. In these circumstances public meant not private. Candidates or prospective candidates for election held public meetings to display the support that they had and to drum up more.[103] Organisations or groups might choose to hold an outward facing event for reasons that included raising their profile, attracting new members or subscriptions or perhaps (as in the case of the Bristol Literary and Philosophical Society) merely to allow members to show off to their acquaintances.[104] Societies established to promulgate certain practices or beliefs advertised public meetings where attendance wider than their immediate membership was welcomed. The Salford Temperance Society held a public meeting at the conclusion of which several individuals became members.[105] Many societies were by the early nineteenth century commonly launched at what were termed public meetings, like that held for the 'purpose of forming' the Manchester Methodist

[103] *Morning Chronicle*, 29 Apr. 1826.
[104] *Bristol Mercury*, 22 Feb. 1831.
[105] *Morning Post*, 31 Jan. 1831.

Missionary Society which was attended by various 'friends to the cause'.[106] This process should be understood as part of the phenomenon discussed previously where societies were increasingly conceived of less as groups of likeminded individuals and more as bodies that existed independent of their individual members: they acquired some non-private qualities. Provisional committees established to draw up the rules of societies often reported their work to a public meeting at which the society was then formally established. That these meetings were sometimes labelled with the older term general meeting indicates their nature.[107] Commercial organisations also held public meetings that were like general meetings, in that they were occasions when directors reported or accounted to shareholders; the directors of the Chilean Mining Association resolved at a private meeting to hold a public meeting at which subscribers' deposits would be returned, subject to the deduction of expenses.[108]

More interesting in relation to the issues explored here were public meetings held by societies that campaigned in the public interest. This phenomenon seems to have appeared in the 1820s (or perhaps we should say re-appeared, as some late-eighteenth century examples were cited in the introduction to this chapter). Societies' reasons for holding public meetings probably included accessing wider opinion (or being able to claim they had) and drawing attention and support to their causes.[109] It is difficult to assess how widespread the practice was, but it further illustrates the increasing flexibility and utility of the society form. In 1831 the Liverpool anti-slavery society organised a public meeting to consider a petition for the immediate abolition of slavery. The meeting was of 'members and friends', clearly seeking support from more than those already affiliated to the

[106] *Manchester Mercury*, 7 Mar. 1815.
[107] Stockport, Stockport Local Heritage Library [hereafter SLHL], 53/2, *Proceedings of the Public Meeting … Establishing An Auxiliary Bible Society* (Stockport, 1813).
[108] *Morning Post*, 24 Mar. 1826.
[109] Innes, 'Seeing Like a Surveyor', p. 10; *Northampton Mercury*, 1 Feb. 1823; *CJ*, 78 (1823), p. 104.

society.[110] These meetings were of groups that presented themselves as public-interest identities but could not comply with all the requirements of publicness. Though it was possible for their representations to be framed as for the general good, they cannot have been truly open to those who opposed their cause, nor can their proceedings have been properly deliberative given their opinions were explicitly predetermined. Describing an anti-slavery society meeting as a public meeting can be understood as a gesture in the direction of the dominant ideology of the time, albeit one that its promoters could only imperfectly enact.[111] Although direct petitioning in the name of societies did occur by this time, it remained relatively rare and perhaps this difficulty in being fully public was part of the explanation. As was noted previously, the anti-slavery society continued to prefer that petitions came from public meetings of inhabitants.

A third type of public meeting that fell outside the parameters of publicness was a kind sometimes organised by the trades, including meetings associated with industrial disputes. For the trades public seems to have indicated the presence of others beyond the group in question and a desire that their proceedings be publicised. A public meeting of weavers and spinners called by advertisement to discuss a strike at two mills in the Ashton area was attended by around five thousand. The strike had potentially wide ramifications because, following a wage cut at the two mills, other employers in the area said they would also reduce wages unless that cut was overturned.[112] Many not directly connected to the dispute, therefore, had an interest in its outcome. Furthermore, making the full circumstances of the dispute widely known might be hoped to assist its prosecution. The meeting was public in that it was publicised, both in advance and after the event, and attendance was open. It was not, however, deliberative or concerned for the public good. How the trades were affected

[110] *Liverpool Mercury*, 28 Jan. 1831.
[111] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', p. 218.
[112] *United Trades Co-operative Journal*, 14 Aug. 1830.

by the instability of the distinction between public and private when applied to their concerns is a topic treated in the next chapter.

Many of the behaviours explored in this chapter were also evident in other types of meeting, at least in terms of how they were called and conducted. Both vestry and town meetings about local issues, for example, were arranged and run in a similar manner to those about public matters. These behaviours became something a norm for the period, even in contexts where the subject matter made it impractical to claim to be acting in the public interest. Some uses probably reflected no more than the promiscuous application of a fashionable term.

7.5 Conclusion.

At the height of the reform agitation Absalom Watkin (a member of the group of middle-class reformers in Manchester) recorded in his journal that the group had decided to refer a question on how to proceed to 'those gentlemen in the town who were most conversant with the rules of public meetings'.[113] Although conventions would be more accurate than rules, the remark indicates that contemporaries understood there was a consensus that governed public meetings. There were right and wrong ways of proceeding. While there is a danger of over-rationalising what people did, the underlying patterns of behaviour are clear. The apparently formulaic and even mannered style adopted in many meetings served purposes. This chapter has identified those purposes and has sought to present an overarching explanation of both the practices of public meetings and their rhetorical justification.

[113] Absalom Watkin, *The Diaries of Absalom Watkin, A Manchester Man 1787-1861* ed. Magdalen Goffin (Stroud, 1993), p. 155, (15 Oct. 1831).

More broadly, these three chapters about organising in the locality in the early decades of the nineteenth century have shown us not only how people organised but why they adopted the methods they did. The shift from most eighteenth-century petitions about public matters coming from interest groups, constituencies and corporate bodies to the rise of inhabitants as a political identity inevitably shaped methods of organising. The legitimacy of inhabitant-meetings was constructed and using broadly similar methods across the nation helped to establish accepted norms. Lord Liverpool's dismissal of a petition from Stockport in June 1819 as 'informal' because it was the product of a 'meeting which can have no corporate or legal existence' was increasingly unusual.[114] By the early 1830s such attitudes were all but non-existent. There was still no formal right to meet, but most meetings that were organised according to the conventions laid out here were widely regarded as appropriate.

If the principles of publicness were disregarded at a meeting of a generally defined identity (like inhabitants) about a public matter the resulting opinions were likely to be criticised. The presentation of matching petitions that took opposite positions also became uncommon. However, the argument that a public meeting represented the opinions of more than those present remained tendentious and parliamentarians were often reluctant to accept that petitions represented the views of the locality. Lord Liverpool's dismissive attitude was still maintained by many but was articulated and enacted in different ways. James Thompson's description of opinion in the late nineteenth century as being 'weighed not counted' neatly captures the continuing selectiveness of parliamentarians' judgements as to whose voices mattered.[115] Nonetheless, as Thompson showed, public meetings

[114] Poole, *Peterloo*, p. 215.
[115] Thompson, *British Political Culture*, p. 23.

remained a valued element in determining what was claimed to be public opinion through the later nineteenth century.

8: Trade societies and how working people campaigned.

Analysing the identities adopted to pursue different causes also provides a new perspective on the role of trade societies in campaigning by working people. Although the trades largely limited their petitioning to work-related causes trade activities provided those who engaged in them access to likeminded people, networks of connections and opportunities to acquire transferable skills. Further, the practices and culture of trade societies influenced how working people organised outside of those societies. Wider issues were pursued by working people using other collective identities which, by the end of the period studied, had come to include the working classes.

8.1 Introduction.

Although many trade-specific combination acts were passed in the later eighteenth century, generally including some pro-workmen provisions, the Combination Act 1799 (replaced by that of 1800) was the first overarching statutory restriction. The acts made criminal any agreements among workmen to obtain an increase in wages or an alteration in other working conditions.[1] Summary proceedings, which could be instigated by masters, were speedy but only limited penalties were available. The effectiveness of industrial action was also impacted by the common law of conspiracy and by master and servant laws; workmen could be imprisoned for stopping work without finishing a job and required to complete the work after release.[2] Together these laws impeded and obscured industrial organisation but did not prevent it. In the context of discussion as to whether the laws (repealed in 1824) should be reintroduced in 1825 the *Leeds Mercury* wrote, 'there is not a town,

[1] 39 Geo. III, c. 81 and 39 & 40 Geo III, c. 106.
[2] John Orth, *Combination and Conspiracy: a Legal History of Trade Unionism* (Oxford, 1991), chapters 4, 7; Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955* (London, 2004).

perhaps not a trade, in the kingdom, in which the workmen have not combined for many years whilst the Combination Laws existed in their utmost rigour'.[3] Both Iorwerth Prothero and R.A. Leeson suggested that trade organisation strengthened whilst the Combination Acts were in force.[4]

Historians use the phrase trade society to describe the associations formed by workers prior to the development of more continuous and institutionalised trade unions.[5] In the absence of a better alternative, the term is adopted here but is not ideal. Society implies a structure and formality that often did not exist or cannot be evidenced and the forms were more variable than a single label implies. Associations might serve needs that arose regularly or only occasionally. Many were ephemeral, reliant on established habits of organisation and lacking formal structure or even identity, disappearing when the need passed.[6] Much collective activity was by *ad hoc* groups which, together with friendly societies and tramping networks, should be understood here as encompassed within the term trade society unless the context indicates otherwise. When trade society is used it means a group defined by a particular activity (ropemakers) and not general terms for workers (artisans).

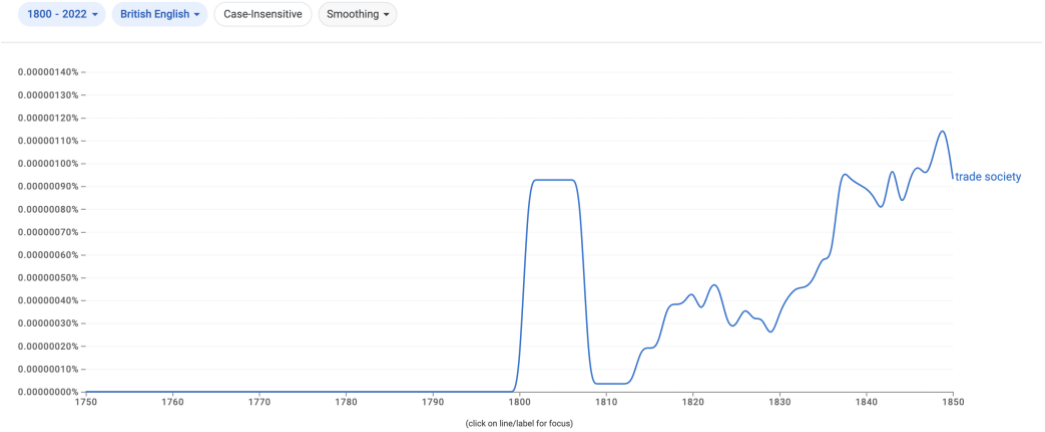
The term 'trade society' seemed to be rarely used until the 1810s and came into common usage only in the later 1820s. Prior to this, collected groups of workmen were referred to only by their trade — the tailors, the weavers.[7] The Google n-gram at figure 8.1, which shows how after a spike around the turn of the century the phrase increased in use after the end of the Napoleonic wars (with smoothing, so presenting a moving average), was

[3] Reprinted by *Manchester Gazette*, 23 Apr. 1825; *The Early English Trade Unions: Documents from the Home Office Papers in the Public Record Office*, ed. Arthur Aspinall (London, 1949) contains a good selection of Home Office papers about disputes while the acts were in force .
[4] Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, p. 41; Robert Leeson, *Travelling Brothers: the Six Centuries' Road from Craft Fellowship to Trade Unionism* (London, 1979), p. 115.
[5] To avoid the error made by Sidney & Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London, 1920) of measuring against later trade unions; Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, pp. 2, 59.
[6] Rule, *Experience of Labour*, pp. 150-51.
[7] Hay and Craven, *Masters, Servants*, p. 14.

corroborated by word searches in the databases of *British Library Newspapers* and *Parliamentary Papers*.[8] These sources give insight into use of the term by observers more than by participants. However, William Cobbett used it, as did *The Trades' Newspaper* (established 1825 and owned by several trade societies) and there is no suggestion that working people considered it a negative label.[9] The more critical label of 'combination' was still commonly used — see the remark in the *Leeds Mercury* quoted above — and was perhaps more consonant with the widespread lack of institutional form.[10] The term 'trade society' came into common use only when a need for it developed. In part, it distinguished them from benefit societies and reflected the increasing sophistication of these organisations. '[T]rades and benefit societies' began to be mentioned in celebrations marking national events and in connection with the Queen Caroline affair. 'Trade society' was used only twice in evidence given to the Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery in 1824. On the first occasion, when an Irish carpenter referred to 'our trade society' he was asked, 'what do you mean by a trade society?' The answer related to being time-served (by which he meant that his trade tried to control the supply of labour to those that had completed apprenticeships).[11] Labelling specific societies as 'trade societies', as *The Morning Chronicle* did in an 1825 item about the power of the tailors' society, placed an association of individuals within a wider social and economic phenomenon.[12] For workers, the term reflected a growing sense of shared identity and commonality of interests amongst those sufficiently organised to form societies.

[8] Searched 1780-1830; e.g., *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 Nov. 1820, 20 July 1821.
[9] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 27 Jan. 1820; *Trades Newspaper*, 7 Aug. 1825, 11 June 1826.
[10] Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, p. 2.
[11] *PP* (1824), 5 (51), First Report from the Select Committee on Artizans and Machinery, pp. 444, 469.
[12] *Morning Chronicle*, 27 Aug. 1825; *Worcester Journal*, 29 May 1828; *Manchester Courier*, 3 Oct. 1829.

Figure 8.1: Google n-gram showing use of trade society from 1750-1850.



Trade societies have fallen from fashion with historians since the move away from class analysis.[13] This is unfortunate as the argument that they were a seedbed for wider engagements remains sound. Edward Thompson influentially argued that the industrial and wider activities of workers should not be differentiated until at least the 1840s, arguing that both evidenced their rising class consciousness.[14] There is a voluminous historiography that agreed and disagreed with his interpretation.[15] The method adopted in this thesis of analysing the relationship between identities and causes — showing what groups did *not* campaign about —is particularly helpful here because it provides a new perspective on these old debates about trade societies' wider role.

Our discussion opens by identifying the main purposes for which the trades organised and shows how the forms adopted related to those purposes.[16] Reasons why these bodies were not easily used to campaign for wider matters are suggested. They did, however, provide

[13] Chase, *Early Trade Unionism* is a rare exception; see pp. 73-6 for a discussion of whether industrial and political activities should be interpreted separately.
[14] Thompson, *The Making*.
[15] For a sample see, Foster, *Class Struggle*; Robert G. Hall, 'Tyranny, Work and Politics: the 1818 Strike Wave in the English Cotton District', *International Review of Social History*, 34 (1989), pp. 433-70; A. E. Musson, *British Trade Unions, 1800-1875* (London, 1972); Duncan Bythell, *The Handloom Weavers: a Study in the English Cotton Industry During the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1969).
[16] Iorwerth Prothero, *Radical Artisans in England and France, 1830-1870* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 49-62 for a similar approach.

bases that might be mobilised in other ways to campaign about wider issues. Further, distinctive practices of connecting groups together that were widely used by the trades remained unlawful even after repeal of the Combination Acts and might have come under closer scrutiny if they had campaigned about wider matters. Nevertheless, the skills and experiences acquired in the conduct of trade activities underpinned other organised activity by working people and were particularly evident in the practices of the societies they established to campaign about non-work issues. Finally, the chapter analyses the work-related causes campaigned for by the trades, together with the identities adopted by working people to campaign about wider matters.

8.2 Purposes and forms.

Friendly societies were widely established by working people (and others) across the nation.[17] At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the average membership was just under one hundred.[18] Most were not occupation-specific; and some that were, like medical societies, had members who were not working people.[19] Of the first thousand societies registered in Middlesex under the Friendly Societies Act 1793, the names of only somewhere between 6 and 10% (depending on definition) indicate that they were limited to a particular trade. Given that the coopers' society was called the Friends of Humanity, the real percentage must, however, be higher.[20] The provision of benefits in times of sickness or other infirmity was a core function for many trade groups and one that required continuous existence. By choosing to register under the 1793 Act societies acquired

[17] Simon Cordery, *British Friendly Societies, 1750-1914* (Basingstoke, 2003); Clark, *British Clubs*, chapter 10.
[18] P. H Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England, 1815-1875* (Aldershot, 1993), p. 5.
[19] Julia O'Neill, 'The Spirit of Independence: Friendly Societies in Nottinghamshire, 1724-1913' (PhD thesis, Nottingham Polytechnic, 1992), p. 42.
[20] 33 Geo. III, c. 54; LMA, MC/R/007: List of Friendly Societies Enrolled in the Office of the Clerk of the Peace for the County of Middlesex, 1794-1830, the first 1000 registrations between 1 May 1794 and 15 January 1807; *PP* (1825), 4 (417), Minutes of Evidence before the Select Committee on Combination Laws, p. 42.

something akin to corporate status, with property automatically deemed to be held by their trustees, who could take legal action in respect of it. In addition to putting societies on a more stable financial basis, the Act's approval of them and their meetings was invaluable given the various statutory restrictions on meetings and societies. That registration included approval of the rules must have had the unintended consequence that rule books might not fully reflect how a society conducted its affairs.

The combined effect of legislation in the 1790s supplied reasons to make friendly societies the public face of the trades, but to what extent were they cover for other activities? A reluctance to register, and so draw their existence to the attention of the authorities, is suggestive. Clive Behagg showed that in the year the Combination Act was repealed (1824) more societies registered in Birmingham than the total number that had registered since the act was passed in 1799.[21] An 1810 Lancashire spinners' strike was described as organised 'under the sanction of sick club articles' by a participant (a reluctant witness to an 1824 select committee).[22] The London coachmakers hid 'secret rules' and a 'grand committee' behind a benevolent society from 1816.[23] Although it is likely that financial support for industrial activities was provided by other friendly societies, evidence is surprisingly rare given how hard it was sought by contemporaries. Even Colonel Fletcher, the ever-assiduous Bolton magistrate, was unable to provide a 'decided opinion'.[24] An 1808 Home Office correspondent noted efforts by strikers to obtain funds from benefit societies were 'fruitless' as few were limited to weavers.[25] Perhaps the most telling evidence of the practice is an 1828 editorial in the *Trades Newspaper* that praised as 'legitimate and useful' the provision of friendly society funds (often repaid with interest) to

[21] Clive Behagg, *Politics and Production in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London, 1990), p. 110.
[22] *PP* (1824), 5 (51), First Report from the Select Committee on Artizans and Machinery, p. 573.
[23] *Stamford Mercury*, 16 July 1819.
[24] *Early English*, doc.185.
[25] *Early English*, doc. 97.

'brother workmen' resisting wage reductions.[26] It was risky, however, to use funds other than for the provision of benefits to members. Some weavers' societies lent money to support delegates associated with an application to Parliament in 1816 for minimum wage legislation. Although it was subsequently repaid, the loan remained a 'bone of contention' with some arguing that money should never be used 'but for the purposes it was put in'.[27] Disgruntled members might even sue, as did a carpenter who objected to friendly society funds being used to campaign against the reinstatement of the Combination Acts in 1825.[28]

The organisation of houses of call and tramping networks were core activities for some trade bodies that required an administrative framework. Houses of call were public houses where employers seeking skilled men (these trades were exclusively male) could find time-served craftsmen. When work was short, men could be provided with cards that confirmed their qualified status. This meant if they travelled to other towns to seek work, local societies should provide interim relief and include them in the time-served men offered to masters there. Tramping created national networks of communication within a trade and was operated by the more traditional craft trades — the tailors, hatters, shoemakers and carpenters. Leeson identified a marked growth of tramping in the early nineteenth century.[29]

The quest to maintain and, if possible, improve the terms and conditions of work produced forms of organisation that varied by trade and circumstance. There was limited collective bargaining in the period, although Prothero suggested that several London trades had

[26] *Trades Newspaper*, 4 Nov. 1828.
[27] *PP* (1825), 4 (437), Report from the Select Committee on Combination Laws, p. 64; Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, p. 58.
[28] *Trades Newspaper*, 19 Mar. 1826.
[29] Leeson, *Travelling Brothers*, chapter 5, especially pp. 111-13; E.J. Hobsbawm, 'The Tramping Artisan', *Economic History Review*, 3 (1951), pp. 299-320; William Kiddier, *The Old Trade Unions: from the Unprinted Records of the Brushmakers* (London, 1930), p. 51; Thompson, *The Making*, p. 263.

'wage bargaining machinery' in the 1810s.[30] More commonly, issues about pay involved intermittent activity that might give rise to strikes. Much of this activity was organised by groups formed for the purpose and fading thereafter, relying on what John Rule termed 'habits of association'.[31] Cotton-handloom weavers across the northern region took strike action in 1808. This was probably co-ordinated by the network of weavers' clubs that had managed an application to Parliament for a wage arbitration system in 1800, although there is little information about the strike (save that it was claimed that friendly societies financed it).[32] An 1810 strike by the spinners was highly organised, with a managing body and striking men arranged in numbered districts.[33] A strike of a thousand workers in the London docks in the same year must have been co-ordinated but little evidence survives to tell us how.[34]

What any individual was paid was of collective concern. Systems of payment by piece, rather than day, and the provision of materials (sometimes defective) required detailed knowledge about what was expected on both sides of the bargain. The Spitalfields' weavers, who had statutory wage regulation from 1773 until 1824, frequently applied to the Middlesex bench for rulings.[35] An arbitration system to address disputes about cotton weavers' pay was introduced in 1800 following highly organised lobbying by weavers for that purpose. Individuals must have received support and assistance from some form of organisation; the same representatives, for example, appeared for cotton weavers in multiple proceedings (individuals with knowledge of the work). Collective organisation is

[30] Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, p. 41.
[31] Rule, *Experience of Labour*, p. 151; Behagg, *Politics and Production,* pp. 119-121 has a good discussion of 'ephemeral action'.
[32] Discussed further below; Joanna Innes, 'Des Tisserands au Parlement: la Légitimité de la Politique du Peuple (Angleterre, 1799-1800)', *Revue d'histoire du XIX siècle,* 42 (2011), pp. 85-100; J. L. & Barbara Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer* (London, 1979), p. 61.
[33] *PP* (1824), 5 (51), pp. 573, 605.
[34] *Early English*, docs. 106-9.
[35] LMA, MJ/SP/1800-1822: Middlesex Sessions of the Peace, various.

most evident in the nine hundred cases submitted simultaneously in 1802 from Whitefield (near Manchester), prior to which the weavers had taken legal advice on whether they could 'arbitrate their masters in a body' (they could not).[36] The scheme, however, was short-lived and Lancashire workers had few other opportunities to use the law, particularly as the Elizabethan apprenticeship laws were held not to apply to trades that developed after the act was passed.[37]

There were marked differences between the two study regions in how they organised because what trades needed from their organisations varied. Early in the period, the most structured trade societies were those belonging to some of the long-standing skilled trades in London, which conducted all the functions discussed above relevant to their work. Some had an entry fee; that of the millwrights was two guineas in 1802.[38] The tailors and the shoemakers had multiple divisions around the capital and the carpenters and sawyers probably also did.[39] These trade societies were increasingly undermined by the growth of 'dishonourable' businesses, which employed non-time served men to produce lower quality goods in greater quantity.[40] Other London trades organised on an *ad hoc* basis. The Thames shipwrights only established a permanent trade society in 1824 (although they had a benefit society from the 1790s); the Spitalfields Engine Silk Weavers formed their society in 1825, but less institutionalised organisation clearly existed before.[41] In Manchester and the surrounding towns, the tailors, some of the leather trades and the letter press printers, amongst others, tramped. The hatters, particularly concentrated in Stockport

[36] *PP* (1803), 8 (114), Select Committee on Petitions relating to Act for settling Disputes, Evidence, p. 34.
[37] Kevin Binfield, 'Introduction', to *Writings of the Luddites*, ed. Kevin Binfield (London, 2004), pp. 32-47.
[38] Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, chapter 2; Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London, 1995), chapter 2; Thompson, *The Making*, pp. 263-4; *Rules Adopted by Journeymen Millwrights* (London, 1801).
[39] *Gorgon*, 3 Oct. 1818, Allen Davenport, *The Life and Literary Pursuits of Allen Davenport*, (London, 1986), p. 18.
[40] Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, pp. 43-5.
[41] Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, pp. 49, 163; *Trades Newspaper*, 25 Sept. 1825; Chase *Early Trade Unionism*, p. 7.

and Ashton, were highly organised (and tramped).[42] Nevertheless, the culture of the trades in the region was dominated by the cotton workers (who could not tramp) and worked and lived in proximity to each other even before factory working was fully established. The calico printers moved from London to Manchester in the late eighteenth century and brought with them an established society. By 1814 they were said to have a national organisation.[43] Formal spinners' societies appeared first in the 1780s, but the existence of continuous bodies is not evidenced for many years.[44] Both the calico printers and the spinners were described as in a 'state of combination' against their employers throughout the 1810s.[45] In 1834 one commentator described the spinners as the 'best organised union in the kingdom'.[46] The cotton weavers' level of organisation seemed to fluctuate and was only occasionally visible. That it was proposed in Manchester in 1824 that local groups of weavers should liaise indicates that earlier more widespread organisation may have retreated to local groups only.[47] In both regions organisations became more evident to contemporaries (and historians) after repeal of the Combination Act in 1824.

That the forms of organisation adopted by trades varied so much and were often temporary means it cannot be assumed that it was appropriate or practical to use trade bodies to pursue campaigns unrelated to work. Trade societies existed to further the work concerns of individual members of the relevant trade who contributed to their society financially and otherwise. As the cordwainers argued, journeymen of 'other trades hatters, curriers etc.' took an 'active concern in everything that interests their trade' and if the cordwainers

[42] Glen, *Urban Workers*, p. 102-3.
[43] H. A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth Structure and Policy: a Comparative Study of the Cotton Unions* (London, 1962), p. 57.
[44] Turner, *Trade Union Growth*, pp. 62-3; Raymond Kirby, and A. E Musson, *The Voice of the People: John Doherty, 1798-1854: Trade Unionist, Radical and Factory Reformer* (Manchester, 1975), pp.13-5.
[45] Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, p. 179, quoting Colonel Fletcher.
[46] Edward Tufnell, *Character, Object and Effects of Trades' Unions* (London, 1834), p. 2.
[47] Turner, *Trade Union Growth*, p. 53; Innes, 'Des Tisserands'; *Manchester Courier*, 5 Feb. 1825; *Caledonian Mercury*, 6 June 1825 for a failing weaver's society.

wanted to 'raise the trade to a more respectable rank' it was necessary to have their own organisation.[48] Prothero suggested that trade societies at this time did not 'represent an underlying unity' but were a 'conscious creation which sought to construct this unity'.[49] To pursue matters of general interest under a trade identity ran the risk of undermining unity and distracting the body from the trade concerns which were its primary role. Those urging Manchester weavers to join a new union argued that 'if in attending to national concerns we neglect our trade, we must be miserable, though the nation were prospering'.[50] If friendly society members objected to funds collected to provide benefits being used for industrial purposes, expenditure unrelated to work was likely to be more controversial. When the London brushmakers decided to contribute to the 'loyal and patriotic fund' in 1831 (to assist reformers in getting the Reform bill through Parliament) their contribution was calculated as an amount per member, with any who objected entitled to personally receive their *pro rata* amount.[51] The approach suggests they thought objections a real possibility.

The trades would also have been conscious of the risks of falling foul of legal restrictions. Prior to 1824 such activity could have drawn unwelcome attention to their organisations. The 1825 campaign that opposed the reinstatement of the combination law reveals how highly they prized the new regime. Gratitude to Parliament for repealing the Act was repeatedly stated, excesses (violence) condemned, as were secrecy and oath taking. They were keen to make the limited ambitions of their societies evident and the Stockport spinners reflected the views of many when they stated that 'our only object in associating [is] to obtain a just remuneration for our labour and skill and proper and equitable

[48] *Early English*, doc. 83.
[49] Prothero, *Radical Artisans*, p. 89.
[50] BL, Add MS. 27801, f.240: Manchester Address Aug. 1824, Francis Place Papers.
[51] Manchester, Working-Class Movement Library, TU/BRUSH/1/A/3, 4 May 1831: London Minute Book; *Hereford Journal*, 4 May 1831.

regulation by which as workmen we are to be governed'.[52] A speaker at a Manchester meeting urged his fellow-workmen to 'be cautious how they afforded a pretext for depriving them of that freedom' only recently granted.[53] The Combination Act 1824 permitted combinations for specified trade related matters, reduced by the 1825 Act to those about pay and hours of work. Combinations for other purposes remained unlawful. Even after 1824 using trade societies to campaign for non-work causes might jeopardise their ability to organise for work-related purposes.

Nor could it be assumed that members of trade societies held the same opinions about national causes or wanted to campaign for them via their trade. Carolyn Steedman offered an alternative interpretation of how working people experienced their lives to that provided in Thompson's classic work.[54] She noted that a framework knitter, embedded and interested in his trade and community, made no reference in his diaries to wider campaigns about national issues. His attendance at his friendly society was about sociability, not politics. Even Thompson noted that the radicals of the period sometimes complained about the apathy of the people.[55] Such complaints became more visible when newspapers began to be published by and for working people. John Gast (the shipwright and leading radical in London) was frequently frustrated by what he termed their 'lukewarmness'.[56] At a meeting about machinery, for example, he said that he had expected that such a widely advertised meeting would have been crowded, but only one hundred attended; 'It was quite enough to dishearten those who were striving to better their condition'.[57] *The United Trade Co-operative Journal* (written by John Doherty, the Manchester spinners' leader) devoted

[52] *Manchester Gazette*, 12 Feb. 1825; see BL, Add MS. 27801: Papers relating to the Repeal of the Combination Act, Place Papers for further examples.
[53] *Manchester Gazette*, 16 Apr. 1825; Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, p. 112.
[54] Carolyn Steedman, *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class: Work, Self and Sociability in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2013).
[55] Thompson, *The Making*, p. 85.
[56] *Trades Newspaper*, 8 Oct. 1826; *Trades Newspaper*, 9 Sept. 1827.
[57] *London Free Press*, 11 Feb. 1827.

its first page in August 1830 to an address to the operatives of Manchester challenging their 'indifference' to efforts to improve their condition and urging them to unite; 'It is your own cause you are called upon to defend and your own interests you are required to promote.'[58] These difficulties would not have encouraged trade societies to embark on campaigns about non-work issues.

Nevertheless, gathering men (and occasionally women) together with shared economic circumstances provided sites of mobilisation for campaigning about non-work-related issues. Trades met in nominated public houses at known times, when information about campaigns, meetings and other groups could be circulated. Evening gatherings had a business element, followed by sociability when more general issues could be discussed.[59] Networks of connections established through trade activities assisted working people to campaign outside of those trade bodies.

8.3 Practices and skills.

The trades used distinctive methods of connecting small groups into bigger organisations that embodied a culture of egalitarian decision-making. That these remained largely unlawful even after 1824 was a further reason why it was unwise to use trade bodies to campaign about wider matters. Those practices were, however, sufficiently important to working people that they were often replicated in the organisations they established to campaign outside of their trade bodies. Other organisational skills were also learnt in trade societies, almost exclusively to the benefit of men.

[58] *United Trades Co-operative Journal*, 21 Aug. 1830.
[59] Cordery, *British Friendly*, p. 34; Steedman, *Everyday Life*, p. 72-3; Prothero, *Radical Artisans*, p. 105.

8.3.1 Connecting groups together.

Even the more structured trade societies did not yet have hierarchical systems of control from the centre and the main method of connecting parts was via the appointment of delegates. This practice balanced participation and representation in ways that were distinctive to groups of workers and was employed by trades nationally, including *ad hoc* groups. Sometimes, the bodies to or from which delegates were sent were labelled as branches, divisions or districts. Much of this vocabulary was new or represented a development from its original meaning. Samuel Johnson's dictionary, for example, did not include a subsidiary part of an organisation in the definition of branch.[60] However, the word was used with that meaning in the Unlawful Societies Act 1799 (passed the same day as the Combination Act). That act provided that if societies were composed of different 'divisions or branches' or of 'different parts, acting in any manner separately or distinct from each other', including any part that used delegates, they were 'unlawful combinations'.[61] The Seditious Meetings Act 1817 extended this to every society that used any 'committee … delegates ... representatives … or missionaries to meet, confer or communicate' with any other such groups and individuals.[62] Neither the 1799 nor 1817 clauses were time-limited and remained in force after the Combination Act was repealed in 1824. Trade societies continued to use delegates and form branches and committees but were vulnerable to action against them. In correspondence about the Tolpuddle unionists in 1834, Lord Melbourne initially advised the Dorset magistrates to use the provision of the 1817 act, stating it had been 'frequently' applied to 'advantage'.[63] Historians have noted

[60] Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language, Eleventh Edition* (London, 1799).
[61] 39 & 40 Geo III, c. 79, cl. 2.
[62] 57 Geo. III, c. 19, cl. 25.
[63] TNA, HO 52/24/45, note by Melbourne; Roger Wells 'Tolpuddle in the Context of English Agrarian Labour History, 1780-1850', in John Rule (ed.), *British Trade Unionism 1750-1850: the Formative Years* (Harlow, 1988), pp. 98-142, p. 122; see also Yeo, 'Chartist Democracy', pp. 360-62.

that trade societies used delegates, but the extent and significance of their reliance on the method has not been fully explored.[64]

Workshops were places of work but also the basis for much trade organisation. Shops varied in size but were generally quite small. Papers relating to the financing of an 1810 spinners' strike in the Manchester area detailed thirty-five shops, with an average of around seventeen men per shop.[65] Some trade societies formally incorporated the shop into their structures. The Friendly Associated Mule Cotton Spinners of Stockport, for example, authorised the head shopman (provided that he was a member) to collect the subscriptions of those who worked in the shop.[66] As John Rule noted, the shop was 'a natural unit which could through delegation of representatives to a central meeting develop organically into a structured union'.[67] To this can be added that to be effective in protecting workmen, shops needed to be part of a bigger body. On their own, they held little bargaining power and employers were adept at moving men or work to gain the upper hand. Sometimes, delegates were appointed in accordance with the rules: the journeymen boot and shoemakers elected committee delegates from each shop who rotated every two months.[68] In other circumstances, selection was on an *ad hoc* basis; in 1823 the spinners who worked for Messrs. Jones at Tyldesely (nine miles from Manchester) deputed four men 'one from each flat or storey' to demand a pay increase.[69]

Larger numbers required more layers of organisation, with districts or divisions between the workplace and the top layer. Towns were often divided into districts for rating and other administrative purposes and it seems the trades sometimes used or adapted these

[64] Orth, *Combination and Conspiracy*, for example, does not discuss delegates.
[65] *PP* (1824), 5 (51), p. 606.
[66] *Articles, Rules Orders and Regulations… Mule Cotton Spinners… Stockport* (Stockport, 1795), rule 7.
[67] Rule, *Experience of Labour*, p. 151.
[68] *Early English*, doc. 82.
[69] *Exchange Herald*, 13 May 1823.

divisions.[70] In 1799, the Bolton weavers had a three-tiered system based in districts that elected representatives to a divisional committee, which in turn elected a central committee.[71] In 1805, they formed groups that did not exceed eleven, each of which sent a delegate to a general meeting. Labelling these groups 'classes' and limiting their size must have been a conscious use of Methodist terminology and practice.[72] While the Methodists were not exempted from the Unlawful Societies Act, it was not enforced against them. The Bolton weavers adopted a similar structure again in 1818.[73] Efforts by the spinners to form wider organisations in 1825 and 1829 were based on delegation from districts. [74]

Cross trade cooperation was also achieved by delegation. The London committee that managed the parliamentary campaign in favour of maintaining the apprenticeship laws (1812-1814) comprised delegates from the trades. The masters (including Alexander Galloway, the former LCS member) complained to the Home Office that the trades' 'mischievous influence and overwhelming power is greatly augmented by a system of delegation … [which] have given the journeymen of this metropolis the means of identifying their several interests, ascertaining their strength and consolidating their power'.[75] Later campaigns about the combination laws and friendly societies were also managed by groups of trade delegates.[76] The decision in 1818 to form the short-lived general union, the Philanthropic Society, in the Manchester area was made at a meeting of deputies of the trades from the surrounding towns.[77] (The terms 'delegate' and 'deputy' appear to have been used interchangeably, with the former generally favoured.[78]) That

[70] SLHL, Archive box No. 18, 33: Stockport Night Watch, 1819, John Lloyd's scrapbook; Redford, *History of Local Government,* p. 208 map of 14 Manchester rate districts established 1792.
[71] Innes, 'Des Tisserands', p. 92; Glen, *Urban* Workers, p. 147 for similar Stockport body.
[72] TNA, HO 42/82/45,16 Jan. 1805, letter from Fletcher; Baker, 'The People', pp. 222-3.
[73] TNA, HO 42/179/323, 13. Aug. 1818, *At a Meeting of the Cotton Weavers of Bolton*.
[74] Kirby and Musson, *Voice of the People*, chapter 4.
[75] *Early English*, doc. 145.
[76] *Morning Chronicle*, 21 Apr. 1825; *Trades Newspaper*, 18 Mar. 1828.
[77] TNA, HO 42/179/41, 19 Aug. 1818, Notice, Manchester.
[78] Johnson, *Dictionary*, defined a delegate as a deputy.

society was to consist of auxiliary societies of the various trades in each town which would send deputies to monthly meetings of the general society. The label auxiliary was probably adopted from charitable societies like the Bible Society, which had formed auxiliaries since around 1809. The Bible Society's auxiliaries had limited autonomy, generally focusing on fund-raising and distributing literature.[79] The Bible Society was under no risk of action being taken against it. Indeed, local groups were probably insufficiently 'separate' to fall foul of the legislation for they were not represented on the society's central body. Nevertheless, the use of the term auxiliary by them and other moral reform and charitable societies (including the Anti-Slavery Society, formed in 1823) may in part have been to distinguish themselves from the kind of groups that used delegates and branches, as well as an assertion of central control. The term auxiliary did not catch on with trade societies. A later effort at a general union, the National Association for the Protection of Labour (NAPL) formed in 1829 in Manchester had districts.[80] Each district was independent and not controlled by other parts of the association.[81]

Care was taken to balance the number of delegates from any group. The silk weavers' general union, established in 1824, provided that each society with less than twenty paying members should send one representative to the committee of the general union, while those that had twenty or upwards sent two.[82] Proportionality was particularly important for cross-trade bodies. The rules of the Philanthropic Hercules (a general union briefly formed in London in 1818) provided that trade representatives would be in proportion to membership without a cap, but that each trade should have only one vote, balancing openness, the

[79] See 2.3.4
[80] Kirby and Musson, *Voice of the People*, chapter 6 especially pp. 157-8.
[81] Tufnell, *Character, Object*, p. 4.
[82] BL, Add. MS.27799, f.168: *Rules… all Trade Societies of Journeymen Silk Weavers that Join the General Trade Union established in 1824*, Place Papers.

importance of a voice and decision-making power.[83] The London trades debated how many representatives each trade should have on the committee to manage the campaign against the revival of the Combination Acts. Although seven deputies from the sawyers were present (probably from different societies) it was agreed that there should be only two deputies from each trade, to ensure none 'would obtain an undue influence'.[84] The NAPL distinguished between attendance by 'hearers and spectators' (hearers is another Methodist term) and voting which, after the first general meeting, was limited to one delegate for every thousand members in a district.[85]

Other groups used branches and delegates but not in the same way as the trades. In the 1780s, the Associated Counties had a committee of delegates and the General Chamber of Manufacturers of Great Britain briefly had a national committee of delegates that sat in London: a similar method was used by the Dissenters in 1790.[86] These practices do not appear to have been continued. The 1799 act excluded from its ambit the freemasons whose leaders had, in return, given undertakings that masons would not engage in political matters.[87] In 1817 the Quakers were also excluded, presumably at their request. Other Dissenting groups, some of whom had standing committees of delegates, probably rightly concluded they were not at risk.[88] It had long been common for towns or commercial groups to send individuals to Parliament, often with petitions but also to lobby for their interests or watch the progress of committees and bills.[89] Certainly, in the early nineteenth

[83] BL, Add. MS.27799f.43: *Articles of the Philanthropic Hercules... 1818*, Place Papers.
[84] *London Mechanics Journal*, 30 Apr. 1825.
[85] *United Trade Co-operative Journal*, 12 June, 3 and 24 July 1830.
[86] Black, *The Association*, pp. 51-2; Redford, *Manchester Merchants*, pp. 9-10; *Committees for Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts: Minutes 1786-90 and 1827-8*, ed. Thomas Davis, London Record Society, (London, 1978), p. 123, 5 Mar. 1790.
[87] Prescott, 'Unlawful Societies Act'.
[88] Hunt, *Two Early Political*.
[89] Stuart Handley, 'Local Legislative Initiatives for Economic and Social Development in Lancashire, 1689-1731' *Parliamentary* History, 9 (1990), pp.14-37; Brewer, *Sinews of Power*, chapter 8.

century, and possibly before, those individuals were sometimes termed delegates.[90] Sending delegates to Parliament was, however, very different from their use by the trades.

Trade delegates were authorised by one part of an organisation to represent them to another part, creating a direct and continuing connection with communication and accountability flowing both upwards and downwards. As the *United Trades* newspaper wrote, the 'persons selected for the performance of such a task are those who are considered to possess the most knowledge, influence and ability'.[91] Edmund Burke famously argued that an MP was obliged to represent what he judged to be the interests of the nation, not just those of his constituents.[92] A trade delegate did not represent the wider trade (all weavers or shipwrights, say) but the group that sent him and was generally appointed *from* the group as well as *by* the group. The trades' practices of delegation involved the ongoing participation of the lower levels, creating a chain of command as well as a system of representation, with decisions at a higher level reported back, justified and implemented. Delegates to the first general meeting of the NAPL at which the rules were agreed reported having consulted members before attending.[93] During wage negotiations in 1829, delegates of the Spitalfields weavers were instructed about what terms the journeymen would accept. Following a long meeting with the masters 'the committee of delegates returned to report the result of their labours', then went back to the negotiations before finally reporting on the deal that had been reached.[94] Delegates also represented the higher level to the group. A Manchester moulders' delegate to the NAPL was strongly criticised for giving a misleading report to those who had appointed him.[95]

[90] *Manchester Mercury*, 14 Mar. 1815.
[91] *United Trades Co-operative Journal*, 13 Mar. 1830.
[92] Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: the Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, 2015) p. 382.
[93] *United Trades Co-operative Journal*, 17 July 1830.
[94] *Morning Advertiser*, 9 May 1829.
[95] *United Trades Co-operative Journal*, 12 June 1830.

The creation of command structures from a base could be interpreted as an implicit criticism of the system of parliamentary representation. James Harrington's ideal republic proposed delegation from equal units around the country and delegates remained an important element in the conventions and anti-Parliaments of English radicals through to the Chartists.[96] In some trade bodies, delegates referred to themselves as 'representatives'.[97] The NAPL, which organised geographically rather than by trade, listed the districts 'present by representation' at its first general meeting. When individuals spoke, they were identified by their place (e.g., Bolton 1) and delegates 'returned to their respective places to lay the proceedings before their constituents'.[98] Delegates from the silk weavers also referred to their 'constituents' when meeting the Board of Trade in 1826.[99]

The increased visibility and activity of trade societies after the repeal of the Combination Act in 1824 caused disquiet amongst some business leaders and parliamentarians and in March 1825 William Huskisson (a dedicated free trader) requested that a further select committee be formed. In various reports of his parliamentary speech, Huskisson referred in negative language to the societies' structures and systems of delegation. *The Morning Post* quoted him as describing the colliers' rules as like one of the 'constitutions of the new states of South America'. Not only did each trade form associations, but there was 'an association consisting of delegates from all the trades in each district and from these were formed one general congress' where the majority decision bound all; 'this was well enough in Parliament but it was certainly not right' for a trade body.[100] In *The Times'* report

[96] Lars Behrisch, 'Equality, Proportionality and Statistics: Political Representation from the English to the French and American Revolutions', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2023), pp. 159-89, p. 169; T. M. Parssinen, 'Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics, 1771-1848', *English Historical Review*, 88 (1973), pp. 504-33, pp. 511; Irish Convention Act 1793 (passed after elected delegates met in conventions) declared illegal all assemblies that claimed to be a representative body.
[97] *Trades Newspaper*, 24 July 1824.
[98] *United Trades Co-operative Journal*, 26 June 1830; Tufnell, *Character, Object*, p. 4.
[99] *Trades Newspaper*, 29 Jan. 1826.
[100] *Morning Post*, 30 Mar. 1825.

Huskisson described such arrangements as a 'sort of federal republic of different trades'.[101] Robert Peel was quoted in the Manchester press as having said in the same debate that if 'the system of delegation was allowed to prevail, it would be pregnant with the greatest mischief'.[102]

The trades highly valued their greater freedom to organise and vigorously opposed the reintroduction of the Combination Act. In London the calico printers and curriers argued that each trade should act alone in the campaign as the 'combination of so large a body of men might excite alarm'.[103] The *Newcastle Courant* expressed concern at 'little parliaments of mechanics [that] are now sitting in almost all the great manufactories … one was formed of the journeymen of London, by two delegates from each trade'.[104] The Manchester committee formed to resist re-enactment noted that 'vollies of terrific abuse have been fulminated … against the working classes for managing their agreements by delegates and committees', but that it was 'ridiculously absurd' to think complex matters could be investigated and rationally considered without them. They went on to argue that 'delegation' was not responsible for the few reported cases of violence committed by individuals beyond the control of committees 'whose arms are no other than reason and persuasion'.[105] When moving the third reading of the 1825 Combination Bill, Huskisson highlighted 'delegates' of the shipwrights in 'permanent sittings … dictating' methods of work (a practice which appalled the select committee).[106] Hobhouse expressed a minority view when he argued that 'the practice of small bodies acting for the interests of the many upon the principles of delegation was the very safety valve of society'.[107]

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[101] *The Times*, 30 Mar. 1825.
[102] *Manchester Courier*, 2 Apr. 1825.
[103] *Morning Chronicle*, 21 Apr. 1825.
[104] *Newcastle Courant*, 29 Apr. 1825.
[105] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 2 July 1825.
[106] Hansard, 2nd Series, vol. 13, Commons, 23 June 1825, vol. 13 cc. 1348-1349.
[107] *Morning Chronicle*, 30 June 1825.

Trade activities were not generally considered a constitutional threat. However, the statutory prohibition on delegates meant that using trade bodies to campaign about matters of more general interest, especially parliamentary reform, risked action being taken against those bodies and the possibility of more stringent legal restrictions being imposed on trade societies. The culture embodied by these delegation practices was, however, sufficiently important to working people that when they formed organisations to campaign about non-work causes, they often used similar methods. These remained unlawful but did not endanger their trade organisations.

Many of the radical societies established by working people in the 1790s were organised on a similar basis to that favoured by the trades. Radical societies in Sheffield, said to have provided a model for the LCS, were established by men likely to have participated in the extensive network of trade societies in the town. Both the Sheffield and London societies organised small groups, which divided when they became too large and elected delegates to general committees.[108] The 1792 rules of the LCS emphasised that a delegate was 'the representative of his constituents'.[109]

The practices of the radical societies established in the 1810s were also clearly informed by those of the trades.[110] Although the Lancashire Hampden Clubs were not formally connected, they sent delegates to joint meetings that decided issues of policy and tactics.[111] Iain McCalman describes the Spenceans as using a 'benefit club system of dividing … into federated lodges under rotating chairmen'.[112] The activities of these groups led to the imposition of further restrictions on the use of delegates and branches by the 1817

[108] Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*; Barrell, 'London'.
[109] *The London Corresponding Society's Addresses and Regulations* (London, 1792), p. 7.
[110] See 4.3.2.
[111] TNA, HO 42/158/151, 15 Jan. 1817 letter from AB.
[112] McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 100.

Seditious Meetings Act. Nevertheless, the Union Societies that were the successors to the Hampden Clubs continued to organise meetings of delegates from the surrounding towns.[113] It is difficult to identify how they could have co-operated to form a wider movement without doing so.

Organisations formed by and for working people to campaign for wider matters in the 1830s continued to adopt federated structures and delegates. Established in 1831, the NUWC became the leading ultra-radical group in London. NUWC branches were formed around the metropolis; delegates elected by those branches represented them at general meetings of the society.[114] The branches had autonomy in their own activities and several sent petitions to Parliament.[115] In the autumn of 1831, when a Royal Proclamation reminded the nation of the statutory prohibition of branches, the NUWC relabelled theirs as classes at the suggestion of William Benbow (formerly of the Lancashire Hampdens), who explicitly argued that the 'Wesleyan Methodists' were a useful model. Class leaders were to be appointed to every twenty-five members who would attend weekly meetings of the union.[116]

In contrast, the governance model provided by the BPU was of a central council that was exclusively middle class and was 'selected' at annual meetings of the Union.[117] That the BPU was 'unashamedly authoritarian' marked a difference from the middling societies of the eighteenth century, which Kathleen Wilson argued had open and equal cultures that demonstrated their distance from the client economy.[118] The BPU may have been led to

[113] *Manchester Observer*, 12 June 1819; see Kirby and Musson, *Voice of the People*, p. 415. for an 1821 example.
[114] *Poor Man's Guardian*, 10 Sept., 12 Nov. 1831.
[115] *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 874.
[116] BL, Add MS. 40005, f.2: 14 Oct. 1831, NUWC Minute Book; Yeo, 'Chartist Democracy', pp. 362-64 for similar approaches to the problem.
[117] LoPatin, *Political Unions*; Yeo, 'Chartist Democracy', pp. 362-63.
[118] Carlos Flick, *The Birmingham Political Union and the Movements for Reform in Britain, 1830-1839* (Folkestone, 1978), p. 18; Wilson, *Sense of the People*, pp. 69, 74.

adopt this approach by a desire to attract members from the working classes, without allowing them to hold positions of influence, but their style of governance may have contributed to the difficulty in maintaining these cross-class bodies.

8.3.2 Public speaking.

Trade activities required at least some of their members to be able to marshal facts and articulate arguments to varied audiences in different contexts. Even at the most basic level of the workplace or club, a man might need to speak for himself. When suffering persecution for not being time-served, William Lovett used the long-established method: I 'thought it best to call a shop-meeting and lay my case before them'.[119] Clive Behagg noted that 'the process of debate was carefully protected'.[120] Rule books often contained procedures that regulated when and how men could speak; the shoemakers required that in 'all debates the speaker must stand up and address the President and keep strictly to the question'.[121] Michael Davis suggested that the strict protocol of LCS meetings, which included 'removing of hats and standing when addressing the chair', was perhaps learnt from debating societies.[122] Given that some LCS organisers were active in debating societies, there is a case for this suggestion. However, the widely shared culture of trade societies was surely a more likely formative experience.

Despite Francis Place's description of the London tailors implicitly obeying the directions of a secret central committee, the balance of evidence about trade societies speaks of active engagement at every level.[123] John Gast (the shipbuilder's leader and radical) described

[119] Lovett, *Life and Struggles*, p. 31.
[120] Behagg, *Politics and Production*, p. 119.
[121] *Early English*, doc. 82.
[122] Michael Davis, 'Introduction', in *The London Corresponding Society, 1792*-1799 eds. Michael Davis, James Epstein, Jack Fruchtman and Mary Thale (London, 2002), p. xxxv.
[123] *PP* (1824), 5 (51), p. 45.

each yard as ‘a sort of republic in itself, governed by its own rules’ decided upon by the men.[124] He may have been disingenuous about the extent of organisation involved in disputes, but his basic point contained much truth. This mode of decision making was a verbal process with agreements hammered out in meetings of varying scale. When the London shoemakers struck in 1812 ‘men in ragged habiliments and of squalid looks, poured forth in touching and eloquent language their appeals to the unmarried men’ to support them by going on the tramp.[125] In large disputes decisions were made in big meetings, sometimes after heated discussion. During the widespread industrial action across Lancashire in 1818, action was agreed at meetings attended by hundreds and addressed by men from their own trades who had to be capable of managing mass meetings in difficult times.[126] At an 1825 meeting of the London ladies-boot-and-shoemakers about a threatened reduction in wages around nine hundred men listened to several lengthy speeches on the state of the trade.[127]

The formation of trade societies and wider organisations required potential members to be persuaded. In Manchester in 1824, arguments were presented to around three hundred delegates about why the state of the trade, effects of taxation and the situation of other trades demonstrated the need for the weavers to organise across the region.[128] Meetings about the formation of the NAPL explained the principles and benefits of a general union to sometimes sceptical audiences.[129] Early in the friendly societies’ campaign of 1828, societies around the country debated whether it really was necessary to get involved, as better informed colleagues explained the threat posed by the Bill.[130]

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[124] *PP* (1825), 4 (417), p. 307.
[125] John Brown, *Sixty Years' Gleanings from Life's Harvest* (Cambridge, 1858), p. 43.
[126] TNA, HO 42/179/408, 17 Aug. 1818, letter from Withington.
[127] *Trades Newspaper*, 21 Aug. 1825.
[128] *Cowdroy’s Manchester Gazette*, 18 Sept. 1824.
[129] For two meetings at Chorley, *United Trades Co-operative Journal*, 20 Mar. & 10 Apr. 1830.
[130] *Trades Newspaper*, 29 Mar. and 26 Apr. 1828.

Sometimes a case needed to be presented to external audiences. Four men from each shipyard were appointed to meet with the master shipbuilders and explain objections to new work arrangements.[131] When the shipwrights established their society they sent representatives out to other towns encouraging them to organise, both for their own good and to prevent the London shipwrights from being undermined by work being moved to other ports.[132] Financial support for strikes might be solicited from other towns, as in 1825 when Mr Tester, the representative of the Bradford wool-combers, made 'eloquent and affecting' speeches at meetings all over the country, including London and Manchester.[133] The discussion groups for working people that flourished in the 1820s had an important training as well as an educative role but they only augmented skills many had already acquired through their experience of trade activities.

8.3.3 Women.

Most organisation occurred in the skilled trades where men dominated, but some women were also employed. As Joyce Burnette noted, the gender divide was clear in most jobs in the cotton mills. Burnette estimated that women made up 95% of the reelers, 57% of weavers, but less than 19% of mule spinners in the Lancashire cotton factories in 1833. Mule spinners aggressively kept their trade male and most of that 19% were assistants.[134] The traditional trades in London (such as the tailors and shoemakers) were almost entirely male; the trades in the docks even more so.[135] Only the Spitalfields silk weavers had a

[131] *PP* (1825), 4 (417), p. 197.
[132] *Ibid.*, pp. 253-54.
[133] *Trades Newspaper*, 16 Oct., 4 Dec. 1825.
[134] Joyce Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 26-8, 41, 147, 244-47; Michael Winstanley, 'The Factory Workforce', in Mary Rose (ed.), *The Lancashire Cotton Industry* (Preston, 1996), pp. 124-5.
[135] Chase, *Early Trade Unionism* pp .45-6.

significant, organised, female workforce in London.[136] Several trades had rules that prohibited working with women.[137] Female-only friendly societies, however, had a long history and provided some women with opportunities to manage societies. Robert Glen estimated that one-third of the friendly societies of Stockport were women-only in the 1820s. The proportion of female societies in London appears to have been lower and to have declined over the period.[138]

It is likely that when women were part of the workforce they participated in some collective activities, but not all. Kathryn Gleadle's apt term of 'borderline citizens' captures the position here as well as it does that of the middle-class women she studied.[139] Working women had few opportunities to acquire the transferable skills of organisation. It is unclear to what extent they attended meetings, although at shop level it may have been impractical to exclude them. It is unlikely they were ever delegates or took official roles. During the 1828 campaign resisting the Bill to alter how friendly societies were managed, some female societies in London contributed to the central fund for managing the campaign. Male societies that subscribed were allowed a delegate who could attend the weekly meetings of the central committee; subscriptions from female societies merely received a round of applause.[140]

The obligations of collective behaviour fell on women as well as men (and may, therefore, have involved some attendance at meetings). During a strike in Stockport, 'the weavers to the amount of 1222 men and 355 women … paraded the streets peaceably'.[141] Glen

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[136] L.D. Schwarz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation: Entrepreneurs, Labour Force and Living Conditions, 1700-1850* (Cambridge, 1992); Sally Alexander, *Women's Work in Nineteenth Century London: A Study of the Years 1820-50* (London, 1987).
[137] Chase, *Early Trade Unionism*, pp. 46, 114.
[138] Clark, *Breeches*, pp. 35-36; Glen, *Urban Workers,* p. 110; Glen and Clark presumably judged by a society's name.
[139] Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens*.
[140] *Trades Newspaper*, 12, 19 Apr. 1828.
[141] Poole, *Peterloo*, p. 175.

described a Stockport power-loom weavers' strike as consisting of 'mostly adolescent males and females' with twelve young women among those imprisoned after its conclusion.[142] In 1799, it was reported to the Home Office that women in Wigan were becoming weavers to replace husbands who had enlisted and that the weaver's association intended to apply to Parliament for wage regulation.[143] It is unlikely these women-weavers were exempted from the subscription to pay the cost of that application.

The feminine identity was rarely visible in petitions. That several female friendly societies from both regions petitioned against the Friendly Society Bill in 1828 is exceptional evidence of female involvement.[144] Petitions to Parliament were almost always expressed as coming from male identities (that from the weavers in 1799 was from 'journeymen cotton weavers') but then (and for long after) the masculine included the feminine, so women may have been involved. A rare surviving original petition to a cotton master requesting a minor adjustment in working hours was from 'we, your workmen' but the signatories included women — Mary Cooper, Jane Singleton and others.[145] Applications to the Middlesex Sessions by the Spitalfields weavers also included some from women.[146] That both the identities and the arguments presented to Parliament were in masculine language means that involvement was obscured from contemporaries, diminishing the possibility of extending activity by example. The rhetoric of a 'family wage', increasingly adopted from the 1820s, and the wider language of manliness and independence that became so dominant for both working and middle-class men reinforced this presentation.[147]

[142] Glen, *Urban Workers*, p. 73.
[143] *Early English*, docs. 24 and 25.
[144] *CJ*, 83 (1828), pp. 293, 328, identified by name alone.
[145] BL , Add MS. 40384, f.251: Peel Papers
[146] LMA, MJ/SP/1820/04 and 1821/04/06: Middlesex Sessions of the Peace.
[147] Matthew McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester, 2005).

8.4 Campaigning.

In this final section we examine campaigning by trades and by groups self-defined as working people. No doubt the individuals involved in both overlapped, but the forms of organisation depended on the identity mobilised. We begin by exploring how largely unarticulated and changing understandings of public and private affected campaigning by working people.

8.4.1 Private and public.

As the eighteenth century progressed industrial disputes more frequently led to applications to Parliament and were largely dealt with under the private bill procedure, begun by petition and referred to a select committee of appropriate members.[148] Both sides (occasionally masters and men were in accord) presented a case to Parliament and sometimes the public. They were interest groups in a private matter for which wider public support might be sought. In 1745 the tailors of London circulated a handbill which expressed the hope that their application to amend a statute regulating their trade would be seen by 'all good people of circumstance … to be a matter that truly concerns publick [sic] liberty'.[149] Resulting legislation was generally categorised as a public act, a classification relevant mainly to its evidential weight in legal proceedings and whether it would be processed by the parliamentary printer, but inevitably also carrying the suggestion it might signify to a wider constituency.[150] Thus, many late eighteenth-century statutes about workmen were public acts that had been private bills.[151] Various trade-specific

[148] Frank Galton, *Select Documents Illustrating the History of Trade Unionism: 1 the Tailoring Trade* (London, 1896) provides a selection of eighteenth parliamentary applications in the tailoring trade.
[149] BL, Add Ms. 27799 f.6: Place Papers; Joanna Innes, 'Regulating Wages in Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth-Century England: Arguments in Context', in Perry Gauci (ed.), *Regulating the British Economy, 1660-1850* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 195-215, pp. 201-4.
[150] Sheila Lambert, *Bills and Acts: Legislative Procedure in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1971).
[151] Innes, 'Regulating Wages', p. 201; 8 Geo. III, c. 17, re the tailors.

Combination Acts of that period were passed at the instigation of groups of masters by this private bill procedure, although the influential Spitalfields Act (1773) came to Parliament as a public bill (probably because the tumult caused by weavers' protests gave the issue a public order dimension). The Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 were the first that applied to all workmen and were introduced as public bills by government ministers.[152] Those acts marked a shift in the perception of trade activities to being of general concern.

If trade matters lay on the boundary between private and public in the late eighteenth century, by the 1820s they had become uncontrovertibly public, both in terms of procedure and interest. The growing ideological dominance of the principles of political economy and free trade meant that trade and work were no longer perceived as merely the concern of those immediately affected, but as raising wider questions of public policy. The *Commons Journals* captured the shift as it took place. As previously mentioned, from 1803 the index to the *Journals* began to list 'matters of a public nature' on which petitions had been received. Some petitions so categorised concerned private bills; for example, petitions in 1804 relating to a private bill about calico.[153] There was some inconsistency at first, but the trend over the first two decades was for petitions relating to workmen and working conditions to be categorised as of a public nature, to the extent that petitions about an 1829 dispute between some Spitalfields weavers and their employer, of no apparent wider significance, was so listed.[154] From 1803 the journals also listed applications for private and public bills. Initially, the private categories were bridges, churches, drainage, harbours, highways, enclosures, naturalisation, navigation, poor, streets, and various, now eventuating, if they passed, as instances of a new category, local acts. The private bill category also initially included applications relating to workmen, working conditions or

[152] Orth, *Combination and Conspiracy*, chapter 4.
[153] *CJ*, 58 (1803), 'Index - Petitions; Matters of a public nature'.
[154] *CJ*, 84 (1829), Index, 'Spitalfields Weavers'.

similar, eventuating by contrast, if they passed, in public acts.[155] Over time, bills concerning workmen were less likely to be categorised as private bills; in a related development, it also became increasingly rare for bills relating to specific trades to be passed at all.

This liminal status of trade issues offers a further explanation, in addition to those outlined in the last chapter, for the practice where some meetings of the trades were described as public meetings. Part private — interest groups formed to further the work concerns of their members; part public — entailing engagement with issues increasingly attended to by those not immediately involved. The increased use of the term 'trade society' was perhaps part of the same phenomenon, reflecting a sense that this was a sector of activity best understood in general terms. Arguably also connected was the adoption of the label 'the working classes'.

Campaigning by the trades about work-related matters is analysed below, followed by a discussion of campaigning by working people about non-trade matters. As we will see, general identities were normally adopted to campaign about public matters of wide interest, but there were some exceptions.

8.4.2 The trades' petitions on work-related issues.

The parliamentary rules of procedure meant that for most of our period petitions were not accepted from societies.[156] It is impossible, therefore, to establish from the parliamentary records whether petitions from groups of workmen were organised by institutionalised societies or *ad hoc* groups (both of which fall within the definition of trade societies used

[155] *CJ*, 58 (1802-3), Index.
[156] George Bramwell, *The Manner of Proceeding on Bills in the House of Commons* (London, 1823), pp. 33-34; Henry Miller, 'Transformation of Petitioning in the long Nineteenth Century (1780-1914), *Social Science History* 43, (2019), pp. 409-29, p. 415 for similar provisions in other European states.

here). Members of the Stockport Cotton Jenny Spinners Union Society gave evidence to the Select Committee on Combinations in 1824 and submitted its rules to the 1825 Committee. It seems likely that the same society lay behind an 1825 petition from the Stockport spinners against reinstating the combination laws, but that can only be supposition. That the society was formed a few months before the Combination Act was repealed but only produced its rulebook after repeal illustrates another difficulty in seeking too tight a definition of trade society.[157]

200 petitions submitted to the House of Commons by trade societies (as broadly defined) between 1800 and 1832 were identified: 113 from the northern region and 87 from the London region. Only petitions submitted by specifically identified trades and by friendly societies were included, not those whose backers were identified by wider formulations, like artisans and mechanics. The tables 8.1 and 8.2 provide a geographical breakdown of petitions; the graphs at figures 8.2 and 8.3 do so temporally.[158] All the petitions from friendly societies concerned their own governance. 95% of trade petitions from the northern region and 85% of those from the London region concerned matters directly related to work and to friendly societies.

[157] *CJ*, 79 (1824), p. 217; *PP* (1824), 5 (51), p. 409; *CJ*, 80 (1825), p. 351; *PP* (1825), 4 (437), p.33.
[158] *CJ*, 55 (1800) to 87 (1832).

Table 8.1: Originating location of worker petitions from the northern region

Location	Trades	Friendly Societies
Manchester	38	2
Ashton	12	0
Bolton	7	1
Oldham	3	0
Stockport	14	20
Wider	16	0
Totals	**90**	**23**

Table 8.2: Originating location of worker petitions from the London region

Location	Trades	Friendly Societies
Bethnal Green	0	6
Bromley St Leonards	0	1
Clerkenwell	0	0
Hackney	0	0
Islington	1	1
Limehouse	4	2
Mile End	0	0
Old Street	0	2
Poplar	1	0
Shadwell	2	0
Shoreditch	0	6
Spitalfields	14	1
Stepney	1	0
St George in the East	0	0
Stratford	0	2
Wapping	0	0
Whitechapel	0	2
Wider	41	0
Total	**64**	**23**

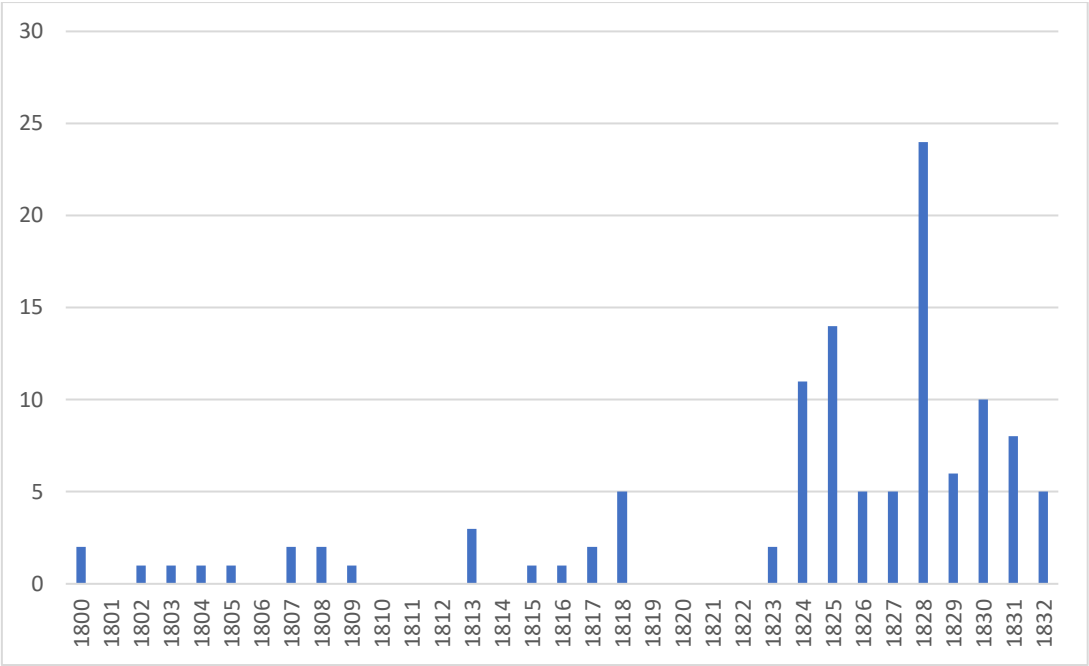

Figure 8.2: Workers' petitions (including Friendly Societies) from the Northern Region by year

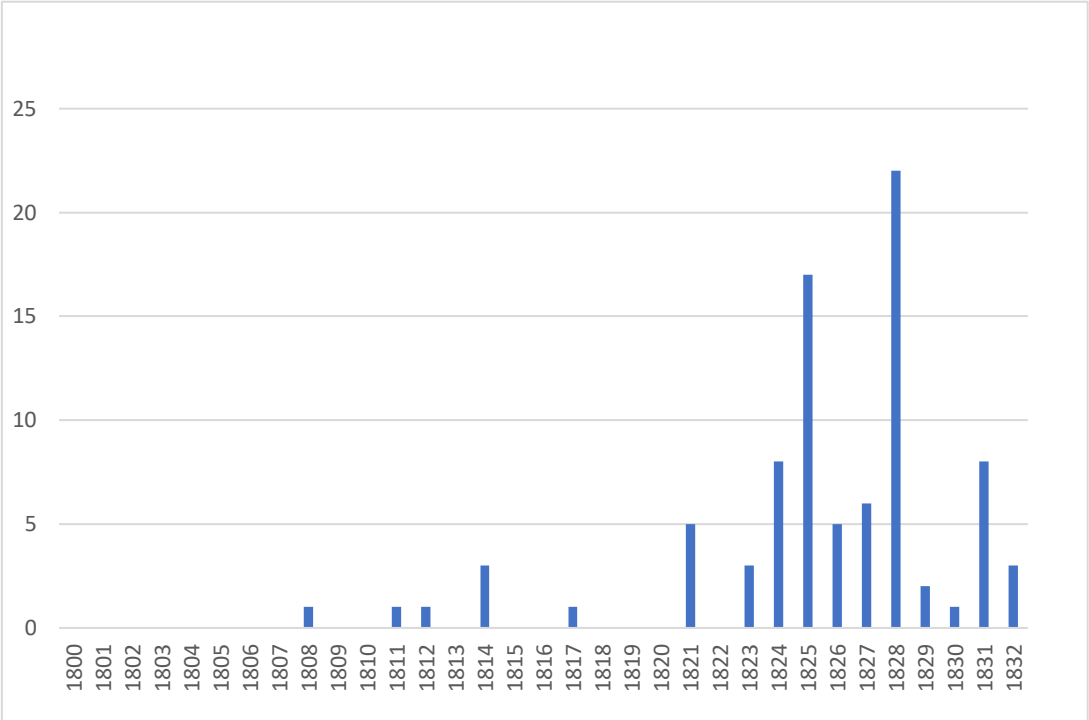

Figure 8.3: Workers' petitions (including Friendly Societies) from the London Region by year

Table 8.3: Petitions from both regions broken down by category of issue.

Category of issue	Northern region	London region
Combination laws	20	24
Duties and export/import laws	15	7
Wages	19	7
Work regulation	28	6
Trade regulation	0	6
Other	8	14
Friendly society laws	23	23
TOTALS	113	87

Analysed by broad categories of subject matter there was significant overlap between petitions from the two regions (table 8.3), but a good deal of difference in the detail of who was petitioning about what and when. Workers from the cotton trade unsurprisingly dominated petitions from the northern region, accounting for over 75% (table 8.4). All but one of the nineteen northern petitions about wages were from the cotton weavers; five prior to 1810 were about wage arbitration and minimum wage legislation; those in the 1810s complained more generally about low wages. In the 1820s the weavers largely abandoned hope of parliamentary assistance, although they did request compulsory collective bargaining to establish minimum rates. Their petitions in 1830 were about the Truck Acts (which sought to eliminate payment of wages in kind). The twenty-eight petitions about work regulation all related to conditions within the cotton factories. Three early petitions (1803-5) were from calico workers with complaints about unhealthy working conditions and too many apprentices (repeated in 1815). The remaining twenty-four petitions, largely in the 1820s and early 1830s, sought regulation of the working hours of the young in factories. Another issue that became more prominent in the 1820s (about which several different trades petitioned) were import/export duties and various trade regulations.

Table 8.4: Petitions from the northern region broken down by trade.

Petitioners	Number of petitions
Cotton workers:	68
Weavers	23
Spinners	31
Calico printers	9
Other	5
Silk workers	7
Tailors	1
Hatters	2
Boot and Shoe	3
Sawyers	4
Carpenters	2
Cabinet makers	1
Miscellaneous	2
Total	90

Table 8.5: Petitions from the London region broken down by trade.

Petitioners	Number of Petitions
Silk workers	16
Shipwrights	11
Ropemaker, mast makers, caulkers	7
Ship loaders, seamen	4
Sawyers	6
Carpenters	7
Iron and brass founders	3
Tin plate workers	3
Smiths	1
Coopers	1
Bakers, fishmongers	2
Tailors, boot and shoe	2
Calico printers	1
Total	64

No trades dominated in the London study area to the same extent as the cotton workers (table 8.5). There was only limited petitioning prior to 1820. The repeal of Elizabethan apprenticeship laws was the subject of three petitions in 1814 (several submitted jointly with the masters are not included here). Here too, petitions about duties and imports were evident in the 1820s. The silk weavers, who lost the protection of the Spitalfields Act in

1824 when duties on imported silks were also abolished, were responsible for all but one of the London petitions about wages. Mostly from the 1820s there were several petitions about trade regulation, be it the East India Company, the navigation laws or the silk trade. London petitions about work regulation raised minor matters, such as sabbath working.

What effect did the combination laws and their repeal have on petitioning by the trades? Although the acts did not restrict the right to petition, the status of preparatory organisations was sufficiently ambiguous that in 1799 the Home Office itself sought legal advice on the Lancashire weavers' sophisticated organisation to support an application to Parliament (and were advised it would be unwise to prosecute); the weavers also took advice.[159] Those leading the national campaign about apprenticeship laws in 1812 to 1814 circulated counsel's opinion that preparatory meetings and the collection of subscriptions were lawful, but care should be taken not to stray into resolutions about specific workplaces.[160] One set of accounts relating to the apprenticeship campaign showed that the trades had paid nearly £180 to date in legal fees.[161] Expense and anxiety probably meant some contemplated petitions were not pursued. Furthermore, the Combination Act must have deterred the formation of organisations that might in due course have arranged petitioning campaigns.

Many other issues, however, affected the volume of petitions. One influence can be characterised as societal attitudes. From the later 1810s working people generally were deterred from campaigning by the seditious meetings legislation and, particularly after Peterloo, a loss of faith in political solutions. That the Seditious Meetings Act 1819

[159] Innes, 'Des Tisserands', pp. 94, 97.
[160] Senate House Library, MS755, f.237, 238, Circular 18 June: Isaac Rogers Archive.
[161] *The Subjoined is the Form of Petition Intended to be Presented …* (London, 1813)

extended the matters on which (outdoor) meetings were restricted to trade matters may also have had an effect. Beginning around 1823 (when that Act was coming towards the end of its five-year operation) there was a groundswell of activity that was wider than the trades. A second issue that affected the number of petitions was the timing and popularity of specific causes. Parliamentarians increasing acceptance of the principles of political economy made them ever-more predictably unsympathetic to the kinds of requests for wage regulation made in the early years of the century. Much of post-1823 petitioning from both regions was in reaction to proposals that would affect workers, rather than proactive. Repeal of the Combination Act provided the focus for most petitions in 1824 and 1825; most of those in 1828 concerned resisting the Friendly Societies Bill. Repeal of the Spitalfields Act not only caused petitions opposing that repeal, but thereafter frequent petitions from distressed silk workers seeking intervention to ameliorate their circumstances. Campaigns about both factory working conditions and the regulation of imports and exports related to wider developments in the economy and the structure of work from the mid-1820s. Lastly, the national, highly organised campaigns about combinations and friendly societies must in turn have facilitated other petitioning, as networks of connections, knowledge and skills were further developed.

8.4.3 Campaigns about non-work issues.

The trades sent few petitions that did not directly relate to their work. Groups of workmen petitioning about their immediate concerns constituted interest groups with specialist knowledge and personal experience they could offer to parliamentarians.[162] The further they moved from their immediate concerns, the less status their petitions had. Petitions about non-work causes accounted for only 5% of the total from the northern region, all but

[162] See Alison Gilbert Olson, *Making the Empire Work: London and American Groups, 1690-1790* (London, 1992), p. 59 and Gauci, *Politics of Trade*, p. 218 for interest groups and information.

one of which were about the corn law. That the region's trades sent only one petition about parliamentary reform is, as noted previously, highly revealing of the practices of petitioning at the time. There were more petitions about general matters from London (15% of the region's total); five about Queen Caroline, three on the corn law and five parliamentary reform (four in 1831). The lack of other suitable identities in the capital, particularly the challenge to organise inhabitant-meetings outside of parishes, perhaps made trade identities more appealing.

When people petitioned for causes of wider interest but as working people, they commonly used general identities like mechanics and artisans, eventually the working classes, rather than weavers or shipwrights. Many of the same people were undoubtedly involved in these wider campaigns as in those pursued under trade identities. The skills and experience gained in trade activities were employed and the cultures and practices of trade societies shaped the organisations established for these non-work-related purposes. Analysing the causes pursued under different identities and the exceptional occasions when trade groups campaigned about wider public matters illuminates how working people carved out distinctive practices of organising within the conventions of the time.

Petitions submitted from the northern region between 1810 and 1812 that variously argued for peace, economic and sometimes parliamentary reform have often been discussed by historians as from the trades.[163] However, whilst networks of weavers' committees and other trades were involved in the background arrangements, petitions were mostly submitted using general identities. Some used collective descriptions of workers, like that in May 1811 from forty thousand 'manufacturers and artisans of Manchester' who

[163] Dinwiddy, 'Luddism and Politics'; Hammonds, *Skilled Labourer*, pp. 63-5; Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, pp. 228-30, 239-40.

complained of distress and sought the revocation of the Orders in Council.[164] Others were expressed as from inhabitants, like that from Bolton which sought parliamentary reform and peace in 1812.[165] Residents of Chowbent (twelve miles north-west of Manchester) and Chorley (ten miles north-west of Bolton) came closest to petitioning on general issues as trades, respectively petitioning about peace and sinecures as 'weavers and other working manufacturers of Chowbent' (that from Chorley used similar wording).[166] An 1811 leaflet circulated by delegates from the cotton trades reporting on the lack of substantive response to the petitions for relief for their distress to Parliament in May 1811 was signed by their secretary, but apparently drafted by the Manchester reformer, John Knight. The author wondered whether the 70,000 petitioners would have been treated the same if they had been able to vote and recommended that in future 'they' should campaign for parliamentary reform; it was addressed to 'the manufacturers, mechanics, artisans and others (inhabitants of Manchester and its vicinity)'.[167]

Campaigns for parliamentary reform by working people in the later 1810s were pursued through cause-specific societies (Hampden Clubs, Union Societies and the Spenceans), together with meetings either of inhabitants or collective descriptions of working people that did not reference their trades. The Lancashire reformers organised meetings of inhabitants that agreed petitions to Parliament (the Clubs did not petition).[168] The London meeting at Spa Fields in 1816, organised by some Spenceans and Henry Hunt, was of 'distressed manufacturers, mariners, artisans' of London (other similar formulations used during the 1810s are discussed in chapter 6.3.2). Members of trade societies — so far as

[164] *CJ*, 66 (1811), p. 383.
[165] *CJ*, 67 (1812), p. 207; Dinwiddy, 'Luddism', p. 39.
[166] *CJ*, 67 (1812), pp. 348, 374.
[167] TNA, HO 42/117/1-2, *To the Manufacturers, Mechanics Artisans and Others (Inhabitants of Manchester and its Vicinity)* ... 21 Oct. 1811; Hammonds, *Skilled Labourer*, p. 64.
[168] See chapter 5.5.

that was an on-going status — must have been involved in these campaigns in both regions. It was noted in 1817 that the Manchester meetings organised by radicals 'swelled much in number' when the spinning factories closed for the day.[169] Robert Glen showed that the cotton trades dominated the occupations of those who called reform meetings in Stockport in 1818 and 1819 (using the advertising method of calling locality meetings of inhabitants).[170] The only petition identified from a trade supportive of this agitation from either region was that of the 'journeymen carpenters and joiners of the metropolis' in 1817.[171] These carpenters seem to have been an exceptionally cohesive and committed group; Henry Hunt attended one of their meetings in 1817 and in 1830 they led the formation of the NUWC (see below).[172]

The widespread industrial and political activity throughout the northern study area in 1818 illustrates that separate identities were maintained between trade and national causes despite the overlapping repertoires of behaviours and personnel.[173] Radicals urged the trades to join forces with them and correspondents to the Home Office carefully monitored the situation.[174] It was reported from Manchester that 'much certainly has been tried to convert the turnout [strike] into political purposes but I think with little or so success'.[175] 'Politics were not introduced' at a meeting of 1500 colliers.[176] The Stockport weavers 'refused to suffer' Bagguley (one of the Hampden leaders) to address them.[177] The chairman of a meeting of delegates of several trades from four counties called to discuss contemporaneous strike action emphasised that the meeting must not 'touch on politics,

[169] McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, pp. 106-7; TNA, HO 40/4/27, 4 Feb. 1817, letter from Joseph Green.
[170] Glen, *Urban Workers*, p. 234.
[171] *CJ*, 72 (1817), p. 144; the tailors of the City of London also petitioned but are outside the study area; *CJ*, 72 (1817), p. 48.
[172] *Early English*, doc. 205; *Penny Papers for the Poor*, 12 Mar. 1831.
[173] Hall, 'Tyranny, Work'; Poole, *Peterloo*, chapter 8; Hammond, *Skilled Labourer*, chapter 5.
[174] TNA, HO 42/179 contains numerous reports.
[175] TNA, HO 42/179/16, 21 Aug. 1818, letter from Sir John Byng.
[176] TNA, HO 42/179/22, 24 Aug. 1818, letter from John Lloyd.
[177] TNA, HO 42/179/293, 20 Aug. 1818, letter from David Ramsay.

that must be the discourse for another day'.[178] The rules of the short-lived general union (the Philanthropic Society) formed that year limited its activities to industrial matters, as did those of the similar London body.[179]

Exceptional support for Queen Caroline (1820-1821) from both the trades as such and wider groups of working people is probably best explained as a mixture of timing and opportunity. Prothero argued that the affair 'promoted open political demonstrations by the trade societies, as opposed to petitions alone, and established a practice that was maintained throughout the decade'.[180] Legal proceedings against the Queen resonated with working people in the context of the post-Peterloo trials.[181] George IV's support of the authorities at Peterloo made him unpopular with working people; several Manchester trades, for example, did not join the procession to celebrate his coronation.[182] The Seditious Meetings Act 1819 severely limited the ability to hold meetings, but the breadth of agitation in favour of the Queen provided much freedom of action.[183] The almost daily processions through the capital of groups carrying loyal addresses to the Queen offered the London trades an opportunity to display their pride in, and assert the legitimacy of, their societies.[184] Their involvement was integrated with that of other groups from whom they could absorb some legitimacy: thus, the calico printers and the carpenters processed with the 'Lord Mayor and Common Council and a vast variety of other deputations'.[185] Trade

[178] TNA HO 42/179/338, 18 Aug. 1818, statement of James Fleming.
[179] TNA, HO 42/179/41, 19 Aug. 1818, clause 8 of Resolutions; contra Hall, 'Tyranny, Work', p.433 that its objects were 'Trade and Reform'.
[180] Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, chapter 7, quote p. 142.
[181] Rogers, *Crowds, Culture*, p. 250.
[182] MALH, M91/33/2, pp. 55-6 - letter press printers had been unable to attend as they were 'extremely busy'.
[183] The Manchester meeting of working people for the Queen made this point expressly, *Manchester Observer*, 9 Sept. 1820.
[184] *Statesman*, 19 Dec. 1820, 15 Aug. 1821; *British Press*, 23 Jan. 1821; *Address of the Brassfounders* (London, 1821); Steve Poole and Nicholas Rogers, *Bristol from Below: Law, Authority and Protest in a Georgian City* (Martlesham, 2017), p. 39 for the trade's involvement in a 1761 Bristol procession to celebrate the coronation.
[185] *Statesman*, 22 Jan. 1821.

banners carried slogans that went beyond work concerns, proclaiming the 'power of public opinion' and that the constitution should be protected from 'arbitrary encroachment'.[186] Although trades often re-used their banners, the appropriateness of these phrases that critiqued both the attacks on the Queen and the statutory restrictions imposed after Peterloo suggests they were fairly new. Five London trades even petitioned in support of the Queen (against the removal of her name from the liturgy).[187] There were no processions in Manchester and the trades there seem not to have participated in pro-Queen demonstrations. (A procession in Liverpool to celebrate her acquittal did however include that town's trades.[188]) In both Manchester and London support for the Queen was also expressed in meetings of collected working people.[189] The Manchester meeting of 'journeymen, artisans and mechanics' was led by known radicals; their address criticised those who filled 'seats which ought to be filled by the representatives of the nation' and referenced Peterloo.[190] The suggestion that 'and other inhabitants' should be added to 'artisans, mechanics and labouring classes' as the originators of the resulting address was rejected on the grounds that the lower orders 'should keep aloof'. It was 'to be regretted that they were not more conscious of the power they possessed'.[191]

Newspapers owned and managed by the trades encouraged working people to engage with wider issues. *The Trades Newspaper* (established 1825), in addition to detailed reports of industrial meetings and disputes, published lengthy discussions of the principles of political economy, both theory and practice. Problems relating to work were placed in their

[186] *British Press*, 23 Jan. 1821; *Statesman*, 15 Aug. 1821; *Address of the Brassfounders* (London, 1821); Sonny Angus, 'Material Culture of Class in Scottish Radical Processions, 1832-1884', *Labour History Review*, 88 (2023).
[187] *CJ*, 76 (1821), pp. 12, 27, 60.
[188] *Liverpool Mercury*, 24 Nov. 1820; Thomas Laqueur, 'The Queen Caroline Affair: Politics as Art in the Reign of George IV', *Journal of Modern History*, 54 (1982), pp. 417-66, p. 427 for trade activity in other towns.
[189] *Statesman*, 4 Aug. 1820.
[190] *Manchester Observer*, 2 Sept. 1820; *Black Dwarf*, 13 Sept. 1820
[191] *Manchester Observer*, 9 Sept. 1820.

wider economic and political contexts and must have influenced working people, although wider campaigns were generally pursued using non-trade identities. The paper reported, for example, an 1828 meeting of the Spitalfields' silk weavers about their distress at which there was a wide-ranging discussion of the currency system, national debt, the taxation that serviced it, the maintenance of a standing army, the corn laws and a 'corrupt, boroughmongering system of representation'. Yet, the meeting unanimously adopted a petition that sought only the re-introduction of wage regulation.[192] Analysis of the causes of the weavers' distress went far beyond the direct interests of their trade but their immediate concern — wage regulation — would not have been assisted by raising these wider matters.

Several newspapers owned by the trades supported the Reform Bill agitation. *The Weekly Free Press* (successor to *The Trades Newspaper*) provided extensive coverage of campaigning by working people and discussions of what shape reform ought to take. *The United Trades Co-operative* Journal, owned by the NAPL, lasted only a few months. Being unstamped it was 'forbidden by law to enter on political discussions', but its editor, John Doherty (the Manchester Spinners' leader and radical), could not resist. It was replaced by the stamped *Voice of the People* in January 1831 which supported radical reform of Parliament and supplied extensive coverage of the reform agitation.[193]

This financial backing of newspapers by trade societies was not uncontested. In a case brought by a disaffected member, a court refused to interfere in a friendly society's purchase of a share in the *Trades Newspaper*, deeming it an investment decision that was not open to

[192] *Trades Newspaper*, 23 Feb., 1 Mar. 1828.
[193] *United Trades Co-operative Journal*, 6 Mar. 1830; Kirby and Musson, *Voice of the People*, pp. 187-88; see for example, editorial *The Voice*, 5 Mar. 1831; Robert Sykes, 'Trade Unionism and Class Consciousness: the 'Revolutionary' Period of General Unionism, 1829-1834', in John Rule (ed.), *British Trade Unionism 1750-1850: the Formative Years* (Harlow, 1988), pp. 178-99, p. 185.

review.[194] The Bolton societies seceded from the NAPL, partly distrusting Doherty but also objecting to funding the newspaper with trade monies; one speaker spoke of breaking 'the fundamental laws of the Trade Union by attempting to convert the money which had been paid in … to any other use than that for which it had been originally subscribed'.[195]

Anti-corn law agitations of the 1820s constituted a turning point as the identity of the working classes was adopted to campaign about a non-trade-related matter. Moves in that direction had previously occurred when workers resisted the reimposition of the combination laws in 1825.[196] Several trades did petition as such about the corn laws (see chapter 9 for a discussion of how these were interpreted as a trade question). Yet there was a growing appreciation of the connections between living standards, wider issues of economic policy and parliamentary representation, issues more naturally campaigned for using general identities and in public meetings. Michael Sonenscher suggested that in 1790s France the identity sans culotte served the need for a 'uniting terminology away from the separatism of trade-based identities'.[197] There was a similar need in England in the 1820s. For all the trumpeted inter-trade assistance provided to strikers, trade societies' primary purpose was to defend the identity, skills and wages of their members. Adopting the label working classes served organisational purposes: it circumvented the tendency towards sectionalism that trades sometimes exhibited and suggested that meetings were accessible by all working people (men, anyway) regardless of whether their trade was organised. Earlier formulations like mechanics and artisans had maintained some connection to trade divisions. The term working classes reflected a more horizontal division of society, moved closer to the leading political identity of the day (inhabitants)

[194] *Trades Newspaper*, 19 Mar. 1826
[195] *Bolton Chronicle*, 20 Nov. 1830.
[196] *Stockport Advertiser*, 4 Feb. 1825.
[197] Michael Sonenscher, *Work and Wages: Natural Law, Politics and the Eighteenth-century French Trades* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 330; Clark, *Breeches*, p. 177.

whilst facilitating working people taking charge of their own meetings. The dominant technique of the period — public meetings — did not make use of the organisational practices of the trades but was governed by the previously discussed conventions that developed with the new form. This is why it mattered that (variations of) such meetings could be explicitly called for and led by working people, with both the language and substance of resolutions shaped by their concerns. When it was proposed that a Mr Eddie should chair a Manchester public meeting of the working classes about the corn law, a member of the crowd called out — 'Is he a workingman and a townsman? 'Aye' said another 'he is and he's a good un'.[198] Thereafter meetings of the working classes were commonly held in the northern towns on a variety of public matters of general interest.[199] In London it seems that such meetings did not occur until 1831, when the NUWC were behind several.[200]

As discussed in the section about practices and culture, the ultra-radical body the NUWC had individual members organised in branches (and later in classes) which sent delegates to a central body. Historians have often discussed the society as though it was a trade body, with institutional membership, but it was not.[201] That had been the original intention when it was first launched as the Metropolitan Trades Union, but even then it was also proclaimed that 'every working man in the metropolis is invited individually to join'.[202] The NUWC constitution referred to trade delegates representing their societies and initial meetings were attended by such delegates.[203] However, this form was not sustained and after July 1831 there were no further references to trade delegates and no indication that

[198] *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Oct. 1826.
[199] *Trades Newspaper*, 7 Jan. 1827; *Manchester Gazette*, 24 Feb. 1827.
[200] *Penny Papers for the Poor*, 2 July 1831; *CJ*, 86 (1831), pp. 645, 693.
[201] Chase, *Trade Unionism*, p. 144.
[202] *Penny Papers for the Poor*, 1 Apr. 1831.
[203] *Penny Papers for the Poor*, 9 Apr., 4 June 1831.

the NUWC continued to have collective, rather than individual, members. The change was not explained, but the use of society funds may, once again, have been an issue. Henry Hetherington (editor of the *Poor Man's Guardian*, which covered NUWC activities) reported that he had attended a meeting of the Musical Instruments Makers Society to encourage their involvement, but they had doubted that their rules permitted it; the individuals present all promised to join. An alternative explanation would be that some societies rules may have contained the not uncommon provision prohibiting political activities.[204]

There is more to campaigning than petitioning and it is evident that many trades discussed and broadly supported parliamentary reform. As noted above, the Spitalfields weavers did so in 1827 and the brushmakers made a financial contribution 1831. When the Reform Bill passed the NAPL organised a celebratory procession of the Manchester trades and numerous other examples of support from the trades could be cited. [205] Nevertheless, it is significant that most northern trades did not petition as such for parliamentary reform, with the sole such petition identified being that of the cabinet makers (seeking election by ballot).[206] That there were four reform petitions from the London trades possibly reflects that the London trades largely worked separately from each other making activity by the working classes harder to organise — though four is not a huge number. Other petitions may have been overlooked in the thousands that flooded into Parliament during the reform agitation, but generally when working people petitioned as such, they did so either from public meetings of the working classes or as members of National or Political Unions of the Working Classes.

[204] *Poor Man's Guardian*, 15 Apr. 1831.
[205] Behagg, *Politics and Production*, p. 112.
[206] *CJ*, 86 (1831), p. 310

8.5 Conclusion.

Malcolm Chase quoted an 1830 statement that 'Trades Unions and Political ones are now so intimately blended that they must be looked on as one', but this was wishful thinking by a radical.[207] Some trade activists shared with those seeking radical reform of Parliament a desire to unite the two movements, but co-joined movements could not be sustained. Trade and political societies largely remained separate bodies with separate purposes. The individuals involved overlapped and the culture and practices of trade societies were formative for working people's organisations more generally. Distinguishing the methods used to campaign for work and non-work matters shows, however, that we should be cautious about suggestions that named trades supported specific wider causes in the period up to 1832.[208]

[207] Chase, *Trade Unionism*, p. 144.
[208] Behagg, *Politics and Production*, p. 113 argues there was marked change after 1832.

9: Anti-corn law campaigning, 1825-1831

Campaigns against the corn law in the late 1820s make a useful final case-study because they were so widespread that all the forms studied in previous chapters were employed. What influenced the choice of method from that range of options and with what consequences? The last chapter considered forum selection in the context of campaigning by working people. The anti-corn law agitation allows that approach to be extended to a broader range of groups and organisational forms. Studies of the early decades of the nineteenth century often move from one parliamentary reform campaign to the next, viewing the 1820s as a period of education and reflection, but later agitations were enriched by the organisational developments of these years.

9.1 Introduction.

Forum selection has attracted little consideration as a topic and it is generally implicit that the social status of the protagonists determined the fora in which they campaigned.[1] Status, however, provides no explanation for the use of different structures by groups of the same social standing, nor for the use of the same structures by groups from different strata. Studies of particular campaigns that discuss why certain approaches were adopted come closest to engaging with the issue, although none directly consider it.[2] Joshua Civin's analysis of the identities mobilised in various Liverpudlian petitioning campaigns is unusual in explaining some forum selection.[3] Michael Roberts' study of moral-reform campaigning which sought to answer the question 'who needed to be convinced and by

[1] Thompson, *The Making*; Brian Lewis, *The Middlemost and the Milltowns: Bourgeois Culture and Politics in Early Industrial England* (Stanford, 2002).
[2] Pickering and Tyrrell, *The People's Bread*; Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester, 2007); Henry Miller, 'Popular Petitioning and the Corn Laws, 1833-1846', *English Historical Review*, 127 (2012), pp. 882-919.
[3] Civin, 'Slaves, Sati', pp. 187-205.

what methods?' suggests a fruitful approach.[4] Who was to be mobilised and what were the organisational consequences that flowed from that identification?

A wider range of organisational forms were employed in the 1820s than in the anti-corn law campaigns of the 1810s. The form of organisation used and who convened the event determined its constituency, both objectively in terms of who was invited and subjectively in terms of who might feel such a meeting was likely to speak to or for them. Form also affected the arguments advanced from a meeting. Reasons for adopting different methods of organising and the consequences of those choices are explored in the first part of the chapter. Anti-corn law campaigning also provides a lens that allows us to consider changes in the practices and culture of organising in the late 1820s. The nature of the cause and the breadth of urban support for a change in the law provided opportunities for extending the methods of organising in ways which, while potentially available to everyone, particularly facilitated campaigning by working people. Developing knowledge of the principles of political economy increasingly informed that campaigning.

The corn law was the legislative embodiment of a long-standing but periodically re-targeted policy to encourage English farmers to grow sufficient cereal crops.[5] The wartime blockade brought high prices as agriculture was *de facto* protected from foreign competition, so peace raised the question of future policy on corn prices. In 1815 despite strong urban objections to what was seen as the subordination of consumer to producer interests and provoking riots in London, Parliament prohibited the importation of corn until the domestic price had reached an average of 80 shillings a quarter; if it reached that

[4] Roberts, *Making English Morals*, p. 15.
[5] This paragraph is based on Boyd Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce: the Economic Policies of the Tory Governments, 1815-1830* (Oxford, 1977); Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 264-307; Barnes, *Corn Laws*, chapters 7 and 9; Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey, *From the Corn Laws to Free Trade: Interests, Ideas, and Institutions in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2006).

height, then corn could then be imported duty-free. Despite this historically generous measure of protection, agricultural distress in the early 1820s led to a strong lobby agitating for an increase in the protected price. The government's apparent concession in 1822 was, in practice, qualified by the retention of discretionary powers which ministers used to prevent the price of corn rising sufficiently to trigger the new statute's provisions. The campaign from the manufacturing and other urban centres for repeal of the corn law was nonetheless reignited in 1825 by the commercial crises that hit employment and profit, and the flames of agitation were fanned by ministers' implementation of free trade policies in other sectors. Commercial and industrial interests united against the landowners. Working people also campaigned against the law which they believed raised the price of their main food. Landowners and farmers resisted change but, broadly, did not seek additional protection.[6] After much high-political manoeuvring the compromise embodied in the 1828 Act allowed the importation of grain under a sliding scale of duty that fell as the price of domestic corn rose, though reduction in duties lagged behind price rises; only after the price reached 66 shillings was the reduction in duty greater than the increase in price. This remained the position (with a minor adjustment in 1842) until the corn law was repealed in 1846.

9.2 Organising against the corn law.

9.2.1 A comparison of the campaigns in the 1810s and 1820s.

In the 1810s opposition to the corn law from the study regions came almost entirely from inhabitants, organised in official locality meetings: in the 1820s diverse petitioning identities were mobilised in various types of meeting. All the northern towns and London parishes studied here participated in the post-war agitation, with some submitting four

[6] Barnes, *Corn Laws*, p.185-6; Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, chapter 11.

petitions from inhabitants (split between the Houses) over two short periods of intense activity in 1814 and 1815. Most of the meetings from which these petitions were launched can be identified (from minutes, newspapers and recitals in the parliamentary journals) as official locality meetings.[7] Only the petitions from the 'inhabitants' of Ashton, Oldham and Stockport (towns that were poorly covered by newspapers at this date) are of uncertain status, but they probably also emanated from official meetings.[8] Neither commercial groups nor trade societies petitioned.[9] No societies were formed to campaign against the law. By contrast, in the 1820s petitions emanating from official meetings of inhabitants were outnumbered by those from unofficial and advertised meetings, including meetings of the working classes. Many trades and commercial bodies held meetings to agree petitions. By the end of the period, some petitions were also organised by campaigning societies (included within 'other' on the chart at figure 9.1).

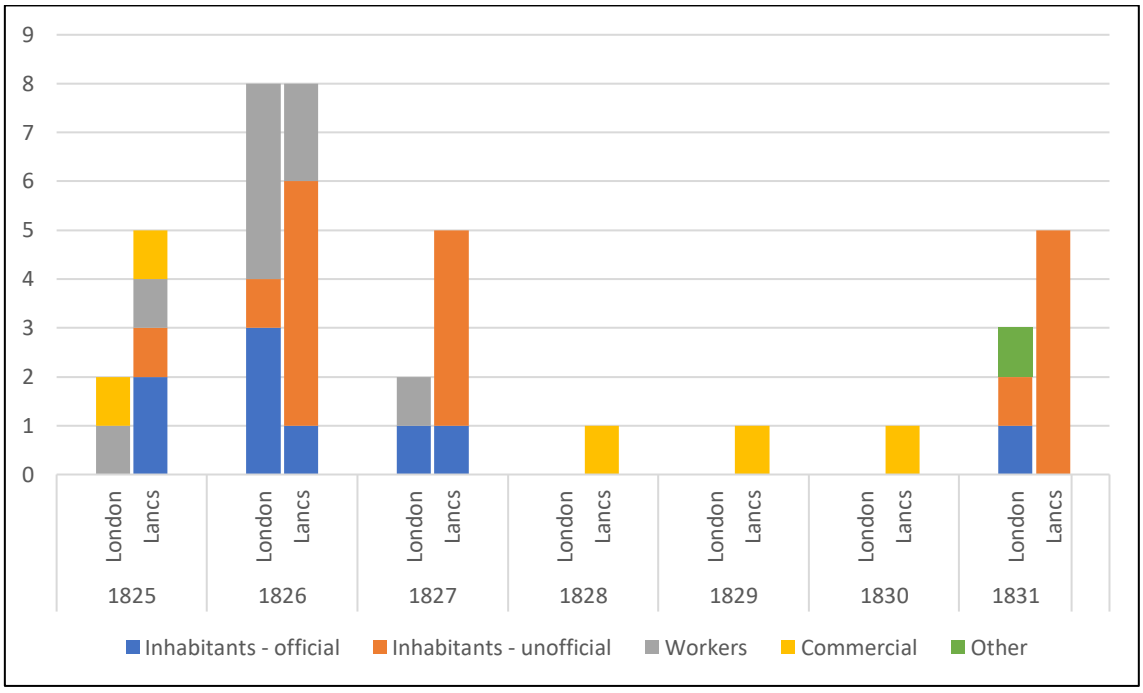

Figure 9.1: Petitions to the House of Commons from both regions against the corn law, 1825-1831.

[7] See chapter 6.
[8] *CJ*, 69 (1814), pp. 320, 327.
[9] Some Chambers of Commerce in other towns petitioned about the corn laws, *CJ*, 69 (1814-15), Index, 'corn', and chapter 6.

Greater numbers of people were involved in the 1820s as activists (organising and leading meetings) and as attendees of meetings than in the 1810s. Not only were more meetings held in the 1820s, but those meetings were also often larger. Manchester's 1814 official town meeting about the corn law was held in the police room which could hold approximately one hundred people; that of 1826 met in the Manor Court Room with a capacity of 2,000.[10] In 1827 around 1,200 attended a meeting at Oldham and up to 3,000 were at an Ashton meeting.[11] In London a meeting of the 'mechanics' attracted an audience of a couple of thousand people.[12] The variety of meetings and levels of attendance were, in all likelihood, mutually reinforcing. Increased engagement maintained the variety of forums, the wider range of assemblies raised interest and potential attendees felt that meetings were more accessible and potentially more relevant to them. James Vernon argued that holding meetings inside rather than outside intentionally restricted access to the official public sphere, but he did not analyse the number, scale and subject matter of indoor and outdoor meetings.[13] It is true that women were significantly less likely to attend indoor meetings, but how many outdoor meetings opposing the corn law were held in the 1810s? The marked increase in the numbers attending meetings in the 1820s and the greater number of those meetings suggest that active engagement by men had expanded.

9.2.2 The relationship between identities mobilised and the forms of meetings.

The distinction between public and closed meetings mattered because it affected who could attend, determined whether those meeting could claim to represent the public or a sectional opinion and influenced the arguments that might be advanced. Figure 9.2 summarises in diagrammatic form some of the conclusions of earlier chapters and

[10] *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 28 May 1814, 16 Dec. 1820; *Manchester Gazette*, 19 Aug. 1826.
[11] *Bolton Chronicle*, 24 Mar., 21 Apr. 1827.
[12] *Trades Newspaper*, 20 May 1827.
[13] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, chapter 6.

represents the position in the late 1820s. While this schematic diagram oversimplifies the landscape, it highlights the distinction between public locality meetings (on the left) and non-public meetings (on the right). By this time, public meetings were understood to be (at least in self-presentation) open, deliberative and civic minded. Public meetings might be official (called by the relevant authorities on receipt of a requisition), unofficial (called after the rejection of a requisition) or advertised (no requisition submitted).[14] On the right of the chart are types of interest often, but not necessarily, institutionalised. Meetings of private interests were in principle closed; those of public-interest societies were more open, but not to the extent of public meetings. The arrows indicate the form of public meeting which the members of given interests were most likely to seek if they felt such a meeting was desirable.

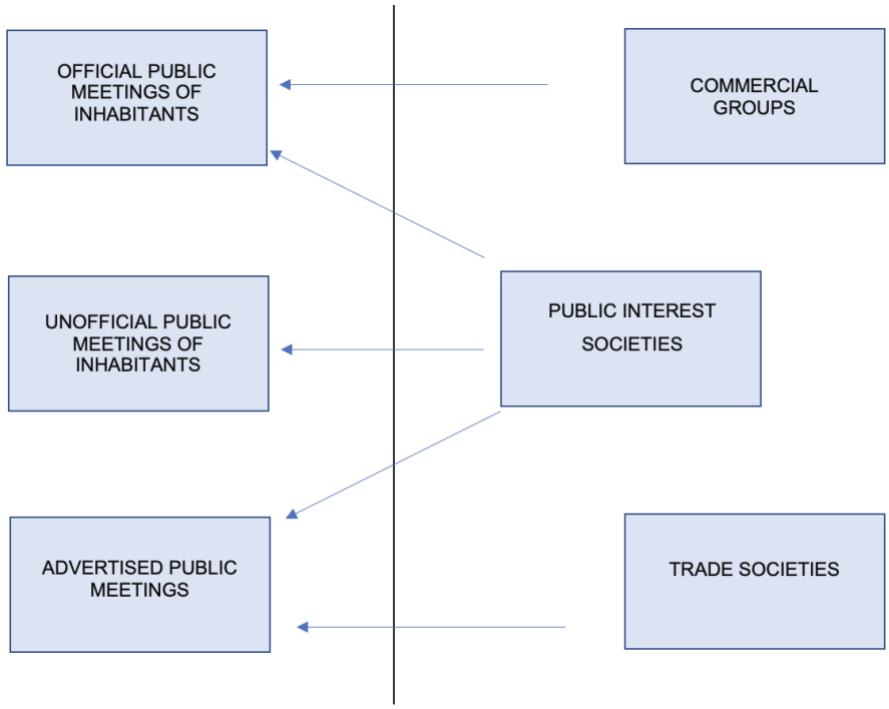

Figure 9.2: Schematic chart of forms of organisation, c.1827

[14] See chapter 6.

Individuals might meet under the identity of an interest group or participate in public meetings of any of the types identified above. Understanding the differences between these meetings illuminates reasons for and consequences of campaigning using different identities and different methods of calling meetings. Most of the important commercial men of Manchester were members of the town's Chamber of Commerce.[15] The Chamber was at this time lukewarm about opposing the corn law and divided about whether it should intervene at all.[16] One body of opinion held that campaigning should be left to meetings of inhabitants and the Chamber confine itself to 'commercial matters'; others responded that if the Chamber did not act in this, it might as well dissolve.[17] This 1825 discussion was resolved with the drawing up of both a petition from the Chamber and a requisition for a public meeting of the town, with a majority of the Chamber's directors (and no doubt many members) signing the requisition.[18] Manchester businessmen wanted to present their opinion to Parliament as an interest group, but also thought that on this nationally contentious question an official meeting of the town was appropriate.[19] The change in the expressed identity of participants (from member of a society to inhabitant) was linked to the change in form from a private meeting to a public meeting. Chambers' meetings were for members only, while Manchester town meetings, although dominated by many of the same commercial men were, in principle, accessible to all inhabitants and certainly all opinion.[20] The profile of public meetings, and their connection to the similarly elevated public opinion, will have been relevant to decisions about whether to meet as interests (private) or inhabitants (public) or to do both. That opinion could be claimed to

[15] Redford, *Manchester Merchants*, chapter 5; see chapter 4 here; Manchester, 19 Dec. 1820; *Cowdroy's Manchester* Gazette, 16 Dec. 1826.
[16] Turner, *Reform and Respectability*, p. 237; Prentice, *Historical Sketches*, pp. 251, 301.
[17] *Manchester Mercury*, 1 Mar. 1825.
[18] *Manchester Courier*, 19 and 26 Feb. 1825; both the Chamber and the town petitioned, *CJ*, 80 (1825), pp. 331, 337.
[19] *CJ*, 82 (1826), p. 74; 83 (1828), p. 336 for other Chamber petitions about the corn law.
[20] See chapter 7.2.

have been tested in public debate before a broad and diverse audience was one reason to organise a public meeting.

Although the trades generally took a narrow view of what causes fell within their interests, some nevertheless considered that the close relationship between the price of food and wages brought the corn law within the ambit of their concerns.[21] Several petitioned against the law, especially in London where the shoemakers, the sawyers, carpenters and ropemakers all held meetings in early 1826.[22] As interest groups formed to further members' concerns, trade societies held closed meetings (like those of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce). They were not meetings of the public, but 'of', say, the carpenters, under which identity any resulting petition would be submitted. Twelve hundred were said to have attended a meeting of the London carpenters' (advertised in the *Trades Newspaper*, although the time was only fixed the night before so word of mouth was also important). Those kinds of numbers were likely to have included some who strictly were not the designated attendees, but that would not have altered the essential quality of the meeting.[23]

In addition, the new form of advertised locality meeting was used to call public meetings of collected workingmen about the corn law. The decisions to hold meetings of the Manchester working classes in 1826 and the mechanics of London in 1827 resulted in gatherings at which neither attendance nor opinion could be restricted.[24] These meetings should be understood as directed both at trade groups and at a subset of inhabitants (including but not restricted to tradesmen).[25] Although technically open to any, notices

[21] See chapter 8.4.3.
[22] *Trades Newspaper*, 19, 26 Feb., 2 Apr.1826.
[23] *Trades Newspaper*, 26 Feb. 1826; *CJ*, 81 (1826), p. 254.
[24] *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Jan. 1826; *Trades Newspaper*, 20 May 1827.
[25] Chapter 6.2.3.

calling the meetings made clear their core constituency, discouraging some as much as they encouraged others. A meeting, for example, about the corn law in 1826 was advertised as 'of the working classes and others of Manchester'.[26] The form of meeting reflected choices organisers made about which identities to mobilise and presumably shaped how those attending understood what part of the public they were seeking to embody.

Self-consciously public should be distinguished from the question of publicity. Detailed reports in newspapers make clear that journalists were present at some closed/private meetings (probably by invitation) and sometimes reports were submitted to newspapers by interested parties.[27] It was a matter of judgement for the group in question whether the publicity that came from journalists being present was sufficiently advantageous to outweigh the risk of establishing a precedent that might prove awkward in the future. The principles surrounding press reports of non-public meetings were explored in the *Manchester Gazette* in 1826. The context for Manchester's anti-corn law campaigning at this juncture was a downturn in trade that caused significant distress among working people. One of the town's responses was to establish a fund for their relief managed by a general committee. At a meeting of that committee there was an argument about whether Archibald Prentice (editor of the *Gazette*, a strong believer in public debate and an active participant in many institutions of the town) could report the discussion. One gentleman objected to Prentice taking notes: 'it should be understood that what was said in that room ought not to be made public by being reported in the newspapers.' Prentice provocatively asked, 'if it was a closed and secret meeting' (the line used to criticise private meetings of inhabitants that attempted to pass off their views on an issue as those of the town). The

[26] *Manchester Gazette*, 21 Oct. 1826; *Manchester Guardian*, 28 Jan. 1826; Prentice, *Historical Sketches*, pp. 256, 270.
[27] For example, the report of the carpenters' meeting, *Trades Newspaper*, 26 Feb. 1826.

other attendees refused to take his bait and argued that gentlemen should be free to express their 'private sentiments' about how best to organise relief for working people without the constraint imposed by concern about their comments appearing in the newspapers.[28] They were not meeting to take a public stance. In contrast, journalists were free to attend public meetings and anything said could be reported.[29] On many occasions the press reports of public meetings may have been regarded by participants as being as important to the general agitation as the resulting petitions. At the official Manchester public meeting in 1825 one speaker issued a rallying call to the nation:

> If ministers … find themselves opposed by the Country Gentlemen and not a single petition upon the table from the manufacturing towns in what a situation they would be placed. It was highly important then that Manchester, the first manufacturing town in the world, should set the example of petitioning and he trusted that every town in the kingdom would speedily follow.[30]

A public meeting that agreed a petition and that was as widely reported as possible was the best way to realise that intention.

Anti-Bread Tax Associations (ABTAs) that were formed from 1826 illustrate how the meetings of cause-specific societies fitted with the distinction between public and private meetings. ABTAs were designed to coalesce around a public issue rather than an identity — the society was not for commercial men or spinners as such, but for those who opposed the corn laws in the public interest. Meetings were for members only, but any who supported the associations' aim were welcome to join.[31] These were not public meetings in the meaning of the term understood at the time but were more open than those of interest groups organised around and for pre-existing identities. The meetings of societies like

[28] *Manchester Gazette*, 29 July 1826.
[29] e.g., *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Oct. 1826.
[30] *Manchester Gazette*, 5 Mar. 1825.
[31] *Trades Newspaper*, 24 June, 26 Oct. 1827.

ABTAs can, therefore, be understood as hybrids that occupied a space between public and private (reflected in their position in the schematic diagram above).

9.2.3 How forum selection affected arguments.

If the form of meeting and the identity assumed by those meeting were intrinsically linked, the arguments advanced formed a third element in the equation. Arguments were shaped by the type of meeting and, conversely, arguments that organisers wanted to make may have influenced their decision about what form of meeting should be adopted or who should meet.[32]

Discussions at meetings of interest groups and resulting petitions articulated a particular experience or expertise, mounting arguments directly connected to the interest they represented. The Manchester Chamber of Commerce framed their 1826 petition around a discussion of the recent stagnation of trade and how the corn laws drove foreign nations to turn from farming to manufacturing, citing American exports that competed with English manufacturers.[33] Many working people were unconvinced about the benefits of free trade and sceptical about whether repeal of the corn laws would improve their circumstances.[34] Trade society petitions generally focused, therefore, on the impact of the uneven adoption of free-trade principles on their members. The (London) Ladies shoemakers observed 'with much concern, the introduction of a free trade in certain articles and at the same time the free importation of corn prohibited; thereby forcing the operatives of this empire into a foreign contest with their arms pinioned'.[35] They went on to complain about tax on their raw materials and that they had a 'particular claim upon the attention of the Legislature'

[32] See Miller, 'Popular Petitioning' for the arguments advanced by different groups in the later agitation, pp. 902-910.
[33] *Manchester Courier*, 11 Nov. 1826.
[34] *Trades Newspaper*, 18 Mar. 1827; see Chase, *Chartism*, pp. 158-9 for similar attitudes in the 1840s.
[35] *Trades Newspaper*, 4 Mar. 1827.

because of the 'injurious' importation of French shoes. The shoemakers' presentation of their experience of inconsistent economic policy placed the corn laws squarely within the interests of their trade, made the case for why it was desirable for them to petition and advanced arguments that were too specific for a meeting of inhabitants. Similarly, the shipwrights complained of the admission of foreign-built ships, while the ropemakers raised cheap rope imports from Russia.[36]

By contrast, at public meetings (official, unofficial and advertised) arguments were framed as being in the national interest. As we have already seen, one element of the process of constituting a public at this time was the adoption of a disinterested, public-spirited persona (whatever actual self-interest lay behind the intervention).[37] Old Street vestry resolved that the corn laws were 'injurious to all national interests and detrimental to … the general good', while the petition from the inhabitants of Bolton agreed at an official public meeting argued that the current restrictions on importing corn were 'inconsistent with the soundest principles of national policy and highly injurious to the best interests of the people'.[38] What was in the national good might, however, be interpreted through particular lenses. For one Manchester speaker at an unofficial public meeting, England and trade were indistinguishable, as he rhetorically enquired 'why a powerful nation like England, meriting happiness and greatness by its high moral character – its skill – its capital – its enterprise – and above all by its unwearied industry, is in a state the most depressed and wretched?'[39]

What policy was in the national interest was interpreted differently at official and unofficial meetings of inhabitants in the cotton towns. Official meetings sought, in the

[36] *CJ*, 81 (1826), p. 107; *Trades Newspaper*, 5 Feb. 1826.
[37] Chapter 7.2.
[38] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM, Feb. 1826; *CJ*, 80 (1825), p. 454.
[39] *Manchester Gazette*, 19 Aug. 1826.

words employed in Bolton's petition 'such alterations as seem expedient' in the corn laws, while most of the unofficial meetings in the region sought their repeal.[40] There were several reasons why official town meetings may have adopted this approach.[41] The Manchester Tories who controlled whether official town meetings were held were reluctant to campaign against ministerial policy. Manchester business opinion was not yet fully in support of repeal, with the Chamber of Commerce expressing concerns for the economy if the laws were repealed and men active in Manchester's corn exchange also opposing radical changes in the laws.[42] Oldham and Bolton had farming interests that the towns' authorities could not disregard (Boltons' farmers petitioned as such against any amendment to the laws).[43] An unofficial Manchester public meeting in August 1826 which argued for repeal was organised by middle-class activists who attended and spoke at many official public meetings in the town.[44] That group took advantage of the meeting being unofficial to put forward arguments in the name of the town, with the sanction of a public meeting, which would not have been agreed either by the Chamber of Commerce (of which several were members) or by an official town meeting.

Unofficial public meetings also offered opportunities to mobilise across a range of causes and perhaps build a broader base of support for future action than was likely at official meetings. The unofficial Manchester meeting in August 1826 was called about the 'state of the country'; that is its stated purpose was drawn broadly so as to permit discussion about the need for a reduction in taxation and improved currency management, as well as repeal of the corn laws.[45] An unofficial public meeting in Oldham in 1827 agreed to petition not

[40] *CJ*, 80 (1825), p. 545
[41] *CJ*, 80 (1825), pp. 331, 454; 82 (1827), p. 288.
[42] *Manchester Mercury*, 1 Mar. 1825; Michael Turner, 'Before the Manchester School: Economic Theory in Early Nineteenth-Century Manchester', *History*, 79 (1994), pp. 216-41, especially pp. 235-7.
[43] *Manchester Gazette*, 5 Mar. 1825; *CJ*, 82 (1827), p. 198; Price, 'Governing the Community', p. 126.
[44] *Manchester Gazette*, 12 Aug. 1826.
[45] *Manchester Gazette*, 12 Aug. 1826.

just about the corn laws but also parliamentary and currency reform, reduced expenditure and the recent additional grant to the Duke of Clarence.[46] In contrast, official public meetings in the northern towns and London vestries limited their attention to corn alone.[47] Official meetings were not necessarily limited to one subject, but the process of officially calling inhabitants together to discuss the locality's views on a matter of national contention probably worked most smoothly, producing proposals that were more likely to be approved, if such meetings had a single focus.

Mobilisation was not merely a question of what was campaigned for but whether potential attendees felt that a meeting might speak to them as well as for them. Although workingmen were eligible to attend town and some vestry meetings, many will have felt that those meetings were not relevant to them. One speaker at a meeting of the Manchester working classes in 1827 referred to a recent official town meeting about the corn laws that he had attended, stating that 'many of the poor working people thought that it was a meeting of gentlemen and did not go.'[48] Public meetings of working people still framed their concerns as in the national interest; the 'country was in a fearful state and it was the duty of everyone, young and old, to exert themselves, to come forward to extricate the country from this state'. [49] Their discussion, however, analysed the situation of working people in language that resonated with their audiences and presented their predicament as that of the country. A key argument advanced by these meetings was that the working class was an identity entitled to be heard by Parliament and one that workingmen ought to adopt.

[46] *Bolton Chronicle*, 21 Apr. 1827; *CJ*, 82 (1827), p. 408.
[47] See *CJ*, 80 (1825), p. 454 (Bolton); 81 (1826), p. 211 (Shoreditch), 250 (Poplar); 82 (1827), p. 288 (Oldham).
[48] *Manchester Gazette*, 11 Aug. 1827.
[49] *Ibid.*

Who was being mobilised led to differences in the voices adopted at meetings, even when those meetings appear similar. The neighbouring London parishes of Shoreditch and Old Street had less need to accommodate a spectrum of opinion about the laws than had the official meetings in the northern towns; in both parishes official vestry meetings agreed petitions seeking 'much amendment' or repeal of the corn laws. Old Street's vestrymen were ratepayers assessed on £30 p.a. or more, whilst Shoreditch was open to all ratepayers and these thresholds perhaps explain their different articulations of the needs of the nation.[50] Old Street's resolutions used the language of economic theory, referencing the 'value of labour' and the comparative burdens felt by commerce and agriculture and doubting the 'expediency of experimental deviations at the suggestion of theorists'.[51] The Shoreditch vestry was increasingly concerned about the declining affluence of the parish population and the consequent impact of that on the poor rates; their petition complained of increased pauperism, the suffering of the 'labouring classes' and argued for 'the greatest advantage to all classes of society'.[52] The contrasting tenor of their resolutions suggests that the discussion at the two meetings was markedly different.

9.2.4 Local leaders.

It is implicit in the preceding discussion that decisions were made about how to organise meetings — when to hold them, who to mobilise, what form should be used and what arguments made. Although some historians have emphasised the importance of local leaders, the model of the gentleman leader still tends to obscure the activities of men who have left less mark on the historical record.[53] Not only did these local activists make

[50] See chapter 6.3.1.
[51] ILHC, LBI/PVM/3, OSVM, Feb. 1826.
[52] HAD, P/L/4, SVM, 15 Mar. 1826.
[53] Belchem and Epstein, 'Gentleman Leader Revisited'; Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, p. 235; Vernon, *Politics and People*, pp. 266-90; Simon Morgan, *Celebrities, Heroes and Champions: Popular Politicians in the age of Reform, 1810-1867* (Manchester, 2021) includes some lesser figures, but broadly focuses on the big names.

organisation possible, but they also shaped what form it took and, therefore, the arguments advanced.

Little is known about the background to calling the meeting of the working classes of Manchester in January 1826 about the corn laws.[54] That decision, however, gave the opportunity to attend to men from a variety of trades whose societies may not have chosen to act or who had no society.[55] It is likely that the organisers were among the main speakers at the meeting. These were men with established reputations within their trade societies, many of them spinners, who might have chosen to organise meetings of their trades. Thomas Foster (a spinner) had in 1825 been twice sent to London as a delegate charged with lobbying for the Factory Bill and against amendments to the combination laws; he was described by the *Manchester Guardian* as 'the ablest and most influential man' amongst the spinners.[56] Jonathan Hodgins (another spinner) spoke at several meetings of the working classes about wider matters in the 1820s. William Baxter (a fustian cutter) had also been a delegate lobbying against the combination laws.[57] As the recognised leaders of the trades of Manchester, these men and others like them (John Doherty, for example) shaped the form and agenda of public meetings of the working classes in the town.

The leaders of the trade societies in the metropolis took a different approach and largely organised trade meetings.[58] Again, individuals who led and were probably involved in organising these meetings can be identified. George Adam (who led the carpenter's meeting mentioned above) was involved in the *Trades Newspaper*, the friendly society campaign of 1828 and in ABTA; Thomas Voak, a shoemaker was also involved in the co-

[54] *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Jan. 1826.
[55] Manchester's spinners, fustian cutters and Failsworth's weavers also petitioned; *CJ*, 80 (1825), p. 356; 81 (1826), pp. 111, 338.
[56] *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Oct. 1826, 24 Feb. 1827; *Manchester Guardian* 10 Oct. 1829.
[57] Kirby and Musson, *Voice of the People*, pp. 37, 57; *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Oct. 1826, 24 Feb., 11 Aug. 1827; John Lawton, another spinner, chaired the meeting.
[58] *Trades Newspaper*, 19, 26 Feb. and 2 Apr. 1826.

operative movement.[59] Only a meeting of 'mechanics' in Blackwall (almost certainly organised by John Gast, the shipwright's leader) adopted a more general approach in the capital in 1826 and in the event the meeting was attended mainly by shipwrights.[60] In 1827 a general meeting of mechanics was held and although Gast and Adam (amongst others) spoke, it was chaired by Joseph Hume, M.P.[61] The parliamentary focus of the discussion at that meeting may have disappointed attendees who hoped it would engage with their daily difficulties. The description mechanics and that the chair was not a working man suggests that the scale of the metropolis, combined with the absence of any one dominating industry, may have impeded the development in London of meetings labelled as of the working classes. Greater standing was probably needed to sustain a general meeting in the metropolis, while the predominance of cotton manufacturing in Manchester provided a base that made such activity possible. These were assessments made by local leaders.

The organisers of meetings also set the agendas. Unofficial public meetings in Oldham and Ashton, led by the veteran radicals John Knight and William Fitton, resolved to petition not only for repeal of the corn laws but also for a long list of causes that included parliamentary reform and reduced expenditure.[62] A few weeks earlier an official public meeting in Oldham had resulted in a petition of the 'clergy, manufacturers and other inhabitants' seeking such modification to the corn laws as would allow a sufficient price to the grower and relief to the manufacturing interests.[63] The inhabitants of Oldham were offered a choice between a meeting presenting a full 'radical' agenda or one seeking only the amendment of the laws and in all probability dominated by affluent inhabitants.

[59] Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, pp. 203, 219, 294.
[60] *Trades Newspaper*, 5 Feb. 1826; Prothero, *Artisans and Politics* for Gast.
[61] *Trades Newspaper*, 20 May 1827.
[62] *Bolton Chronicle*, 24 Mar., 21 Apr. 1827; *CJ*, 82 (1827), pp. 408, 606.
[63] *CJ*, 82 (1827), p. 288.

Decisions about who to organise and what agenda to offer shaped not only the form of meeting but who could and would attend and what they might resolve.

Finally, it should be noted that individuals also shaped activity by *not* organising. The contingency of what did and did not occur is illustrated by the London parishes. In contrast to the widespread post-war agitation, only Limehouse, Old Street, Poplar, Shoreditch and Stepney organised vestry or parish meetings against the corn law in the 1820s, following requisitions signed by men whose identities we do not know (apart from that of Old Street whose signatories included the likes of William Proctor, grocer and John Reddall, sash maker).[64] None of the parishes studied seem to have had a well-established group of activists. The failure either to requisition official meetings or organise unofficial meetings appears to have left many inhabitants in these localities without a vehicle for expressing their opposition to the corn law.

9.3 Developments in the practice and culture of organising in the late 1820s.

Broad urban support for reform of the corn law meant that the campaign provided a context in which the practices of organisation could be further modified. Two extensions to the methods of organising that occurred during the campaigns were particularly helpful to working people who sought to present their concerns in their own voices. Increasing awareness of the principles of political economy enabled them to analyse and connect myriad matters.

[64] See chapter 5 for vestry minutes references and *CJ*, 81 (1826), pp. 211, 250, 264; 82 (1827), p. 245, *Journals of the House of Lords*, 58 (1826), p. 131; *Post Office Directory 1820* (London, 1821), pp. 285, 290.

9.3.1 Changes to organisational practices.

The Manchester meeting of the working classes about the corn law in January 1826 was probably the first public meeting of the 'working classes' on a public matter of general interest. Much has already been said here about this meeting. It was discussed in chapter 6 as a new type of locality meeting; in chapter 8 it was analysed as part of working people's solution to the difficulties of using trade identities to campaign on wider matters; the meeting has already been mentioned in this chapter. The point now is that it was understood at the time as a significant development and it is relevant that this step was taken in the campaign against the corn law. The *Trades Newspaper* devoted several pages to a detailed report of the 'first meeting that has been held by the labouring portion of the community' against the corn law, which the paper clearly considered to be innovative and significant.[65] The meeting was reported in the national newspapers.[66] The *Manchester Guardian* noted that when (the editor, presumably) had seen the placards advertising the meeting, he had suggested to townsmen 'in a higher station of life' that they should assist, but it was thought preferable to 'leave it to the labourers and artizans of this town to put their own case in their own way; to record their views and feelings respecting a measure which influences not merely their comforts, but their every-day means of existence'.[67] These comments illustrate why the campaign provided an ideal context for taking the step of organising explicitly as the working class, drawing legitimacy on the one hand from the fact that the issue was the subject of a national campaign (so not likely to be typed seditious) and on the other from the notion that it was the fundamental duty of a man to feed his family, so that anyone who bore that obligation had standing to take part. It is another example of the measured way in which methods of organising were expanded.

[65] *Trades Newspaper*, 29 Jan. 1826.
[66] See, for example, *Morning Chronicle*, 31 Jan. 1826.
[67] *Manchester Guardian*, 28 Jan. 1826.

Thomas Foster, opening the meeting, regretted that the task had not fallen to one of the town's leading men — performative modesty appropriate for the occasion? He proceeded to turn that failure into a substantive point, suggesting it revealed the distance of such men from the 'misery and want' experienced by working families.[68]

Others followed Manchester's example. In February 1826 a public meeting of the 'labouring classes' in Stockport discussed a petition for repeal of the corn law. Unlike the Manchester meeting, which agreed a petition from 'the working classes', Stockport's was submitted from 'inhabitants'.[69] Whether this reflected reluctance to present the identity of 'labouring classes' to Parliament, tactically judging that inhabitants were more likely to be listened to, or because they were advised that it was the correct form is unknown. Perhaps it was just another example of caution. As we saw in chapter 6 this shift to meeting without any requisition and without following the lapsed statutory procedures made it possible to organise public meetings of parts of places (meetings that were also probably dominated by working people). They thus presented themselves as a public-interest group that was aligned with the rhetoric of the public, whilst also expressing their concerns in their own terms. The method was used by several groups to campaign against the corn law and, later, for parliamentary reform.[70]

The second organisational extension during the anti-corn law campaigns was the formation of ABTA. The identities of most involved is unclear, but the idea possibly began with the radical Allen Davenport and some leaders of the London trades participated (in their private capacities). The membership was probably dominated by working people. ABTAs aimed to establish a national network of societies, more formally connected than either the

[68] *Manchester Guardian*, 28 Jan. 1826.
[69] *Stockport Advertiser*, 17 Feb. 1826; *CJ*, 81 (1826), p. 115.
[70] See chapter 6.

radical societies of 1790s or the Hampden Clubs of the 1810s had achieved. Networked societies were likely to breach the continuing statutory prohibition on branches, but nonetheless ABTAs were established in London (several) and Manchester (one) as well as Stroud, Gloucester, Nailsworth, Kidderminster, Sheffield and possibly Liverpool.[71] Again, it is relevant that these steps were taken in the context of the anti-corn law campaign.

The ABTA leadership's awareness that their organisation pushed at the boundaries of accepted conduct is demonstrated by their explicit modelling on other societies which had branches and whose activities were not impeded by the authorities. That their name - Anti-Bread Tax Association - referenced the anti-slavery society was made even clearer when in 1829 ABTA adopted the name 'The Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of the Corn Law'. They chose to mirror the formal name of the anti-slavery society because that society provided 'a model for their conduct against which no objections can be raised'.[72] ABTAs also referred to Agricultural Associations, another helpful precedent in relation to branches.[73] 'Let us imitate the landlords in one thing – let us have an 'Anti-Bread Tax Association in every county, the chairmen of which should meet in London as the Chairmen for the County Agricultural Associations do'.[74] This defensive borrowing of the accepted legitimacy of other groups marks ABTAs as early and cautious protagonists in what would become a central mode of organising; the public-interest society. Although there is no evidence of any attempt by the authorities to intervene in ABTA's activities (perhaps because the movement never took off) when the Political Unions of the reform agitation attempted to connect in a formal organisational structure the Royal Proclamation

[71] *Trades* Newspaper, 1826, various; Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, pp. 219-20.
[72] *Trades Newspaper*, 7 Mar. 1829; Catherine Hall, 'Anti-Slavery Society act.1823-1833)' *ODNB* (Oxford, 2008), http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/96359 (15 Dec. 2017).
[73] See chapter 5.5.
[74] *Trades Newspaper*, 19 Mar. 1826.

that restated the prohibition on branch organisation suggests that ABTAs' concerns were not entirely misplaced.[75]

What were the attractions of campaigning through a society like ABTA? Societies could offer opportunities to participate in campaigns to people who could not access locality or trade organised meetings and petitions. Many ABTAs petitioned Parliament under the identity of their association, but some organised petitions of inhabitants.[76] ABTA number two (Marylebone) did both, petitioning under the identity of the association in 1827, but in 1829 petitioning as the 'undersigned inhabitants of the parish of St Marylebone' (note the explicit presentation of the views of some inhabitants with no pretension to represent the opinion of the parish).[77] The inhabitants of Marylebone did not apparently have the opportunity to attend a locality meeting on the corn law. The petitioners from the Kidderminster ABTA were described as 'woolcombers' — this suggests either that they had no trade society or it was not prepared to arrange a petition against the corn law.[78]

Societies could adopt policy and tactical positions in a way that would not have been possible in the fluid and open circumstances of town or parish meetings, where every gathering addressed an issue *de novo* and in principle all opinion had to be heard. ABTA campaigned only about the corn law for 'to mix up anything whatever with petitions against the Corn Law is giving to those gentlemen a weapon to use against the petitioners.'[79] (Compare with the multiple matters discussed at some unofficial locality meetings.) The limit of two hundred members in each society was imposed so that the secretary when submitting the petition could affirm that he vouched for the signatories,

[75] LoPatin, *Political Unions*, pp. 126-8.
[76] *Trades Newspaper*, 10 Sept. 1826, 28 Oct., 11 Nov. 1827, *Morning Chronicle*, 23 Feb., 30 June 1827, 9 May 1829; *Liverpool Mercury*, 19 Dec. 1828.
[77] *Morning Post*, 23 Feb. 1827; *Weekly Free Press*, 28 Feb., 14 Mar. 1829.
[78] *Morning Chronicle*, 9 May 1829.
[79] *Trades Newspaper*, 20 Aug. 1826.

addressing the objections of parliamentarians who queried the signatories of some petitions. Each group was allocated a number, so that the extent of opposition to the corn law was available in easily calculable numbers.[80] None of this had much effect, but these goals would not have been achievable using other methods of organising.

Societies provided opportunities to educate others about their cause and build wider support. With their purposes embedded in their names, their causes were publicised whenever the societies were mentioned. Parliamentary coverage in the newspapers tended, for example, to report petitions submitted by ABTA using the society's full title. The term 'bread tax' itself encapsulated a controversial argument against the law (which was not a tax) and put the spotlight on the government's choice not to repeal it.[81] The Sheffield Mechanics Anti-Bread Tax Society wrote and published *The Ranter*, complete with pages of footnotes, that provided detailed arguments and evidence that supported their cause.[82]

That meetings were for members meant that those who opposed a society's aims could be excluded and there was no obligation to tolerate opposing views. This quality proved useful to those who opposed Catholic emancipation. In 1825, some anti-Catholic meetings had been criticised and even disrupted for holding what were described as public meetings but open only to inhabitants who agreed with the organisers and then presenting the resulting views as those of the town.[83] The establishment of Brunswick Clubs in 1828 (some of which were re-named Anti-Catholic Associations) provided an identity for anti-Catholic campaigners which allowed them to hold closed meetings.[84] In another variation on the theme, some of the smaller Political Unions developed into groups whose members

[80] *Trades Newspaper*, 20 Aug., 10 Sept., 22 Oct. 1826.
[81] *Morning Chronicle*, 11 Mar. 1826, 23 Feb. 30 June 1827; *Morning* Post, 23 Feb. 1827, 9 May 1829; Liverpool *Mercury*, 19 Dec. 1828; *Northampton Mercury*, 29 Dec.1827.
[82] Sheffield Mechanics' Anti-Bread Tax Society, *The Ranter* (Sheffield, 1830).
[83] See chapter 6.2.2.
[84] *Manchester Courier*, 18 Oct. 1828; *Bolton Chronicle*, 22 Nov. 1828; Masaki, 'Tory Associational Culture'; Tilly, *Popular Contention*, pp. 311-2.

formed common opinions on a range of issues. That of Bethnal Green, for example, campaigned not just about parliamentary reform but also about taxes on newspapers, the King of Hanover and the flogging of Private Somerville.[85]

9.3.2 Debating political economy.

A speaker at one Manchester meeting of the working classes about the corn law said, 'our sufferings have made us into politicians and induced us to study political economy in order that we might find the real cause of them' (a nice reference to the meaning of politician as someone interested in politics).[86] The 1820s debates about the corn law raised complex questions in political economy: free trade, currency management, what impact did the law have on manufacturing, wages and poor relief? Who benefitted from the law, were they necessary, should they be amended or completely repealed? How should food supplies be managed? Agitation about the corn law spurred discussions about the many interconnected elements. The increasing adoption of free-trade principles by parliamentarians made them oppose forms of trade regulation that had been more widely accepted in the eighteenth century. Put together with hard experience of trade stagnation and structural shifts in the organisation of work, by the 1820s it was widely appreciated that economic theory affected people's day-to-day lives. This is not to say that economic principles were not referred to earlier; rather that they became more common and were more frequently employed to justify campaigning about public matters.

Much of this explosion in the study of political economy occurred in the context of debating and discussion groups, returning us to the themes of the first case study.[87] The

[85] *CJ*, vol.87 (1832), pp. 472, 527, 590.
[86] *Manchester Gazette*, 28 Oct. 1826.
[87] Wahrman, *Imagining*, pp. 230-5; Noel W. Thompson, *The People's Science: the Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis 1816-34* (Cambridge, 1984), chapters 1 and 2; Claeys, 'Political Economy'.

Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society and the London Philomathic Society, both of which generally avoided topics of current controversy, debated issues raised by the corn law as, more predictably, did the re-formed British Forum, now in Clerkenwell.[88] As ever the boundary between print and orality was permeable. That Samuel Bailey thought there was a market for his *Questions in Political Economy* which provided topics for debate, together with arguments and reading suggestions, speaks to the popularity of the subject.[89] T.P. Thompson's *Anti-Corn Law Catechism* (1827), much re-printed and a staple in the campaign that re-ignited in the late 1830s, could be read alone but was useful in group discussions where the answers could be further explored.[90] The fifty pages of questions roamed the world from the Baltic, via Egypt to the Pitcairn Islands, referencing low wages, trade stagnation, supply and demand, imports and exports, free trade policies, capital supply, taxation, rent levels and agricultural practices. Its subject may have been the corn law, but its primary lesson was that in this complex, trading world, a wide range of issues were interconnected. References to French shoes and Russian rope in the trades' anti-corn law petitions show this was understood by working people.

Noel Thompson argued that key texts produced between 1824 and 1827 emphasised 'the need for the working classes to confront and defeat the political economists with the concepts, constructs and analytical tools of political economy.'[91] The *Trades Newspaper* published lengthy extracts from Hodgskin's *Labour Defended Against the Claims of Capital,* but also suggested that shops should club together to buy McCulloch's *Circumstances which Determine the Rate of Wages* for its analysis of 'the cause of rent, the

[88] *Absalom Watkin, Extracts from his Journal, 1814-1856*, ed. A.E. Watkin (London, 1920), p. 108; Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism*, p. 89; *The Philomathic Journal and Literary Review* (London, 1825), p. 383; *The Hoxton Sausage and Jerry-Wags Journal* (London, 1826), No.4, p. 30.
[89] Bailey, *Questions in Political Economy*.
[90] T.P. Thompson, *Catechism on the Corn Laws* (London, 1827); Michael J. Turner, *Independent Radicalism in Early Victorian Britain* (London, 2004).
[91] Thompson, *People's Science*, p. 12.

operation of the corn law, the principles of population, the accumulation of capital'.[92] The *Weekly Free Press* offered complimentary copies to any reading society.[93] A working-class take on political economy was developed at innumerable reading and discussion groups, post-business discussions at friendly societies, houses of call and Mechanics Institutes. Other opportunities to learn about political economy included Owenism and the co-operative movement which took off in the late 1820s.[94]

Political economy provided concepts and language that allowed apparently disparate matters to be connected, thus legitimising the engagement of working people with a range of general, public matters. During a period of distress in 1816 the Bolton weavers had processed through the town, enacting a demonstration against charity soup using the effigy of an old soldier. A dislike of charity was a recurring theme of the reform meetings of the 1810s, but the arguments advanced focused on high taxation, the unfairness of the corn law and that working men should be able to support their families by their labour.[95] In 1829 and another period of distress, a Bolton 'public meeting of the working classes' (called using the new method of advertised meetings developed in the context of anti-corn law campaigning) was primarily about boycotting milk and butter because of their high prices, but also discussed wage levels, agricultural policy (including the corn law) and restrictions on international trade.[96] Complex arguments that British poverty was connected to import tariffs in America and the monopoly of trade with China were expected to be understood in

[92] *Trades Newspaper*, 21, 28 Aug., 4 Sept. 1825, 14 May 1826; Thomas Hodgskin, *Labour Defended Against the Claims of* Capitalism (London, 1825); J. R. McCulloch, *An Essay on the Circumstances which Determine the Rate of Wages…of the Labouring Classes* (Edinburgh, 1826).
[93] *Weekly Free Press*, 28 Feb. 1829.
[94] See chapter 4.5; *Republican*, 4 Aug. 1826; *Trades Newspaper*, 4 Sept. 1825; Kirby and Musson, *Voice of the People*, pp. 320-21; *London Cooperative Magazine*, 1826 and 1827; *Manchester Mercury*, 29 Sept. 1829; Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium: from Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 30-66.
[95] TNA, HO 42/153/504, 14 Sept. 1816, letter from Fletcher; *Cowdroy's Manchester Gazette*, 16, 29 Sept. 1816.
[96] *Bolton Chronicle*, 4 July 1829.

a meeting of working people about the price of butter. From the 1820s onwards familiarity with political economy underpinned much public discussion and widened the range of matters with which the public believed it was entitled to engage.

9.4 Conclusion.

This 1820s agitation about the corn law has received little historiographical attention, largely overshadowed by the later campaign. It does, however, provide a good basis for examining how people organised at the end of the period studied here. That the arguments advanced from meetings varied so much in ways that can be connected to (on the one hand) the identity of those making the representations and (on the other hand) the form of their meeting underlines the importance of changes in how meetings could be called and who by. Experiments in methods of organising continued to be made in a measured fashion. The opinions being expressed about the corn law in the 1820s were markedly more varied than those in the 1810s, a development shaped both by the more complex landscape of opportunities and by greater awareness of the principles of political economy. There were now choices to be made about who to mobilise and how. Activists who arranged meetings and determined agendas had a vital role. Nevertheless, that both the substance of resolutions and the language in which they were expressed were so tailored to those being mobilised suggests that proceedings at meetings were also important. Some organisers had aims wider than just changing the corn law and were interested in building groups that might in the future coalesce around a broader body of policy questions. The practices of organising were vibrant on the eve of the Reform Bill agitation.

10: Conclusion

In the summer of 2023, a conference at Durham University entitled '*Organise! Organise! Organise!*' explored why, how and to what ends people in Britain and Ireland organised for political purposes in the long nineteenth century and a special edition of *Parliamentary History* will, in 2025, publish papers from that conference.[1] That was only one manifestation of a developing body of research. *Organizing Democracy: Reflections on the Rise of Political Organization in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Henk te Velde and Maartje Janse, explored organising across Europe and was the product of another conference, '*Getting Organised*'.[2] Diego Palacios Cerezales' and Oriol Ljuán's collection *Popular Agency and Politicisation in Nineteenth Century Europe: Beyond the Vote* figures in a series of 'new social history of politics' that is 'uncovering the strategies of popular meetings and political organizations to influence the political system'.[3] As was noted in chapter 1 Huzzey, Miller and Navickas have all encouraged historians of nineteenth-century politics to study practice. By investigating the changing ways in which people were able to organise in England in the first three decades of the nineteenth century this thesis offers a contribution to the field. Developments in organisational practices since the late eighteenth century enabled different types of people to mobilise wider sections of society. We cannot fully understand extra-parliamentary politics of the period if we do not understand the challenges those organisers faced and how they sought to resolve them.

Central to my account and one of its more innovative features is that the political identities adopted when people organised mattered. While historians have paid some attention to this

[1] https://royalhistsoc.org/calendar/collective-action-associational-culture-and-the-politics-of-organisation (23 Aug. 2024).
[2] Velde and Janse (eds.), *Organizing Democracy*.
[3] Diego Palacios Cerezales and Oriol Ljuán (eds.), *Popular Agency and Politicisation in Nineteenth Century Europe: Beyond the Vote* (Cham, 2023).

issue for the eighteenth century, it remains largely unexplored for the nineteenth century though Civin's work on Liverpool and Miller's 2023 book both broach the topic.[4] The shift from the eighteenth-century view that voter (often encapsulated by phrases like the 'nobility, gentlemen and freeholders' or 'burgesses and freemen') was the appropriate public-interest identity, to its replacement by inhabitant was key to opening up opportunities to the wider extra-parliamentary nation. The significance of inhabitant as an organising identity was associated with what I have called locality meetings, which developed from inchoate beginnings in the eighteenth century to become the widely accepted form of the public meeting. The diversification from the mid 1820s of the identities adopted by those who wanted to express opinions in the public interest further expanded the opportunities to campaign. People moved between different identities, adopting the one judged most suitable to the cause and the arguments they wanted to advance. Analysing the methods of organising provides a framework to pull together work that has focused on petitioning, on specific subjects of agitation and by groups of different social status and allows us to appreciate the broad conventions within which most extra-parliamentary activity of the period occurred.[5] It also highlights the extent to which individual campaigns relied upon a wider nexus of activity and the importance of the cross-fertilization of behaviours — for example, the abolition campaign's influence on the practices of organisation more generally.

Changes in how people organised cannot be fully understood by investigating one social group in isolation. A substantial body of work addresses the efforts of working people to

[4] Phillips, 'Popular Politics'; Loft, 'Petitioning and Petitioners'; Civin, 'Slaves, Sati'; Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, chapter 5.
[5] For example, Fraser, 'Public Petitioning'; Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery*; LoPatin, *Political Unions*; Morris, *Class, Sect and Party*; Lewis, *Middlemost and the Milltowns*; Turner, *Reform and Respectability*; see also note 6 below.

campaign in this period and the difficulties they experienced.[6] Little of what is written here directly challenges that work and much of it enhances the story those historians have told. However, class-specific accounts run the risk of missing what was common to the behaviour of a broader social spectrum (and therefore also what may have been particular to specific groups). For example, the loyalist elites of towns, commercial leaders and working people organised meetings that were convened in similar ways. In Manchester in 1814 an official public meeting of inhabitants was called to agree a 'dutiful and loyal address' to the Prince Regent about peace in Europe.[7] In 1816 meetings for parliamentary reform dominated by working people were held across the region; that in Bolton was identical in form to the loyal meeting about peace.[8] The Manchester meeting that resulted in the Peterloo massacre was an unofficial meeting called after the organisers' requisition was rejected; so too was the meeting which launched the BPU in 1830.[9]

Nevertheless, the constraints within which people operated varied and their social status was relevant to the difficulties they faced. Local elites with control of the levers of power could organise official meetings at will. Those meetings were widely accepted as lawful and appropriate and organisers had ready access to resources, be it space or finances, although in the London parishes there was some resistance to using the rates to campaign about causes unrelated to parish business. Even elite groups could find it difficult to mount arguments on unpopular positions — to support the King against Queen Caroline or to oppose Catholic Emancipation — because the requirement that public meetings be open meant they might find theirs was a minority view. Public-interest societies (like Brunswick

[6] For a sample see Thompson, *The Making*; Belchem, *Orator Hunt*; Glen, *Urban Workers*; Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*; Navickas, *Protest*; Poole, *Peterloo*.
[7] *Wheelers Manchester Chronicle* 25 June 1814.
[8] TNA, HO 42/153/496, Bill Post, 25 Sept. 1816.
[9] Poole, *Peterloo*, pp. 253-259; LoPatin, *Political Unions*, p. 28.

Clubs) where attendance could be restricted to those who supported the cause provided a means of bypassing these difficulties and mobilising a particular point of view.

Organisers hailing from the middle classes had gained confidence about the legality of unofficial meetings by the early 1820s. Resources might be an issue but their continued complaints about the failure to accept requisitions were also, in part, a way of articulating a story about ongoing struggles for local power. As we saw in chapter 9, unofficial meetings had the advantage of giving organisers greater freedom to shape agendas, in turn allowing wider coalitions of support to be developed. By the mid 1820s that flexibility might sometimes be preferred to official meetings.

Issues of legality and legitimacy were more complex for working people. That they felt secure in the legitimacy of public meetings is demonstrated by their creation of the new form of advertised meetings for the working classes. Yet outdoor meetings of working people on any scale were vulnerable to the new offence of unlawful assembly. Obtaining appropriate resources was a significant problem. Legal restrictions continued to affect the trades' engagements with wider causes. Efforts to organise politically using delegates or branch structures also remained unlawful.

The depth and breadth of the extra-parliamentary nation's organisational skills and tools by the 1820s demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how people could and should be mobilised to express their opinions. The historiographical focus on causes, especially parliamentary reform, presents an intermittent picture of extra-parliamentary activity and the 1820s as a quiet decade.[10] That apparent quietude raises the question of how the campaign for parliamentary reform in the early 1830s erupted in such vigorous and

[10] Thompson, *The Making*, p. 781 does so explicitly; Navickas, *Protest*.

extensive form.[11] By overlooking the processes of organising we fail to understand the broader context and the longer-term changes that paved the way.

The extended political activity of these decades was underpinned by a widely practised habit of association. Associational activities became more varied and could be accessed by a wider range of people than had been the case even in the later eighteenth century. Campaigning and even some non-campaigning bodies that fall outside the definition of political used here (for example, the Bible Society and various societies that can be loosely termed philanthropic) could be found across the nation and the scope of their concerns ranged widely, engaging different sorts. As a result, it became more common to have personal experience both of organised activity and of organising that activity. Newspapers frequently reported societies' activities with the consequence that even non-participants could read of approaches that might be emulated or adapted.

Being alert to the terminology that organisers employed enhances our understanding of what people were doing and how they understood their activities. Changes in the meaning of 'politics' and especially 'public' have been explored with public meeting, public opinion and public speaking all emerging as key terms in the period. The meaning attached to the term public meeting, say, gradually accrued from the later eighteenth century, reflecting new practices in holding meetings and in turn both shaping subsequent practice and acquiring rhetorical significance. Language and experience cannot be usefully separated.[12] Other changes in language noted here were less consequential. Describing subsidiary organisations as branches simply involved the application of a familiar word (derived, it is suggested, from branch banking) to a new form.[13] Noticing that

[11] LoPatin, *Political Unions*; Derek Fraser, 'The Agitation for Parliamentary Reform', in J.T. Ward, (ed.), *Popular Movements, c. 1830-1850* (London, 1970), pp. 31-53.
[12] Contra linguistic turn, exemplified by Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*.
[13] Allpress, *British Philanthropy*, pp. 88-100.

contemporaries had to find new terminology draws our attention to the novelty of what they were doing.

This thesis does not simply fill a gap between existing bodies of work — pre 1800 and post 1830. By tracing the emergence of new approaches, it suggests new questions that can be put to the periods before and after. The rise of the vocabulary of the 'meeting' through the eighteenth century is outlined here in chapter 1 but this development, not previously noted, could be further investigated. That parliament was aware of a shift is indicated by the focus of repressive legislation, which moved from Tumultuous Petitioning in 1661 to Seditious Meetings in 1795, but much remains unclear about this evolution, except insofar as it has been addressed by Huzzey in his exploration of requisitions.[14] The nineteenth-century framing of representations made by groups with general identities as being in the national interest does not appear to have been the early eighteenth-century practice. In that period groups seemed to base their right to comment not just on their identity but also the subject-matter. Addresses to Queen Anne in 1710 emphasised support for the succession plan and the established church, while Wilkite petitions in 1769 asserted the rights of voters.[15] Probably a combination of changes in both political identities and the nature of the causes led to the adoption of national-interest arguments, but this needs to be traced through the eighteenth century, especially the later eighteenth century.

The early decades of the nineteenth century were probably exceptional in terms of the great care organisers took in terms of how they proceeded to arrange meetings. Their efforts in this period provided a bridge between the more limited activism of the later eighteenth century and the extensive extra-parliamentary engagements evident by the end of the period studied. We can sense campaigners proceeding step by step, pushing in a

[14] 13 Car. II, c. 4; 36 Geo. III, c. 8; Huzzey, 'Public Meetings'.
[15] *Collection of Addresses*; Rudé, *Wilkes*, chapter 7.

measured fashion at the boundaries of how meetings could be organised and by whom. As the modes of organising became increasingly accepted, there was less concern to underline the legitimacy of those activities. Requisitions continued to be submitted even in the expectation of rejection in the late 1830s, before fading away in the 1850s. Local authorities continued to deny consent to or disperse some Chartist meetings and to bring prosecutions against their leaders.[16] Nevertheless, public political meetings arranged by a broad range of people were commonplace.

The ambitions of organisers and the challenges they faced continued to change in the period after that studied here. Work on the anti-corn law campaign and Chartism provides information about methods of organising much of which is incidental to accounts about other matters, with Paul Pickering's and Alex Tyrrell's study of the Anti-Corn Law League unusual for the extent of its discussion of organisation.[17] Eileen Yeo argued that Chartists should be seen as 'practical democrats and movement builders who tried to work within formidable difficulties'.[18] Her suggestion of investigating practice was not, however, pursued — probably because her piece appeared in the same volume as 'The Language of Chartism' by Stedman Jones.[19] There are obvious dangers in attempting to extrapolate general patterns of behaviour from a consideration of only one or two campaigns, however prominent those campaigns were in their day. Nevertheless, there are clear indications of changes in practice. Both the Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League created national movements. What problems did these create and how and to what extent were they resolved? What if anything did their practices owe to less directly political groups, such as schools societies or temperance campaigners? Another area of change is in political

[16] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings'; Chase, *Chartism*.
[17] Pickering and Tyrrell, *People's Bread*.
[18] Yeo, 'Some Practices and Problems', p. 245.
[19] Stedman Jones, 'The Language of Chartism'.

identities. Some Dissenters campaigned as such against the corn laws.[20] Did the breadth of support for that campaign offer Dissenters a way of extending their political activities or were they already engaging as Dissenters with a wider range of causes? Were the representations they made in any way distinctive or connected to their identity? Did identities more generally continue to shape the arguments advanced? Chartists submitted national petitions to Parliament with millions of signatures expressed to be 'from the undersigned people of the United Kingdom'— another petitioning identity.[21] Within those petitions, it was possible to connect numbers of signatures to localities: they were both local and national. What was the relationship between these monster petitions and the locality as an organisational matrix? Did the balance alter between organisation by societies and through locality meetings? What influence did these two movements have on each other and on other campaigns? An investigation of the practices of organising in the 1830s and 1840s would no doubt reveal other themes. We can only fully understand the challenges and opportunities that faced people wanting to express their opinions to parliament and the nation by taking account of the practices of organisation.

[20] *PP*, (1842) 563, 'Corn Laws: a Return of the Number of Petitions… for Repeal of the Corn Laws…'; Miller, *Nation of Petitioners*, pp. 142-7; Miller, 'Popular Petitioning', pp. 906-7; Pickering and Tyrrell, *People's Bread*, chapter 5.
[21] *The Times*, 3 Mary 1842; Paul Pickering, 'And Your Petitioners &c': Chartist Petitioning in Popular Politics' 1838-1848', *English Historical Review*, 116 (2001), pp, 368-388. Chase, *Chartism*, pp. 79-81, 201-207.

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A.3: Rev. William Hay scrapbook, 1816 - 1817

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B.9.41:Francis Phillips scrapbook

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(b) Manchester Archive and Local History

BR f 942.72 S176: volume of broadsides

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(c) Working Class Movement Library

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CJ, 43 (1788), pp. 220, 243, 250

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(b) Reports from Parliamentary Committees:

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57 Geo. III, c. 19 – Seditious Meetings Act 1817

58 Geo. III, c. 69 – Sturges Bourne Vestries Act 1818

60 Geo. III & 1 Geo. IV, c. 6 – Seditious Meetings Act 1819

4 Geo. IV, c. 34 – Master and Servants Act 1823

5 Geo. IV, c. 95 – Combination Act 1824

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2 Will. IV, c. 45, – The Representation of the People Act 1832

2 & 3 Will. IV, c. 64 – Parliamentary Boundaries Act 1832

(e) Statutes – local

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Old Street: 48 Geo. III, c. 97

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Bolton Chronicle (1825 - 1832)

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(b) Items in the following newspapers were identified by searches in the electronic databases:
Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Collection
https://www.gale.com/intl/c/17th-and-18th-century-burney-newspapers-collection

British Library Newspapers, Parts I-V (1732-1950)
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The Times Digital Archive, 1785-2019
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(i) pre-1800 only:

Chester Chronicle

The Courier

Daily Courant

Felix Farley Bristol Journal

The Gazeteer

General Advertiser

General Evening Post

Hampshire Chronicle

Hereford Journal

Lloyd's Evening Post

London Chronicle

London Courant

London Evening Post

Middlesex Journal

Morning Herald

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Public Advertiser

Sheffield Register
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Stamford Mercury
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The following newspapers were major sources:
Cobbett's Political Register
Leeds Intelligencer
Liverpool Mercury
Manchester Mercury
Morning Chronicle
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The following were consulted occasionally:
Bell's Weekly Messenger
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