

The Petition as a Recruitment Device: Evidence from the Abolitionists' Congressional Campaign

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ABSTRACT

The petition is one of the most consequential institutions of republican government. Yet considerable historical evidence suggests that petitions are routinely ignored by the legislatures and executives who receive them, raising the question of why petitioning flourishes when the credibility and authority of the petition is often minimal. In this speculative essay I interpret the petition as the historical solution to a recruitment problem faced by activists building new political organizations in network-rich but information-poor environments. Essentially, the list of signatories accompanying a petition is a rich political resource. For the recruiter, the petition's signatory list (1) identifies individuals sympathetic to its prayer, (2) locates those individuals (implicitly or explicitly) in a social structure, and (3) fosters new networks in the process of gathering signatures. For the citizen, the list indicates who and how many have assented to the petition's prayer. I assess this account of the petition in an analysis of a sample of 3,915 antislavery petitions to the House of Representatives from the 25th Congress (1837-1839). Several stylized features of these petitions – repeat signatories, the abundance of non-voting signatories, the preponderance of door-to-door canvassing, copied signatures, and the transmission of petitions to legislators out of the petitioners' district – cohere roughly with a mobilizing interpretation. I also present preliminary evidence that the cross-county distribution of 1830s petitions from New York anticipates (1) the growth of American Anti-Slavery Society chapters and (2) antislavery party voting in the 1840s in a way that other variables cannot. The essay concludes that the abolitionists' petition drive was as much a method of mobilization as an expression of public sentiment. My interpretation suggests that the most important readers of a petition are its signatories, and raises the possibility that the petition can be politically consequential even when it is known to be ignored by its intended recipient.

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The petition stands as one of the most common and momentous institutions in the history of republican government. Some of the most consequential documents in the political development of European-American democracy have taken the form of petitions – the petitions of nobles to King John in 1214 that engendered the Magna Charta, the celebrated “petitions of right” to the kings of Europe (including the 1628 Petition of Right), mass petitions during the English, French and 1848 Revolutions, and the Americans’ Declaration of Independence, among others. In the United States, circulated petitions were staple features of the most influential political movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – anti-Sabbatarianism, temperance and prohibitionism, abolitionism, several suffrage and civil rights movements (for the propertyless, for African-Americans, and for women), the populist and anti-monopoly campaigns, and numerous others. Even in the present age of mass electronic communications, printed and electronic petitions remain a common feature of mass and special-interest political participation.

For all of its popularity, however, the petition exhibits some curious properties. Evidence from a number of studies suggests that many if not most petitions are ignored by their intended recipients – kings, territorial governors, legislatures, courts. This is suggested in narratives of petitions to Roman emperors (Tauken 1998), petitions of right to the Crown (Foster 1977), antislavery petitions in the antebellum U.S. republic (Miller 1995), and recent mass petitions in Latin America (Weschler 1990). Further, there are formidable hurdles to the credibility of any petition – the forging of signatures, the very real possibility that signatories may not fully embrace the entire intent of the petition when signing it, and the tenuous link between petitioning, voting, and political authority. In short, we face at least three stingy puzzles when thinking about the petition in modern political society:

- Why does the petition flourish when the document is so often ignored, and *known* to be ignored, by its intended recipient?
- Why does the petition flourish when it is so difficult to establish credibility?
- After having gathered hundreds or thousands of signatures, why do petitioners seek even more signatories when the incremental force of yet another name is marginal?

When we conceive of petitions less as purely expressive documents and more as sponsored devices wedded to political mobilization, we arrive at one (by no means the only) answer to these questions.¹ The central claim of this essay is that petitions are usefully conceived as a technological device through which political actors recruit and mobilize citizens to their causes. My argument proceeds from two empirical features of petitions and the petitioning process.

The first is *sponsorship*. While historians, literary scholars, sociologists, and political scientists have long viewed petition signing as an act of individual expression (Blake et al, 1956; Helson et al, 1956;

¹ I restrict attention to *directed petitions* in this essay. Directed petitions address their prayer to a public authority or governing body; the directed petition has an identified recipient whose action or attention is sought. This excludes *plebiscitary petitions* whose intent is to gather a sufficient number of signatures to place a proposition or candidate upon a ballot. The most proximate literature in political science on petitions concerns exactly these documents and is focused primarily upon referenda. In the political development of petitions and political institutions, however, referenda-related petitions are of recent vintage. Petitions of grievance, petitions of right and petitions of memorial – all directed petitions sent to legislatures, monarchs, and territorial governors – have a much longer history.

Wilcox and Weinberg 1971; Zaret 2003; Zaeske 2003), the fact remains that many (perhaps most) petitions are created, subsidized and circulated by political organizations – reform societies, social movement organizations, splinter groups, guilds and unions, interest groups, political parties, and the like. Indeed, it seems that most individual petitioners affix their signatures to a petition not after having sought out the document, but *after having been requested to sign it*. In other words, it is not the signatory who seeks the petition, but the petition that seeks the signatory. No analysis of the modern petition is complete, I claim, without proper attention to those actors and organizations who sponsor petitions.^{2 3}

The second empirical feature is the petition's *structure*. The directed petition is a document with two features: (1) a *prayer* or *declaration* of principle, policy or grievance (usually addressed to a ruler or representative body), and (2) a *signatory list* comprising the written names of those who support the prayer. In the common understanding and academic study of petitions alike, it is the declaration that harvests virtually all consideration (e.g., Zaret 2003, Zaeske 2003). In this essay, I wish to draw attention to the *visual and informational structure* of the petition and the political significance of the signatory list.

For the list of names affixed to a petition is a rich political resource with at least three dimensions. First, the signatory list comprises a database of information about individual preferences, ideologies and beliefs. Beyond its ostensible function of signaling the ruler of broad support for the prayer, the signatory list also *identifies* and *locates* a set of individuals who are in agreement with the prayer. Crucial here is location; the petition either implicitly or explicitly identifies where in a complex social structure the individuals sympathetic to the prayer are to be found.

Second, the *process* of gathering the signatory list can congeal new networks (which are often affine to existing networks of affiliation), structures that must be negotiated by anyone constructing a new political organization.

Third, the petition provides the potential joiner or sympathizer with information and legitimacy. It offers a statement of goals and policy, and it demonstrates that there are (numerous and individually notable) others who also agree with the prayer. For uncertain or ambiguous individuals who may waver at the prospect of announcing their affiliation with a cause, the petition provides comfort and legitimacy.

² See Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) for a similar “demand-side” analysis of political participation. Burns, Schlozman and Verba (1995, 2001) and Verba, Schlozman and Burns (2003) examine the extent to which individuals are recruited into political participation, including whether or not they are asked to sign a petition. Neither these nor other analyses of which I am aware directly addresses or examines the strategic or network-based notion of petitioning.

³ It is all the more astonishing, then, that the history and politics of petitioning have received so little study, not only from political scientists but also from academic and popular historians. Aside from scattered essays on specific documents (London's “Monster Petition” of 1680, for example), and a sizable literature on the petition of right in early modern England, and survey analyses of petition-signing as a form of participation, there exists not a single summary monograph devoted to the general politics or history of petitioning in republican government. This assessment remains subject to revision. I have made it upon a relatively exhaustive search of over 1,000 titles from the Harvard Library catalog and a full search of all political science, history and sociology journals in the J-STOR database. I have also conducted a search on the Internet for resources and titles, which has essentially replicated my bibliographic searches elsewhere. I have also consulted with my colleague Sidney Verba, who has agreed with my assessment of the American politics literature on petitions. I assume all responsibility for this statement.

Petitions undoubtedly serve numerous purposes – individual expression, signifying commitment to a cause, signaling a ruler, establishing legitimacy, submitting matters for consideration to a legislature or ruler, elaborating grievances or principles of belief, and many others. In this essay I focus rather narrowly and analytically upon their organizational value. The essay is part of a larger project on petitioning and democratization in the United States, in which many of these other dimensions of petitioning will be explored.

At few junctures in the political history of any nation was petitioning more vibrant than during the abolitionist campaign of the antebellum U.S. republic. From the 23rd Congress (1833-1835) onwards, abolition societies flooded the national legislature, particularly the House of Representatives, with thousands of signed documents requesting the elimination of slavery in the District of Columbia, the prohibition of slavery in the territories and the refusal of statehood to any prospective state whose constitution permitted chattel slavery. The campaign was spurred to new intensity when the House, led by pro-slavery Southern Democrats, adopted the “Pinckney resolution” in 1836 and began to systematically table the petitions. This institutional procedure quickly acquired the title of “gag rule” and endured until 1844 when it was repealed (Miller 1995; Jenkins and Stewart 2003). Upon its adoption, a mass of petitions deluged the House. The campaign of the 25th Congress is therefore seen by some authors as an angry response to the Pinckney gag, a surly message to Southern legislators that popular voices would not be hushed by a tabling of petitions in the national legislature (Miller 1995).

In this paper I offer and entertain preliminary evidence for a different hypothesis: that the petition was a stunningly effective device for revealing citizens sympathetic to the abolitionist cause and aggregating these citizens into antislavery organizations. More specifically, the *process* of petitioning was one in which the circulation of petitions and the gathering of signatures both exploited existing social networks and constructed new ones. The campaign in the Twenty-Fifth Congress, while certainly stoked by resentment against the Pinckney gag, was in fact a much wider attempt to mobilize potential adherents into the antislavery cause. Indeed, I consider the possibilities that (1) the gag was in part adopted out of fear of the mobilizing force of the petition, and (2) that the expanded petition campaign might have occurred in the absence of the Pinckney gag.

I begin by fleshing out the historical context in which anti-slavery agitators worked in the 1830s – a party system that sidestepped slavery and an emerging pattern of political organization based upon patronage that made network recruitment critical for the success of any reform movement. Drawing upon scholarly literatures on political participation and network theory, I then characterize the dual challenge facing early antislavery entrepreneurs as that of search and network formation. I then retreat from narrative for a moment to consider the petition more generally as a device that can solve these problems. I then review the development of antislavery petitioning in the antebellum Republic and assess the theory.

I employ both symbolic and quantitative data to evaluate my theory of the circulated petition. My theory bears some specific implications for the form and rhetoric of the declaration, as well as the structure of the petition document. I discuss some stylized features of the petition more generally and the abolitionist petitions of the 1830s in particular, pausing to gesture to those facets of the circulated petition that cohere (albeit roughly) with a mobilizing interpretation.

My analysis of petitions differs from most contemporary analyses in political science in that I study the petitions themselves as opposed to survey responses in which respondents are asked whether or

not they have signed petitions generally or a specific petition in particular. I draw upon a new and partial data set of 3,915 petitions sent to the House of Representatives from 1833 to 1837. The data are part of an ongoing project, joint with Jeffrey Jenkins and Charles Stewart III, to collect a much larger sample of antislavery petitions to the House in the antebellum period.⁴

I use this data in three ways. First, I use them to offer some brute characterizations of the political and rhetorical composition of antislavery petitions and the demographic characteristics of their signatories. Second, I examine those features of the petitions that were associated with a longer signatory list, conducting simple regressions of the number of signatories upon salient features of the petition. Finally, I aggregate these data by county for one crucial state – New York, where the Liberty Party campaign of James Birney in 1844 is commonly believed to have thrown the state and the general election to Democratic candidate James K. Polk – and assess whether the cross-county distribution of petitions from the late 1830s serves as a predictor of Liberty Party voting in the 1840s and the growth of antislavery organization in the late 1830s. The results, while undoubtedly limited by non-random assignment of petitions across counties, suggest a positive correlation, which may imply that petitioning was much more consistent with partisan political activity than historians of abolitionism and the antebellum republic have believed.

Strategy and Networks: A Prefatory Note on the Petition as an Institution

In some respects, I am offering a strategic interpretation of the petition and the petitioning process. The notion that a petition has strategic uses for organization building is consistent with rational political entrepreneurship, and I believe that such rationality in the use of the petitioning process ought to be a central feature of study.

There are, however, two features of my account that differentiate it from most rational choice analyses of institutions. First, my theory directly incorporates networks. In particular, my notion of the petition's power stems from an assumption that the building of political organizations is both constrained by and dependent upon social networks. The petition is particularly useful when it reveals not only the preferences but also the *social location* of individuals who consent to its declaration. For in building a political organization in an information-poor environment, it is crucial to identify *where* – where in a geographical grid, where in a church hierarchy, where in an economic class, where in a political association – sympathetic individuals are located. Political entrepreneurs, I shall claim, face the tricky task of “searching through networks” (Watts 2003; Watts, Dodds and Newman 2002). The petition provides one – by no means the only – solution to this problem.

A second feature of my account is the absence of any argument about design. In other words, while I claim that petitions can serve a function, I do not adopt the explicitly *functionalist* position that the petition was *designed* as a tool of mobilization. Indeed, to the extent that the European-American petitioning process was designed for any purpose, it was created to *limit* mobilization and establish constraints of credibility and volume upon expressions of grievance to monarchs and territorial rulers. Instead, I believe that the petition was historically appropriated by shrewd actors who

⁴ I emphasize again that in this paper, all responsibility for inferences and errors in using these data is mine alone. Our hope is to eventually collect data on all anti-slavery petitions in the antebellum period. Our short-term goal is to complete collection for the 25th Congress, which has the convenient and informative historical juxtaposition of falling after the Pinckney gag but before the formation of the Liberty Party.

learned of its potential to aggregate and mobilize citizens in their political causes. In this respect, my argument gestures as much to the unintended consequences of institutions as it points to their strategic use.

Search and Networks in the Early Abolition Campaign

In the immense literature on antislavery activity in the antebellum United States, scholars have disagreed on the essential nature of abolitionism in the 1830s and 1840s. Some scholars, connecting abolitionism to the Second Great Awakening and other moral reform movements such as anti-Sabbatarianism and temperance, see abolition as a crusade of religious conversion and spiritual expression (Stewart 1997). These scholars derive some comfort from the reluctance of many antislavery leaders, principally William Lloyd Garrison, to counsel antislavery activists to vote or to engage in party formation. Antislavery, they argue, was primarily a moral crusade, not a political one. Others see early antislavery organizations as politically minded reform movements that anticipated partisan activity (Sewell 1976). Still others see abolitionism as a radical splinter movement, wedded neither to evangelical revival nor to partisan politics (Kraditor 1979).

Whether antislavery is conceived as an ecumenical reform movement, a religiously motivated but politically disorganized activity, an emergent party, or something else, it is undoubted that early antislavery entrepreneurs wanted to build organizations and convert northern citizens to their cause. There were several issues at stake in the early campaign. The first, most clearly, was the effort to convince Northerners (and many white Southerners) that slavery was a moral evil and must be abolished. The second, and more problematic, was to convince antislavery sympathizers that the dominant alternative to chattel slavery was immediate and uncompensated emancipation. For throughout the early antislavery crusade, radical immediatists coexisted and fought with colonizers and conservatives over the best institutional alternative to slavery.

The dominant antislavery organization of the 1830s – the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) – was committed to one form of abolition: immediatism. In its effort to convert anti-slavery sympathizers to activists and members, the AASS confronted the limits of its approach to slavery. The uniqueness of its view rendered its organizational search problem even harder. Neither anti-Southern, nor anti-slaveholder nor anti-slavery sentiment implied an agreement with the immediatist program. To complicate matters, immediatists faced sometimes violent opposition from anti-abolitionist mobs composed of slavery sympathizers, conservatives and colonizers (Richards 1970).

The search problem faced by early abolitionists was all the more daunting because political and institutional circumstances effectively foreclosed many standard methods of recruitment. Recruiting through established party organizations was not an option, because party labels provided little if any information on anti-slavery ideology during the Jacksonian era (Aldrich 1995); there were numerous pro-slavery Whigs and anti-slavery Democrats in the North, and both parties endeavored to keep slavery off of the electoral and legislative agenda. Of course, third party labels might have provided such information, but slavery-focused third parties such as the Liberty Party and the Free Soil Party emerged after, not before, the critical mobilizations of the abolition campaign. So too, did splinter party factions in the states – the Massachusetts Conscience Whigs and the Barnburner Democrats of New York, for instance.

The construction of political organizations through networks was all the more important because mid-nineteenth century political parties depended crucially upon patronage and the networks of exchange and information that it created (Formisano, Aldrich 1995, James 2002). Political organizations of consequence, whether parties or factions or associations, organized through networks and relied upon these networks to aggregate and distribute resources, disperse information, and bring voters to polls. Unless antislavery activists could mobilize through reliable networks, their efforts would matter little in an environment dominated by patronage parties and organized associations. One of the chief challenges facing early antislavery activists, then, was locating those citizens and voters sympathetic to its cause, and creating new organizations from among these individuals.

Search and Synthesis in Network-Rich and Information-Poor Contexts

Consider, then, a stylized search problem faced by a political organization in a network-rich but information-poor environment.⁵ The political entrepreneur faces a population of N individuals, k of whom agree with the declaration of the organization. Individuals in the population are connected to each other by a web of social connections, a web that may be represented as an N by N affiliation matrix \mathbf{X} . (It is quite possible that to represent the social structure more accurately, the analyst would need more matrices, random affine transformations of the others, because resource exchange might accompany affiliation; see Padgett and Ansell 1993.) Assume in the best case that the organization knows k , e.g., that exactly 150 of 400 individuals in the population would join the organization if asked. The organization's search problem is still tricky, because the entrepreneur does not know which of N are sympathizers. The task facing the organization is then to identify and recruit, presumably at some minimum cost per person asked, the maximum number of sympathizers to the organization.⁶

Broadcast searches through a population, in which the only search strategy employed is the attempted recruitment of each and every individual in the set, are either inefficient or inefficacious. Theoretical research on search in networks (Radner 1993; Watts 2003; Watts, Newman 2002) suggests that pure strategies of random or exhaustive search over the population in a network wastes resources. Such a strategy is inefficient because all individuals in the population are targeted with equal probability if the entire population is searched one-by-one. This strategy can also be inefficacious because the attention process of individuals is limited: the targets of lobbying are more likely to remember and respond to a personal visit or supplication than a newspaper advertisement.

The organizer can do better if she can exploit the web of social connections linking various individuals as a way of targeting likely sympathizers in her canvassing effort. That matrix is unknown to the organizer and must be recovered through search.

In this context, the process of petition circulation can be seen as an institutional protocol – figuratively a series of if-then statements – whereby an agent (canvasser) searches through a population sequentially, by asking some smaller set of individuals whether or not they agree, then

⁵ This section of essay offers an intuitive representation of an unpublished and in-progress mathematical model I have developed elsewhere, tentatively entitled “Petition Protocols for Type Search in Random Networks.”

⁶ This is of course a stylized representation of the aims of a political organization, but I would note that the leaders of political organizations in their infancy are often more concerned with membership than are leaders of more established organizations. James Q. Wilson, *Political Organizations*, (Princeton, 1995).

asking each signatory for the names of those who would sign. Agreement with the declaration is a noisy but useful indicator of the probability with which the signatory will expend other energies on behalf of the organization (joining as a member, contributing money or other resources, canvassing, rallying, or perhaps voting).

In petitioning strategically in this way, the canvasser can be said to adopt either of two strategies. The first, described by the snowball sampling logic in the previous paragraph, I call *affiliate iteration*. In affiliate iteration the canvasser identifies “friends” of the petition’s prayer and then asks friends to name (likely friendly) affiliates.⁷ The resulting pattern of search is not unlike that of snowball sampling used by social psychologists and sociologists studying social networks (e.g., Laumann and Knoke 1987). The second is a form of exhaustive search that I call *grid search* (think “door-to-door” canvassing). In grid search the canvasser uses a pre-existing “grid” or map to search sequentially through the population, but does not update conditional probabilities using the results of search (that is, she does not consider the possibility that signatories might be able to identify other friends of the petition). It should be clear that under most conditions, using affiliate iteration outperforms grid search. In affiliate iteration the canvasser exploits the fact that friends of the prayer affiliate with other friends more often than they do with enemies.

Perhaps more counterintuitive is the fact that, for most networks in the social worlds confronted by political organizers, a pure affiliate iteration strategy is also suboptimal relative to one in which the canvasser “mixes” between affiliate iteration and grid search. The reason concerns the well-known redundancy property of affiliation and “strong tie” networks, a property of many social structures that sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) used to build an argument for “the strength of weak ties.” Put differently, if a friend’s friend is appreciably likely to be my friend, then affiliate iteration will eventually result in search that cycles back upon itself, producing no new information. For this reason, at least some degree of grid canvassing is necessary to cross cliques in a social structure.⁸

The petition having been completed, the sponsoring organization now has three resources. First, the petition lists individuals, implicitly differentiating those who agree with those who do not. Even in the absence of other information about the signatories, the size of this set is useful as an indicator

⁷ There is something of this narrative in William Lee Miller’s (somewhat anachronistic) account about the circulation of local petitions in the antebellum republic.

These were your neighbors who sought you out in your home or field or forest, behind your counter, at your desk, with your team – in a time more innocent than ours, before such canvassing was commonplace and at a time when a petition meant something....The woman who approached you with her petition in hand, at Wednesday night prayer meeting, or in your barbershop or at your door, would probably be somebody you knew, or somebody who knew somebody you knew.

Notice the affinity of pre-petition networks to post-petition networks here.

⁸ More technically, in a world where only affiliate iteration and grid canvassing are possible, consider a canvasser’s possible strategies \mathbf{d} as a member of the class $\Delta \in (0,1)$. Then any d_t is the probability (say) that the canvasser uses iterate affiliation at time t , and $1 - d_t$ is the probability of grid search. Represent the social matrix \mathbf{X} as the transition matrix of an embedded Markov chain (through which the searcher “transits” from one potential signatory to the next). Then it can be shown (Carpenter 2003) that for any “reducible” \mathbf{X} (in which all states of the chain do not “communicate”), $\mathbf{d}_t^* \in [0,1]$ which holds even if there are multiple optima.

of the breadth of support for the organization's cause. (Most abolitionist petitions in the National Archives appear to be accompanied by a statement offering a numerical sum of signatories.)

Second, by one of two mechanisms, the sponsoring organization has some information on the social location of sympathizers. The first mechanism depends upon the information carried in the signatory list. Consider first the case (common in petitions) that the signatory list contains names only, without other information. In small-world contexts where an individual is known by others in the community – and his domicile, personality, family, trade and other traits are readily identified upon hearing his name – the signature alone can reveal useful information about social location. This is particularly true for community elites or “local notables” whose names are likely to be more readily identifiable on a petition, and whose signatures may rest at the top of the signatory list as a signal to others who are asked to sign it.⁹ A second case is where an electronic or postal address, telephone number or other means of communication accompanies the signature.¹⁰

The second mechanism depends upon the canvasser and her local knowledge of the population. Just as important, the canvasser, who has approached individuals, now knows who has signed and where they are located (their domicile, their membership in a church). Armed with this knowledge, she can find and recruit these individuals. This local knowledge renders the canvasser a crucial agent in the political organization.

Third, the canvasser has created a new network of affiliation by virtue of having met and conversed with sympathizers and signatories. Of course the creation and structure of this network are not at all exogenous; the canvasser will have relied to some extent upon pre-existing social networks in gathering signatures. Petition-induced networks will generally represent affine (random) transformations of the matrix of connections by which the canvasser searched through the population in the first place.

The structure of the petition can often facilitate network-based search, because early signatures provide a signal of sorts to later signatories. Since names are placed upon a petition sequentially, many potential signatories may observe the list before deciding whether to affix their name to the document. Early signatories can lend local legitimacy to a petition (they can, of course, induce some individuals not to sign). One implication of this structural feature is that we might expect the earliest signatories to a document to be local notables whose identification with the declaration serves to popularize that statement and to reduce the risk perceived by potential signatories.

⁹ I thank Charles Stewart III for this point.

¹⁰ Many contemporary petitions request the signatory to list her or his postal or electronic address, telephone number(s), workplace or professional affiliation, organizational affiliation, and other locating information. The standard interpretation of this accompanying information is that it serves to establish the credibility of the signature and prevent fraud. This interpretation is undoubtedly correct, but does not capture the full value to the petitioning organization of such locating information. Perhaps readers will recognize something of the familiar in the following story. The author, a committed but untalented fly-fisherman, can recall signing a petition for a “clean the rivers” campaign in Michigan some four years ago. Within a week of having given his address, he was inundated by mail and solicitations from the same organization, as well as by the Sierra Club, Greenpeace and other associations to which he did not belong. Organizational use (and abuse) of this information has led some states to circumscribe the uses to which identifying information may be put. California, for instance, prohibits the use of signatures on plebiscitary petitions for uses other than the aggregation of registered voters to a threshold; California Electoral Code, Section 18650.

Legitimacy: The Petition's Value for the Potential Signatory

Another crucial dimension of petition's function is the value, comfort and space it provides to the signatory. Signatories are potential joiners of an organization, and they must consent to have their names appear on the petition. What value does the petition provide to the potential signatory?

The first is political information: the petition's prayer offers one or more expressions of policy or belief to which the organization is publicly committed. The petition's prayer may elaborate these in some detail. Upon reading the prayer, the potential signatory can say: "here is a principle or policy for which this Organization/Movement stands." In this sense, the petition is a forerunner of modern political advertising, which also broadcasts policy positions taken by parties and candidates.

Unlike much political advertising, however, the petition comes with a signatory list.¹¹ This points to the second, and perhaps more important service of the petition: the establishment of legitimacy. An organization's potential sympathizers may be ambiguous or uncertain about the organization's cause and the value of joining. By demonstrating that others, perhaps many others, support the petition's prayer, the petition can reduce the vulnerability felt by yet uncommitted sympathizers. The presence of "notable" signatories (either local notables or recognizable celebrities) can also give the potential joiner comfort. Sheer numbers and notable names may give comfort to potential signatory and may make joining easier.

Comfort in numbers matters because for the directed petition, the individual's signature is something of a public commitment to a policy position. This has advantages and disadvantages. Among the disadvantages are that the sympathizers of a movement or cause can be identified and signaled out by opponents for intimidation or violence (Zaeske 2003: 38; Weschler 1990). Among the benefits of this publicity is that the individual can declare her allegiance to a policy that, without having to marshal rhetorical talent or individual argumentation in doing so. But unlike the individual letter (Lee 2002), the petition presents a larger community of sympathizers, and unlike the individual letter, the petition is circulated or made publicly available. Hence signing a petition usually entails both greater publicity and greater "power in numbers" than does a letter-writing campaign.

The Petition before and during the American Antislavery Campaign

Petitions have a long history in world politics. Petitions have been a common method of presenting grievances to territorial rulers or legislatures, as well as a tool for the introduction of private bills. Petitions were commonly used in the Roman Republic, and evidence exists of their use in classical Athens and other city-states of antiquity. Institutional and procedural developments in late-medieval and early modern England were most influential for petitions in the United States. Petitions from the Commons to the Crown – often submitting private bills or listing grievances – were widespread in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. A favorable royal response to a Commons petition often yielded a new statute, and the petition's dominant use in this period was as a means of introducing or proposing legislation. As a fine study by Elizabeth Foster has shown, the terms private bill and petition were used synonymously well into the Stuart period. Most private bills introduced in the

¹¹ Some advertisements may convey endorsements by organizations or celebrities, but the directed petition differs from (most of) these in a crucial respect: the aggregation and listing of individual signatories, many of them unknown or unrecognizable to readers of the petition.

Commons assumed the petition form, as did many public bills. It was during the fifteenth century onwards that the petition and the private bill were gradually separated in concept and in practice, such that by the reigns of James I and Charles I they were distinct institutions. The full instantiation of this separation came in the 17th-century petition of right, including the celebrated 1628 Petition of Right to Charles I.

This separation of private bills from petitions at once belittled and exalted the petition. On one hand, once the petition was no longer tied so directly to the statutory process, a petition became (in the eyes of some magistrates, particularly Elizabeth I) a much less meaningful political instrument, an expression of sentiment at best orthogonal to the institutions of the realm. On the other hand, petitions qua private bills had long been ignored by the Crown. The notion, ever more common after the Stuart period, that the petition was more than simply a request for goods or redress of trivia gave petitions (especially the newer petitions of right) a more exalted status.

Whether understood as private requests or public declarations of rights, the English petition was generally accompanied by norms of deference to the crown (Foster 1974: 37-8; Zaret 2003, Chapter 8). Indeed, petitions and the petitioning process placed as many constraints upon the Commons as upon the king. The English petition channeled the demands of subjects into a supplication, one which was usually negligible by the magistrate. As Foster argues, the petition of right was designed as a compromise between radical expression of discontent and deference to regal authority; it was, in the eyes of Coke, a form of remonstrance fundamentally acceptable to the Crown, undertaken with the firm understanding that no part of its content limited the prerogative of the King.

It is not particularly surprising that American abolitionists relied upon petitions, given that British abolitionists had used them to great effect and given that so many strategies and tactics of American abolitionists were copied across the Atlantic. Also, petitioning was a common and highly legitimized form of political activity in the antebellum U.S. republic, more common in many contexts than the use of the franchise. Well after the rise of modern printing presses, most petitions of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to Crown and Commons were in manuscript form (Van Broekhoven 1994). Nor did the use of petitions as devices to introduce legislation disappear. Bailey (1979) documents the extensive influence of popular petitioning upon Burgesses legislation in colonial Virginia.

The AASS centered its early strategy upon the petition. Its very founding document – the “Declaration of Sentiments and Purposes” in 1833 – assumed the petition form, and William Lloyd Garrison bragged to colleagues in the movement that his “Declaration” had attracted forty more signatories than had Thomas Jefferson’s of four decades earlier (Mayer 1998). The Society’s first annual report called upon votaries of the new organization to petition Congress for the abolition of slavery and slavery-related institutions in various forms.¹²

There is some controversy over whether the petition campaign of the 25th Congress was spurred by the gag rule (as historian Dwight Dumond maintains) or whether the historical arrow is reversed. Whatever the case, the AASS was committed to an aggressive petitioning campaign well before

¹² *The Declaration of Sentiments and Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, American Anti-Slavery Society, 1835). See also *First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society: with the speeches delivered at the anniversary meeting, held in Chatham-Street Chapel, in the city of New-York, on the sixth of May, 1834*, (New York: Dorr and Butterfield, for the American Anti-Slavery Society, 1834), p. 33.

Pinkey gag. In addition, petitions were sent en masse to John Quincy Adams well before the gag rule's enactment.

A Blunt Summary of Abolitionist Petitions to Congress in the 1830s, with Features of the Petition Predicted by a Mobilization Perspective

Petitions are marked by structural as well as literary features, and this section I consider some common features of the antislavery petitions and show how some of the more noteworthy or surprising features are consistent with the "tool of mobilization" interpretation I offer here. The mobilization theory of petitions suggests that the features of the petition will reflect its status as a network search mechanism, and that the circulation process of petitioning will be conducted in such a way as to maximize not only the number of signatories but the local knowledge and information that can be gleaned from their signatures and from the canvassing process.

It is worth considering an alternative, "stock" theory of the petition that can serve to highlight the distinctiveness of the mobilization perspective. The standard notion of petitions as an instrument of expression for grievances and policy coheres roughly with a signaling theory of political communication.¹³ Under this interpretation, the petition is a costly and informative signal of the breadth of public or district sentiment on a given issue. To render this alternative theory on a clearer basis, we might consider the stylized situation of an uncertain, reelection-oriented representative who faces an election with voters of unknown "type" (here, whether or not the voter subscribes to immediatism). An organizer in the district would like the legislator to think that a high fraction of his constituents are immediatists, whereas the organizer's opponent (a pro-slavery Whig or Democratic colonizer, for instance) would wish for the legislator to believe that the fraction of immediatists is low. Because any rhetorical characterization of the constituency opinion is "cheap," the immediatist organizer would like to show evidence of costly activity undertaken by immediatists in the district. The petition might accomplish this task in two ways, first by displaying the large number of sympathizers with the immediatist cause, and second (perhaps more important) by implicitly displaying the immense energy that immediatist activists have spent canvassing for names. It is, then, not simply the signing of a petition but the aggressive circulation of petitions by activists that functions as a signal of constituent "type" to the uncertain legislator.

Both mobilization and signaling theories of the petition, then, predict that organizers would wish to maximize the number of signatories. The signaling theory predicts that petitions will be structured in such a way as to express costly (informative) activity on the part of activists and signatories. An important feature of the signaling petition, therefore, is its credibility; to what extent does the petition induce the legislator to change his beliefs about the type of his constituents? (If the legislator already believed that most of his constituency was immediatist, then there would be little point in mass petitioning, at least from the signaling perspective.) That is, to what extent does it allow the legislator to differentiate between casual antislavery sentiment and genuine immediatist ideology?

Figures 1, 2 and 3 offer visual samples of the petitions contained in legislative records of the National Archives. These and all petitions studied for this paper are taken from a partial (non-random) sample collected from the Records of the House of Representatives (Record Group 233) of

¹³ Lohmann (1992) provides a generalization of the sort of theory I have in mind.

the National Archives. The following features of these petitions, some of which are consistent with both mobilization and signaling theories, emerge from a cursory examination of this sample.

1. *Organizational Sponsorship and Printed Declarations.* In at least two ways, the deluge of antislavery petitions in the 1830s was explicitly sponsored, coordinated and subsidized by national, state and local anti-slavery societies (Zaret 2003: 6). First, national anti-slavery societies and periodicals circulated printed declarations that differed little from petition to petition. Canvassers could then cut out these forms, attach a blank piece of paper, and circulate the combination as a petition. Because access to low-cost printing and copying was not widespread, this was an indirect but substantial subsidy of the abolitionist petition campaign. Second, abolitionist societies employed paid signature-gatherers throughout the early 1830s, although this practice gave way to relying upon unpaid women canvassers.

It is useful to compare the Americans' reliance upon printed declarations with the prevalence of handwritten declarations in the English abolition campaign just years earlier. The late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries witnessed the transformation of the petition form. Well after the printing press was in common use for pamphleteering, newsprint and advertising, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Commons petitions remained handwritten. Exactly why the manuscript form remained predominant when alternative and cheaper technology was available for the mass production of petition forms is unclear. Yet from the standpoint of credibility, the manuscript form established credibility and costliness.

It is all the more interesting, then, that American abolitionists departed from their British counterparts and resorted to circulation of pre-printed declarations. From a signaling point of view, this represents a decline in the cost and credibility of the petition. Indeed, many anti-abolitionist legislators decried the mass production of petitions. Moreover, from the expressive account of petitioning, it is noteworthy that many of the prayers to which signatories attached their names were very short, with little in the way of rhetoric. From a mobilization perspective, however, there was only a gain in efficiency from the move to mass-produced petitions. The object was to obtain signatures, locating information, and build new affiliation networks. The transformation of petitions from handwritten to printed and mass-produced was orthogonal to this motive.¹⁴

2. *Most antislavery petitions were not sent to the member from the district where they were signed.* Instead, they were sent to members from other district and indeed other states, such as John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts or William Slade of Vermont. To get a lower bound estimate on the fraction of petitions sent out of district, I examine only those petitions from New York for which the intended recipient could be identified ($N = 896$ petitions), and then compute the percentage of this sample that was transmitted to members not of the New York congressional delegation. For the sample here, this is an astonishing 58.9 percent, or 528 of the 896 New York petitions.

The mobilization perspective makes little of this, beyond the fact that if signatories knew the petition was being sent to Adams (a former President of the United States), it may have given the petition more legitimacy. Yet this pattern is decidedly inconsistent with the signaling perspective, which would predict that constituents would send petitions to the members of their district.

¹⁴ There is another testable proposition from the mobilization account which would require more (and different) data to assess. If some petitions are signaling devices and others are mobilization devices, then we should expect to see the manuscript form prevail among signaling devices and the mass-produced form prevail among mobilizing petitions.

3. *The abundance of copied signatures in identical handwriting* A number of the petitions in the National Archives contain manifold signatures written in the same hand. Figures 4 and 5 offer examples. It is likely that the signatures were recorded by the canvasser of the petition. To get a sense of raw magnitude of such signature copying, we coded each petition with a blunt indicator for whether there were observed five or more signatures on the petition that were (in the reader's judgment) clearly in the same written hand. For the larger sample, this designation applied to 34 percent (896) of the approximately 2,700 petitions for which this information was coded. For the New York sample, the fraction is 46 percent. In some cases, very long petitions with hundreds of signatories had identical handwriting for all of the signatures. For instance, a January 8, 1839 petition of women from Amherst, Massachusetts praying against the annexation of Florida from had 280 names copied in identical hand (RG 233; HR 25A-H1.8, Folder 25, petition date January 8, 1839). Just more than a month later, women from Amherst submitted another petition, this one with 462 identically scribed signatures, calling for the repeal of the gag rule ((RG 233; HR 25A-H1.7, Folder 3, petition date February 14, 1839).

It is possible, though unlikely, that such petitions were fraudulent, that is, that the individuals whose names are listed upon these documents did not intend to sign the petition and that their names were copied against their consent. If so, then neither a mobilization nor a signaling perspective will make much headway in analyzing such a petition. The fraudulent petition reveals poor information to the mobilizing organization, and lacks the credibility required of a signaling petition.

Suppose, however, that the petition is valid; all signatories consented to have their names written down by the canvasser. From the standpoint of signaling, this is still suspect, as the legislator would doubt the credibility [note occasional congressional complaints here]. From the standpoint of mobilization, however, there is nothing in principle wrong with copied signatures, *as long as the canvasser develops and retains local knowledge about the signatories*. The copied signatures function as a database of sympathizers – a written database on the document, and a networked database in the memory of the canvasser – regardless of who pens the names.

Whatever else it signifies, the abundance of copied signatures also poses problems for the purely expressive account of petitioning. If petition signing was an act of individual expression, why did those expressing their views decide not to sign their identities but have another person record their names?

4. *Repeat signatories across similar or identical declarations*. There is abundant evidence that many citizens signed more than one petition, and that in many cases they signed more than one petition with the same declaration (Magdol 1986: 246). In some cases, canvassers circulated several petitions simultaneously, asking potential signatories to pray for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, the denial of annexation to Texas, the abolition of the interstate slave trade,¹⁵ and the abolition of slavery in the territories.

¹⁵ In the literature on antislavery activity in the antebellum republic, it is sometimes inferred that an argument or petition to abolish the interstate slave trade was equivalent to an argument to abolish the entire institution of chattel slavery everywhere it existed. This is a common but substantial misreading. Petitioners who wanted Congress to abolish the interstate slave trade were invoking the powers of Congress to regulate commerce among the states, powers derived from Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution. Congress could regulate such commerce without directly taking Southern property in slaves. That is, the interstate slave trade could be abolished without interfering in intrastate slave trade or without emancipation of any kind. Indeed, petitions to abolish the interstate slave trade were implicitly deferential; like

From the standpoint of mobilization, the presentation of multiple petitions to a potential signatory is akin to requesting her to publicly reveal her beliefs in a series of issue-specific votes. Each petition is an implicit vote in a series of votes, and the signatory's choice to sign one sort of petition but not another reveals important information about her antislavery views.

5. *Growing size of signatory lists.* As rough evidence that the antislavery organizations were becoming more effective in canvassing, Barnes (1933: 266) reports that the average number of signatures per petition in his samples from 1836 to 1840 were as follows:

1836-37: 32 signatures per petition
 1837-38: 59 signatures per petition
 1838-39: 91 signatures per petition
 1839-40: 107 signatures per petition

If antislavery petitions were functioning as mobilizing instruments, aggregating signatories into antislavery organizations, then network contagion effects would generate a growth pattern like this one even if antislavery sentiment were not becoming more widespread. The contagion would proceed by dint of previous signatories (1) contacting new sympathizers and (2) signing new petitions themselves.

6. *Declining inclusiveness of declarations.* Antislavery petitions had numerous declarations, including those calling for the abolition of slavery in the District, abolition in the territories, prohibition of the interstate slave trade, rescinding of the gag rule and others. Some of these proposals attracted more support than others. Given a set of declarations, an organizer conducting a social search through networks would begin petitioning with the most inclusive and popular declaration of the set. This would identify the broadest set of individuals sympathetic to the aims of the organization. (It would also present the organization's aims in the most legitimate and positive light.) A mobilization perspective would therefore suggest that early petitions should bear less controversial declarations. As the movement gets organized, more controversial or selective petitions are circulated. This allows for more selective targeting once a "broad database" has been assembled.

The antislavery petitions cascading upon the House of Representatives were primarily concerned with abolition in the District of Columbia. Before the Pinckney gag rule was passed in 1836, Theodore Weld gave sixteen lectures to hundreds of enthusiastic antislavery women and men in Utica, New York. There followed a simultaneous organizing drive for the Utica Antislavery Society and petition drive to call for District abolition. More than 600 names were added to the Utica society's membership; more than 1,200 signed the petition. More generally, in the sample collected for this paper, 47% of the petitions called for abolition in the District. Of the set of possible declarations, abolition in the District was the least constraining position to which to offer consent. Abolition in the District left slavery in the Southern states, Southern states' rights, the interstate slave trade and slavery in the territories intact. In part for this reason, one might expect that petitions calling for District abolition may have garnered more signatures than petitions with other, more controversial, declarations. One test of this hypothesis appears in Table 3, where signatory aggregates are regressed upon petition characteristics. This analysis shows that in fact District

other antislavery arguments, they explicitly and implicitly acknowledged that Congress possessed no constitutional authority over property relations in the states (Dumond; Barnes 1933).

abolition generally garnered fewer signatures than did more controversial prayers. However, petitions sampled by Magdol from New York and Massachusetts show that, for petitions with different declarations submitted on the same day or week from Utica and Fall River, Massachusetts, District abolition garnered significantly more signatures than did protests against the gag rule, in some cases hundreds more (Magdol 1986: 166).

7. *Reliance upon door-to-door canvassing.* It is difficult to assay the extent of door-to-door canvassing versus other forms of petitioning during this period. From archival sources such as diaries and recorded notes, door-to-door canvassing appears to have been a frequent mode of petitioning, especially by women canvassers (Van Broekhoven 1994). Door-to-door canvassing is helpful from a mobilization perspective because it uncovers networks.¹⁶

8. *The mixture between canvassing and snowball circulation.* There two established methods of circulation for antislavery petitions: door-to-door canvassing (discussed previously) and circulation at church meetings and clerical conferences. Because “weak” network ties are redundant, a mixture between cross-network search (door-to-door canvassing) and search within networks (church circulation) was a way for antislavery organizers to cross social and kinship cliques.

9. *The preponderance of women (non-voting) signatories.* In part because women were able and energetic organizers, in part because women played an important role in the everyday life of antebellum Protestant churches, and in part because suffrage laws left women with no better political alternative than to petition, women were the predominant signatories to antislavery petitions (Stewart; Van Broekhoven 1994; Zaeske 2003). A crude lower bound on the number of women is possible by aggregating all of the names in women’s-only petitions, adding the female totals from separated-column petitions, and adding the number of identified women signatures. From the current (incomplete) sample, this produces an estimate of 54 percent.

10. *Canvassers became fundraisers and activists.* Although the appropriate evidence is difficult to aggregate for this point, anecdotal evidence points to numerous cases where women who were canvassers during the 25th Congress petitioning drive subsequently occupied important activist and fundraising roles in local antislavery organizations (Jeffrey, *Silent Army of Abolitionism*, Van Broekhoven, 2003).

11. *Retention of original petitions in organization’s possession, transmission of copies.* It was common for local antislavery societies to hand-copy the petition upon its completion and to forward only the copy to Congress. Evidence of this practice is at present only anecdotal, but it certainly coheres with the idea that organizations put the completed petition to organizational use.¹⁷

The Rhetorical and Structural Form of the Antislavery Petition

¹⁶ One way of testing for whether door-to-door canvassing was in operation would be to examine the sequence of names enrolled on a set of petitions from the same town and then merge this information with property records to see whether the sequence followed an observable topological grid. This may be possible with Magdol’s (1986) data from Lynn, Massachusetts and other northeastern cities, but I have yet to locate his data.

¹⁷ Petition of Inhabitants of Mentz, Cayuga County, New York, to William Slade, January 22, 1839; NA I, RG 233. “William Slade: Sir, Enclosed is a true copy (the original of which is in my possession) of Eighty petitioners praying for the abolition of slavery in the D.C. By presenting it, you will only render your name still more dear than ever to us.”

One advantage of focusing attention upon the sponsorship and use of petitions is that we can consider the thoughts and strategies that go into the design of the prayer. For most petitions, after all, the prayer is written *before* signatures are secured. What might a mobilization perspective suggest about this activity? And what evidence do we have from antebellum petitioning that sheds light upon rhetoric?

It is worth noting first for many antislavery petitions, there was little in the way of “rhetoric” at all. At times, the signatory list followed a threadbare sentence stating the proposition behind which the signatories had supposedly united. This was true for a great many petitions that carried hundreds and even thousands of signatures. Florid rhetoric, then, was by no means a necessary condition for the aggregation of numerous signatories.

A second consideration comes in the idea that the canvasser wants both to identify sympathizers but avoid antagonizing those with moderate or somewhat conservative views on the issue (VanBroekhoven 2003). The crucial readers of the petition in my account are its signatories. Not only must the prayer include language and policy positions to which many (all) of them can agree, it must have emotive and spiritual or cultural content with which signatories can feel comfortable. Hence not merely the phrasing of the prayer but its evoked symbols – religious concepts, national and ethnic idioms – must be given careful consideration.

I do not have sufficient evidence at this writing to assess whether such dictates (among others) were followed by petitioners. Instead, I resort to a review of some of the prayers in the sample collected for this paper, proceeding inductively.

The following petition declaration from the 24th Congress is exemplary of petitions calling for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. The petition begins with an air of deference, followed by a firm reminder of congressional obligations under the Constitution.

“TO THE HON. THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

YOUR PETITIONERS, inhabitants of the City of New York, beg leave to represent to your honorable body, that whatsoever views they may entertain of the evils of Slavery, as it exists in certain states of the Federal Union, they are fully aware that those evils are beyond the constitutional control of the Federal Government; and so far from soliciting your interposition for their removal, they would...

But if Congress are required by solemn obligations to abstain from the assumption of powers that have never granted to them, it will not be denied that they are imperatively called on, by the oaths they have taken, to exert the powers expressly delegated to them, in the manner and for the purposes demanded by the honor and welfare of the country, and the dictates of justice and humanity.

The petition continues by offering an appeal to the republican tradition, noting that the District of Columbia represents the entire Republic.

The People of the United States have seen fit to vest in Congress by the 1st Article of the Federal Constitution “exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever” over the District of Columbia. The power, thus possessed by Congress, over this District, although free from all constitutional restrictions, is nevertheless bounded by such limits as are imposed by the immutable laws of justice and morality, applied with a sound discretion and an honest intention. Your petitioners would

humbly represent that these laws, thus applied, forbid Congress to exercise their “exclusive legislation” TO PERPETUATE SLAVERY in the District placed under their control. The acts of Congress, passed for the government of the District, do in fact perpetuate a system at variance with the genius of republicanism, the principles of religion, and the maxims of political expediency. It would be derogatory to the American People, to suppose that it is their wish, that the seat of their national government, the capital of their great and happy Republic, should forever be dishonored by a system reprobated by the whole civilized world, and admitted by all among ourselves to be wrong in the abstract. Yet it is obvious that this stain on our national escutcheon can never be effaced while existing laws relative to Slavery in the District of Columbia, continue in force.

The petition concludes with a call for immediate action.

But if slavery is ever to cease in the District, your Petitioners would respectfully ask, at what more favorable period than the present, can measures be taken for its abolition? The [small number of slaves] now in the District, preclude all reasonable apprehension of danger from their liberation; or should such apprehension exist, it will not be diminished by postponing their emancipation till their numbers are greatly augmented.

Your Petitioners refrain from pointing out the mode in which a measure, which they regard as due to the rights of humanity, the obligations of religion, and the character of the country, might be safely accomplished; but they do most earnestly and respectfully entreat your Honorable Body to pass, without delay, such laws as to your wisdom shall seem right and proper, for the final abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia.

And your Petitioners, &c.

[followed by signatories]

In addition to republicanism, a second trope dominant in the petitions of the time was deference to antebellum cultural norms, particularly among women petitioners. The following declaration, taken from a form petition, shows that female petitioners were clearly aware of gender categories in the early Republic that mapped gender upon to the public/private distinction (Cott 1977).

“TO THE HONORABLE THE SENATE AND THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:

The petition of the undersigned ladies of _____ humbly sheweth,

That your petitioners, aware that scenes of party and political strife are not the field to which a kind and wise Providence has assigned them, would not appear thus publicly, in a way which, to some, may seem a departure from their place, did not the peculiar nature of the case demand it. Were it any matter of merely political interest, they would be silent. But when the weak and innocent are denied the protection of the law; when humanity is sold in shambles to the highest bidder; when all the sacred ties of domestic life are sundered for the gratification of avarice, they cannot but regard it as their duty to supplicate for the oppressed those common rights of humanity, of which they have been so long deprived, and which they dare not ask for themselves.

Your petitioners, therefore, pray your honorable bodies, in the exercise of your Constitutional power, without delay, to abolish Slavery in the District of Columbia, and by that act, to make it worthy to be the capital of a free and Christian nation.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Petition taken from HR 24A, H1.3, RG 233, NA I.

To petition Congress was, for many women of the early Republic, a calculated political risk. As historian Nancy Cott (1979) and others have emphasized, antebellum political culture was characterized by “separate spheres” for men and women. Petitions often separated women’s and men’s signatures in distinct columns (see Figure 6). Petitioning to Congress involved an explicit transgression of cultural boundaries, which is why the women addressed the cultural propriety of their petition at its very outset.

It is for this reason that women’s petitions of the 1830s often combined republican language with traditional deference (Van Broekhoven 1994: 189). Traditional deference could be expressed explicitly, as above, or implicitly by framing the appeal in spiritual or evangelical terms. Statistical analyses of the petitions (not reported here) suggest that the appearance of the concept “republican” (and related terms such as “Republic”) is highly correlated across petitions with the appearance of the word “Christian” (and related terms such as “Christ”).

Quantitative Analysis of Petitions and Petitioning

The rhetorical and ideational structure of antislavery and other petitions has been analyzed. Yet in many cases, the mass of petitions has not. In this section I study the sample characteristics of an incomplete sample of 3,915 petitions from the 25th congress and a complete sample for this Congress from the state of New York. Table 1 displays summary statistics from these samples, in which the unit of analysis is the petition document, not the signatory. Table 2 offers a similar set of summary statistics disaggregated by type of petition (women’s only, gender-separated signature columns, or neither of these types).

[Tables 1 and 2 about here.]

Some noteworthy results emerge from Table 1. Almost one-quarter of the petitions (33 percent) are women’s only petitions, while another quarter (24%) separated women’s and men’s names in columns. These categories are useful markers for those cases in which women were the canvassers, as when women canvassed they did so according to norms that separated genders into “separate spheres” of public activity (Cott 1978). Perhaps half of the petitions, then, were produced by women canvassers. Petitions averaged 211 signatories for this sample, and 44 percent focused upon District abolition. The plurality of petitions came from Massachusetts (27%), while another quarter derive from New York and another 11% hailed from Ohio.

Table 2 breaks down some of these summary statistics by subsample, specifically as to whether or not the petition is a women’s only petition, a petition in which male and female signatories appear in separate columns, or a petition that takes neither of these forms. The first noteworthy result is that when women petitioned themselves or when they occupied a “separate sphere” (a distinct column) on the petition, signatures were significantly higher. Women’s petitions were slightly less likely to use republican language, but republican language is correlated positively with religious language.

A second result is that women’s-only petitions and gender-separated petitions were far more likely to contain copied signatures as we have coded them in this analysis. Whereas 13 percent of the “other” category contains apparently copied signatures, a full 65 percent of women’s only petitions contain them, and almost half (49 percent) of gender-separated petitions do so. It is likely, then, that women’s canvassing was associated with a more extended practice of copied signatures. This

pattern is undoubtedly worth a separate analysis and deserves greater exploration than I can give it here.

[Table 3 about here.]

I then explore the factors (petition origin and petition structure) associated with a longer signatory list. Table 3 offers a simple linear regression of signatories upon petition characteristics. I estimate three models: a model with fixed effects (indicator variables) for each state from which the petitions originated, a model with fixed effects for each township (where this could be identified) from which the petition originated, and a replica of the second model estimated only on the sample from New York state. The results support those in Table 2, namely that women's-only petitions and column-gender-separated petitions garner more signatures. So too, petitions from New York and Massachusetts had longer signatory lists than those from other states. There is also some evidence that prayers with explicitly Christian rhetoric are associated with longer signatory lists.

Did Petitioning Anticipate Antislavery Organization and Partisan Political Activity? Petitions, AASS Chapters and the Liberty Vote in New York State

If the antislavery petition was truly an instrument of recruitment into a wider cause, then we might expect to observe two patterns. First, the organization of antislavery activism should be predicted by petitioning activity. Second, petitions should anticipate antislavery partisan political activity.

[Table 4 about here.]

The clear problem in assessing these predictions derives from the non-random assignment of petitions across localities. In other words, we lack of any sort of cross-sectional “natural experiment” with respect to petitions that would allow us to observe the effects of a “treatment” in a quasi-experimental setting. In lieu of (and in some respects inferior to) such a research design, a different tack is taken here. I instead attempt to demonstrate that petitioning during a select two years of congressional history – the 25th Congress, in which massive increases in petitioning were spurred by the gag rule – anticipates *subsequent* antislavery organization and *subsequent* partisan political activity, controlling for (1) *previous* antislavery organization, and (2) *previous growth* in antislavery organization.

I turn first to the assessment of antislavery organization in New York State, focusing on changes in antislavery organization from 1836 to 1838. During these two years the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) exploded in size, from 527 chapters to 1,350 nationwide, and from 103 to 369 in New York. In Table 4 I present the results of two log-linear regressions. In the first (Table 4a), the logged number of AASS chapters in 1838 in a New York county is regressed upon the logged number in 1836 and the logged number of petitions from the same county during the 25th Congress (1837-1839). One observable problem with these estimates is that, lacking any AASS data for 1839 and 1840, it remains possible that 1838 chapter organization is driving some of the observed petitioning activity.

Caveats aside, the estimates in Table 4 suggest that the growth in official antislavery organization after 1836 is appreciably associated with petitioning activity. In Table 4a, 1838 chapter organization is significantly associated with petitioning activity after controlling for the “lagged” chapter organization in 1836.

A somewhat more incisive analysis is presented in Table 4b. Here county-level changes in the level of chapter organization from 1836 to 1838 are regressed upon (1) the level of chapter organization in 1836, (2) the change in chapter organization from 1834 to 1836, and (3) 25th Congress petitions. So any correlation of the assignment of 25th Congress petitions with either pre-1837 antislavery organization or the pre-1837 trajectory of antislavery organization is controlled for. Here the results are quite interesting. Whereas neither 1836 chapter organization nor 1834-1836 chapter growth is significantly associated with 1836-1838 growth, petitioning activity during the 25th Congress is associated with 1836-1838 growth.

[Tables 5 and 6 about here.]

I turn next to the observable anticipation of partisan political activity by petitioning. For this reason the 25th Congress (1837-1839) has a convenient and informative historical juxtaposition. It falls after the adoption of the Pinckney gag rule in the House, meaning that virtually all petitioners *knew* that their petitions were being tabled in Congress without a reading. Yet the 25th Congress was also completed before the creation of the Liberty Party in 1840. Here, then, we can rule out endogeneity of the strict sort. Since there was not even a budding antislavery party organization before 1840 (Kraut), it cannot be the case that Liberty Party organization in the 1840s was driving petitioning activity in the 1830s. We still face, however, the issue of non-random assignment. Namely, is there some unobserved factor associated with the (latent) probability of antislavery partisanship that was operative in petitioning, leading us to a perhaps spurious association? I return to this possibility in a moment.

Table 5 presents the results of six linear regressions of county vote percentages for congressional and presidential elections in 1842 and 1844 upon county petition and chapter aggregates in the late 1830s. (Although James G. Birney also ran on the Liberty ballot in 1840, I am unaware of any available statewide or nationwide vote totals for that campaign.) I regress each county Liberty vote percentage observed (the 1842 midterms, the 1844 general, and the 1844 congressional) upon county petitions (1837-39) and either 1836 or 1838 chapter organization. I separate these two variables into different regression because only the 1836 chapter organization is uncontaminated by post-gag-rule petitioning activity, where Table 4 suggests that 1838 AASS chapter organization is partially explained by petitioning activity.

The county petition aggregates are positively correlated with all three voting measures, significantly so for the first two. In the first model of 1842 congressional voting, an additional log-petition from a county in the late 1830s is associated with a 0.62- to 0.73-percentage point increase in the Liberty Party vote. Given that the cross-county standard deviation of log-petitions is 1.26, and given that Liberty Party candidates averaged 0.52 percent of the vote in New York counties in 1842, this is a considerable effect.

In the second model, an additional petition from a county in the late 1830s is associated with a 0.66- to 1.04-percent-point increase in the vote percentage received by Liberty Party candidate James G. Birney in 1844. This regression is perhaps the most robust of the three estimated, because the fact that one candidate appears on all county ballots is an implicit control for candidate “quality” and resources. Birney averaged 1.12 percent of the vote in New York counties in 1842. A standard deviation increase in petitioning (1.26 more log-petitions per county) was, then, associated with

about a two-thirds to five-fourths increase in vote share for Birney, depending on the estimates used.

Although the petitions seem to be positively correlated with Birney voting and with congressional voting in 1842, they are not significantly correlated with congressional voting for the Liberty Party in 1844. Exactly why this relationship does not hold for congressional voting when it holds for presidential voting is unknown at this writing. It may be due to differential ballot access or candidate heterogeneity at the district level.

Table 6 reports estimates from more fully specified models in which county-level covariates are included. Once again county petition aggregates are positively and significantly associated with Liberty Party voting. Few other observable covariates appear to be associated with higher abolitionist voting except for manufacturing employment, which bears a negative association.

In summary, petitioning of the late 1830s is plausibly associated with Liberty Party voting of the early 1840s. These brute relationships must, of course, be accompanied by a note of caution that petitions were not randomly assigned across counties. While I have attempted to control for other factors related to petitioning, in particular the presence and growth trajectory of anti-slavery organization, it remains possible that some unobserved factor affecting the variation in petitions is correlated with the latent voting propensities for the Liberty Party.

Other Puzzles and Possibilities

1. *Why did Black Abolitionists Petition State Legislatures?* Readers might well wonder where exactly African-Americans enter into the analysis here. Freedmen signatories on petitions were explicitly identified as “colored signatures” or “colored petitions.” I have not meant to exclude these; there are simply very few in the 25th Congress (three of more than 4,000 examined from the most recent count). Yet there is considerable documentation of African-American petitioning activity in the antislavery cause before the Civil War. Why is it not represented in this sample?

One quixotic possibility comes from a reading of Benjamin Quarles’ fascinating accounts of African-American abolitionists. Quarles observes that antislavery blacks in the North often petitioned state legislatures (he does not mention the dearth of petitions in national records). It is quite possible, then, that black abolitionists petitioned state legislatures but not the U.S. House, and if this pattern is observed it represents something of an historical puzzle.

2. *The Assignment of Cultural and Political Meaning to Petitions.* One problem in the political and cultural analysis of petitions, I surmise, is that canvassers and signatories may have assigned different meanings to the petitions. Indeed, any assumption of identically shared meaning seems incredibly problematic. The question is whether one can attack this problem historically and empirically. One possibility is to examine some set of petitions where both the canvasser and some of the signatories left detailed records (e.g., diaries) and to compare these to see if the same petitions are mentioned and with what interpretation.

3. *Sequence of Names Research.* One implication of my argument here about affiliate iteration versus grid canvassing is that, if either one of these dominates as a search and recruitment strategy, the sequence of names on a petition should follow observable social networks (affiliate iteration) or a

geographical township/municipal grid. Given prodigious work of the sort conducted by Magdol (1986), this should be possible. For now it remains to suggest that much, much more can be done with this data.

4. *Did Petitions Create New Networks?* My account suggests not merely that petitions exploited old networks, but also created new ones, as canvasser could now link signatory to signatory in the burgeoning cause of antislavery. This aspect of the account is rather difficult to assess empirically. One can imagine that in the “weakest” case, petitioning creates a spoke network whereby every individual in the network is connected only to the canvasser. More likely, “lateral” ties among signatories are created or reinforced during the petitioning process that condition the social power of the canvasser.

Is the Theory Portable?

I do not wish to suggest that the theoretical perspective elaborated here necessarily applies to all or even most directed petitions. If the account coheres with only a fraction of mass petitioning activity in American political history, it will have been a valuable addition. Clearly some petitions operate as signaling devices, some petitions are predominately expressive, and many, many petitions exhibit aspects of all three of these accounts (recruitment, signaling and pure expression). At this writing, it seems to me that the recruitment potential of petitioning has the greatest “value-added” precisely when other methods of recruitment are weakest, viz., when party labels and other distinctions convey little information about the issue at hand. It is quite possible that in many settings, emergent social movement activity presents just such a problem, as movements may be more likely to arise when existing political institutions and categories sidestep crucial political, economic and social issues.

Conclusion

The directed petition is more than vehicle of expression and communication in republican contexts. It is a sponsored device whose visual and informational structure are of immense value to those who wish build new political organizations. Perhaps this approach to petitions in the early republic will sound far too mechanistic or functionalist. The idea that a petition such as the Declaration of Independence could have meaning outside that experienced by its intended recipients (Parliament and George III) is, admittedly, absurd. Yet there is nothing inherently functionalist about an approach that focuses attention upon those who sponsor petitions. Petitions were never *created* for mobilizing purposes, I claim, but once used, they were quickly identified as powerful identifying and mobilizing instruments.

More broadly, I believe that wedding the analysis of petitioning to the analysis of political organization puts researchers at less risk of arriving at anachronistic conclusions that petitions always represent “grass-roots” activity or “public opinion.” The study of petitions in political and social settings must grapple, I contend, with three brute facts. First, to rehearse an earlier point, petitions are often sponsored and subsidized, fully wedded to concurrent mobilizing activity. Second, the most important readers of petitions are probably not their recipients, but the people who sign them. Finally, any analysis of petitioning activity must confront the likelihood that

canvasser and signatory attach different meanings to the same document. The theoretical account advanced here, while far from complete, attempts to come to terms with these facts and others.

To the extent that my argument assumes a reductionist character, moreover, I believe that it conducts a useful thought experiment. Would there be any use for petitioning if their intended recipients paid no attention to them, and were *known* to be paying no attention to them? In the historical case surveyed here, all participants knew that the petitions were tabled, not even read or printed by the House. This pattern of rulers ignoring the mass petition is paralleled in many instances in history; hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) of petitions were sent to Congress in the nineteenth century alone; a bare fraction of them were read or were entered into the record. The same appears to be true of many Commons petitions in England before the Stuart period (Foster 1977). This pattern has been replicated in other contexts. From the standpoint of signaling the ruler, this is just so much wasted space. The most likely and important readers of the antislavery petition, then, were not members of the House of Representatives, but the signatories themselves.

Third, the recruitment approach to petitions leads us to consider facets of petitioning – including rhetorical facets – that literary scholarship is likely to ignore. It leads analysts of the petition to consider the sequence of names in a signatory list, the order in which petitions with different declarations are circulated, and the mobilizing effect of language in the declaration.

Upon reflection, my interpretation of petitions generally, and of abolitionist petitions more specifically, may seem obvious. If so, it has eluded not only legions of historians of abolitionism specifically, but numerous other students of the petition more generally. Although glimmers of the mobilizing value of petitions appear in many works, historians and political scientists have failed to analyze petitions in terms of *the informational, political and social-structural resources they provide to organization-building agents*.

For antislavery activists, petitioning revealed individual identities, preferences and social locations, congealed new networks and provided information and the comfort of numbers to potential antislavery sympathizers. No other form of abolitionist activity during this period – stump speaking, pamphleteering, organized marches or rallies – had all of these facets. Like many other institutions of the early American republic – the mass party, the postal system, burgeoning civic associations – the political utility of the petition was to be found at the intersection of rational strategy, ideological action and social networks.

Figure 1

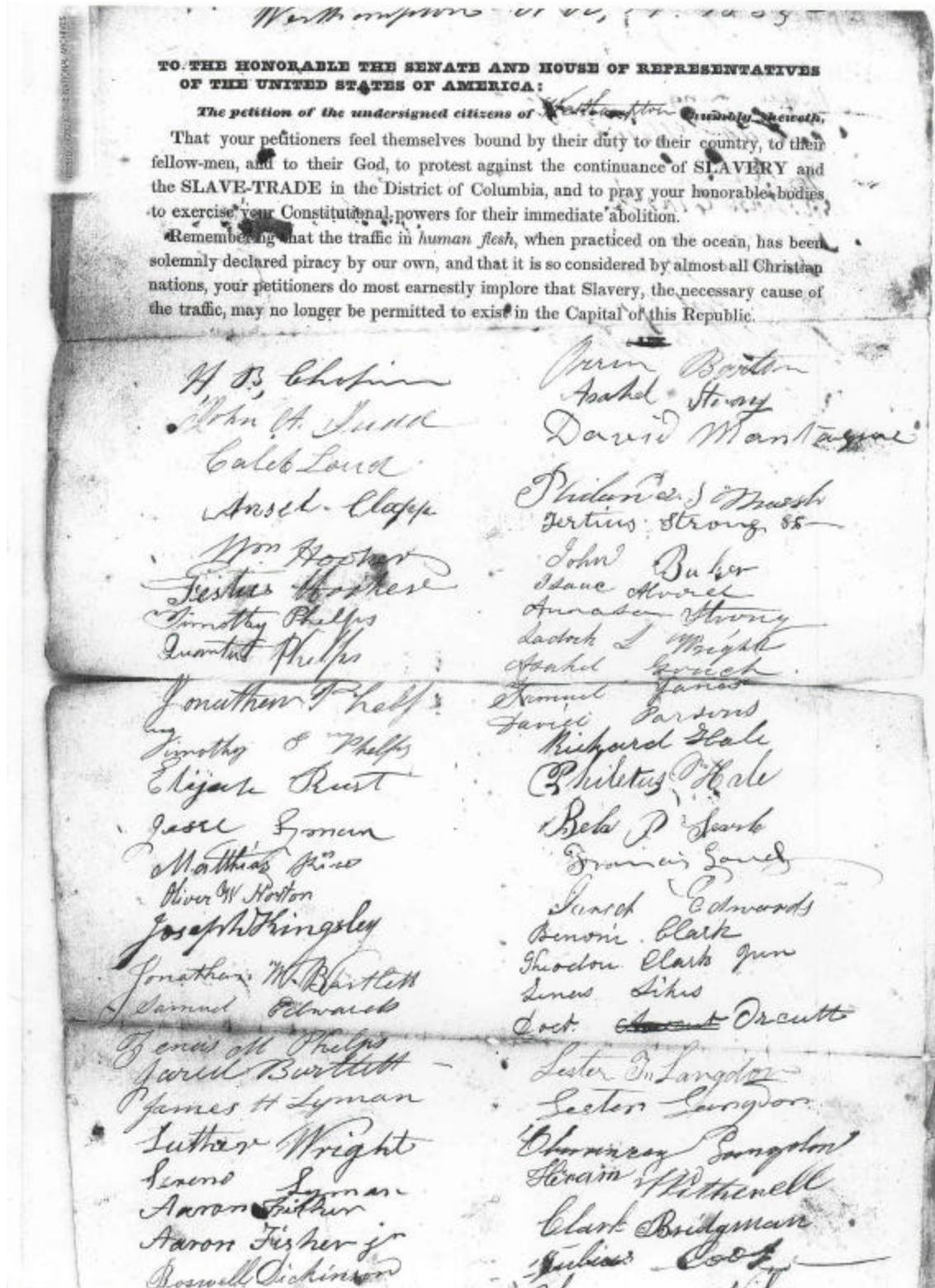


Figure 2

REPRODUCED AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

M E M O R I A L

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, in Congress assembled:

The Memorial of the undersigned, inhabitants of *Montgomery County* in the State of Pennsylvania, most respectfully represents: That the system of Slavery, and the traffic in Slaves, are generally acknowledged to be evils of great magnitude, utterly inconsistent with the precepts of the Christian Religion, and incompatible with the free institutions of our Republican Government:—It is also generally admitted, that the Congress of the United States is invested with Constitutional and ample authority to enact laws for the suppression thereof, in the territory over which it possesses exclusive legal jurisdiction:—And, furthermore, it is clearly evident, that regulations of this nature are loudly called for, by the voice of humanity, the honour of the nation, and the present and future welfare of all classes of the people.

We, your memorialists, therefore invite your attention to this important subject, and recommend the immediate adoption of efficient legislative measures, for the abolition of slavery and the slave-trade, in the District of Columbia.

Your memorialists are not desirous that any rash, inconsiderate, or premature steps shall be taken for the accomplishment of the object here proposed; neither are they aware that the least danger may be apprehended from the speedy extinction of slavery in the said District. The light of experience warrants no such assumption. On the contrary, many examples may be cited, proving that it would be safe and practicable, and likewise highly beneficial to the country at large.

Confiding in the wisdom and patriotism of the members of our National Councils, to devise a plan for effecting the purpose above mentioned, in accordance with the principles of humanity and justice, your memorialists have forbore to suggest the details of a system of operations;—yet they most earnestly request you to take the subject into immediate consideration, and to act upon it without further delay.

And your memorialists, &c.

<p><i>Benjamin Jones</i> <i>John Wilson</i> <i>Thomas Smith</i> <i>Susan Wilson</i> <i>Sarah Mc Feyar</i> <i>George M Wilson</i> <i>Tyson Jones</i> <i>Amos Lukens</i> <i>Wrbowski</i> <i>Elizabeth Shoemaker</i> <i>Rachel Shoemaker</i> <i>Sarah L Wilson</i> <i>Susan J Wilson</i> <i>Ann Jones</i> <i>Mary James</i> <i>Hannah James</i></p>	<p><i>Joshua Paxson</i> <i>Martha James</i> <i>Rebecca Lince</i> <i>Facy Wilson</i> <i>Martha Wilson</i> <i>Facy Fitzwater</i> <i>Martha W Morris</i> <i>Phoebe Moore</i> <i>Sarah Foulke</i> <i>Martha J Lukens</i> <i>Rebecca Wilson</i> <i>Elizabeth Wilson</i> <i>Ellen Jane Holt</i> <i>Mercy Paxson</i> <i>Martha White</i></p>
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Figure 3

REPRODUCED BY THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, in Congress assembled :

The petition of the undersigned ladies of Massachusetts respectfully represents : That they consider the toleration of slavery in the District of Columbia as a direct violation of the precepts of the Gospel, and altogether inconsistent with the principles promulgated in the Declaration of Independence. The universal tendency of this system is degradation of the female character ; for it unavoidably places a large class entirely out of the protection of law or public opinion. The internal slave-trade,—which causes the Capital of the United States to be a by-word among the nations,—is necessarily accompanied with circumstances revolting to humanity. Wives are torn from their husbands, and mothers from their children, under the express sanction of our laws !

Your petitioners believe it to be their duty to urge upon your serious consideration the perpetual wrongs of women and children, whose husbands and fathers are deprived of all legal power to protect them. They cannot be silent while thousands of their sex are condemned to helpless degradation, and even denied the privilege of making known their sufferings. History would blush for American women, if, under such circumstances, they ever allowed the voice of expostulation and entreaty to cease throughout the land.

We do, therefore, most earnestly pray that Congress will immediately abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, and declare every human being free, who sets foot upon its soil.

<i>R. H. Perkins</i>	<i>Fizah White</i>	<i>Mary A. Perkins</i>
		<i>Eliza Blanchard</i>
<i>H. C. Tapfield.</i>	<i>Klarysa Richards</i>	<i>Catherine Cook</i>
<i>Emmie Hunt</i>	<i>William J. Bowditch</i>	<i>Jessamine Blanchard</i>
	<i>Sarah Crane</i>	<i>Susan Blanchard</i>
<i>Deborah Bates</i>	<i>Eveline Hayward.</i>	<i>Sarah H. C. Louns</i>
<i>Paul L. Kingman</i>	<i>Sarah H. Crane</i>	<i>Mary M. Blanchard</i>
<i>Sarah Kingman</i>	<i>Theoda Allen</i>	<i>Ann Blanchard</i>
<i>Mary Kingman</i>	<i>Sarah Woods</i>	<i>Rhoda S. Boye</i>
<i>Arrie Kingman</i>	<i>Harriet A. Hunt</i>	<i>Fizah Hunt</i>
<i>Deborah Weston</i>	<i>Clarithia Hunt</i>	<i>Cynthia Cowing</i>
<i>Nancy Weston</i>	<i>Abigail Thayer</i>	<i>Lucretia A. Cowing</i>
<i>Abigail Weston.</i>	<i>Sarah Thayer</i>	<i>Sarah H. Cowing</i>
<i>Phoebe W. Weston</i>	<i>Adeline C. Thayer.</i>	<i>Susan H. Cowing</i>
<i>Mary Weston.</i>	<i>Hebecca Bowditch</i>	<i>Maria J. Cowing</i>
<i>Mary Blanchard.</i>	<i>Rhoda Nash</i>	<i>Eliza Pinney</i>
<i>Barth S. Richardson</i>	<i>Moanica Sumner</i>	<i>Sally Whitman</i>
<i>Harriett S. Richardson</i>		<i>Mary Kingman</i>
<i>Jessamine Pierce</i>		<i>Jessamine White</i>
<i>Harriet Richardson</i>		<i>Mary M. Blanchard</i>

Figure 4

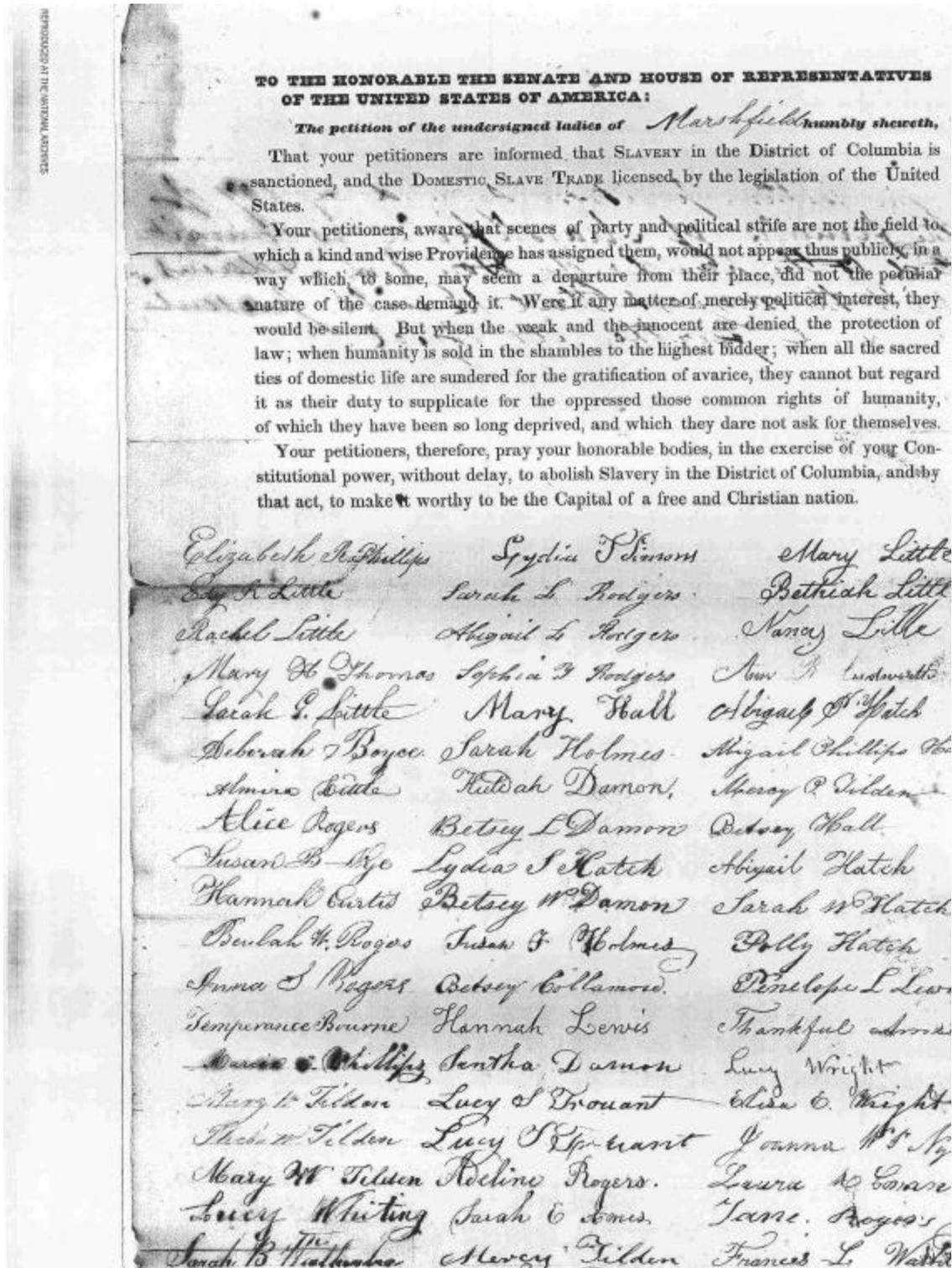


Figure 5

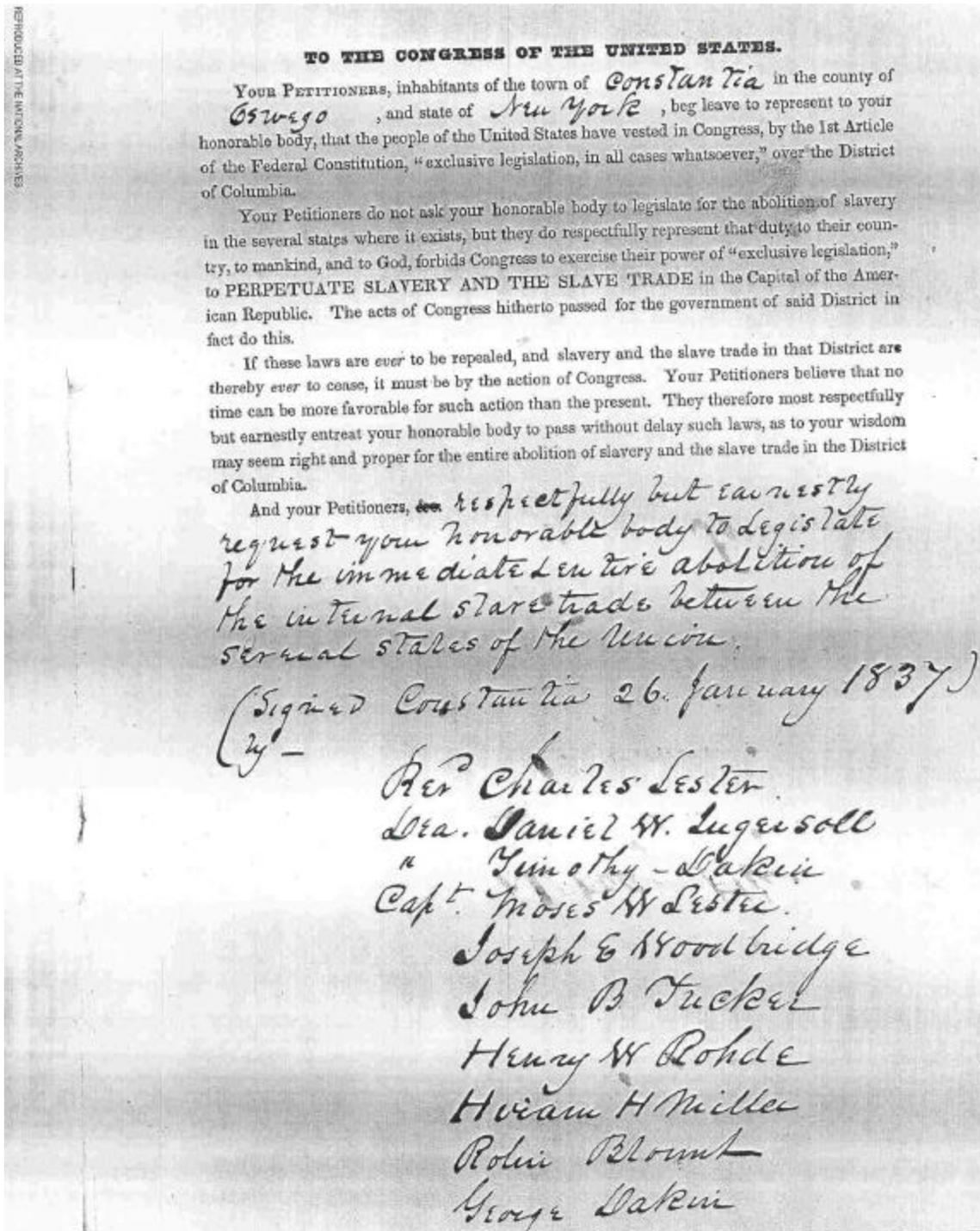


Figure 6

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States:
 The undersigned Inhabitants of Holland Patent Co. in the State of
New York Respectfully pray your honorable body, immediately to abolish SLAVERY, and
 the SLAVE TRADE, in the DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

<u>Males</u>	<u>40 Names</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>42 Names</u>
<u>Abner Hitchcock</u>		<u>Bethiah Hitchcock</u>	<u>42 Names</u>
<u>Jairus Dodd</u>		<u>Sally Dods</u>	<u>40</u>
<u>G. W. Finney</u>		<u>Jessie Dods</u>	<u>82 Total</u>
<u>Robert Wells</u>		<u>Abner Bairstow</u>	
<u>L. Hummer</u>		<u>Laura Rockwell</u>	
<u>S. C. Bryant</u>		<u>Mary Rockwell</u>	
<u>Wm. Dods</u>		<u>Sally C. Smith</u>	
<u>William B. Robbins</u>		<u>Sophia C. Buell</u>	
<u>Royal Robbins</u>		<u>Sally St. Dods</u>	
<u>Alonzo G. Wells</u>		<u>Mary Dods</u>	
<u>J. O. Muller</u>		<u>Stephens Rockwell</u>	
<u>Elihu Hubbard</u>		<u>Sarah Robbins</u>	
<u>Gilbert Hubbard</u>		<u>Lydia Wells</u>	
<u>Fred J. Hopkins</u>		<u>Jessie Wells</u>	
<u>George Hopkins</u>		<u>Abigail A. Wells</u>	
<u>Mary A. Hopkins</u>		<u>Harriet W. Wells</u>	
<u>Grove J. Hopkins</u>		<u>Laura Wells</u>	
<u>Fredrick M. Hopkins</u>		<u>Daniel Nollon</u>	
<u>Thomas H. Smith</u>		<u>David Chapin</u>	
<u>Humphrey A. Brown</u>		<u>Joseph Hamlin</u>	
<u>Samuel Briggs</u>		<u>Sarah D. Hamlin</u>	
<u>Owen C. Lewis</u>		<u>Sarah M. Hamlin</u>	
<u>Simon Hughes</u>		<u>Polly Johnson</u>	
<u>William & William</u>		<u>Harriet E. Johnson</u>	
<u>Andrew Johnson</u>		<u>Carthusa Hubbard</u>	
<u>Garth W. Wolcott</u>		<u>Mary Stille</u>	
<u>Edwin Woodbridge</u>		<u>Elizabeth Robbins</u>	
<u>Daniel S. Wilson</u>		<u>J. Elizabeth Hopkins</u>	
<u>Ozias Cook</u>		<u>Rachel Hopkins</u>	
<u>Wm. C. Gilbert</u>		<u>Mary Russel</u>	
<u>Christina Ward</u>		<u>Hensietta M. Hopkins</u>	
		<u>Philetus M. Hopkins</u>	

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Abolitionist Petitions to Congress, 23 rd -25 th Congresses [NAI, RG 233] Full (Incomplete) Sample; N = 3,915 petitions		
Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
Women's only petition	23%	0.42
Separate columns for women's and men's names	24%	0.43
Number of signatories	211.33	5955.74
Number of female signatories, if given	128.73	3363.21
Petition contains copied signatures	34%	0.47
Declaration contains "Christ+"	7%	0.25
Declaration contains "Republic+"	13%	0.37
Prayer: Abolish DC slavery	44%	0.50
Prayer: No new territories	17%	0.38
Prayer: No new slave states	28%	0.45
Prayer: Abolish interstate slave trade	19%	0.40
Prayer: Rescind gag rule	16%	0.37
Origin State: New York	26%	0.37
Origin State: Massachusetts	27%	0.37
Origin state: Ohio	11%	0.44

Table 1b: Descriptive Statistics of Abolitionist Petitions to Congress, 23 rd -25 th Congresses [NAI, RG 233] New York Petitions Only (Complete Sample); N = 1,050 petitions		
Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
Women's only petition	15%	0.35
Separate columns for women's and men's names	42%	0.49
Number of signatories	139.71	366.80
Number of female signatories, if given	94.52	413.72
Petition contains copied signatures	46%	0.50
Declaration contains "Christ+"	4%	0.20
Declaration contains "Republic+"	8%	0.40
Prayer: Abolish DC slavery	47%	0.50
Prayer: No new territories	29%	0.45
Prayer: No new slave states	32%	0.47
Prayer: Abolish interstate slave trade	29%	0.45
Prayer: Rescind gag rule	7%	0.26

Subsample: Neither Women's Petitions nor Gender-Separated Petitions (N = 1,965)				
Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Number of signatories	77.51	92.05	1	1062
Number of female signatories, if given	4.41	26.85	0	378
Petition contains copied signatures	0.13	0.34	0	1
Declaration contains "Christ+"	0.08	0.26	0	1
Declaration contains "Republic+"	0.16	0.37	0	1
Prayer: Abolish DC slavery	0.36	0.48	0	1
Prayer: No new territories	0.14	0.34	0	1
Prayer: No new slave states	0.30	0.46	0	1
Prayer: Abolish interstate slave trade	0.14	0.35	0	1
Prayer: Rescind gag rule	0.21	0.41	0	1
Subsample: Women's Only Petition (N = 837)				
Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Number of signatories	188.74	466.21	2	5610
Number of female signatories, if given	191.65	474.38	0	5610
Petition contains copied signatures	0.65	0.48	0	1
Declaration contains "Christ+"	0.10	0.30	0	1
Declaration contains "Republic+"	0.11	0.31	0	1
Prayer: Abolish DC slavery	0.62	0.49	0	1
Prayer: No new territories	0.14	0.34	0	1
Prayer: No new slave states	0.14	0.35	0	1
Prayer: Abolish interstate slave trade	0.22	0.41	0	1
Prayer: Rescind gag rule	0.13	0.34	0	1
Subsample: Gender-Separated Petitions (N = 898)				
Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Number of signatories	120.53	109.44	4	1020
Number of female signatories, if given	58.19	64.95	0	1020
Petition contains copied signatures	0.49	0.50	0	1
Declaration contains "Christ+"	0.03	0.16	0	1
Declaration contains "Republic+"	0.06	0.39	0	10
Prayer: Abolish DC slavery	0.42	0.49	0	1
Prayer: No new territories	0.28	0.45	0	1
Prayer: No new slave states	0.37	0.48	0	1
Prayer: Abolish interstate slave trade	0.28	0.45	0	1
Prayer: Rescind gag rule	0.06	0.24	0	1

	Model with State Fixed Effects [N = 3,632 petitions]		Model with Town Fixed Effects [N = 2,617 petitions] (cities = 847)		NY Sample with Town Fixed Effects [N = 786 petitions] (cities = 284)	
	Coefficient	t	Coefficient	t	Coefficient	t
Women's only petition	107.20	5.99	109.76	8.04	212.38	5.04
Gender-separated signatory columns	33.90	5.68	38.31	2.10	30.60	0.70
Declaration contains "Christ+"	24.05	0.88	82.30	2.72	71.28	0.59
Declaration contains "Republic+"	0.55	0.05	-6.38	-0.28	-49.85	-0.56
Prayer: Abolish DC slavery	-20.48	-1.67	-6.51	-0.44	-8.49	-0.25
Prayer: No new territories	15.81	0.98	7.10	0.47	-41.34	-1.18
Prayer: No new slave states	4.55	0.41	24.96	1.52	-4.48	-0.11
Prayer: Abolish interstate slave trade	-6.70	-0.47	21.71	1.50	15.14	0.44
Prayer: Rescind gag rule	-26.91	-2.37	-20.47	-0.92	-68.30	-1.04
Constant	89.55	7.82	69.61	4.44	101.54	2.47

Unit of analysis is petition; dependent variable is aggregate number of signatories.

Table 4: The County-Level Association between AASS Chapter Organization and Petitions to the U.S. House, New York State		
Table 4a: Chapter Organization in 1838		
Dependent variable is log of one plus AASS chapters in county <i>i</i> in 1838		
	Coefficient (Standard Error)	<i>t</i> -statistic
ln(1 + Petitions, 1837-1839)	0.11 (0.05)	2.11
ln(1 + Chapters in 1836)	0.71 (0.21)	3.36
Constant	0.20 (0.09)	2.31
Number of counties = 58; R ² = 0.56; robust standard errors computed. R ² from regression with chapters variable only: 0.29.		
Table 4b: Change in Chapter Organization, 1836-1838		
Dependent variable is change in log of one plus chapters in county <i>i</i> from 1836 to 1838 = [ln(1 + chapters_1838) - ln(1 + chapters_1836)]		
	Coefficient (Standard Error)	<i>t</i> -statistic
ln(1 + Petitions, 1837-1839)	0.12 (0.05)	2.18
ln(1 + Chapters in 1836)	-0.21 (0.22)	-0.96
[ln(1 + Chapters in 1836) - ln(1 + Chapters in 1834)]	-0.19 (0.18)	-1.03
Constant	0.20 (0.09)	2.25
Number of counties = 58; R ² = 0.16; robust standard errors computed.		

Table 5: The Association between AASS associations,
Petitions to the House (1837-1839),
and Liberty Party voting (1842-1844) in New York State

[OLS regressions with robust standard errors]

Dependent Variable: % Total County Vote for Liberty Candidate for House, 1842 (N = 56 counties)				
	(1) [R ² = 0.32]		(2) [R ² = 0.30]	
	Coefficient (Standard Error)	t	Coefficient (Standard Error)	t
ln(1 + Petitions)	0.62 (0.23)	2.71	0.73 (0.27)	2.74
ln(1 + Chapters, 1838)	1.28 (0.56)	2.29	-----	-----
ln(1 + Chapters, 1836)	-----	-----	1.14 (0.79)	1.45
Constant	-4.49 (4.09)	-1.10	-0.19 (0.38)	-0.51
Dependent Variable: % Total County Vote for James G. Birney (Liberty Presidential Candidate, 1844) (N = 58 counties)				
	(1) [R ² = 0.35]		(2) [R ² = 0.29]	
	Coefficient (Standard Error)	t	Coefficient (Standard Error)	t
ln(1 + Petitions)	0.66 (0.32)	2.01	1.04 (0.34)	3.10
ln(1 + Chapters, 1838)	2.71 (0.66)	4.12	-----	-----
ln(1 + Chapters, 1836)	-----	-----	1.76 (1.29)	1.36
Constant	0.03 (0.57)	0.05	0.47 (0.56)	0.83
Dependent Variable: % Total County Vote for Liberty Candidate for House, 1844 (N = 58 counties)				
	(1) [R ² = 0.16]		(2) [R ² = 0.11]	
	Coefficient (Standard Error)	t	Coefficient (Standard Error)	t
ln(1 + Petitions)	0.68 (0.35)	1.95	1.58 (0.98)	1.62
ln(1 + Chapters, 1838)	3.78 (1.19)	3.17	-----	-----
ln(1 + Chapters, 1836)	-----	-----	-0.94 (4.12)	-0.23
Constant	-3.98 (7.30)	-0.54	0.35 (0.71)	0.49

Table 6:
 Petitioning, Antislavery Organization and Liberty Party Voting:
 An Analysis with Covariates from New York Counties

[OLS regressions with robust standard errors]

	% Vote for Liberty Party Cong Candidate, 1842			Pct Vote for James G Birney (Liberty Pres Candidate), 1844			% Vote for Liberty Party Cong Candidate, 1844		
	Coefficient	SE	t	Coefficient	SE	t	Coefficient	SE	t
Petitions/ln(population)	8.40	2.73	3.07	10.22	5.07	2.01	9.79	5.49	1.78
1838 AASS chapters/ln(population)	9.82	7.13	1.38	23.96	7.73	3.10	36.96	19.01	1.94
1836 AASS chapters/ln(population)	-27.51	27.84	-0.99	-42.87	30.69	-1.40	-90.54	60.20	-1.50
ln(Manufacturing Capital)	-1.77	3.03	-0.59	-3.97	3.81	-1.04	7.48	9.68	0.77
Pct Employed in Manufacturing	-3.06	1.10	-2.78	-4.41	1.33	-3.31	-9.28	4.33	-2.14
Pct Employed in Agriculture	0.27	0.30	0.92	0.42	0.57	0.75	0.24	0.65	0.36
Pct Illiterate	0.53	1.16	0.46	2.91	1.90	1.53	2.66	2.66	1.00
Pct College Students	32.73	36.93	0.89	-14.52	61.62	-0.24	-44.21	64.45	-0.69
Pct Professional	-11.77	7.43	-1.58	-19.06	13.64	-1.40	-9.34	17.97	-0.52
Pct White Female 20-29	14.25	4.72	3.02	12.10	7.60	1.59	-0.91	19.61	-0.05
Pct White Female 30-39	-20.94	8.74	-2.40	-6.98	11.64	-0.60	28.35	40.10	0.71
Pct White Female 40-49	-22.97	12.50	-1.84	-22.88	19.53	-1.17	-67.54	46.17	-1.46
Pct White Female 50-59	32.80	15.71	2.09	21.29	29.65	0.72	21.70	40.50	0.54
Daily Newspapers per 100,000 pop	1.45	1.67	0.87	-2.03	1.95	-1.04	-4.14	3.47	-1.19
Constant	50.38	47.64	1.06	59.46	58.61	1.01	20.56	126.64	0.16
	R-sq: 0.58			R-sq: 0.57			R-sq: 0.35		

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