

Protest from Above: Elite Decoupling and Public Petitioning in the VOC Cape Colony*

Jonathan Schoots[†]

Johan Fourie[‡]

Abstract

Elite competition is usually contained. Where wealth, standing, and office overlap, rival elites bargain backstage and public challenge stays rare. Understanding when that containment fails matters for explaining how political orders come to be contested from within. We take up this problem through the 1779 Cape Patriots petition, the most sustained public challenge to Dutch East India Company (VOC) rule at the Cape of Good Hope. Linking the petition’s 404 signatories to household tax censuses, a newly compiled roll of rural officeholders, and auction records of deceased estates, we locate petitioners within the wealth, office, and network structure of settler society. Those who protested were a relative elite. Petitioners were wealthier than non-petitioners and concentrated in the top quartile of rural wealth, about three times more likely under our preferred linkage rule to have served as heemraden, the settler officials who administered the rural districts, and more likely to occupy bridging positions across the colony’s auction networks. Four of the eight Stellenbosch–Drakenstein heemraden serving in 1779 signed. Petitioners’ wealth had not been declining relative to that of other settlers. These patterns fit neither deprivation, populist, nor settler-nationalist accounts of mobilisation. We explain the public form of the challenge through elite decoupling: colonial rule depends on locally embedded allies to project power while reserving central office for metropolitan appointees, and so produces a local elite with the means to contest and no channel through which to bargain.

Keywords: elite conflict; petitioning; settler colonialism; colonial governance; social networks; Cape Colony

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[†]Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand. Email: jonathan.schoots@wits.ac.za.

[‡]Department of Economics, Stellenbosch University. Email: johanf@sun.ac.za.

1 Introduction

In 1779, as American colonists were in open revolt against British imperial authority, Dutch settlers at the Cape of Good Hope – the southern African outpost of the Dutch trade empire – publicly challenged their colonial governors. The Cape Patriots (*Kaapse Patriotte*) organised a petition to the governing board of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), demanding institutional transformation: access to trade, constraints on imperial officials’ commerce, legal protections, and settler appointments in key governing councils. Similar to their counterparts in the Americas and Europe caught up in a transnational ‘Age of Revolutions’, Cape settlers invoked an emerging political language of citizen rights and natural law to challenge the colonial state. Unlike their New World counterparts, their programme did not extend to secession but instead demanded institutional reform: a reconfiguration of the boundary between local power and formal authority.

This paper asks who these petitioners were, and what their economic, political, and social locations tell us about the conditions of political conflict in this settler colonial setting. Against theories that predict mobilisation among the dispossessed, or from a populist or proto-nationalist cross-class coalition, we find that petitioners were an emerging settler elite: drawn from the wealthy and well-connected segments of settler society, and more likely to hold rural administrative and judicial office. These challenger elites also transformed the form of claim-making itself. Premodern petitioning was a tool of legitimate request that sought the benevolent deployment of power from rulers (Zaret, 1996, 2019). The Cape memorandum instead asserted collective claims on the institutions of governance – and did so in 1779, three years before the Dutch Patriots, from whom the movement took its name, presented their first petition (Oddens, 2017), and a generation before the public mass petitioning of the nineteenth century (Miller, 2019).

We use this case to highlight *elite decoupling*: one mechanism by which elite conflict becomes public contestation rather than being absorbed through backstage intra-elite bargaining. The mechanism is especially clear in a settler colonial context, but it identifies a broader pattern. It emerges from a structural cleavage between locally accumulated economic and social power on the one hand, and political control over formal institutions and governance on the other. The VOC Cape reflects a process of elite decoupling emerging from the governing dilemma of colonial rule. Colonial governance’s *raison d’être* is to transfer wealth from colony to colonial power and establish strategic imperial control. To do so it depends on the governance power and imperial-transnational integration generated by institutional control, while simultaneously relying on local alliances needed to project power in the region (Robinson, 1972; Chatterjee, 1993; Cooper, 2002). As wealth is transferred to the colonial centre, a portion of that surplus must purchase the allegiance of local elite allies – a source of local elite accumulation. Growing economic power supplements a local elite’s existing capacity for social embeddedness, an embeddedness unavailable to circulating imperial officials. The dual need for institutional control and local alliance thus produces an eventual conflict between imperial elites who deploy political institutions set in the metropole and local elites who control regional economic and social power.

This decoupling of economic and social power from political-institutional power contrasts with

settings where economic, social, and political elites overlap and can manage conflict backstage through elite cohesion, integration and settlement (Rohr, 2025; Burton and Higley, 1987; Higley, 2010). This was the situation at the Cape: the VOC reserved the colony’s central offices for metropolitan appointees, while locally embedded settlers accumulated land, slaves, social reach, and offices that projected but did not direct colonial power. Public contestation between decoupled elites becomes a more plausible strategy precisely because backchannel accommodation by overlapping elites is foreclosed. Examining this in a settler colonial context builds on the established elite conflict literature and identifies one form of public intra-elite conflict that emerges in many settler, colonial, and imperial societies.

We examine the Cape Patriots protest movement by linking the 404 signatories of the 1779 petition to three archival sources. First, household agricultural tax censuses (*opgaafrollen*) provide measures of economic position: agricultural wealth, slaveholding, and household composition for the colony’s rural districts. Second, a newly compiled list of rural settler officeholders, the *heemraden*, shows who served to project VOC administrative and judicial power in rural districts (Walters, Fourie, and Ross, 2026). Third, auction records of deceased estates (*vendurollen*) enable a reconstruction of Cape social networks and reveal social centrality and prestige. Together, these sources situate petitioners relative to thousands of non-petitioners who appear in the same records, enabling a society-spanning analysis of those who did and did not participate in settler protest.

We find across economic, political, and social domains that those who challenged the VOC were more elite. First, petitioners were wealthier than non-petitioners and concentrated in the top quartile of rural wealth, where one in four households signed. Among that elite, petitioners were not richer overall but were concentrated in the wine-and-slave economy and less oriented to sheep farming, suggesting that they held their wealth in the productive core of the rural economy, more oriented to transnational trade, rather than at the expanding frontier of the colony, more oriented to local consumption. Second, petitioners were more likely to have served in rural administrative and judicial office. In the matched rural sample and under our preferred linkage rule, petitioners were about three times more likely than non-petitioners to have held the office of *heemraad*, which controlled local administration and adjudicated local disputes. Turning from households to officeholders, four of the eight Stellenbosch–Drakenstein *heemraden* serving in 1779 signed, as did seven of the seventeen men who had served during the preceding five years. Many local notables who had administered VOC rural power now sought access to institutional control at the colony level. Third, petitioners were more socially central figures, with the social capital to bridge diverse local communities. Petitioners attended more auctions, were closer to all other nodes, and were more than twice as likely to occupy bridging positions between communities. It was bridging position rather than mere economic activity that distinguished petitioners in Cape auction networks.

This analysis contributes to established debates in three ways. First, we survey structural theories of mobilisation and adjudicate between competing hypotheses in this settler-colonial case. We outline and test theories that predict mobilisation among those experiencing deprivation or marginalisation (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 2011; Kornhauser, 1959/2013; Bročić, 2023), theories that

predict cross-class unity in the form of populism (Laclau, 2005; Jansen, 2017) or settler nationalism (Johnston and Lawson, 2005; Veracini, 2010), and theories that predict elite challenge (Lachmann, 2000; Padgett and Ansell, 1993; Khan, 2012). Second, we engage the literature on elite conflict (Lachmann, 2000; Bearman, 1993; Padgett and Ansell, 1993; Zhang, 2021) and elite cohesion (Mills, 1956; Burton and Higley, 1987; Rohr, 2025), specifying an institutional condition, the separation of local wealth and status from formal institutional control, under which elite competition takes public form rather than being absorbed through backstage accommodation. Finally, we bring the colonial and settler-colonial context to the fore, examining what theories of colonial governance (Robinson, 1972; Chatterjee, 1993; Cooper, 2002) reveal about structural decoupling and placing this case in dialogue with the drivers of settler-colonial challenge elsewhere (Beard, 1913; Adams, 1996; Centeno, 2002).

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 lays out three structural theories of political mobilisation whose observable implications our data can adjudicate. Section 3 develops the argument for elite decoupling in dialogue with work on elite conflict, cohesion, and colonial governance. Section 4 describes the Cape setting, Section 5 the data and analytical strategy, and Section 6 presents results on the economic, political, and social position of petitioners. Section 7 discusses theoretical implications and scope conditions. Section 8 concludes.

2 Where does political challenge arise? Structural theories of protest mobilisation

Examining political conflict in this Dutch East India Company territory offers an opportunity to assess established theories of political mobilisation in a colonial, settler colonial, and chartered-company context. We begin by examining who challenges the settler colonial state. Synthesising older theories of political mobilisation with newer work on colonial structure, we lay out three competing structural accounts: mobilisation from deprivation, cross-class mobilisation through populism or anti-imperial nationalism, and mobilisation by elites. Each yields compositional predictions that we put to the test in our data.

2.1 Mobilisation by social and economic deprivation

The image of the unwashed masses driven to seek change because they have ‘nothing to lose but their chains’ has long captured the imagination of revolutionaries and rulers alike. More nuanced social-strain theories developed to explain how discontent and change can become bases for mobilisation. Relative deprivation theories (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 2011) moved away from absolute lack to emphasise relative changes in social or economic status as a source of political discontent. *Prima facie* evidence from the Cape Patriots movement supports deprivation, both absolute and relative, as a potential source of mobilisation. The movement foregrounded economic hardship in its memorandum of demands, emphasising economic strain that was leaving burghers destitute or expecting to be “reduced to extreme poverty” (Baartman, 2011, p. 33), in explicit contrast

to the extreme wealth of VOC officials “abusing their position to their own financial advantage” (Baartman, 2011, p. 36).

We also examine the social counterpart: mass-society theories (Kornhauser, 1959/2013; Bročić, 2023), which propose that movements draw from socially marginalised groups and argue that those alienated from established institutions are most prone to radicalisation. If these accounts hold, the Cape Patriots should be disproportionately drawn from the economically disadvantaged, the socially marginalised, or settlers whose standing was in decline.

2.2 Cross-class recruitment through populism or settler nationalism

A second body of scholarship examines how a small group of outsider-elite leaders can reframe grievances to rally those experiencing economic disadvantage or social marginalisation. Political movements often emerge when elite actors channel widespread frustration into collective action, using rhetoric that pits an exploited majority against a corrupt ruling class (Laclau, 2005; Jansen, 2017). The Patriots’ invocation of economic hardship and VOC corruption (Baartman, 2011) could signal this rhetorical strategy, as contender elites mobilised latent economic or social exclusion to bolster their numbers. This account predicts a bimodal distribution of participant wealth: wealthy elite agitators and their poorer supporters.

An alternative axis of cross-class unity is predicted by scholarship on settler colonial nationalism. Such studies highlight that settler colonies create a tripartite social structure of imperial, settler, and indigenous interrelations that shape political identity (Johnston and Lawson, 2005; Veracini, 2010). A common settler identity can emerge in opposition to indigenous populations whom settlers seek to dominate, destroy, or displace (Wolfe, 2006). It can simultaneously emerge from opposition to imperial elites who deploy the power of colonial institutions, where settlers encountered greater political subjugation and had fewer rights than their European counterparts (Johnston and Lawson, 2005). A strand of South African nationalist historiography identifies the Cape Patriots movement as a forerunner of anti-imperial nationalism in South Africa (Beyers, 1967). This account predicts participants drawn together by shared structural interests as settlers and dispersed across the settler population rather than concentrated in one stratum.

2.3 Counter-elite challenge

A third possibility is that protesters represent a rising local elite seeking to seize more power. Political sociology has long recognised that political change often turns on conflicts among elites rather than on mass mobilisation from below. Classical elite theory treats society as ruled by a minority elite, with changes in power occurring through elite circulation or competition rather than mass mobilisation (Khan, 2012). Contemporary studies of elites have turned to the shifting unity and disunity of elites, focusing on how intra-elite conflict and counter-elites arise (Bearman, 1993; Hillmann, 2008; Padgett and Ansell, 1993; Zhang, 2021). Structuralist accounts of class conflict attend to the economic foundations of elite power, highlighting political contest rooted in shifts in economic structure (Lachmann, 2000; Marx, 1852/2010; Calhoun, 1981). If the Patriots were an

emerging challenger elite, participants should be drawn from the wealthy and prestigious of Cape society.

3 When does elite competition become public? Elite decoupling in settler colonial settings

As we will show, the Cape Patriots movement represents an elite challenge rather than mobilisation from below or across class. This raises a second puzzle: why did intra-elite conflict in a small colony with relatively few elite contenders become public contest rather than being absorbed through backstage intra-elite mediation?

To explain this puzzle, we propose elite decoupling: a mechanism in which public intra-elite challenge emerges from the separation of economic and social power from political-institutional power.

3.1 Elite cohesion and conflict

One body of scholarship has sought to explain long-running political stability, seen in key cases such as the United States, Great Britain, or Sweden. Scholarship here has pointed to key moments of elite integration and settlement between elite groups (Burton and Higley, 1987; Higley, 2010), followed by a context of elite cohesion, facilitated by a small densely overlapping elite who combine dense network connections with a common normative consensus (Mills, 1956; Burton and Higley, 1987; Higley, 2010; Rohr, 2025). In the Cape context – a small settler society governed by a large and powerful international chartered company – one might expect unity among a small and consolidated elite, with power established through VOC governance institutions, backed by force, and with patronage networks or personalised concessions to dissipate elite conflict.

Yet another body of work has focused on moments of elite conflict and shown how such conflict has long been a source of political transformation. Lachmann’s (2000) comparative analysis of early modern Europe showed how elite conflict – between landed aristocrats, urban merchants, and state-builders – drove institutional transformation when no single elite fraction could monopolise resources across multiple domains. Bearman (1993) demonstrated how transformations in local elite social networks, from kinship to patron-client ties, reshaped alliances in ways that made the English Civil War possible, and Padgett and Ansell (1993) revealed how network position among Florentine elites facilitated open conflict between the old oligarchs and the rising Medici faction. More recently, Zhang (2021) showed that elite insurrections during the Taiping Civil War were driven by local elites whose status was threatened by shifts in the political order, not by mass grievance.

3.2 The decoupling of economic, social, and political power in colonial settings

Drawing insights from this literature, our thesis is that one mechanism of public intra-elite conflict is the decoupling of economic and social power from formal political authority. When economic, social, and political power overlap, and individual elites are wealthy, socially esteemed, and able to exercise political control, backstage negotiation can more readily contain competition. The same is true when elites from different domains are densely connected through schooling, marriage, and social or business ties. Overlapping roles and dense connections combine with normative agreement on the rules of politics to mediate conflict and prevent open public challenge. In historically stable metropolitan polities, wealth, social status, and office often overlap: landed elites hold representative seats, merchant families purchase or acquire offices, and economic prominence converts, albeit imperfectly, into political access. When economic power and social prestige are decoupled from institutional access, however, an excluded economic and social elite may be both motivated and equipped to mount a public challenge.

This insight is general, but it applies with particular clarity in colonial settings. Colonial rule generates a separation between sources of elite power that its own institutional structure makes difficult to mediate. The contradiction follows from two governing imperatives. On the one hand, imperial control and cross-empire integration concentrate authority at the metropolitan centre, exercised by appointed officials and backed by metropolitan force. On the other, those officials cannot project power throughout colonial society without locally embedded allies who provide knowledge, reach, and administrative capacity. Chatterjee (1993, pp. 16–18) describes the preservation of institutional control through the “rule of colonial difference”, under which the colonial state’s power rested on preserving the ruling group’s alienness. Cooper (2002, p. 5) similarly describes the colonial state as a “gatekeeper state” controlling the interface between colony and world economy, yet possessing “weak instruments for entering into the social and cultural realm”. Robinson (1972) shows that European imperialism lacked the manpower, resources, and legitimacy to govern directly and therefore depended on alliances with local social elites, indigenous or settler, who supplied administrative capacity while advancing their own wealth and power.

This governing dilemma was a driver of elite challenge in settler colonial and colonial settings. It was a source of local elite accumulation of economic and social power, as local elites facilitated administrative and governing capacity in exchange for advancing their own wealth and power. Yet at the same time, the process systematically blocked the conversion of local economic and social power into control over the governing rules themselves. VOC officials at the Cape derived authority from Company appointment; settler elites accumulated wealth, slaves, and social standing while being denied access to seats in the governing Council of Policy or the Council of Justice.

This blocked access at the Cape has clear parallels in other settler colonial settings where locally embedded elites challenged metropolitan authority. The American Revolution, in the Progressive interpretation advanced by Beard (1913), was driven in significant part by economic elites whose commercial interests conflicted with British mercantile regulation. Centeno (1997, 2002) showed how Latin American independence movements were led by Creole elites whose local economic promi-

nence was not matched by political authority under Spanish colonial rule. In the Dutch Republic and its empire, Adams (1994, 1996) documented how the familial state and Company structures created chronic tensions between metropolitan principals and colonial agents. The closest parallel is the 1653 New Netherland Remonstrance, in which settler delegates petitioned another Dutch chartered-company government for exactly this institutional standing – that provincial legitimacy rest also on the scrutiny of respectable settlers – 126 years before the Cape petition (Middleton, 2010).

These cases share a common structural feature: a colonial institutional order that separated local economic and social power from formal political authority, generating a stratum of locally prominent actors with incentives to contest and limited access to backstage channels. The Cape case allows us to observe this mechanism with unusually detailed quantitative data on the economic, office holding, and relational dimensions of petitioners’ structural positions.

This decoupling has two consequences for the form of elite contestation. First, it removes the institutional channels through which intra-elite conflicts are typically managed. If settlers cannot bargain through shared governing bodies or rotate through offices alongside metropolitan officials, the backstage accommodation that reduces elite conflict in metropolitan settings is unavailable. Second, it creates a category of locally prominent actors with both the resources to afford the costs of public dissent and the motivation to seek institutional reform. The result is a distinctive form of contestation between ordinary backstage accommodation and mass insurgency: public claim-making organised by actors with economic resources and reputational standing, but without secure access to formal authority.

4 Historical context: the Cape Colony, the VOC, and the 1779 petition

The Cape of Good Hope was established as a VOC refreshment station in 1652 and remained under Company governance until the British takeover in 1795. Unlike settler colonies governed directly by metropolitan states, the Cape was administered as Company territory. Formal authority was concentrated in VOC-appointed officials – the governor, the senior members of the Council of Policy, and the Council of Justice – whose careers depended on metropolitan patrons and Company hierarchies rather than on local constituencies (Adams, 1996). The Cape grew into an important waypoint of East–West trade and a rapidly expanding agrarian and slave-based economy, with a settler and enslaved population that approximately doubled between 1750 and 1795 (Fourie and Von Fintel, 2011; Fourie, 2013).

The Cape Patriots (*Kaapse Patriotte*) movement was the most important settler political movement challenging the VOC during its rule of the Cape. This movement asserted the political and economic rights of the *Vrij Burgher* (“free burgher” or “free citizen”) population of the Cape. Burghers were a distinct Cape category: settlers freed from VOC employment who could own land, trade within limits set by the Company, and participate in civic life, but who were largely excluded

from the offices that controlled trade, taxation, and adjudication.

The centrality of burgher identity in this movement has shaped two lines of historiography. One tradition has viewed it as the first stirrings of anti-imperial settler nationalism, a forerunner of later Afrikaner nationalism (Beyers, 1967). A recent revisionist approach instead highlights transnational connections (Baartman, 2011, 2019). In Dutch towns, burghers were a privileged category of inhabitants with civic rights and responsibilities, while Enlightenment currents across Europe celebrated citizen government. At the Cape, burgher status became both a legal marker of the free settler population and a political idiom for claims-making that resonated with Dutch political currents (Baartman, 2012).

At the same time, the Cape was a settler colony built on land appropriation and coerced labour. Settler prosperity depended on enslaved labour and on the gradual displacement, destruction, and incorporation of indigenous Khoe and San polities (Green, 2022; Wolfe, 2006). This tripartite structure – metropolitan officials, settlers, and subordinated indigenous and enslaved populations – shaped the distribution of resources and insecurity. Settlers’ claims to rights and representation existed alongside, and were enabled by, regimes of domination and exclusion. Our data capture the internal stratification of the settler household economy and the relationship between that stratification and public claim-making. We do not directly observe political agency among enslaved or indigenous actors, even though those groups shaped the colony’s political economy and security environment. We return to this limitation in the discussion.

5 Data and methods

5.1 Petition signatories

Our dependent variable is public petition signing. We use the list of all 404 signatories to the 1779 Cape Patriots memorandum, collected by Baartman and published as an appendix to his dissertation (Baartman, 2011). The originals are held at the Western Cape Archives and Record Service, C 2665, pp. 2–9. We treat signatures as observable, public-facing participation. This is narrower than ‘support’ for the movement, which may have included individuals who would not risk public association or who preferred less visible forms of participation. A signature was also a costly act: petitions were public documents, and signing one against the Company involved reputational risk, which is what makes the composition of the signatory list analytically revealing (Zaret, 1996). Barriers to signing do not appear to have been steep: illiteracy, for example, was not a hindrance, as four petitioners signed with an X.

5.2 Tax censuses and the construction of production-asset value

To locate petitioners within the colony’s economic structure, we use the *opgaafrollen* (tax censuses). Compiled annually by colonial authorities, these agricultural tax censuses list household heads and spouses, numbers of children, enslaved workers, and Khoesan labourers, alongside agricultural assets and outputs (Fourie, 2013; Fourie and Von Fintel, 2011).

Our analysis focuses on Stellenbosch and Drakenstein, the two largest and most established settler districts in 1779 and home to most of the colony’s settler population. The districts span the urban settlement of Stellenbosch town, large commercial farms, and frontier homesteads, covering a wide range of economic and social positions. The two remaining districts are not available. Records for the Cape District, including Cape Town, do not survive for this period, so the most urban settlers – artisans and the transient administrative and mercantile population – are outside our frame. Records for Swellendam are incomplete. Swellendam was a recently established outlying district with a smaller, dispersed frontier population; given its remoteness and weak political integration, few petitioners are likely to have come from there (Penn, 2005). Our results therefore speak to the rural agrarian settler population the census observes, not to the colony as a whole.

Matching signatories to the census. We manually matched petition names to census names using conservative criteria that prioritise false negatives over false positives: when multiple individuals with identical first and last names appeared in the tax censuses, we excluded the match. We matched 165 of 404 signatories (41%). The order of names and the decile-specific match rates suggest that recruitment began in Cape Town, whose signers do not appear in our Stellenbosch–Drakenstein census frame, and later moved into the rural districts. Table 1 shows the matching rate across petition deciles. Matches in the first decile include several high officeholders from Stellenbosch and Drakenstein at the front of the petition. The lower rates in deciles two to four are consistent with mobilisation in the Cape District. High rates in deciles six to nine suggest that we match most rural petitioners, while the decline in the final decile may reflect Swellendam signers or Cape signers added at the end. Cape Town signatories, particularly VOC retirees and the urban mercantile class, are a specific and identifiable gap. §6.7 reports a bounding exercise that asks what Cape District petitioners would need to look like for the rural wealth finding to reverse.

For the common 1779 wealth sample we retain all households recording a positive quantity on at least one of the five priced asset series. This yields $N = 1,139$ households, including 153 petitioners and 986 non-petitioners. The filter removes 236 households, 12 of them petitioners, that report none of the five: some are sparse records, but others are genuine households whose assets lay outside the priced series, twenty-nine of them recording enslaved workers. We note this because it is relevant to the bounding exercise in §6.7.

Table 1: Match rate by decile of signature position

Decile (1 = first)	Signatories	Matched	Match rate
D1	41	11	26.8%
D2	41	4	9.8%
D3	41	3	7.3%
D4	41	1	2.4%
D5	40	12	30.0%
D6	40	26	65.0%
D7	40	34	85.0%
D8	40	33	82.5%
D9	40	30	75.0%
D10	40	11	27.5%

The *opgaafrollen* have known limitations. They centre settler households, with enslaved people and indigenous groups appearing only as numerical counts that capture their position in the settler household economy, and erase any view of their own social experience and activity. Settlers had incentives to underreport wealth to avoid taxation, and the figures are self-reported (Fourie, 2013; Fourie and Von Fintel, 2011). Notwithstanding those constraints, the Stellenbosch and Drakenstein *opgaafrollen* are the most comprehensive source on the Cape’s eighteenth-century settler economy.

We construct a *production-asset value* from five priced productive series in the *opgaafrollen* (cattle, sheep, horses, wheat volume, wine), valued using the decadal price series compiled by Fourie and Von Fintel (2011). The measure is narrower than household wealth in the probate-inventory sense (Fourie, 2013): it excludes land, vines, brandy, wagons, firearms, credit balances, and the capitalised value of enslaved labour. Slave counts enter as a separate covariate.

5.3 Heemraden and local officeholding

We measure petitioners’ political status first from the office titles recorded on the petition: *Heemraad* for a current officeholder and *oud Heemraad* for a former officeholder. We then use the roll compiled by Walters, Fourie, and Ross (2026) from the *Resolusies* of the Council of Policy, the Stellenbosch and Drakenstein district minutes, and De Wet’s nineteenth-century compilations. The extract records annual appointment cohorts for 1719–1783. Appointments were made in December, service began the following January, and terms lasted two years.

We use this evidence in two distinct ways. Table 5 asks what share of the Stellenbosch–Drakenstein officeholders signed. The combined roll contains four annual Stellenbosch–Drakenstein appointments followed by two Swellendam appointments; we retain the first four positions and hand-link the twelve title-identified petitioners to the district roll. Eleven occur in the 1762–1778 appointment cohorts used by the table; the twelfth, François du Toit de Oude, appears in the 1722 Stellenbosch–Drakenstein cohort. We consolidate spelling variants while retaining unqualified

common names as distinct from officeholders explicitly marked *d'oude*.

Table 6 instead compares prior service among matched petitioner and non-petitioner households. For petitioners, the office title provides the indicator directly. For non-petitioners, we code prior heemraad service by matching the household head to the pre-1779 roll. Matching follows the same conservative protocol used for the census link, with patronymics and common suffixes (*d'oude*, *d'jonge*, senior/junior) preserved when they distinguish namesakes. Where a normalised name matches multiple 1779 household heads, as for the de Villiers, du Toit, Marais, and du Plessis lineages, we use the *opgaafrollen* panel to compare the historical heemraad's service years with each candidate's tenure as household head. Twenty-one such collisions arise. Eight are settled by an actual overlap; eleven show no overlap and are assigned to the longest-tenured candidate; two cannot be resolved and are dropped. Online appendix E reports the differential under alternative treatments. This household linkage is separate from the direct hand match used in Table 5.

5.4 Auction networks

To locate petitioners within the colony's interaction structure, we use auction records of deceased estates (*vendurollen*), compiled by the Cape Orphan Chambers between 1701 and 1825 (MOOC Series 10, volumes 1–36). These auctions were public events at which estates were liquidated and community members gathered, often over multiple days. Historians have highlighted that these were social as well as economic gatherings, semi-festive events attended by whole households, which supported diverse social connections (Mitchell, 2009; Fourie et al., 2025). The society-spanning scope of these records and the communal social practices they reflect make the auction data a valuable proxy for the broad-yet-shallow 'weak ties' of Cape settler society.

We reconstruct a two-mode network linking individuals to the auctions at which they purchased goods in the five years before the petition (1775–1779). Centrality measures are computed directly on the bipartite graph; one-mode projection compresses path distances and inflates density and closeness centrality in affiliation networks (Everett and Borgatti, 2013). Linkage between person nodes and petition signatories was performed through fuzzy matching on first, middle, and last names, honorifics, and gender, and all petitioner matches were human-verified. The matched sample contains 2,225 person-nodes (172 petitioners, 2,053 non-petitioners). We compute standard centrality measures (Freeman, 1978; Wasserman and Faust, 1994): degree (number of auctions attended), closeness (average network distance to all others), and betweenness (frequency of lying on shortest paths between other node pairs). Figure 4 uses a Fruchterman–Reingold layout (Fruchterman and Reingold, 1991, seed = 1779).

One feature of the data shapes our inferential strategy: we observe auction participants only when they won a bid, so the network is filtered through purchasing power and successful bidding rather than pure social attendance. We therefore distinguish the network effects of high auction activity (degree) from the residual signal of brokerage position after accounting for degree, as reported in §6.6.

5.5 Analytical strategy

We compare petitioners and non-petitioners across three dimensions of social position: economic (wealth in the tax censuses), political (office holding and prior heemraad service), and relational (auction-network position). We test for differences in mean and distribution, and ask whether the petitioners are concentrated in particular wealth and centrality strata. We also adjudicate the relative deprivation account using the panel structure of the *opgaafrollen* to test for differential within-household wealth trends before 1779. This allows us a detailed picture of the social position of petitioners in the Cape.

6 Results

6.1 Who were the petitioners? Wealth characterisation

How did petitioners' wealth compare with that of non-petitioners? Petitioners were markedly wealthier overall, concentrated in the top wealth quartile and in the wine sector, a marker of the established rural economy, and under-represented in sheep farming, a marker of peripheral pastoral agriculture.

Figure 1 visualises petitioners' wealth relative to the rest of the observed rural population, showing the joint distribution of total wealth (detailed below) and slaveholding. Petitioners cluster among wealthier households, with the three wealthiest petitioners ranking among the ten wealthiest individuals in the two districts.

Table 2 compares mean asset holdings between petitioners and non-petitioners in the common 1779 wealth sample ($N = 1,139$; petitioners = 153). Petitioners held more horses, wheat, wine, slaves, and settler household members than non-petitioners. The gaps are largest where the established rural economy was concentrated: petitioners held roughly four times the wine wealth and nearly twice the enslaved workforce of non-petitioners. Cattle differences are modest, and sheep – the asset most closely associated with the frontier pastoralist (*trekboer*) economy on the settlement periphery – show no difference at all.

Table 2: Wealth and household characteristics: petitioners vs. non-petitioners, 1779.

	Pet. mean	Non-pet. mean	Diff.	Pet. n	Non-pet. n	p
Cattle (Rds)	109.5	88.3	21.2	153	986	0.06
Sheep (Rds)	64.5	74.2	−9.8	153	986	0.31
Horses (Rds)	116.0	59.1	57.0	153	986	<.001***
Wheat (Rds)	32.0	14.0	18.0	153	986	0.01**
Wine (Rds)	194.5	46.4	148.1	153	986	<.001***
Slaves (no.)	7.25	3.84	3.41	153	986	<.001***
Settlers (no.)	4.33	3.46	0.87	153	986	<.001***

Note: Values in *rijksdaalders* (Rds). Two-sided t -tests. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

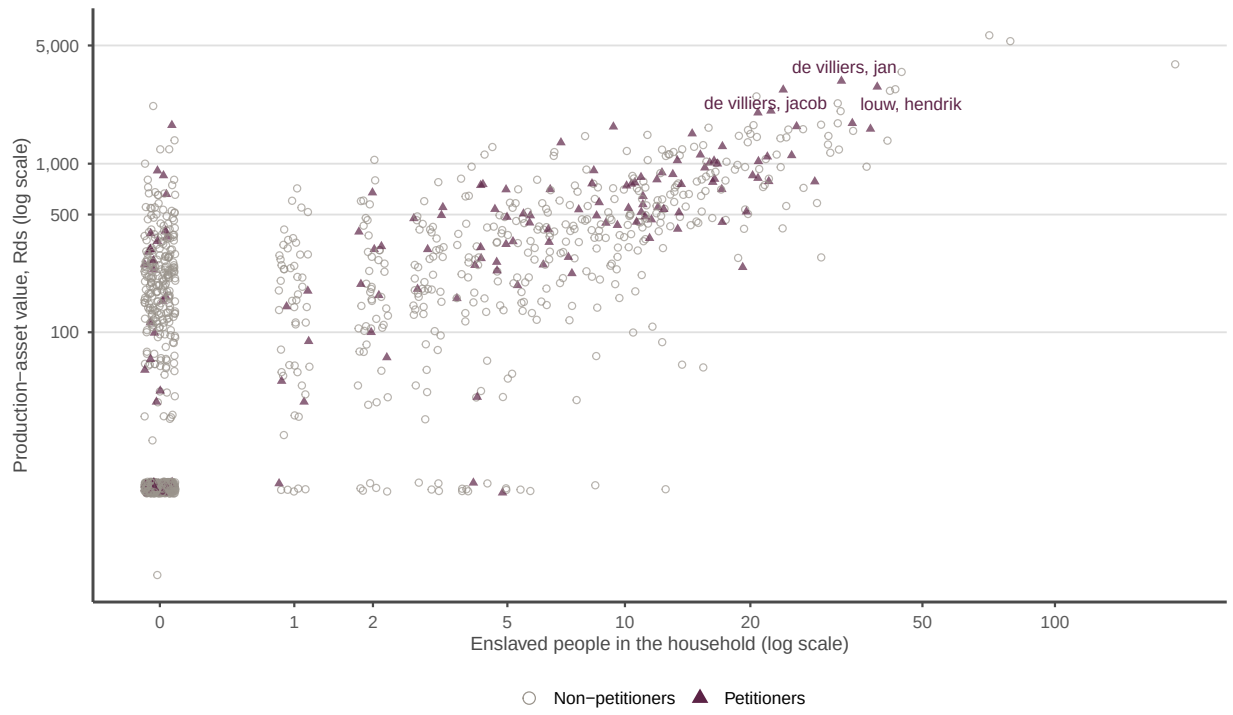


Figure 1: Production-asset value and slaveholding, 1779. Petitioners are filled triangles ($n = 153$); non-petitioners are open circles ($n = 986$). Both axes are $\log(x + 1)$ so that households holding none of an asset remain on the panel; tick labels give the underlying raw values. Points are jittered slightly to separate ties. The three labelled households are the wealthiest petitioners.

Distributional and rank tests point to the same conclusion (online appendix A): petitioners rank higher than non-petitioners on the overall index and on every asset except sheep, the advantage is greatest for wine, total wealth, and slaves, and all differences survive false-discovery correction. Figure 2 visualises sectoral differences by comparing cumulative distribution functions for key assets. Each curve plots the share of households holding at or below the quantity on the horizontal axis, so a curve farther to the right indicates systematically larger holdings. Households holding none of an asset are retained and appear as the height of the curve at zero. The petitioner distribution lies to the right of the non-petitioner distribution for every asset except sheep. The wine gap is especially large: 43 per cent of petitioners held wine compared with 11 per cent of non-petitioners, and the difference persists at higher thresholds.

Petitioners were therefore drawn from a rightward-shifted part of the asset distribution, especially for the commodities that defined the wine-and-slave elite. They were disproportionately wealthy and, among the wealthy, concentrated among established farmers at the centre of the Cape’s rural economy.

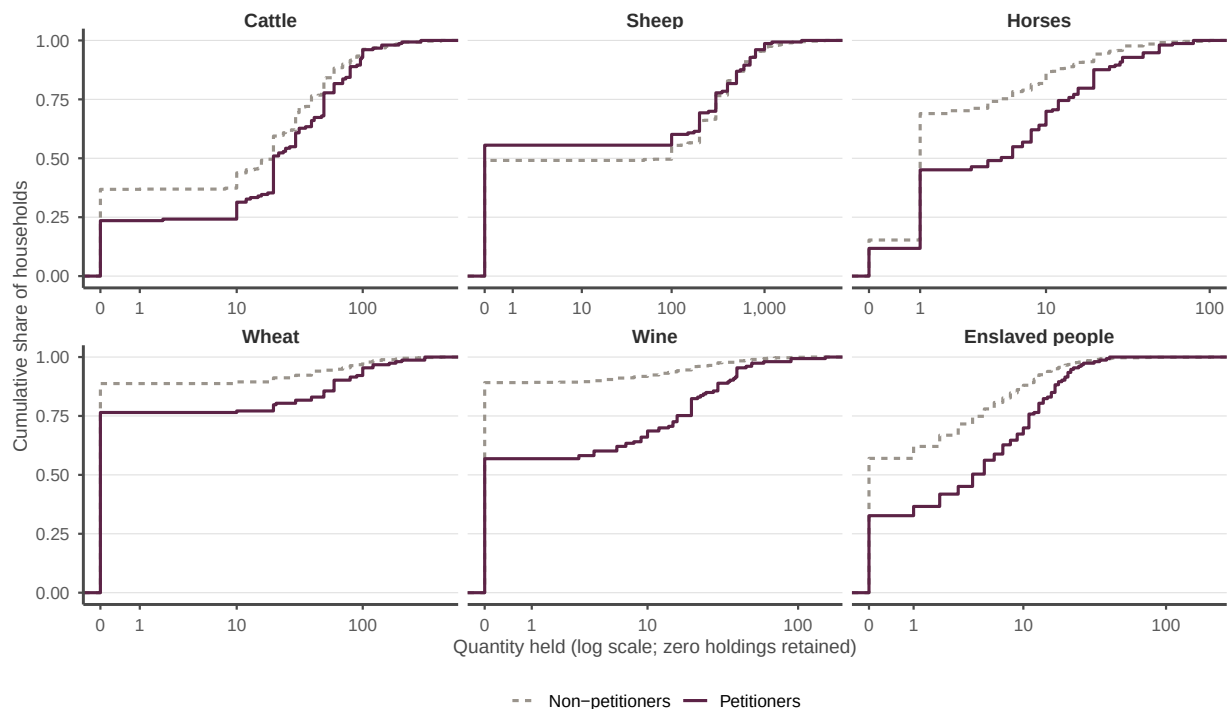


Figure 2: Cumulative distributions of asset quantities for petitioners and non-petitioners.

6.2 Concentration at the top and within-elite differentiation

The mean differences in Table 2 are not driven only by a long left tail of poorer non-petitioners. Panel A of Table 3 shows a clear concentration of petitioners among the wealthier households: petitioning rates are 8.4% in the bottom quartile of rural wealth, 8.0% in the second quartile,

12.0% in the third, and 25.3% in the top quartile. This pattern is inconsistent with mobilisation by the discontented poor or the bimodal wealth distribution implied by a populist account. Its wealthy skew also provides little support for broad cross-class mobilisation, although settlers throughout the wealth distribution did sign. Petitioning was concentrated in the upper tail of observable rural wealth.

Table 3: Upper-tail concentration and within-elite differentiation.

<i>Panel A. Petitioning by wealth quartile</i>					
Wealth quartile	<i>n</i>	Petitioners	Petition rate	Mean wealth (Rds)	
Q1	371	31	8.4%	11.2	
Q2	200	16	8.0%	101.9	
Q3	283	34	12.0%	276.5	
Q4	285	72	25.3%	892.1	

<i>Panel B. Petitioners vs. non-petitioners within top wealth quartile</i>					
Variable	Petitioners	Non-petitioners	Difference	<i>p</i>	
Total wealth (Rds)	930.7	879.0	51.8	0.52	
Wine wealth (Rds)	376.7	190.2	186.5	0.002**	
Wheat wealth (Rds)	59.4	50.0	9.3	0.52	
Sheep wealth (Rds)	103.2	203.7	−100.5	<.001***	
Slaves (no.)	13.1	12.6	0.5	0.74	

Note: Panel A uses the common 1779 wealth sample ($N = 1,139$). Panel B restricts the sample to the top wealth quartile ($n = 285$) and reports group means, with the Difference column the mean difference. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Panel B of Table 3 focuses on the wealthiest quartile. Among elite households, which elites signed? Within the top quartile, petitioners were no richer overall than non-petitioning elites. What distinguished them was their domain of economic activity: elite petitioners held roughly twice the wine wealth and half the sheep wealth of their non-petitioning peers, while wheat wealth and slaveholding did not differ. Petitioners were thus disproportionately drawn from commercially oriented wine households and less often from sheep-oriented pastoral elites.

This compositional contrast is revealing. Wine wealth in eighteenth-century Stellenbosch and Drakenstein was concentrated on long-established farms with secure water rights, enslaved labour, and the kinship and credit networks held by older settler lineages (Van Duin and Ross, 1987; Fourie and Von Fintel, 2011; Groenewald, 2011; Mitchell, 2009). Van Duin and Ross (1987) show that these districts came to dominate the colony’s wine economy, with production rising sevenfold between 1740 and the end of the century. In their formulation, “the Cape district remained the bread basket of the colony”, while the inland districts became its “wine barrel” (Van Duin and Ross, 1987, p. 45). Wine farmers were therefore at the economic centre of these rural districts. Sheep wealth, by contrast, characterised the frontier-oriented pastoral economy extending into the *trekboer* zone documented by Penn (2005). This composition points to a petitioning faction drawn

disproportionately from settled wine-farming lineages rather than pastoralists on the less settled periphery. This distinction also aligns with the petition’s demands for direct trade with passing ships and the right to export. Wine was a market-oriented luxury product (Van Duin and Ross, 1987, p. 43), so the VOC’s control of trade constrained producers seeking local and international markets more directly than pastoralists serving passing ships and local demand.

6.3 Wealth trajectories: testing the deprivation mechanism

Petitioners were wealthier, but were they a once wealthy stratum on the decline? If relative deprivation drove mobilisation – if petitioners had once been prosperous but were experiencing a reversal – their wealth trajectories before 1779 should diverge from those of non-petitioners. We test this using the panel structure of the *opgaafrollen*. Figure 3 displays average household wealth for petitioners and non-petitioners from 1764 to 1779. The two series are nearly parallel; petitioners remain well above non-petitioners throughout the period, with no visible divergence in the years preceding 1779.

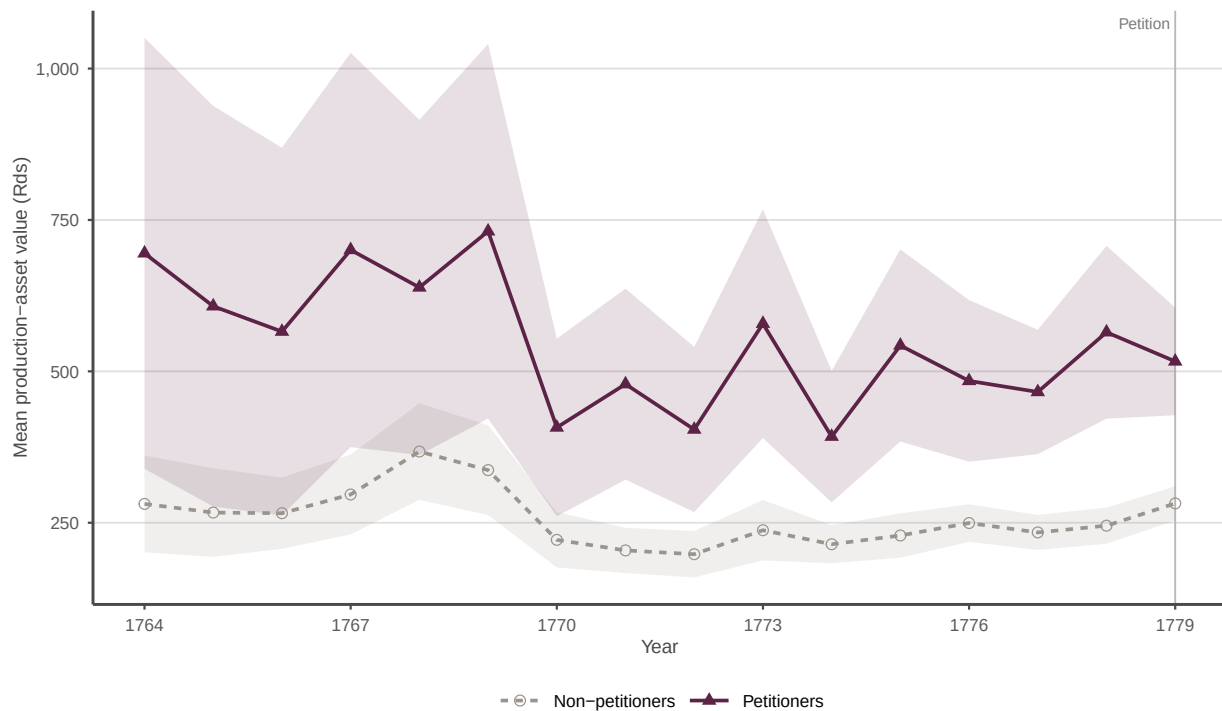


Figure 3: Average household wealth, 1764–1779. No differential trend is evident.

A formal pre-trend test confirms this visual impression. Using only pre-petition years (1764–1778), we estimate a within-household trend model in which the coefficient of interest captures whether future petitioners were on a different wealth trajectory. The petitioner-specific trend term is substantively negligible and statistically indistinguishable from zero (online appendix B). Growth comparisons agree: an event study shows that any detectable year-on-year differences

are inconsistent with the relative-deprivation thesis. If anything, petitioners followed an upward relative trajectory in some preceding years. Relative deprivation therefore does not explain why wealthy settlers challenged the VOC. Petitioners were wealthier and did not experience relative decline before 1779.

6.4 Political office: testing access to institutional power

We turn to officeholding to ask whether petitioners were marginal to the institutions of colonial rule or already recognised within them. If the Patriots were drawn primarily from the margins of power, we would expect few links to the colony’s civic, military, or church offices. Instead, Table 4 shows that officeholding was common among signatories and spread across the principal institutional domains through which settler standing was recognised. Forty-seven of the 404 signatories (11.6%) list VOC-recognised titles, spread fairly evenly across the Cape’s civic, military, and ecclesiastical hierarchies.

Table 4: Officeholding among petition signatories by institutional domain.

Office	English title	Domain	Current	Past	Total
Civic administration					
Burgerraad	Burgher councillor	Civic	3	0	3
Heemraad	District official	Civic	4	8	12
Commissaris	Commissioner	Civic	1	1	2
Brandmeester	Fire warden	Civic	1	0	1
<i>Civic subtotal</i>			9	9	18 (38%)
Military					
Capitein	Captain	Military	2	2	4
Luijtenant	Lieutenant	Military	5	1	6
Ritmeester	Cavalry captain	Military	1	0	1
Cornet	Cornet	Military	3	0	3
Vaandrig	Ensign	Military	3	0	3
<i>Military subtotal</i>			14	3	17 (36%)
Church					
Ouderling	Elder	Church	2	2	4
Diacon	Deacon	Church	1	7	8
<i>Church subtotal</i>			3	9	12 (26%)
Total			26	21	47

Note: The table records the most prestigious office identified for each officeholding signatory. Many officeholders may have held additional offices over the life course. The 47 officeholders represent 11.6% of the 404 petition signatories.

We now focus on the office of heemraad (pl. heemraden), whose holders deployed VOC power in settler communities. Heemraden were elite settler officers who exercised local administrative and lower judicial authority in the rural districts. They were unsalaried officials serving under a salaried landdrost (magistrate), rather than VOC employees. Drawn from the district’s “most

notable settlers”, they linked central authority and rural settler society. Appointment was for two years and staggered, with half the eight sitting places renewed each year. Selection was “strictly controlled”: the continuing heemraden nominated twice the number of candidates required, from whom the central government chose the appointees (Dooling, 1991, pp. 7–8). Heemraden projected VOC administrative and judicial power into the countryside but had no authority over colony-level decisions. The office therefore exemplifies the colonial incorporation of locally recognised leaders beneath a formal colonial official.

Twelve petitioners identified themselves as current or former (*oud*) heemraden. All twelve can be linked by hand to the Stellenbosch–Drakenstein roll compiled by Walters, Fourie, and Ross (2026). Four were among the eight men serving in 1779; seven had served during 1775–1779; and eleven had served during 1763–1779. The remaining man, François du Toit de Oude, appears in the 1722 cohort. The distinction is therefore temporal rather than geographic: the seventeen-year row below captures eleven of the twelve title-identified signers, while all twelve belong to the district’s longer officeholding history. This concentration locates the petition among recognised local notables who had administered VOC power at district level.

Table 5: Petition participation among Stellenbosch–Drakenstein heemraden.

Service status	Unique officeholders	Appointment slots	Petitioners	Share petitioning
Current in 1779	8	8	4	50%
Served in 1775–1779	17	20	7	41%
Served in 1763–1779	39	68	11	28%

Note: Only the four Stellenbosch–Drakenstein appointments in each annual cohort are used, not the two Swellendam ones. Two-year terms mean the 1777 and 1778 cohorts comprise the eight officeholders serving in 1779. The five- and seventeen-year rows use appointment cohorts 1774–1778 and 1762–1778, respectively. Unique officeholders consolidate hand-verified spelling variants; unqualified common names are not merged with men explicitly marked *d’oude*. Shares use unique officeholders as the denominator. The full crosswalk is in the replication package.

Table 5 reverses the question: rather than asking how many petitioners were heemraden, it asks how many heemraden joined the petition. Four of eight serving Stellenbosch–Drakenstein heemraden signed. Among the seventeen unique men who served during 1775–1779, seven signed (41%). Across the full 1763–1779 service window, eleven of thirty-nine unique officeholders signed (28%). This long-window share is conservative as an estimate among surviving officeholders because some earlier appointees may have died before the petition. The corrected reconstruction therefore shows substantial recruitment among settlers entrusted with the district’s highest civic office.

Table 6 compares heemraad service across petitioners and non-petitioners in our matched households, by wealth quartile. This is a different estimand from Table 5: it asks whether matched petitioner households were more likely than matched non-petitioner households to contain a prior officeholder. To label non-petitioners, we match household heads in the common wealth sample to the list of prior heemraden. Prior officeholding increased with wealth: among non-petitioners,

Table 6: Prior heemraad service by wealth quartile and petition status.

Wealth quartile	Sample		Prior heemraad service %		Diff. (pp)	p (Fisher)
	n	Pet.	Pet.	Non-pet.		
Q1	370	31	0.0	1.5	-1.5	1.00
Q2	200	16	0.0	2.2	-2.2	1.00
Q3	283	34	5.9	2.8	+3.1	.30
Q4	282	72	12.5	3.8	+8.7	.017*
All	1,135	153	7.2	2.4	+4.7	.004**

Note: Common 1779 wealth sample (after wealth filter; $N = 1,135$ rows where the heemraad indicator is non-missing). Petitioner-side heemraad indicator is from the petition name title (heemraad or oud heemraad). Non-petitioner-side indicator is from name match against the heemraden list, using year and household head data to disambiguate populous lineages with duplicate names. Fisher exact two-sided p . The four non-petitioner rows in the two unresolvable collision groups are excluded as missing on the indicator. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

prior service rises steadily across the wealth quartiles, and all eleven matched petitioner heemraden are in the top two quartiles. The gap is concentrated at the top: one in eight top-quartile petitioners had served as heemraad, against roughly one in twenty-six top-quartile non-petitioners. In the full rural sample, 7.2 per cent of petitioners and 2.4 per cent of non-petitioners had served – the threefold difference reported in the abstract. Heemraden are thus over-represented among petitioners, especially at the top of the wealth distribution. This comparison rests on a linkage judgement that the wealth and network results do not require, because petitioners declare the office themselves while for non-petitioners it must be inferred from names. The differential is positive under every rule that uses the panel to resolve namesake collisions, but its magnitude is sensitive to how ambiguous namesakes are treated, and two rules that discard or adversely assign them turn it slightly negative. Online appendix E reports the alternatives, the accuracy of the name match against the roster, and the limits of the continuity rule.

Taken together, these analyses show that petitioners were not excluded from all political power: they were often locally prominent. The findings instead strengthen our thesis that the conflict was grounded in a structural divide between VOC institutional power and locally generated power. Heemraden are an archetypal case of colonial power projection. They were empowered local notables who brought VOC administration to the hinterland, yet remained subordinate to the VOC landdrost and without influence over the Company’s central institutions. In our framing, they were local elite allies recruited to the VOC governing project but structurally excluded from its governing decisions. They were also well placed to fill any new seats in the councils that the petition demanded. The combination of local recognition, administrative experience, and blocked access to central authority helps explain why the Cape Patriots could organise a public institutional challenge without resembling either a deprived mass movement or a broad settler-nationalist mobilisation.

6.5 Network position of petitioners

Finally, we turn to examine the social position of petitioners. Using auction networks as a proxy for the weak ties of Cape colony society, we find that petitioners were more socially central figures than non-petitioners, showing that those who joined the petition were more embedded and more able to bridge across diverse Cape communities than those who did not.

Table 7 compares network centrality for petitioners and non-petitioners in the auction network. Petitioners attended more auctions, were closer to every other node in the network, and had roughly twice the betweenness centrality of non-petitioners, with rank-based tests confirming each difference. Because betweenness in sparse co-attendance networks is heavily right-skewed and zero-inflated, those rank-based comparisons are more informative than the means. The contrast is clearest at the median: the typical non-petitioner attended a single auction and occupied no bridging position, while the typical petitioner attended more and occupied genuine bridging positions between others.

Table 7: Network centrality: petitioners vs. non-petitioners.

	Mean non-pet.	Mean pet.	t	p		% diff.
Degree	2.03	2.74	-3.25	.001	**	34.9
Closeness	0.234	0.244	-6.37	<.001	***	4.3
Betweenness	1,327	2,754	-2.07	.04	*	107.6
<i>Non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U)</i>						
	Med. non-pet.	Med. pet.	U	p		Cliff's Δ
Degree	1	2	140,400	<.001	***	0.205
Closeness	0.238	0.244	133,934	<.001	***	0.241
Betweenness	0	171	138,625	<.001	***	0.215

Note: Auction purchase network, 1775–1779, largest connected component. Non-petitioners $n = 2,053$; petitioners $n = 172$. U is reported for the non-petitioner group; Cliff's Δ is oriented so that positive values indicate petitioners ranking higher.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Figure 4 visualises the two-mode auction network. Each node represents either a person (petitioner or non-petitioner) or an auction event; edges connect individuals to the auctions at which they purchased goods. Petitioners (filled nodes) are visibly dispersed across the network rather than clustered in a single region of it, and many sit between otherwise separate auction clusters. Because auctions were held across the colony, proximity in this network indicates social reach across dispersed rural communities as well as shared attendance. Petitioners here are shown to be drawn from across the network, not a single localised and tightly connected faction. Further, petitioners have a wide reach, often bridging to more peripheral auctions, but not to the most isolated ones.

Petitioners were disproportionately central figures in this network. They were twice as likely as non-petitioners to appear at more than one auction and almost two and a half times as likely to occupy the top quintile of betweenness centrality. Figure 5 shows the density distributions of

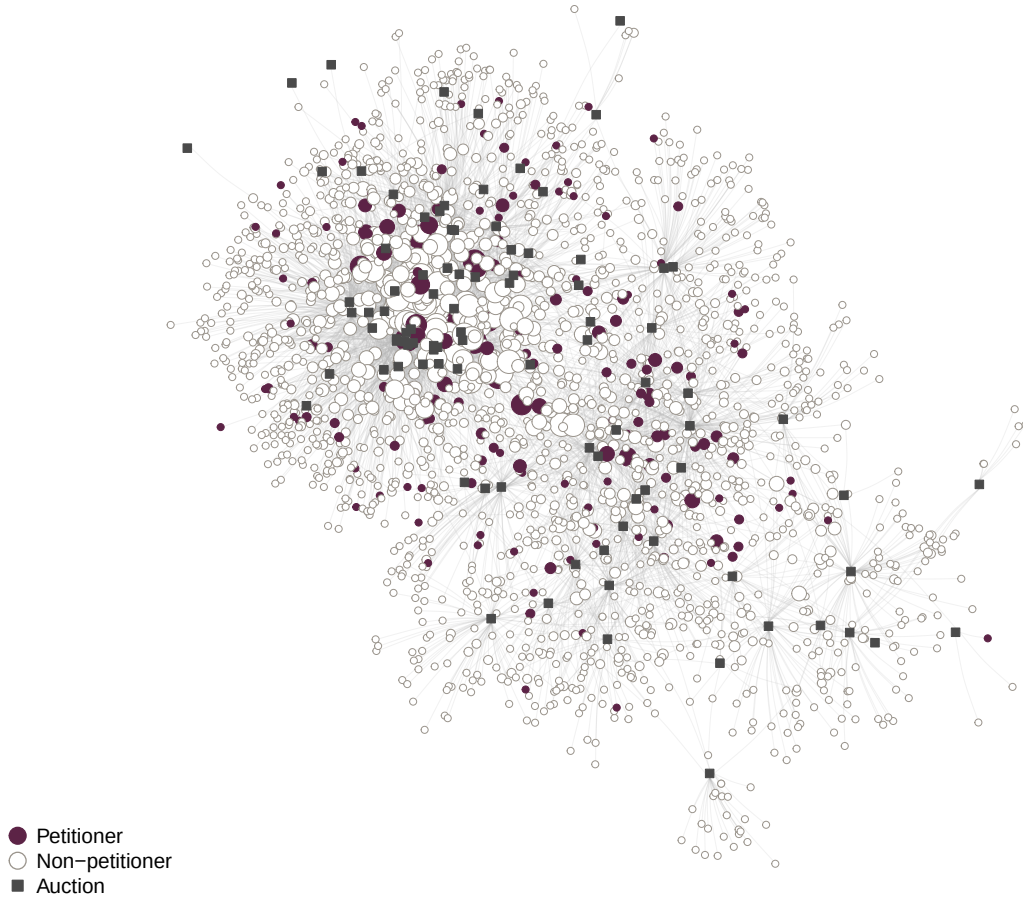


Figure 4: Two-mode auction network, 1775–1779. Filled circles are petitioners ($n = 172$); open circles are non-petitioners ($n = 2,053$); squares are auction events ($n = 95$). Edges connect individuals to auctions at which they purchased goods. Node area scales with degree under a single rule for all persons. Fruchterman–Reingold layout, seed = 1779; the one disconnected person–auction pair is omitted.

betweenness centrality and the rightward shift of the petitioner distribution.

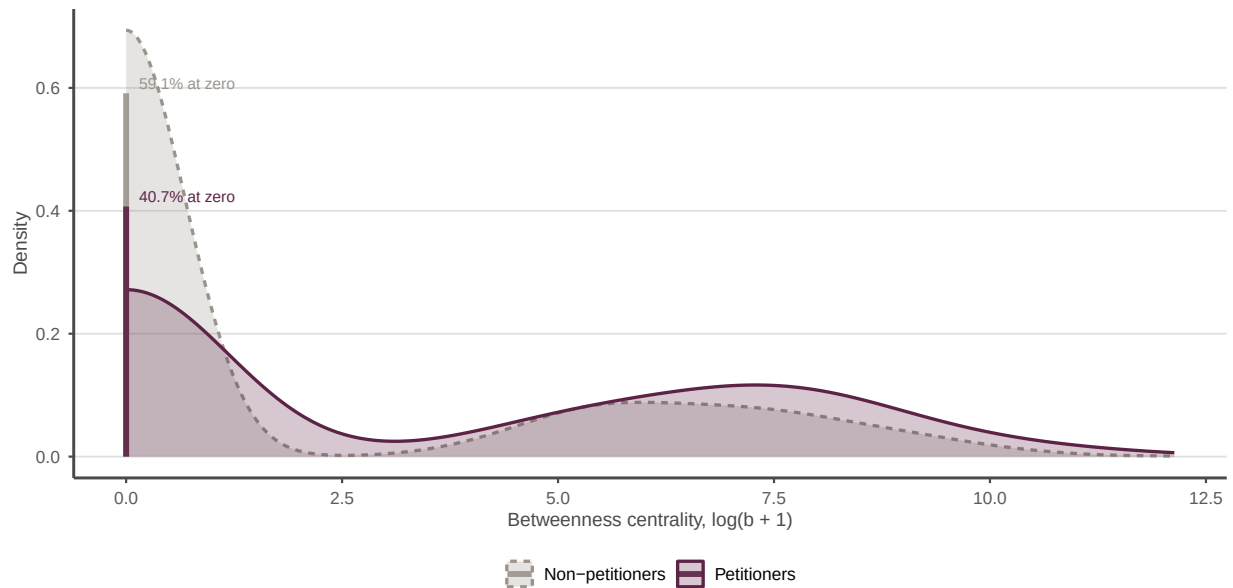


Figure 5: Density distributions of betweenness centrality by petition status. Petitioners are shifted rightward and are less clustered at 0.

Together, the statistics and visualisation locate petitioners in a diverse social space, showing that recruitment was not geographically confined. Petitioners were closer to all others than non-petitioners on average, yet were not concentrated in the network’s most central cluster. Their large mean betweenness advantage shows that many occupied bridging positions connecting otherwise less integrated communities across the colony. Historians’ accounts of auctions as social and festive gatherings (Mitchell, 2009), together with the evidence of wealth and local governing prestige above, provide context for interpreting these results. Many petitioners were notable settler elites with the means, prestige, and social recognition to participate in circles tied both to Cape Town’s urban export economy and to the agrarian economy of the outlying rural districts.

6.6 Brokerage, not mere attendance volume

Petitioners are more central in this network. Yet, to what extent is this network result a by-product of higher auction activity? Wealthier settlers may simply attend and purchase at more auctions, and we have shown petitioners were wealthier. We therefore ask how betweenness centrality (bridging position) relates to degree centrality (attendance volume) in predicting petition signing.

Table 8 reports three logistic regressions of petition signing on degree and betweenness centrality. On their own, both measures are strong predictors: those who attended more, and those who bridged more, are both more likely to be petitioners. Entered jointly, however, betweenness retains identifiable variance while the unique contribution of degree becomes indistinguishable from zero. A Firth-penalised rare-events correction (Firth, 1993) leaves the joint model essentially unchanged,

and a residualised specification confirms that the unique-to-betweenness component accounts for the variance (online appendix C1). We thus find that bridging position, over and above auction attendance, predicts petition signing. The reverse is not true: once bridging position is accounted for, attendance volume adds no further predictive power.

Table 8: Logistic regression: network centrality and petition signing (auction network, largest connected component).

	(1) Degree only	(2) Betweenness only	(3) Both
Log degree	4.97*** (0.705)		0.62 (0.088)
Log betweenness		0.79*** (0.112)	0.71* (0.101)

Note: Average marginal effects from logit, reported as percentage points per one-log-unit change. Underlying logit coefficients in parentheses. $N = 2,225$ (petitioners = 172, non-petitioners = 2,053). Variance inflation factors in col. 3 are 3.6 for both regressors. * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Permutation tests examine the same question at the level of network structure and affirm the result. We perform two tests: randomly reallocating the petitioner label across the observed network, and randomly reassigning ties while preserving degree (online appendix C2). The observed brokerage gap is more extreme than any of 2,000 random reallocations of petitioner labels, and a stricter configuration-model permutation preserving the bipartite degree sequence still leaves a significant residual advantage in bridging position once degree is held fixed. Petitioners purchased at more auctions and, net of that activity, had a greater capacity to bridge otherwise disconnected clusters.

If the network advantage merely reflected wealthier settlers attending more auctions, degree centrality would be the stronger predictor. Instead, betweenness remains predictive when the two measures enter together, whereas degree does not. Petitioners were active at multiple auction gatherings, but were distinguished above all by their movement across otherwise disconnected clusters. This supports the interpretation of petitioners as local elites tied both to the colonial centre and to rural, agrarian, and peripheral settler communities. Their embedded social capacity spanned a colony divided between local settler society and international imperial power.

A caveat applies. A signature reflects both the willingness to sign and the chance of being reached as the document circulated: brokers may have organised the petition, or it may have reached them along the same ties that give them high betweenness. We read bridging position in this combined sense, as the relational structure along which the petition circulated, and do not claim to identify organisers as such.

6.7 Robustness: Assessing missing Cape petitioners

The linkage rates reported in the data section show that we capture much of the petition’s second half, while unmatched signers in its first half almost certainly include many from the Cape District.

Of the 404 signatories, 153 enter the common rural wealth sample. Because the Cape tax records for this period do not survive, we cannot observe these urban petitioners. To assess robustness, we ask how poor the omitted signers would have to be to eliminate the observed wealth difference between petitioners and non-petitioners. The 153 petitioners in the common wealth sample average 516 rijksdaalders, compared with 282 for non-petitioners. The other 251 signatories fall outside that sample: 239 were not matched to the censuses and 12 were matched to households recording none of the five priced assets. For the combined petitioner mean to equal the non-petitioner mean, these 251 would have to average about 139 rijksdaalders, or 49 per cent of the non-petitioner mean. Put differently, more than half would need to record no wealth at all, with every remaining signer holding the full non-petitioner average. Milder assumptions do not eliminate the premium: if the omitted signers resembled non-petitioners, the combined petitioner mean would be 371 against 282 (online appendix D1). The premium is not robust to every assumption. If 70 per cent held nothing and the remaining 30 per cent held non-petitioner wealth, the combined mean would fall to 248; if all 251 held nothing, it would fall to 196. These scenarios mark the limit of the exercise. Our measure captures agricultural production assets, so Cape Town merchants, artisans, and Company retirees might record little of it regardless of their urban standing. The bound therefore supports the claim that petitioners came from the wealthier part of the *rural* settler economy, not a claim about the wealth of the movement as a whole.

7 Discussion

Evidence from tax-census wealth, political officeholding, and auction networks gives a consistent picture of those who challenged the colonial governance of the Cape. Across all three domains, petitioners came disproportionately from the upper echelons of settler society. These findings locate the structural basis of mobilisation in this settler-colonial context and contradict the movement’s own rhetoric of deprivation. We find neither mobilisation from the margins or from those facing relative deprivation, nor the cross-class participation predicted by populist or settler-nationalist accounts. Instead, petitioners were a relative elite who used the petition to challenge VOC governance in public.

Petitioners were wealthier, concentrated in the upper quartile of wealth, and distinguished among the wealthy by their location in the established wine-producing region. Many were leading men across administrative, military, and religious hierarchies. Petitioners were disproportionately likely to have held the rural administrative-judicial office of heemraad. Four of the eight men serving Stellenbosch–Drakenstein in 1779 signed, as did seven of the seventeen who had served during the preceding five years. Petitioners were also more socially central figures: they were active across communities and, net of that activity, distinguished by their ability to bridge the Cape’s central and rural social spheres. These domains of power overlapped. Wealthy settlers were disproportionately likely to hold heemraad office, as Walters, Fourie, and Ross (2026) show. Our auction-network analysis therefore separates the effects of activity from the ability to bridge Cape communities,

recognising that wealth increased opportunities to connect rural and urban spheres.

From this quantitative perspective, we also glean a rich outline of the notable and influential men of the rural agricultural heartland of the Cape Colony. Let us offer an interpretive picture of what these numbers suggest: A petitioning settler notable may have been a wealthy farmer and slave owner, perhaps a wine maker who sold his goods to the VOC storehouse to be sold on by the VOC to passing ships. He may have been a deacon or church elder, or risen through the local militia, perhaps even rising to the role of Heemraad to preside over and resolve conflicts among his settler peers. He was able to leave his farm to the supervision of others and travel, able to mingle with society in the town as much as be welcomed at a rural homestead, participating in buying and in festivities at local auctions across the colony when others could not achieve this same access. The picture, then, is of figures with economic, social, and administrative influence embedded in their local context. Yet this influence was institutionally curtailed at a key point. The VOC would brook no admittance to control over governing institutions which set the rules of the game. The notable settler who had accumulated this rural wealth and prestige remained of a different class to the VOC appointed officials who were always able to swing the game in their own favour, to control the rules of access to the world market, to control the rules which shape how society was governed and how judgment and justice were dispensed.

Attending to the structure of formal political authority under VOC rule directs attention to an alternative source of political challenge and grounds our thesis for our proposed mechanism of elite decoupling.

7.1 Elite decoupling and historical political sociology

The public political challenge of those who are disproportionately wealthy, socially connected, and likely to be local officials points to an elite cleavage and not a non-elite challenger group. Two features make this public intra-elite challenge puzzling: first, public elite challenge is surprising in this relatively small settler colony where a small elite are more likely to be cross-connected. Second, in another context, where political-institutional power overlaps with wealth, prestige, and social power, we might expect conflict to be absorbed through elite negotiation and settlement (Burton and Higley, 1987; Higley, 2010).

We argue that a mechanism of *elite decoupling* explains this public form of intra-elite conflict: those with local economic and social power are decoupled from access to any political control over the formal institutions of governance. Our thesis is that such decoupling is especially clear in colonial contexts, where the institutional centre of authority is deliberately located outside the local society it governs. Colonial rule is sustained by two contradictory imperatives. Imperial authorities must retain control over the institutions that connect the colony to the metropole and determine the allocation of trade, offices, taxation, and legal authority. Yet they must also govern territories that they lack the personnel, local knowledge, social reach, and legitimacy to administer directly. They consequently depend on locally embedded allies who can project colonial power into society (Robinson, 1972; Chatterjee, 1993; Cooper, 2002). This dependence gives local elites

opportunities to accumulate wealth, standing, and organisational capacity, while the imperative of imperial control restricts their access to the institutions through which the colony's governing rules are made. Colonial governance can therefore generate the very local elite capable of challenging it while simultaneously preventing that elite's incorporation into central political authority.

The Cape Patriots illustrate this contradiction. Settlers with wealth, social prestige, and VOC-recognised standing to administer rural society challenged the Company's institutional power. Participation by Stellenbosch–Drakenstein heemraden is especially illustrative: four of eight serving officeholders, and eleven of thirty-nine who had served during 1763–1779, signed. These men projected VOC power, adjudicated disputes, and administered the countryside beneath a VOC landdrost, yet remained excluded from the colony-level institutions whose rules they implemented. Local officeholding therefore did not eliminate the cleavage between settlers and Company officials. Instead, it gave settler notables administrative experience, public recognition, and an understanding of governance while making the limits of their authority especially visible. These challengers combined the material capacity to organise, knowledge of governance, and exclusion from influence over its central rules. The metropolitan centre's effort to retain direct control of the colonial apparatus thus became structurally decoupled from a locally embedded elite that accumulated wealth and subordinate political authority. The same structural tension recurs in settler revolutions in the Americas and anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia.

Our reading is consistent with the principal modern study of the movement. Baartman (2019) documents the 1779 conflict as a factional struggle within the Cape's ruling stratum, running along lines of kinship, patronage, and commercial interest. On the movement's composition we agree: the Patriots were neither the poor nor the burghers en masse. What our account adds is the institutional reading. The factional alignments Baartman documents are the local expression of a structural cleavage between locally embedded wealth and standing on one side and reserved central office on the other.

This argument extends historical political sociology's treatment of elite conflict. Existing studies show how competition among elites can drive political transformation when different factions control different resources, when established networks fragment, or when political change threatens an elite's status (Lachmann, 2000; Bearman, 1993; Padgett and Ansell, 1993; Zhang, 2021). Elite decoupling identifies a related but distinct configuration. The relevant division need not arise from newly diverging interests within a previously integrated ruling class. It can be institutionally produced and reproduced through the separation of scales of power: local elites accumulate economic resources, social embeddedness, and subordinate governing experience, while an externally appointed elite retains authority over the central state. The resulting conflict is not simply between old and new wealth, or between cohesive factions competing within shared institutions. It is between elites whose power rests in different domains and whose opportunities for mutual incorporation are structurally unequal. The cleavage that matters here runs neither between colonial officials and their metropolitan principals, as in Adams's (1996) account of Company decay, nor between elite fractions competing within a single polity, as in Lachmann's (2000), but between

locally embedded elites and the external offices to which they had no institutional access.

This mechanism for intra-elite conflict should not be understood as an automatic consequence of separation between wealth and office. Public elite challenge becomes more likely when several conditions coincide. A local elite must possess sufficient independent resources to withstand retaliation; it must be socially embedded enough to coordinate trans-local claim making; and its exclusion must concern institutions that materially constrain its interests and status. At the same time, ordinary channels of incorporation, rotation, or backstage bargaining must remain limited. Where local elites can readily purchase office, enter representative institutions, or secure durable patronage from central rulers, conflict may be absorbed rather than made into public challenge. Where they lack resources or cross-community connections, exclusion may instead produce acquiescence, fragmented resistance, or exit. The Cape Patriots combined the material and social capacities unusually clearly: economic security, local administrative prestige, network brokerage, and exclusion from the institutions governing trade, justice, and political appointment.

The parallels with other colonial challenges are therefore structural rather than claims of historical equivalence. Commercial and landed elites in British North America, Creole elites in Spanish America, and colonial agents within the Dutch imperial system operated in different institutional and ideological settings (Beard, 1913; Centeno, 1997, 2002; Adams, 1994, 1996). Nevertheless, each confronted some version of the problem identified here: locally accumulated power could not be converted on equal terms into control over institutions ultimately answerable to an external centre. Colonial rule's reliance on local alliance, combined with its preservation of metropolitan supremacy, repeatedly created contender elites whose demands ranged from access and reform to autonomy and independence.

Finally, identifying the Cape Patriots as a challenger elite should not be confused with treating their challenge as democratising or emancipatory. The political capacities of Cape settler elites rested on appropriated land, enslaved labour, and the subordination of Khoe and San populations. Their language of burgher rights contested a local elite's exclusion from Company rule without seeking to disrupt the domination of populations whose labour and dispossession sustained settler prosperity. The movement therefore reveals how opposition to imperial domination can coexist with, and be enabled by, colonial domination of others (Wolfe, 2006; Johnston and Lawson, 2005). Elite decoupling highlights how challenges to rulers can emerge from intra-elite cleavages that preserve elite–non-elite power structures. In the colonial case, it clarifies how struggles within the dominant colonial order could generate public political innovation while leaving its foundational exclusions intact.

7.2 Scope conditions

Three important gaps in the available data shape how far our findings generalise. First, we observe only rural wealth, with records from Stellenbosch and Drakenstein but not the Cape District, whose records do not survive, or Swellendam, whose records are incomplete. Cape Town merchants, artisans, and VOC retirees who likely signed near the front of the document are outside our census

frame, and our matched sample is concentrated in the second half of the petition. The bounding exercise in §6.7 shows that the rural wealth premium survives demanding assumptions about the unobserved urban component, but it cannot substitute for a full account of the movement.

Second, the social action of indigenous and enslaved people remains largely invisible in our tax, office, and auction records. The Cape Patriot movement created a local political public and framed a conflict between settler burghers and VOC-appointed officials, yet this conflict rested on enslaved labour and the displacement of indigenous Khoe and San polities (Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2010; Johnston and Lawson, 2005). Settler-colonial theory insists that this public was constituted through the structural exclusion of indigenous and enslaved political voices. The challenger elite’s material capacity arose from land acquired through indigenous displacement and from enslaved labour. Its conflict with the VOC did not challenge settler elites’ domination of enslaved workers or their dependence on Company governors to mediate labour and land dispossession. Nonetheless, indigenous and enslaved peoples shaped the possibilities and limits of intra-elite conflict. A fuller account of why settler elites challenged at this moment would trace frontier violence, the threat of slave resistance, and the Company’s limited capacity to control force and property. We treat these wider imperial, settler, indigenous, and enslaved conflicts, and their effects on different groups’ willingness to contest, as questions for further research that our data cannot answer robustly.

Third, key measurement choices and linkage limits remain open to alternative interpretation. The 41 per cent census match rate, the winners-only structure of the auction network, and the production-asset measure’s omission of land, physical assets, and the capitalised value of enslaved labour all shape our analysis. The matched-household heemraad differential is also sensitive to how namesake collisions are resolved, as online appendix E shows. By contrast, the officeholder participation rates in Table 5 rest on direct title evidence and an explicit hand-checked district crosswalk. We hope these analytical and empirical choices prompt further research using alternative linkage judgements and measures.

8 Conclusion

Who challenged the settler state at the Cape in 1779? The evidence presented here gives a consistent answer across economic, political, and social domains. The Cape Patriots were not disproportionately drawn from impoverished or declining households, nor did the petition represent a broadly cross-class mobilisation of the settler population. Instead, petitioners were wealthier than non-petitioners, concentrated in the upper quartile of the rural wealth distribution, and especially prominent in the established wine-and-slave economy. Their wealth had not declined relative to that of other settlers before the petition. They were also disproportionately drawn from recognised officeholders: half of the eight Stellenbosch–Drakenstein heemraden serving in 1779 signed. Petitioners also occupied more central and brokerage-rich positions in the colony’s auction networks. The movement was therefore grounded in an emerging and well-connected settler elite.

These findings explain both the Patriots’ capacity to organise and the institutional object

of their demands. Petitioners possessed the resources, prestige, administrative experience, and relational reach required to coordinate a public challenge across dispersed communities. Yet their accumulated power remained local and subordinate: they possessed wealth and prestige while remaining excluded from central political authority.

We have described this configuration as *elite decoupling*. It identifies a condition under which intra-elite competition is especially likely to become public: economic resources and social authority accumulate among actors who remain institutionally separated from formal political control. In colonial settings, this separation follows from the simultaneous dependence of imperial rulers on local allies and their determination to preserve metropolitan supremacy. By producing locally powerful actors without incorporating them as institutional equals, colonial rule creates the capacities and grievances from which elite challenges can emerge.

The Cape case thus directs historical political sociology towards a recurrent source of institutional conflict: intra-elite conflict between locally embedded power and external rulers. Existing accounts locate the origin of public elite conflict in interests that newly diverge, networks that fragment, or status that comes under threat, each a departure from a ruling class that was once integrated. Elite decoupling describes a division that is instead built into the design of a political order and maintained by it, so the question is not what ended an elite settlement but whether one was institutionally available at all. Public challenge did not originate only among those most marginal to the colonial order or from a cross-class settler alliance against imperial rule. Here it arose among people who had prospered within that order, administered it locally, and acquired sufficient social reach to contest its limits. That is also a caution against treating public contestation as evidence of a broad social base: a political order can be challenged most visibly by those who prospered under it. The case shows how governing institutions preserve elite rule through structured exclusions while those same exclusions can generate a challenger elite empowered and motivated to contest the right to rule.

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