

Representing Poverty in Petitions for Assistance in Revolutionary Bordeaux, 1791–95

David Briscoe

As with many of Bordeaux's impoverished residents, January was unquestionably the cruelest month for Marguerite Barthelemi. Sixty-four and widowed, her resources were meagre at the best of times, and all but exhausted by the beginning of 1795. Too sick to work, and struggling to afford fuel and food in the depths of a bitter winter and city-wide shortages, Barthelemi spent her days in bed as the precarity of her position threatened to turn lethal. To avert this fate, she turned to the Club National, the city's leading radical political society. Writing to the Club on 2 Pluviôse an III, she explained that she had already been referred to the municipality's welfare board by the representative on mission. However, her poor health combined with the bureaucratic demands of the byzantine local relief system meant she struggled to see her case through to its conclusion. Now, almost six months later, the 'pressing necessity' (l'impérieuse nécessité) of her situation would, she worried, mean any aid the municipality might provide would arrive too late. It was in these dire circumstances that she threw herself upon the Club's republican 'principles of gentleness and justice' (principes de douceurs et de justice). She concluded her letter with a ringing challenge to the *sociétaires*' sense of humanity: 'You, who fortune has granted more than you need to survive, will you look with indifference upon one of your fellow beings, old and infirm, set to die from hunger and cold[?]' (*Vous à qui la fortune a accorder plus que le nécessaire verrez vous avec indifférence un de vos semblables infirme et agé pret a périr de faim et de froid[?]*)¹

In formulating her appeal, Marguerite Barthelemi was faced with the timeless challenge of poverty addressing affluence: how to convince her audience of her need, and their obligation. Ill, out of work, and alone in the world, the former was all too easy to demonstrate; but it was far less immediately evident that the relief of her need was the province of the Club. However, Barthelemi was far from alone in turning to Bordeaux's political societies for aid: several hundred such petitions survive, and both they and the patchy remaining records of the societies contain the ghosts of many others no longer extant. These petitions created models of poverty or need within which the intended beneficiaries could be situated as deserving recipients of the societies' munificence, and in so doing elaborated a range of social rights. Barthelemi's appeal stands out for reducing the equation of social ties and obligations to their blunt, biological essence – I am like you; will you abandon me to my fate? – but this was a conversation that stretched beyond questions of bare subsistence. Petitioners sought redress for a multitude of

David Briscoe is a PhD candidate at Trinity College Dublin, researching eighteenth-century French poor relief programmes.

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¹ Marguerite Barthelemi, 2 pluviôse, an III, Archives Départementales de la Gironde (henceforth ADG), 12 L 28, Club National. Secours. (1790–an IV). All quotations in French preserve the original spelling and diacritics.

losses, and assistance overcoming a broad range of hardships and forms of exclusion. Taken as a body, these petitions provide a window into how the inhabitants of Bordeaux thought and talked about different forms of social belonging; the entitlements and responsibilities they brought with them; and the forms of private need that could become collective problems. This paper will sketch the rough outlines of some of these discussions, and investigate the discursive framework through which petitioners represented themselves as both poor and deserving. It will also consider some of the ways in which these representations changed over time and under different Revolutionary regimes. To this end, I draw upon 394 separate, dated cases for assistance (sometimes comprising multiple letters) submitted to the Société des Amis de la Constitution between January 1791 and its dissolution in October 1793, and forty-four separate, dated cases brought to the attention of the Club National between February 1793 and Pluviôse an III.²

Historians of early modern state-formation have noted the role played by popular petitions in expanding and empowering the state, ascribing to it competencies through the series of assumptions – implicit and otherwise – made in the act and instance of petitioning.³ This phenomenon was not restricted to state organizations by any means, as these petitions demonstrate: as membership of a given community was constituted through interaction, so too were its attendant rights and duties.⁴ This focus on non-state petitioning allows us to examine how Revolutionary social solidarity operated and was conceptualized beyond the rights-based paradigm of state-citizen. Petitioners employed a variety of idealized collective identities in their appeals, ranging from their identification with a local neighborhood or parish to humanity as a whole, but seldom, due to the nature of their appeal, as a being possessed of legal rights to assistance. Rather, their claim upon the political clubs was one of morality and sentiment. The quasi-informal setting of the clubs further added to the mutability of poverty discourses; as they lacked any formal obligations to provide aid, their philanthropic work provided a unique arena in which petitioners and the clubs' members could develop and contest concepts of social obligation. The discretionary nature of this aid also incentivized a wide socio-economic range of petitioners to locate their requests firmly within the political and intellectual project of the clubs.

The Amis de la Constitution and the Club National were the foremost popular societies in Bordeaux during the first half of the Revolutionary decade, and wielded considerable influence within the political life of the city. Otherwise known as the Récollets Club, the Amis de la Constitution fostered the core of the future Girondin bloc, and enjoyed the distinction of affiliation with the Parisian Jacobin Club. However, like the Girondin and Montagnard factions in the National Convention, the political gulf between the Paris and Bordeaux societies grew until they excommunicated one another in late 1792. In retaliation, the Parisian Jacobins upgraded the avowedly Montagnard Club National from correspondent to affiliate society. Following the collapse of the city's federalist revolt in September 1793, the Club National emerged as the pre-eminent force in the freshly purged municipal government, a position it maintained until the Thermidorean reaction.⁵ Despite these political differences, both clubs were united in their attachment to charity as a key element of and tool for the Revolutionary regeneration of society.⁶ The members of both clubs differed substantially from their

² These cases are taken from ADG 12 L 21, Société des Amis de la Constitution/Liberté et de l'Égalité. Secours (1791 et sans date.); ADG 12 L 22, Société des Amis de la Constitution/Liberté et de l'Égalité. Secours (1792–1793); and ADG 12 L 28.

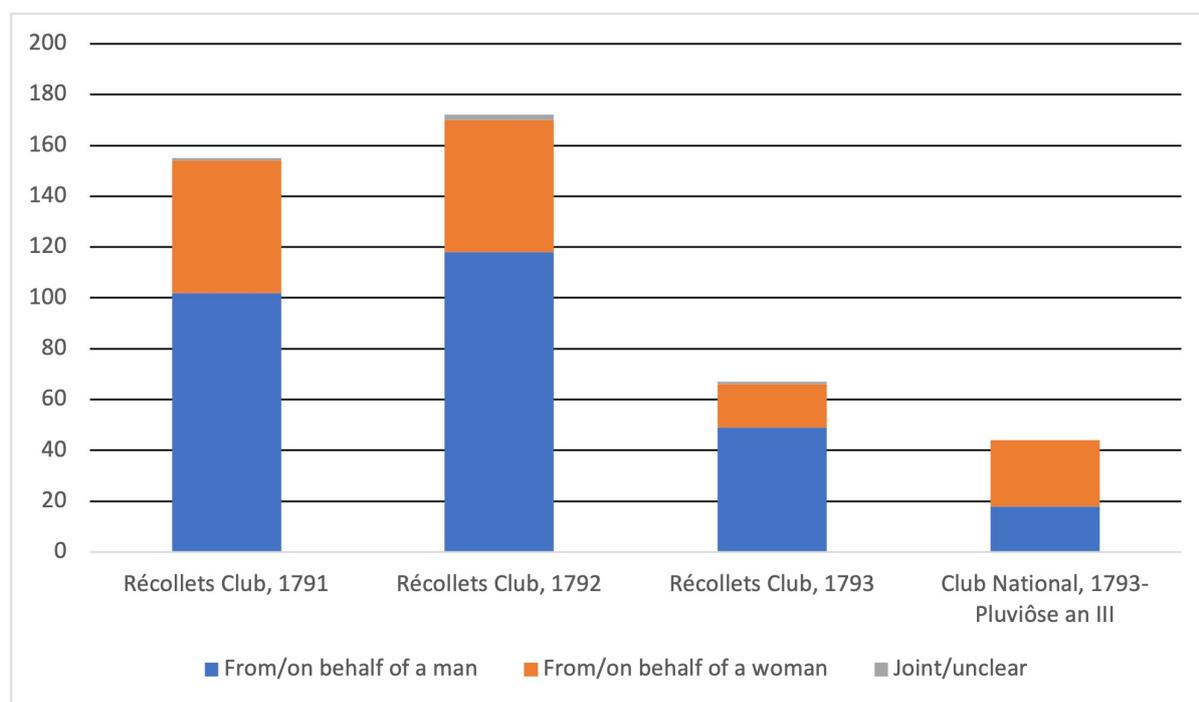
³ Holenstein, "Introduction: Empowering Interactions," 4–5.

⁴ De Swaan, *In Care of the State*, 2–12; Barnes, Auburn and Lea, "Citizenship in Practice," 189.

⁵ Forrest, *Society and Politics*, 62–87; Boutier and Boutry, "Les sociétés politiques", 48.

⁶ Michael Kennedy provides an overview of some of the other charitable initiatives undertaken by the Récollets Club in *The Jacobin Clubs*, 127, 134.

petitioners, not least in being exclusively male, when over a third of petitioners were female (see Graph 1). Neither club admitted women as anything but spectators, although several hundred women established a sister society to the Récollets club – the Amies de la Constitution – which was roundly ignored by their male counterparts.⁷ While the Club National operated a less restrictive admissions process than the Récollets, their membership fees nevertheless ensured a well-to-do membership.⁸ Non-members were permitted to petition the clubs and attend their public tribunes, but were typically barred from direct participation, encouraging the submission of written addresses.



Graph 1. Petitions by gender of primary stated beneficiary

By referring to the subject of the petitions – that is to say, the primary named beneficiary – as the “petitioner”, I prioritize convenience over complete accuracy. It is often near-impossible to tell whether the subject of the petition is the author, or even what their input to the finished document might have been. Some petitions were clearly written by public writers or clerks. One such writer produced several undated petitions for individuals of immigrant backgrounds, who all approached the Friends of the Constitution, “teary-eyed” (*larmes aux yeux*), to tell in strikingly similar phrases how, without any acquaintances to turn to, they were “obliged to vegetate” (*obligé de vegetter*) in poverty, without daring to bring their case before anyone else.⁹ These formulaic professional letters were the exception rather than the rule; such services cost money and would-be petitioners with limited literacy often turned to literate neighbors or philanthropists. Petitions were frequently accompanied by notes of recommendation from neighbors and local officials, attesting to the indigence or good character of the individual or family, which often covered similar ground to the petition itself, further muddying the authorial waters.

⁷ Their activities have received similarly short shrift in the historiography of Bordeaux’s clubs. Forrest, *Society and Politics*, 64.

⁸ Forrest, *The Revolution in Provincial France*, 101. Kennedy, *The Jacobin Clubs*, 55–56.

⁹ At least a dozen letters following this template, all written in the same hand, are contained in the undated folder of ADG 12 L 21.

The petitions themselves exhibit a remarkable diversity of style and form, ranging from a scrap of paper giving the person's name and a few words on their plight, to letters several pages long, expounding at length upon every tragedy to befall the petitioner over the preceding decade. Their idiosyncratic orthography further highlights the wide range of literacy levels of their authors, and are exceptional examples of what Thomas Sokoll has termed "oral writing", capturing the structure and cadences of the petitioner's speech.¹⁰ While many couched their petitions in the hyperbolic language of Revolutionary ardor, or the sentimental narratives so beloved of pre-Revolutionary pamphleteers, this was not an option for all petitioners. Some turned this to their advantage, using the simplicity of their language – often in a deliberately performative way – to underscore their distaste for the circumlocution of the *ancien régime*. One petitioner, a sergeant of hussars named Leymé, claimed that as a good soldier he did not know the right phrases, but trusted in his service to represent his claim, concluding with the postscript: "I speak as a hussar, The society will forgive me" (*Je parle en hussard, La societe m'excuzerà*).¹¹ Artus, a gilder impoverished by the collapse in the market for ornate swords, contrasted the "degrading language" (*langage avilissant*) which "the man bent beneath the yoke of misfortune" (*l'homme courbé sous le joug accablent du malheur*) had been obliged to employ when seeking aid, to the new situation: "now that man is restored to his rights, when he talks to free men he need only speak the truth" (*aujourd'hui que l'homme est rentré dans tous ses droits, lorsqu'il parle à des hommes libres, il ne doit dire que la vérité*).¹²

The outcomes of these appeals are seldom known. Unlike petitions to local government, where decisions were meticulously recorded alongside the lengthy review process for each appeal for aid, the political clubs only kept haphazard records of petitions and their decisions. However, while we may not be able to clearly discern how effective a given approach might have been, the petitions are undeniably affective in their detailed, often excruciatingly frank descriptions of life on the breadline. Historians have made great use of such appeals for aid to excavate subaltern voices and viewpoints.¹³ However, the apparent intimacy of such sources make it all the more vital to consider who these voices are talking to, and whose language they are using. We are not, after all, eavesdropping on unmediated testimonies. Rather, these letters show how a petitioner wished to be viewed, and how they attempted to represent themselves, or the person on whose behalf they were writing, in a sympathetic light. Petitioners may not have been responding directly to questions posed by an inquisitorial source, but we cannot ignore the fact that they were entering under a form of duress into a field of discourse over whose terms of engagement they had very limited control. In soliciting aid from a poor relief body composed of local notables, petitioners sought accommodation with this society and its values.

While the charitable activities of the political clubs, and the ideological aims and broader poverty discourses which underpinned them, gave these petitions their initial impetus and provided a discursive form and context within which the petitioners could represent their poverty, these representations were heavily conditioned by a wide range of cultural norms and expectations of poverty – in particular, of need and merit. Petitioners built upon these background expectancies, and selectively emphasized (or invented) elements of their situation to rhetorically deploy a particular category. The petitions not only reflected contemporary

¹⁰ Sokoll, "Writing for Relief", 104.

¹¹ Leymé, Feb. 2, 1793, ADG 12 L 22.

¹² Artus, July 3, 1791, ADG 12 L 21. A second letter of Artus', sent to the president of the Récollets Club that same day, makes for an interesting contrast with his public condemnation of the "degrading language" of the *ancien régime*. Having heard of the positive reception of his original letter through the offices of a consolatory "angel" (*ange*), Artus hailed the Club's president as "a guardian deity" (*un Dieu tutélaire*), and assured him of his eternal gratitude despite being informed by the aforementioned angel "that your sensitive and generous heart disdains prayers" (*que votre cœur sensible & généreux dédaignait les prières*).

¹³ See, in particular, Sokoll, "Old Age in Poverty"; and Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837*, 3–80.

understandings of these categories, but sought to shape them, and strengthen the rights, entitlements and responsibilities bound to them. Approaching these petitions as discourse-bound mediums for strategic self-representation allows us to de-emphasize the vexed topics of authorial voice and source credibility. These issues assume a lesser significance when we look instead at how people talked about poverty – or old age, unemployment, an unhappy ratio of income to dependents, or any of the scores of miseries that bedeviled the indigent or precariously-situated residents of Bordeaux and could be taken to imply certain rights to assistance – and focus on the common features of these various representations.

The ways in which petitioners represented themselves provide an insight into the normative grounding of the social order of which they were a part, as well as the background expectancies of poverty and necessity; of need and merit.¹⁴ These twin themes were inextricably linked in petitions like that of Marguerite Barthelemi, which represented the claimant's need as being so acute as to provide its own justification. However, need was far from an objective category, and its parameters shifted over time. Although most correspondents faced a subsistence crisis of some sort, the petitions committee of the Récollets Club also received several letters that resemble nothing so much as classified adverts, repurposed with a hasty sprinkling of patriotism. In February 1791, a cabinetmaker named Bresler, whose wife had recently received much praise from the Récollets for the care she had provided to survivors of a shipwreck, sent a letter suggesting the Club's members might like to commission some work from him in appreciation of her efforts. In the autumn of that same year, Charton, a member of the club, sent the president a series of letters setting out his life story at some length and appending to the end of each one a suggestion that the Récollets might like to hold a collection to replace his watch, stolen at one of their sessions. Fearing his wife's bitter reproaches, he begged the president to avoid attaching his name to the requests.¹⁵ A particularly ambitious claim came from the widow Archinard Delagrangé in November 1791, requesting 700-800 *livres* to cover her father's funeral expenses and to meet the costs of moving back to her family home.¹⁶ Petitions such as these were rooted in the discursive and social frameworks of *ancien régime* patronage which, even by 1791, was appearing increasingly out of kilter with the spirit of the Club's philanthropy, and contemporary conceptions of legitimate need more broadly. The incidence of such requests declined dramatically over the following years as perceptions of the forms of need worthy of the clubs' largesse gradually changed, and the medium of petitioning the popular clubs became more firmly established as a conduit for Revolutionary charity.

Those less fortunate in their misfortunes than Charton or Delagrangé typically had to provide more details of their indigence. While petitioners often attributed their need to limited or reduced earning capacity, only a handful sought to demonstrate their poverty through discussion of their actual income. There were eminently practical reasons for this, not least a concern on the part of petitioners to demonstrate the urgency of their need by showing how they had exhausted all other support networks available to them. Even a petitioner such as Guiraud, whose claim to assistance could scarcely have been less controversial, being blind from birth and with a sick wife and two children to support, felt it necessary to underline that he had “used all of his resources as well as those of his friends” (*employés toute ses resource insis que celle de ses amis*) when appealing to the Society.¹⁷ The prospect of laying the most intimate, pathetic details of one's life bare in such a public forum – and the attendant possibility of an unsympathetic, or even hostile reception – cannot have been an appealing one, and led to

¹⁴ Hester and Eglin, “Membership Categorisation Analysis”, 1–2; Jayyusi, “Value and Moral Judgement”, 235–36.

¹⁵ Charton, Aug. 26 and Sept. 29, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

¹⁶ Archinard Delagrangé ADG 12 L 21.

¹⁷ Guiraud, Nov. 3, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

many petitioners putting off their appeal until utter necessity forced their hand. Guillaume Martineau admitted in a post-script to his petition that his vicar had provided him with a letter of recommendation for this purpose on November 15, “but fear of being refused meant that I have waited until the last of my resources [were exhausted]” (*mais la crainte ... d’être refusé a fait que j’ay attendu jusques a la dernière de mes ressources*).¹⁸ An unnamed correspondent of the Club National’s archivist described how the fierce debate with which her letter to the Club had been met a month earlier, and their questioning of her determination to support herself through work, “greatly troubled my sensitive soul” (*donnerent des grandes inquietudes à mon âme sensible*). So great was this unease that she abandoned the entire enterprise, only returning to them when other sources of assistance proved even more hostile, and her landlord ever more intransigent.¹⁹

While petitioners often attributed their need to limited or reduced earning capacity, only a handful sought to demonstrate their poverty through a discussion of income: Lecussan, we learn, provided for his family through “*petites journées*” of 28–30 *sous*,²⁰ while Anne Bousquet managed the impressive feat of supporting herself, her mother and her sister-in-law – respectively too old and young to work – on 12 *sous* a day while her husband was away serving with the National Guard.²¹ For the most part, however, petitioners represented their poverty through vivid and emotive examples and descriptions. These examples reproduced common threads in a popular discourse on poverty stretching far back into the *ancien régime*. The supply of flour had long been a regular feature of popular complaints about the “*misère du temps*”, and a touch-stone in police reports on popular discontent in hard economic times.²² There are echoes of this in the petitions, where a lack of bread was by far the most commonly cited detail employed to convey an individual or family’s utter destitution. Parents, like the widow Marc, often expanded upon this by emphasizing the pain of “hearing all day long the pitiful cries of children asking their mother for bread when she has none to give them” (*entendant toute la journée des cris lamentables jettés par des enfans qui demendent du pain a une mere, et qui n’en a point a leur en donner*).²³

While a great many petitions mentioned belongings sold or put in hock to pay for food or rent, the detail most often employed to underscore this form of distress was to mention the petitioner was without a bed, and “reduced to sleeping on straw”.²⁴ Gorsse revealed he had been compelled to sell his furniture, linen, work and tools to support himself and his family while unable to work due to an injury, only to find themselves “reduced to sleeping on straw, and without bread at this time” (*réduite a coucher sur la paille, et sans pain dans ce moman*), and harassed by his landlord on a daily basis for his unpaid rent.²⁵ Couromy, with bitter sarcasm, told how he survived by selling his furniture and other belongings to *fripriers*, second-hand clothing dealers, “the most just and charitable treasurers of the Needy” (*les plus équitables, et les plus charitables, trésoriers, des Mâlheureux*) who, from the kindness of their

¹⁸ Guillaume Martineau, Dec. 18, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

¹⁹ Anonymous, 29 frimaire an III, ADG 12 L 28

²⁰ Lecussan, Feb. 8, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

²¹ Anne Bousquet, Dec. 26 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

²² Farge, *Dire et mal dire*, 138–39.

²³ Veuve Marc, Feb. 27, 1793, ADG 12 L 22.

²⁴ The presence of these complaints should be treated with caution, given the idiomatic nature of the phrase “coucher sur la paille”, which is mentioned in both the fourth (1762) and fifth (1798) editions of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* as being used “pour exagérer la misère de quelqu’un”. However, the frequency with which these complaints are combined with a comment on the poor quality of their blankets, or the fact that the family in question had sold their furniture, suggests a literal usage. This impression is further reinforced by the tendency, noted below, for municipal officials reporting on a family’s living conditions to comment upon the absence or insufficiency of beds.

²⁵ Gorsse, Oct. 11, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

hearts, only took a seventy percent cut of the value of his belongings.²⁶ Such lists served a dual function, illustrating the depths of the petitioner's indigence while demonstrating that they had exhausted every other avenue before throwing themselves on the clubs' charity.

Yet need was by no means synonymous with impoverishment, and was commonly construed to incorporate some of the primary effects of poverty, including degradation and social isolation. The connection between impoverishment and a diminished capacity to participate in society was often explicitly invoked. In some cases, this appeal had a very practical foundation, when impoverishment threatened to deprive a man of active citizenship. It was this element that troubled Devienne, who lamented the fact that lack of work and the expense of the most basic foodstuffs "would perhaps deprive me of the glorious status of citizenship, being willing but unable to meet the taxation prescribed by law" (*me priveroit peut être du titre glorieux de citoyen ne pouvant malgrez mes sentiments satisfaire au imposition dicté par la loix*).²⁷ The clubs themselves were also income-dependent communities, and raised similar concerns: Dujunca begged the Récollets Club's forgiveness for letting his membership slide eighteen months into arrears, explaining that his income had entirely derived from the rent of a property in Haiti, destroyed in the insurrection.²⁸ Yet this concern that poverty would restrict one's ability both to act and to discharge one's duties as a member of a community extended beyond a legalistic concern with income-dependent status. Gallais, a businessman whose rapacious creditors had left him with little but the shirt on his back, stressed that he was an "honest, but ashamed man" (*honnête homme, mais honteux*) and asked for the Récollets' help "to put me in the position to be a good citizen" (*en me mettant en état d'estre un bon citoyen*) by helping him buy a small booth where he could work as a public writer and from which, in summer, his wife could sell lemonade.²⁹ Constraints upon people's ability to act in society could impact upon their ability to even solicit aid, as Gouricheau observed when he explained that he would not have taken the liberty of writing "if my situation did not prevent from presenting myself before you, being reduced to the most frightful distress" (*sy ma situation ne motoit la faculté de me presenter devant vous reduit a la plus affreuse detresse*).³⁰

By presenting their need through striking instances of deprivation, petitioners were better able to illustrate the psychological and emotional burden of their situation. In doing so, they drew upon the moral polarities and hyperbole of melodrama used to great effect in the pamphlets and courtrooms of the late eighteenth century, seeking to dramatize "the cosmic moral sense of everyday gestures".³¹ These melodramatic representations were unquestionably more arresting and poignant than discussions of daily wages, however pitiful such income may have been, and were more easily deployed by petitioners to invoke the sentiment of their audience. This was a conscious rhetorical strategy on the part of petitioners like the widow Marc, who entreated the Récollets Club to "enter into her pain. Your heart is doubtless moved by it, and it is as though your breast were pierced many times over... You were made, Citizens, to feel and to appreciate the bitterness [of her situation]; be good enough to sweeten it" (*...entrés dans sa paine, votre cœur en est ému sandouttes et vous pensés que le sien en est percé de toutes parts... Vous êtes faits Citoyens pour en sentir et en apprecier l'amertume; deignés y porter quelque douceur*).³² Writing on behalf of the impoverished Labranche family, Fayolle Normand lamented the fact that the male *sociétaires* had not seen, as she had that morning, "their distress, their appalling poverty" (*leur détresse, leur affreuse misere*). Lacking

²⁶ Couromy, Nov. 15, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

²⁷ Devienne, Jan. 24, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

²⁸ Dujunca, Nov. 17 and 23, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

²⁹ Gallais, Feb. 28, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

³⁰ Gouricheau, June 10, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

³¹ Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs*, 66.

³² Veuve Marc, Feb. 27, 1793, ADG 12 L 22.

such first-hand experience of the family's woes, she urged the Récollets to picture "a gentle mother weeping, without broth, without bread, failing for want of nourishment, giving way beneath the weight of the troubles which burden her, her heart rent by the cries of her poor little ones for whom she has not the most basic foods that nature demands of her" (*une tendre mere fondant en larmes sans bouillon sans pain defaillante faute d'allimans, succombant sous le poids du mal qui l'acable, le cœur déchiré par les cris de ces pauvre petis à qui elle ne put donner les premiers allimans que la nature exsige d'elle*).³³ These emotive descriptions of need were used in cases besides that of parental affection. Couromy for example, observed that once he ran out of furnishings to sell to the *fripiers*, "I will be like a snail in his shell: like him, I will carry my house and all my clothes on my body" (*je pourai me comparér au limaçon dans sa coquille; comme lui je porterai ma maison, et tous mes vêtements sur mon corps*).³⁴

The merit of a case was a far more subjective affair and consequently produced far more varied attempts at representation. The Friends of the Constitution of Montauban enumerated several of the chief factors considered in assessing a claimant's worthiness in their letter of recommendation for the widow Caussac in February 1792. Travelling to take possession of an inheritance in Haiti, the Montauban club explained that alongside her efforts to feed her four children, "a prolonged misfortune, a good conduct, and a great deal of patriotism" (*une longue infortune, une bonne conduite, et beaucoup de patriotisme*) convinced them to recommend the unfortunate widow "who was deserving of a better fate" (*qui étoit digne d'un meilleur sort*).³⁵ Those petitioners not fortunate enough to have a Jacobin society to vouch for their qualities had to employ other rhetorical strategies to demonstrate them. Revolutionary ardor was most readily conveyed through personal sacrifice, preferably in connection with an event in the rapidly coalescing pantheon of Revolutionary activism. No fewer than three petitioners to the Récollets Club claimed to have been involved in the capture of the Bastille, and one petitioner allegedly lost his father in that fateful action.³⁶ Another petitioner noted his participation in the Montauban expedition, while Pêrsille Dumont recounted how she had lost her husband and five sons in the suppression of the Nancy mutiny.³⁷

Failing such dramatic proof of Revolutionary commitment, petitioners often emphasized that financial or professional losses occasioned by the Revolution had not lessened their enthusiasm for its principles. As Pierre Degreteau, a former master parchment-maker ruined by the suppression of privileges, sanguinely noted, "individual interest must always be subordinated to the general happiness" (*L'intérêt particulier doit toujours etre subordonné au bonheur général*).³⁸ While service in the army or National Guard was one of the most straightforward and – with the advent of mass conscription – common demonstrations of patriotic attachment, it posed a rhetorical challenge for dependents forced to petition for assistance during the absence of their soldier son, husband, or father. Catherine Brandier, while complaining of the impossibility of supporting herself and her daughter through her "thankless trade as a laundress" (*metier ingrat de blanchisseuse*), was careful to acknowledge that she did not reproach her husband for leaving for the *armée du Midi*. His conduct was that "of a good citizen, a son of the *patrie*" (*d'un bon citoyen, d'un fils de la patrie*), but she hoped that "this common mother" (*cette mère commune*) would not abandon the wives of the soldiers who fought for her.³⁹ Mme Desvimes gave a more full-throated endorsement of her patriotic

³³ Labranche, Feb. 13, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

³⁴ Couromy, Nov. 15, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

³⁵ Veuve Caussac, Feb. 26, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

³⁶ Laurant Payalle, Aug. 13, 1791, and Louis Blanchard, Sept. 24, 1791, ADG 12 L 21; Aubin, April 23, 1792, and Charles Bertrand Sebastien, Nov. 12, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

³⁷ Bouchet, April 13, 1792, and Pêrsille Dumont, March 13 and 18, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

³⁸ Pierre Degreteau, Oct. 19, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

³⁹ Catherine Brandier, Aug. 6, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

poverty, saying “if I have to suffer some privations in the absence of my husband, I must constantly bless them, as it is to ensure the liberty of my *patrie*!” (*si je suis obligée déssuyer des privations par l’absence de mon mari, je dois sancesse les benir, puisque c’est pour assurer la liberté de ma patrie!*).⁴⁰

Even more nebulous was the “good conduct” for which Caussac was praised. Demonstration of this was mostly left to attestations from the neighbors and local worthies – most often the parish priest or justice of the peace – in whose estimation this virtue was largely constituted. Individual petitioners tended to emphasize a willingness to work and a desire to be useful. Annette Lamouroux’s husband gave a particularly determined example of these virtues when, three weeks after breaking his leg, “dragging himself outside with his walking sticks to find some work, he brought 15 s[ous] home to me yesterday evening after not eating anything all day” (*voullant sortir et ce traînant avec des bâtons pour chercher quelques traveaux me porta hier soir 15s sans avoir rien manger de la journée*).⁴¹

Common to all of these traits was a concern to emphasize a shared community with the clubs’ members, whether that be of sentiment, ideology, or a marriage of the two. Petitioners took pains to demonstrate that the virtues in the hearts of the *sociétaires* to which they appealed were ones they shared. The reciprocal obligations of these communities were also stressed. Desvimes may have blessed the patriotic roots of her deprivation, but also protested against the harassment she had received from the local justice of the peace and his bailiffs for non-payment of rents for her shack on public ground on the basis that a wife of a *défenseur de la patrie* should not be subjected to such treatment – patriotism deserved better.⁴² Appeals to the *sociétaires*’ duty of sentiment and humanity were echoed by petitioners detailing their own such duties and how they strove to fulfil them despite their circumstances. Garry explained he was appealing not for himself, as he longed only for death to deliver him from the pains of this world, but on behalf of his family.⁴³ The widow Guenot appealed to the Club National “in the name of sacred humanity” (*[a]u nom de la sainte humanité*) to help her support her two children and octogenarian aunt. She was even more concerned for the fate of her unborn child, as “troubled as I am, it will be impossible for me to give him any milk but that of tears and despair” (*incomodée moi-même, il me sera impossible de lui donner un autre lait que celui de larmes & de désespoir*), and explained that the only reason she still lived was “because she honored her role as mother, and the fruit that she bears” (*parce qu’elle a respecté sa qualité de mere & le fruit qu’elle porte*).⁴⁴

Reciprocity was sometimes presented on more directly transactional lines. The clubs’ political evangelism led some petitioners to bargain for their aid in corresponding terms, promising to raise their children as ardent supporters of the Constitution or Republic. Widow Castel and Françoise Bellesta, in their joint petition of January 15, 1792, declared themselves willing, due to their patriotism and Revolutionary enthusiasm, to put their sewing skills to work in support of the Nation’s troops free of charge, if the Récollets could see their way to providing them with some aid.⁴⁵ Most daring of all were Moraud and Pietre, two young Marseillais who claimed they had been approached by certain people seeking to persuade innocent young men to join the émigré camps in Nice and beyond the Rhine, but promised they would take oaths of allegiance to the Revolution and denounce those who would lure them away from it, provided the Récollets would furnish them with funds to return home.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Femme Desvimes, 25 prairial an II, ADG 12 L 28.

⁴¹ Annette Lamouroux, February 18, 1792, ADG 12 L 22

⁴² Femme Desvimes, 25 prairial an II, ADG 12 L 28.

⁴³ J. Garry, March 15, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

⁴⁴ Veuve Guenot, 18 nivôse an III, ADG 12 L 28.

⁴⁵ Veuve Castel and Françoise Bellesta, Jan. 15, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

⁴⁶ Moraud and Pietre, June 8, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

These rhetorical models of need and merit deployed in petitions were not constrained by nationality, even as the complaints of many non-local French citizens bore witness to a society in which being from another part of France could severely hinder one's ability to find work or assistance. The Parisian Louis Blanchard, a self-professed *vainqueur de la Bastille*, complained of being "foreign without being so" (*[é]tranger sans l'être*) after struggling to find assistance in Bordeaux where he was without any friends or family.⁴⁷ That certain forms of social solidarity and entitlement were open to non-French petitioners is clear from the fact that they were recognized and deployed by a variety of local sponsors on their behalf. Guillaume Menard, promoting the cause of an unnamed Dane who had skipped ship in Bordeaux to enrol as a volunteer in the National Guard, argued that the young man's willingness to defend "our just cause and, with it, that of humanity" (*notre juste cause, & avec elle, celle de l'humanité*), entitled him to some financial assistance for his journey to join his battalion.⁴⁸ Jean Courard Rochat, a young Swiss man who had moved to Bordeaux to find work as a clerk, was supported in his appeal to the Récollets Club by his landlord's neighbors, who observed that, unable to find employment suited to his talents, he sought out work in masonry workshops "sooner than roaming and becoming a burden on society" (*plustot qu'a vaguer et le rendre par la à charge à la société*). As a result of his industriousness and good conduct, they argued, he deserved funds to return to his native Burtigny.⁴⁹

If the nature of the difficulty facing a petitioner played a significant role in determining the form of their appeal, more influential still was their social class and, above all, sex. The gendered contours of citizenship and community membership – of being, acting, and being viewed as a citizen – were starkly reproduced in these letters, in both the categories of merit available to an individual and the values invoked in claiming a category. In many respects, this mirrors the gendering of public insults in which insults used against men and women reflected their different social roles. However, where insults sought to attack and undermine the values on which a person's reputation was based, petitions for assistance sought instead to strengthen them.⁵⁰ This is particularly evident in the markedly greater tendency of male petitioners to link their merit to a variety of public virtues (see Graphs 2 and 3).

Almost exactly a quarter of all petitioners to the Récollets Club made a direct reference to their patriotism, that of the Club and its membership, or both. This rose sharply with the outbreak of war in April 1792, and climbed further still in 1793. There was an unmistakably gendered dimension to this, with twice as many petitions by or on behalf of a male petitioner invoking this virtue compared to female petitioners. This rather crude analysis masks an even more substantial imbalance in the usage of patriotic tropes, as many of those female petitioners appealed vicariously to the patriotism evinced by husbands or sons in the armed forces. This pattern is replicated in the small sample of petitions to the Club National, despite the preponderance of female petitioners, though observations derived from such a small sample deserve to be treated with caution. A similar trend can be observed in statements of attachment to the Revolution and its principles more generally. Female petitioners of the Club National were, however, more ready to invoke their republican sentiments. Even more dramatic gendered divides can be seen in attempts by petitioners to demonstrate their personal probity, or social utility (see Graph 4).⁵¹

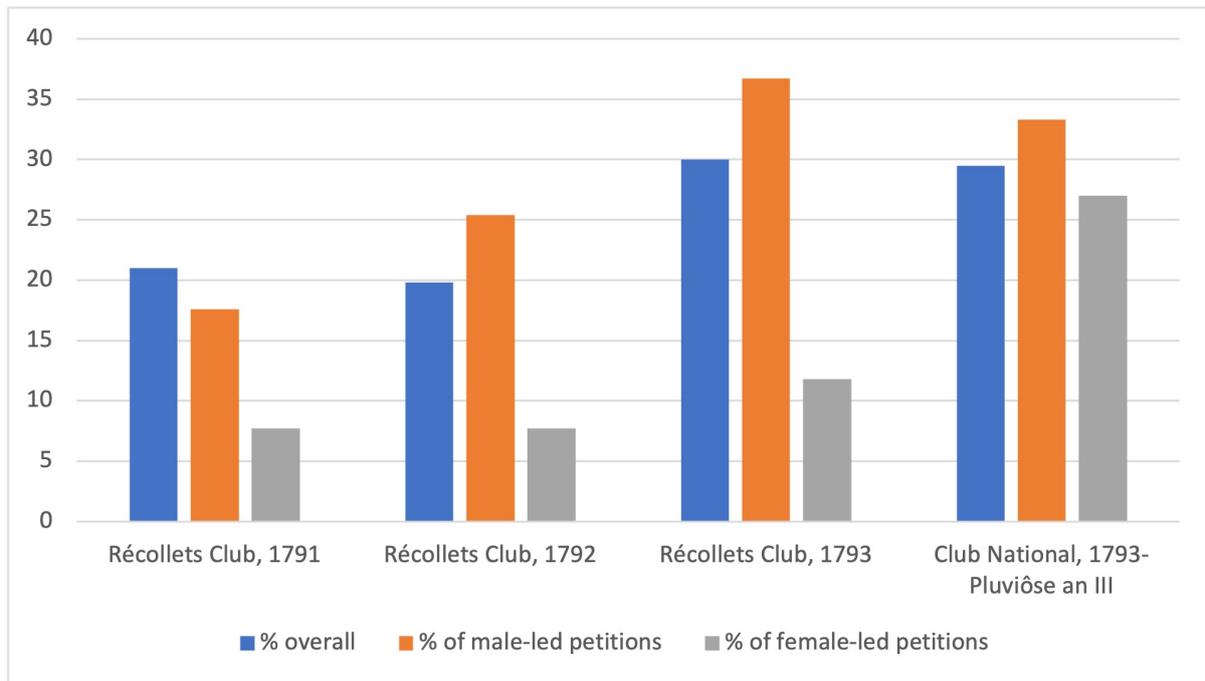
⁴⁷ Louis Blanchard, Sept. 24, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

⁴⁸ Anonymous, Nov. 21, 1792, ADG 12 L 22.

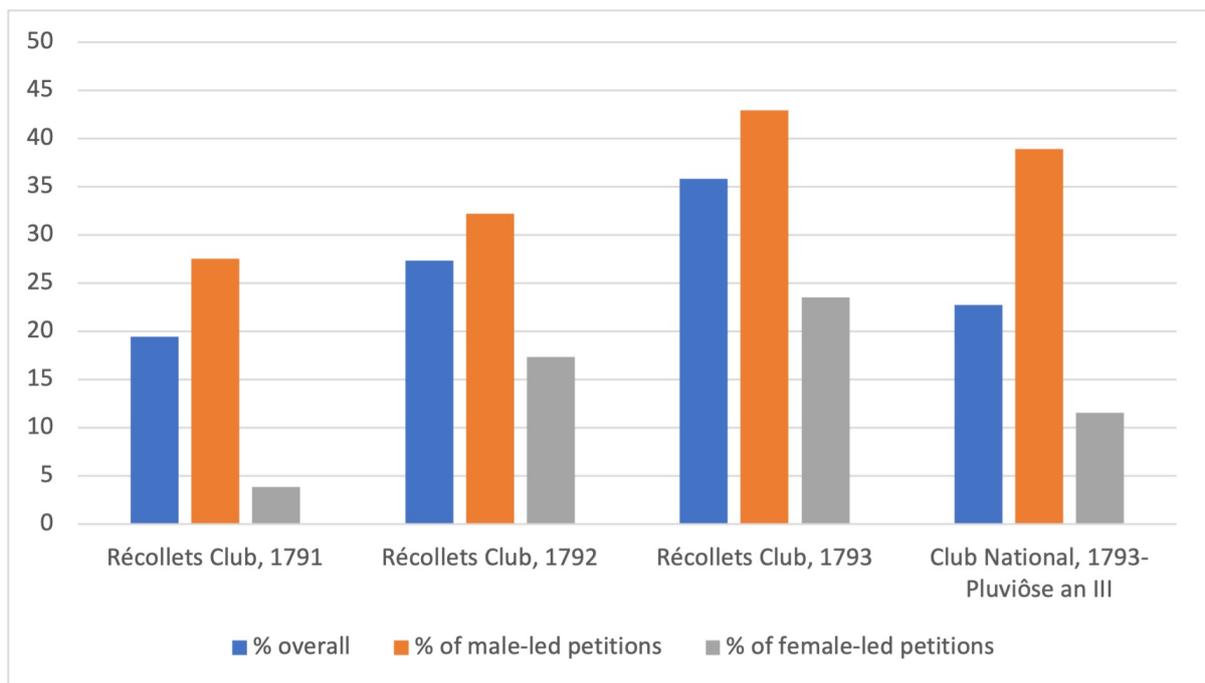
⁴⁹ Jean Courard Rochat, Sept. 11, 1791, ADG 12 L 21.

⁵⁰ Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community*, 39.

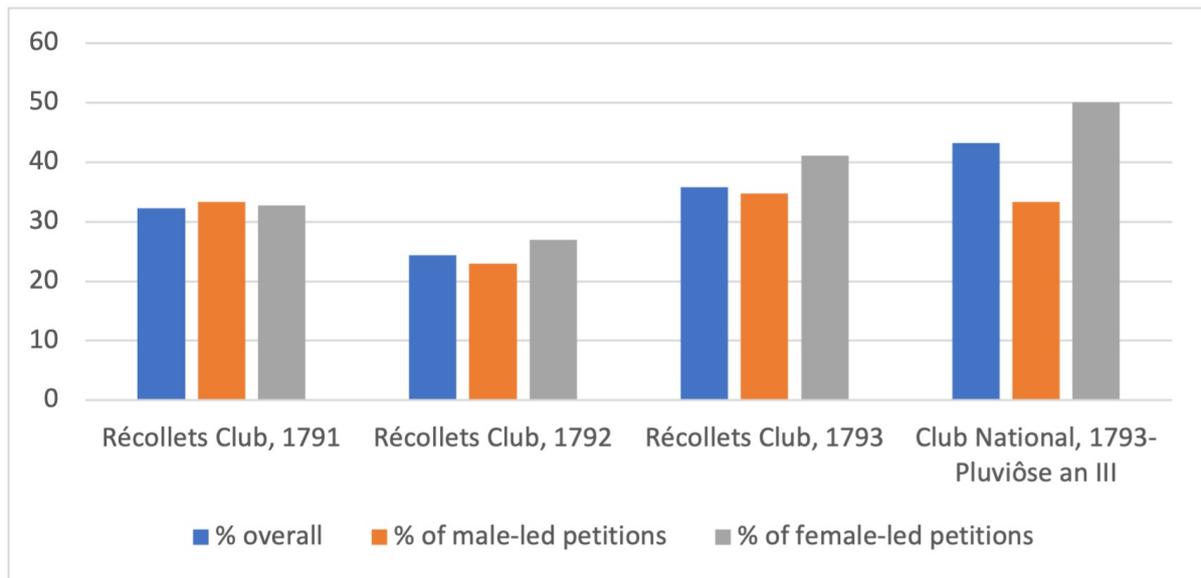
⁵¹ This was not unique to the Revolutionary period, or the poorer classes of society, but rather seems to reflect deeper conceptions of the gendered nature of social obligation. David Troyansky has discovered a strikingly similar gendering of virtues in the appeals of the widows of civil servants for state pensions during the Restoration period. Troyansky, *Entitlement and Complaint*, chapter 7.



Graph 2. Percentage of petitions that invoke the petitioner or society's attachment to the Revolution/its principles, by gender of primary named beneficiary



Graph 3. Percentage of petitions that invoke the petitioner or society's patriotism, by gender of primary named beneficiary



Graph 4. Percentage of petitions that invoke the petitioner's humanity, by gender of primary named beneficiary

A different picture emerges, however, when we move away from these more public virtues, commonly held to exist within an almost exclusively masculine sphere. Women occupied a more restricted position in civic life and were consequently limited in the forms of community to which they could lay claim. Nevertheless, female correspondents of the Récollets Club made use of those areas of civic language more conventionally available to them to locate their claims within the most foundational collective identity: that of humanity itself. Female petitioners were about as likely as male petitioners to appeal to the humanity and sensibility of the club's members. Female petitioners particularly sought to highlight their domestic role as homemakers, as well as mothers of future citizens, soldiers and republicans, blurring the distinction between public and private civic functions. This tied into contemporary assumptions of the task of women in the regenerated family, in which a woman's patriotism found its ultimate expression through the exercise of familial roles in a domestic setting.

This is not to say that the political consciousness and conceptions of female citizenship of the Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires, or the Dames des Halles were not shared by their Bordelaise counterparts. Rather, it is a reflection of the solidarities that petitioners anticipated would best suit their purpose.⁵² Yet it would also be a grave mistake to equate domestic with private. Annie Smart has traced the development in the latter decades of the eighteenth century of the idea of a "civic intimate sphere ... dedicated to (re)producing the values and the principles of the public sphere" in writings by and about women.⁵³ By performing their roles within this intimate sphere, women were able to possess civic virtues and lay claim to a civic identity, and certain civic rights. The absence of overt declarations of patriotism or Revolutionary attachment in these petitions should not, therefore, lead us to conclude that these virtues were unavailable to female petitioners. Rather, it serves to highlight the heavily gendered semiosis of civic membership and identity in these petitions, and within the political and urban space of contemporary France more generally.

Philosophes, physiocrats and government ministers might, when sketching out relief systems, have had the luxury of privileging a single mode of belonging; a single strand within the tangled web of identities and forms of inclusion and exclusion at stake in these concepts.

⁵² Le Bozec, *Les Femmes et la Révolution*, 84–89; Jervis, *Politics in the Marketplace*, passim.

⁵³ Smart, *Citoyennes*, 241.

An unemployed artisan, a dockworker's widow, or a seamstress sleeping among her merchandise in a rickety stall on a public thoroughfare did not. They may well have felt themselves to be wretched, or patriotic, or were eager to be useful, whether through working or, as many emphasized, through spilling their last drop of blood in defense of the *patrie*, and often took such pains to underline these points that it is hard to doubt their sincerity. Yet key to all of these claims was their broader discursive function of locating the petitioner within a given category of deserving poverty which in turn transmitted certain category-bound claims to assistance. The contingent nature of documents such as these has led some historians seeking to recapture representative popular perspectives or testimonies to dismiss them, not unreasonably, as "too broken up", focused only on the matter immediately at hand.⁵⁴ Certainly, these letters cannot be taken to represent the unvarnished views of petitioners on their own situation or the systems for charitable relief from which they sought redress; rather, they show their usage of these systems.

Nevertheless, the changing forms and aims of this strategic self-representation provide a keyhole view of a profound shift in the conceptualization and praxis of community and its attendant obligations over the course of this period. Petitions were a flexible field of discourse, adapting to developing perceptions of need, as well as shifts in the language of civic belonging occasioned by changes in government or the outbreak of war. While these external factors influenced the categories of need which the clubs would consider relieving and the lexicon through which these categories were constituted, petitioners also sought to expand and enrich the ties of community and mutual obligation on which the philanthropic efforts of the clubs were founded. By the time Marguerite Barthelemi sought assistance from the Club National, as the era of Bordeaux's powerful political societies was drawing to a close, the "degrading language" of the *ancien régime* – so passionately, if unconvincingly, denounced by Artus – had long since disappeared from use, if not memory. Even without directly entering into an explicitly rights-based discourse, the shared ties of community, whether political or biological, were imbued with a remarkable array of claims upon one's fellows – claims of which the inhabitants of Revolutionary Bordeaux were well aware, and upon which they drew in a cogent, adaptable manner.

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⁵⁴ Hopkin, *Voices of the People*, 11.

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