

# The voice of the people?

Supplications submitted to the Swedish Diet in  
the Age of Liberty, 1719–1772

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**Abstract**

This dissertation is devoted to the study of who used the formal channels of interaction in the early modern era and why. It examines the full range of the political conversation in early modern Sweden, as seen in the supplications to the Diet in the Age of Liberty (1719–1772), and more specifically the supplications submitted to the parliamentary committee tasked with handling them, the Screening Deputation. The literature yields few systematic studies of this official channel, and supplications have long been terra incognita in the early modern political landscape. Their exact importance is uncertain, to say the least.

Using a database built on three samples from the beginning, middle, and end of the Age of Liberty, the Diet's supplication channel is shown to have been used by two groups: supplicants from state-affiliated households primarily tried to use it to pursue their claims on the state, to settle various issues related to employment, or to receive some sort of support through hard times; and, increasingly, commoners, especially delegates in the Estate of the Burghers, used the channel for their gravamina concerning commerce, taxation, and the like, and state support for public amenities, a group for whom the Screening Deputation offered an alternative route to getting their grievances heard by the Diet. Both groups increasingly used the Diet's supplication channel to appeal the verdicts of the King in Council (Kungl. Maj:t). Although most were not appeals against the Judicial Audit, the results reveal an active use of appeals, and thus a de facto erosion of Kungl. Maj:t's supremacy. The results also show that as many as three-fifths of all supplicants had their supplications accepted by the Screening Deputation for further examination by the Diet. Although the acceptance rate was definitely lower in the 1730s and 1740s, the committee seems to have been fairly benevolent in its interpretation of the rules on petitioning.

The results, lastly, show that although the Diet's supplication channel allowed excluded groups direct access to the Diet—including women of all classes, commoners of rank, and unrepresented groups—it mainly catered to men with the social status or wealth that put them in the middle and upper strata of society. Although this supplication channel stood open to anyone, its egalitarian potential was seemingly never realized. The use of March and Olsen's institutional theory about the logic of appropriateness, has revealed that certain institutional templates and norms that would have enabled these groups more access to the channel succumbed and made room for other institutional foundations.

It is argued that supplications were part of the medieval and early modern centralization of legal and political power, the formation of the state, the protection of the privileges of Swedish subjects, and, during the Age of Liberty, the power struggle between the Diet and the kings. Each supplication viewed by itself might seem trivial, but nonetheless played a part in each and every one of these major processes. An ordinary Swede could have an impact on early modern politics when acting in concert with other supplicants, like rain eating away at rock.

**Keywords**

Age of Liberty, audit, Diet of Estates, early modern state formation, eighteenth century, institutions, national debt, parliamentary committees, petitions, political participation, public office, supplications, taxes, trade privileges, Supreme Court, welfare

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