# 2 URBAN GOVERNANCE
## Citizens and Their Authorities

In 1712 Zürich became involved in the Toggenburg War, a domestic conflict between the Catholic and Protestant members of the Swiss Confederation. Zürich's participation had been decided by the town council without consultation with the guilds, even though this was required by the local constitution. It was just one of the political issues dividing Zürich society. Structurally, the guilds, and their middle-class membership, had much reason to feel aggrieved. No artisan had been elected mayor of Zürich since 1601. In 1713, the 212-member *Grosse Rat* (Common Council) had only thirty-four artisan members, while 60 per cent of Zürich's citizens were artisans. Instead, merchants and officials dominated the council. During the 1713 *Zunftbott*, the general meeting of the guilds, members insisted on the maintenance of the original privileges of the town, dating from 1245, and the constitution that had been introduced after a guild revolution in 1336. On 2 September 1713, 600 citizens were mobilised, demanding a '*hochst nöthiger Reformation*', a very necessary reform. A committee of guild deputies was set up to collect the demands from the guilds' members. Ultimately, 115 points were culled from petitions submitted to the committee. In November the committee negotiated with deputies from the council and on 4 December the council accepted a general reform document. Some demands were met, others were rejected, but that is not the point here. What the 1713 events in Zürich demonstrate is how citizens in premodern Europe could invoke a set of political rights to insist on a say in local politics, and how they could, if necessary, use civic organisations like guilds to mobilise support for these demands.

The Zürich events also show a typical mixture of routine and emergency politics.[1]

This type of civic politics has been systematically sidelined in the traditional narrative of European political history. That narrative has a very simple shape, consisting of two stages, separated by the events of the summer of 1789: the Bad Old Days before the French Revolution, and the modern, democratic era that the revolution initiated.[2] The Bad Old Days were the time of oligarchy and corruption; the French Revolution introduced Europe to popular elections, parliamentary control and so on. Almost inevitably, the British version of this story looks slightly different; its own watershed occurred exactly 100 years earlier, in 1689, with the Glorious Revolution and the introduction of parliamentary rule. However, the Bill of Rights was followed by the Age of Oligarchy, which was only overcome with the Reform legislation of the 1830s. At this point, therefore, one need not be unduly concerned about these differences in chronology.

This picture of the division of European political history, created, of course, by the revolutionaries themselves, was reinforced by historical research from the 1960s. Inspired by the work of Lewis Namier, and immortalised as 'prosopography', or more generally the social history of ruling classes, the main gist of this research was to confirm that these ruling classes were self-perpetuating, through the mechanisms of patronage and co-option. Many books and articles were written outlining and detailing the impact of family and wider social networks on the operation of the political system.[3]

Alongside this research on the ruling classes, another line of work developed in the 1960s, which was concerned with the role of ordinary people in politics before the French Revolution. This developed out of a leftist interest in protest movements, kindled by the mass protests of the era itself. Due to its origins in the 1960s, this type of research was mainly preoccupied with 'revel, riot, and rebellion', as the title of David Underdown's celebrated book from 1985 calls it.[4] The least one can say about the achievements of this type of work, is that by now it has become impossible to discuss predemocratic European politics without reference to the role of non-elites. It is today widely accepted that European politics before the French Revolution was much more volatile and variegated than the steady progress from feudalism to absolutism to democracy would suggest. The rise of the modern state was accompanied by the religious wars of the sixteenth century, the civil

wars of the seventeenth century and the revolutions of the eighteenth century, and in all those events ordinary people – or, more neutrally, non-elites – were significant participants.[5] Nonetheless, the place of these non-elites in routine political processes is still poorly defined and poorly understood. This is because much of the literature on state formation concentrates on national institutions, in spite of the fact that the issues which would be of importance for the non-elites were mostly local, or at best regional in nature.[6] As a result, the contrast between before and after 1789 continues to be misrepresented. But if we want to evaluate non-elite participation in politics, we need to refocus from the national to these local and regional arenas.

The argument about the importance of participatory institutions has been reinforced by recent interpretations of the effectiveness of early modern states. The traditional narrative assumes that centralisation meant greater effectiveness. Decentralised states, like the Holy Roman Empire, the Dutch Republic and the Swiss Confederacy, were seen as either backward, compared to centralisers like France and England, or exceptional – or simply ignored. The positive evaluation of centralisation was, however, supported by precious little evidence. Historians have for too long taken for granted that more *intendants* in the French provinces was proof in itself of a greater grip of central government on regional politics. This view of absolutism is no longer accepted.[7] Data on interest rates, for example, demonstrate that, until the end of the seventeenth century at least, the 'republican' type of state could borrow more cheaply than absolutist regimes.[8] In other words, these states seem to have commanded greater trust from their citizens than the centralised states.

All of this suggests that we need to rethink fundamentally our ideas of the process of state formation. This chapter proposes that much can be gained by combining the two research traditions of local elite studies and the investigation of ordinary people to see how non-elites, i.e. citizens, were routinely involved in urban politics. What I do in this chapter more particularly is to look at the ways in which urban constitutions left room for the involvement of citizens in day-to-day politics. In other words, we are going to mostly disregard the extraordinary situations of 'revels, riots, and rebellions', and investigate how urban government was organised in quieter times.[9] The purpose is to find out to what extent and in what ways, in the era before democratic rights were formally established, citizens (in the broad definition used in

this book) were already participating in local and, more specifically, urban government.

## The Origins of Urban Government

Seen from a global perspective, premodern European towns were equipped with a unique feature: a council that was in charge of local affairs. The establishment of this local council was a standard aspect of urban privileges as they were granted by European sovereigns and amounted to a form of power-sharing to the extent that sovereigns allowed local communities a certain amount of autonomy, but always within the confines of the wider set of rules and authority as it applied within the state as such. In this sense, urban privileges were a specific application of feudal principles, with its fragmented authority. Only in a small number of regions, most notably the Italian Peninsula, would urban autonomy move beyond that.[10] Some Italian towns at least achieved sovereign status for themselves, and thus became city-states. In most of Europe, however, urban autonomy was by definition constrained by the presence of a higher authority, which in a variety of ways would monitor, control and interfere with local governance. How these interactions between towns and sovereigns were shaped is discussed in Part II of this book; at this point it is important to keep in mind that sovereigns were almost always lurking somewhere in the background.

In much of Europe the post-Roman urban revival began in the eleventh century.[11] In Italy it was quite a bit earlier, but also in other regions some towns achieved prominence well before 1000 CE. Barcelona was conquered from the Muslims in the spring of 801 by the Frankish armies, to become part of the Spanish March, ruled by a Count. The local bishop evolved into a second power centre, but only seldom was he able to challenge the Count. For several centuries, Barcelona was dominated by nobles. A bailiff acted as the Count's local representative. Citizens were involved in the governance of the municipal domain, but always under the authority of the Count. Only in the second half of the twelfth century did municipal institutions gradually emerge. The bailiff was instrumental in this development, but it was also carried by changes in the composition of local elites. A new group of merchants and bankers was emerging. We might call them 'patricians', but in the sources they are '*prohoms*'. In 1183 the first consuls appeared as representatives of the community, only to make way in the early

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thirteenth century for other institutions. By 1231 a document referring to '*probi homines, cives, et habitatores Barchinone*', or *prohoms*, citizens and inhabitants of Barcelona, suggests that the local institutions had consolidated and created three distinct categories: mere inhabitants, citizens with formal membership of the community and the *prohoms* who were in charge. Note that the urban constitution was not created at one particular moment, but was the result of a series of minor steps extending over almost a century.[12]

Such a long gestation of municipal institutions was very common. Take Toulouse, in southern France, for example. Once an important Roman settlement and subsequently a Carolingian centre, Toulouse began another cycle of expansion and development in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries. At the time, the Count was the dominant source of authority, having successfully sidetracked the bishop. The Count supervised trade and industry, the judiciary and public finances including feudal services. He was advised by a court, consisting of Good Men who were simultaneously taking care of local affairs and military defence. By the mid-twelfth century the Good Men were known as the 'Common Council of the City and Bourg', i.e. the two elements that together made up the city. This Common Council was subject to the Count, but steadily managed to increase its autonomy. In 1147 the Count devolved his authority over taxation to the Council, and also accepted that the Toulouse civic militia would no longer accompany him on campaigns.[13]

In 1189 the Count lost much of his influence after a rebellion by the city's elites and middling sort. The latter had been encouraged by the Count to organise themselves into guilds; now these same organisations turned against their sovereign. Initially, the elites dominated local politics, but from 1202 merchants and artisans became much more prominent. It was precisely in the decades after 1189 that urban institutions were consolidated and reinforced. Until 1189 the local courts had been mainly concerned with enforcing the Count's ban and maintaining civil order; they offered very little to sort out disputes over property, contracts and so on. Ecclesiastical courts were no help either, so the business community had to rely on informal types of adjudication, by 'friends', 'neighbours' or indeed the Good Men who were now known as consuls. After 1189, and especially after the triumph of the popular party in 1202, much of this informal adjudication was codified and made more transparent. The consuls became an appeals court for those who felt that informal mediation had produced false results.

Representation of the civic community was similarly institutionalised in Toulouse after 1202. In theory the Common Council had been representing all citizens, but in practice it had been the preserve of a relatively small group of families who combined the exploitation of urban and rural real estate with regional and long-distance trade. After 1202 the commercial and industrial sectors of Toulouse society came to power, and they broadened and reinforced the representative character of local government by creating a second council, the General Council. Moreover, for important decisions they called a meeting of all citizens, a *universitas* or public parliament. As this was the time of the Albigensian Crusade, in which Toulouse was heavily implicated, such meetings had to be convened quite often.[14]

The central Middle Ages thus bequeathed a set of urban institutions to subsequent centuries. Even though the number of composite elements was limited, they were cobbled together in endless variety, and both citizens and elites would often attach much value to the specificities of the local assemblage of institutions.

## Urban Government – How It Worked

Apart from the way that local government in Europe was established by charters (considered local constitutions), its other special feature was its collective nature. Some of the Italian city-states were transformed into principalities with a single ruler – most notoriously in Florence under the Medici – but this was an exceptional development. By far the most common situation was that in which a council with one or several dozen members acted as the highest local authority. Such councils would normally emerge during the Middle Ages as the consolidated form of a more informal type of meeting, where the local executive sought advice and legitimacy from a group of representatives of the local community. By implication, such town governments had to be accountable, not only to the sovereign, but at the same time also to their own citizens.

So who was the executive, who were these representatives and how did their institutions evolve? The constitutional arrangements in a handful of towns across Europe can help us get a sense of how urban government worked. These arrangements evolved over time, but in many places they were remarkably resilient during the centuries covered in this book.

One example of such continuity can be found in northern England. York became a 'county corporate' in 1396 and until 1835 its governance structure remained more or less the same. As a county, York was represented in Parliament and was not subject to any regional authorities, simply because it had that same status. In 1603 another fifteen provincial towns in England also had county status. York was ruled by its Lord Mayor, twelve aldermen, two sheriffs and a council of twenty-four. The twenty-four were also known as the Privy Council, to distinguish them from the Common Council. The Lord Mayor and the aldermen were together the Justices of the Peace, i.e. the judicial authority in the town. This combination of executive and judicial authority was an almost universal phenomenon in Europe's late medieval and early modern towns. The Lord Mayor was elected for one year and usually came from the ranks of the recently appointed aldermen. The great majority of former aldermen became members of the Privy Council after their term in office had expired. York's Common Council represented the town's crafts and by implication its civic community.[15]

For several centuries, Utrecht too had a local government dominated by the guilds. In 1304, while so-called guild revolutions were sweeping through the southern territories of the Netherlands, Utrecht also had its taste of revolution when the local guilds removed the patrician-dominated council and installed one whose members were selected by the guild deans. However, in 1528 Charles V, after becoming the new overlord of Utrecht and its territories, overturned the constitution, expressly forbade guild politics and created a council with the right to co-opt new members without any consultation of the guilds or citizens. This council, copied after the Holland model, would remain in power until the arrival of French revolutionaries in January 1795.[16]

In Münster, the guilds had managed to fight their way into the local structures of governance. Münster's constitution was codified in the early thirteenth century, but it continued to evolve. In collaboration with the bishop, who was also the territorial lord of Westphalia, the town managed to increase its political autonomy. Its core institution was the council, or *Rat*, whose membership was shared between twelve patricians and twelve citizens who were elected indirectly by the citizens. The patrician families were known as *Erbmänner*, a socially ambiguous group that combined noble and bourgeois characteristics. The electors also belonged to the local elite. The city lost its urban privileges after the Anabaptist takeover, in 1535, but the bishop was

forced to restore them in 1541. At the time the guilds were still officially banned, because of their support of the Anabaptists, but after several petitions they too regained their former position. The seventeen guilds coordinated their policies in the *Gesamtgilde*, or Common Guild, which acted as a shadow council.[17]

In sixteenth-century Toulouse the town council (*capitoulat*) was self-selective, but it was assisted or controlled, depending on one's point of view, by no fewer than three other councils, the *Conseil Général*, the *Conseil de Bourgeoisie* and the *Conseil des Seize*. The first of these comprised about eighty men from the upper echelons of society, including former *capitouls*, but also merchants and solicitors. It met about four times a year. The *Conseil de Bourgeoisie* met more frequently and comprised a somewhat different subset of notables. The *Seize* were the previous year's *capitouls* together with the sitting *capitouls*.[18] All three councils were in the hands of the elite, but together they still provided some checks and balances.

In eighteenth-century Angers, the local government, or *corps de ville*, consisted of twelve councillors, appointed for life; four aldermen appointed for two years; a mayor and an assistant mayor, both appointed for four years with the possibility of a new appointment. They were supported by three officers: a treasurer, a *procureur* or legal advisor and a secretary, who were all appointed indefinitely. In 1732 and 1737 the merchants of Angers petitioned the French king to demand four permanent representatives on the council. The members of the *corps de ville* were, however, elected by representatives of the general assemblies of the inhabitants, organised in the sixteen parishes of the city. Each parish had the right to send two from its midst to the electoral meeting.[19]

Medieval Siena had a more complex structure because it was at one and the same time a city and a state. The combination required special efforts to coordinate the various elements of the governance structure and this coordination was entrusted to a single individual, the *podestà*, who was an outside administrator and military leader. Siena – and other Italian city-states that employed a similar official – went to great lengths to ensure that the *podestà* would not become an independent force capable of taking power into his own hands and becoming an individual ruler. Despite such safeguards, this is precisely what happened in Urbino, where the Montefeltro dynasty evolved from servants of the community into its rulers.

Siena, however, managed to avoid this sort of development. In foreign affairs the *podestà* had a double role as the commander-in-chief of the Sienese army, and the representative of the Sienese state vis-à-vis other states. As military commander his position was reinforced by the fact that upon his appointment the *podestà* would bring along a trained band of professional soldiers, who would act as the core of an army that was otherwise made up of citizen-soldiers. Domestically, he acted as chairman of the legislative Council of the Bell, and was expected to initiate new legislation. However, his role in domestic politics was constrained in various ways. First of all, his appointment was restricted to six months, later one year. After his term in office he could not be reappointed for a further year, to prevent him from creating a local following. He was, moreover, expressly ordered to remain aloof from local factional politics. The Sienese *podestà* would be recruited from Umbria and the Marche, or from Bologna, almost never from neighbouring Tuscany, which was also the most important military threat to Siena.[20]

However, the preservation of Siena's republican regime depended less on the *podestà*'s personal profile and job description than on the dense web of collective local institutions that took care of the community's affairs. Take the selection of the *podestà*. Besides the town council, this involved consultations with the merchant guild, the consuls of the nobility and twenty specially appointed representatives from each of the three districts of the city.[21] From the late thirteenth to the middle of the fourteenth century the executive consisted of nine men, known as the *Nove*, or Nine. These members were active for a mere two months, and during that period had to leave their businesses and families to live with colleagues.[22] The *Nove* initiated new legislation, but required two-thirds of the Council of the Bell to support it, before it could be written into the statute book.[23] The membership of the core institutions was always a multiple of three, reflecting the crucial importance of the three districts of Siena.[24]

The *Nove*, who had been in charge since 1271, were overthrown in 1355, after Charles IV had conquered the city. A coalition of nobles and artisans took over, but the nobles lost power within a few months. For thirteen years, the government of Siena was in the hands of the *Dodici*, the Twelve. Whereas the *Nove* had been overwhelmingly merchants, the *Dodici* were mainly entrepreneurs and artisans. In 1368 they were succeeded by what we might call a coalition government,

consisting of representatives of the working classes, the artisans and the merchants. Throughout these regime changes, however, military and financial policies remained remarkably stable.[25]

Local government in all of these towns thus shared a number of common features. They were always composed of multiple institutions, providing checks and balances. Most of those institutions had a substantial membership, allowing a variety of opinions. Some offices might be for life, but many local government officials had to step down after a short period of time – one, maybe two years – preventing a monopoly of power in the hands of a single individual. For most of the time the towns we have discussed had a council that in one way or another represented either the corporate civic subcommunities, usually guilds, or the geographic subcommunities in the form of wards, neighbourhoods and so on. On paper, there was room for the participation of common citizens in civic governance, but was this also true in practice?

## The Class Dimension of Urban Government

Almost everywhere, town councils recruited their members among a relatively small, usually elevated group of families.[26] Family relationships among councillors were numerous, with brothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, cousins and so on all seated simultaneously. One would, perhaps, not expect to find a cross-section of urban populations filling the seats of urban governments. For one thing, council membership usually did not carry a salary beyond a small reward for participating in the meetings, even though it could be time-consuming. As one finds repeatedly in towns across Europe, in Siena the members of the Nine were required to suspend their business commitments during their time in office.[27] Secondly, contemporaries were of the opinion that it was better to have wealthy politicians, because these would be less likely to succumb to the temptations of corruption. Whether this was true is not the point here, because social historians have concentrated on another dimension of class rule: the rise of oligarchy.

The argument in a nutshell is that most urban governments of the premodern era were subject to Robert Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy, first formulated in 1911, which asserts that all organisations will sooner or later find themselves dominated by a small in-crowd of people who have an advantage over the average membership in terms of information and network.[28] Complaints about oligarchy, or 'family

government' as contemporaries preferred to call it, were rampant in late medieval and early modern Europe, and an accurate description of the situation in many towns.

It nonetheless bears looking into, as the social background of politicians and administrators might give us a better understanding of the type of interests represented in these institutions. However, we have to keep in mind that our picture may be somewhat unbalanced because most of the collective biographies (or prosopographies) of local politicians have concentrated heavily on the core institutions at the expense of, for example, the advisory Common Councils, simply because their membership was too numerous to cover. In this section I want to establish whether oligarchy was indeed a defining feature of town councils, and if it got worse as time progressed.

For the Holland town of Leiden we have an unusually extensive series of studies tackling the social composition of the local council, beginning in the late thirteenth century and going all the way up to the end of the eighteenth.[29] Never during this period were members of the council genuine professionals, for the simple reason that such membership was only remunerated with a small attendance fee, while the paid positions, of sheriff, mayor or alderman, for example, were mainly temporary appointments for three years at most. Data concerning the earliest generations of Leiden councillors suggest that some of them originated as *ministeriales*, or servants of the Count of Holland, who maintained a court in Leiden. Noble families mixed with this group and the result was a set of families dominating local politics, often designated as a 'patriciate'. These people owned rural estates, but were at the same time active in trade and industry, especially local textiles.[30]

Their influence diminished somewhat after 1400, even though during the fifteenth century one still finds that a third of the families represented in the council had noble backgrounds. The merchants and industrialists were, however, in the ascendant.[31] By the second half of the sixteenth century, the latter had clearly won out. Nobles did not disappear altogether from the Leiden council, but they became a rarity. Instead, council members were active entrepreneurs in textiles and food production.[32]

During the seventeenth century a new type of councillor emerged who had no such ties with trade and industry; the councillor had gone to university and trained as a lawyer.[33] During the eighteenth century this trend was consolidated. University degrees had become the

norm, and most councillors had no day job in addition to their administrative duties.[34]

The Leiden data suggest that the social history of urban government in premodern continental Europe can be subdivided into three eras. The first, from the eleventh century to the fourteenth, was the era of the (semi-)nobles, families whose economic power derived from urban and rural real estate. The second, which ran from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth, was the era of the merchants, in many places challenged by the artisans and their guilds. The third era, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was dominated by lawyers, people whose qualifications were academic and whose training prepared them specially for the legal dimension of government.

These three eras are not found everywhere in quite the same way. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the town council of Gloucester, England, included between 25 and 40 per cent merchants, while over time, the percentage of 'professionals' increased from 10 per cent to 25 per cent.[35] In early eighteenth-century Gdansk, more than 80 per cent of councillors were 'learned men', whereas in previous ages the merchants had predominated.[36] In French towns the displacement of the merchants by *gens du loi* had already begun in the sixteenth century.[37] In Barcelona the merchants were never a significant factor on the council.[38] Some towns did not experience any major shifts in the social composition of their councils. In Cologne, merchants were still five times more numerous than lawyers during the second half of the eighteenth century.[39] However, at a general level the Leiden pattern seems applicable to many places in Europe.[40]

This sequence of social classes might suggest a fixed separation, but this was not in fact the case. Take for example the ambiguity embodied in the Münster *Erbmänner*. In 1597 they launched a legal campaign before the High Court of the Holy Roman Empire, the *Reichskammergericht*, to obtain formal recognition as an imperial estate. The *Erbmänner* had dominated local politics in Münster for much of the Middle Ages, and over time had consolidated as a coherent social group that combined an aristocratic lifestyle with a civic legal status. They described themselves as '*adligen Patricier Bürger und Abkömmlinge der alten Geslechter*', or noble patrician citizens and descendants of the ancient lineages. In another document they presented themselves as the '*Adlige der Stadt Münster*', the nobles of the City of Münster. They had coats of arms, owned manors and refrained from

'modest occupations', i.e. trade and industry, although some of them had been active as merchants well into the sixteenth century. The court case went on for no less than eighty-eight years, and produced twelve fat volumes of legal papers before the *Erbmänner* won their case in 1685. However, their recognition as a 'genuinely ancient, noble and knightly estate' was short-lived. Already in 1709 the emperor decided to take it away from them and they were once again reduced to members of the commoners' estate.[41] As the *Erbmänner* demonstrate, membership of the council set one apart from the rest of urban society, without producing a complete separation from the other citizens.

Next to the council in charge of the daily management of urban affairs, many towns had broader councils that allowed greater participation. In fifteenth-century Berne, for example, the Inner Council (*Kleine Rat*) had twenty-seven members in 1470, but on Easter Day another 293 were elected as members of the Common Council (*Grossen Rat*). The latter came from at least 225 families, perhaps more. Members of the Common Council should be able to afford a full armament, those on the Inner Council also a horse for military purposes. Eight members of the Inner Council and seven on the Common Council were nobles, while many others tried to imitate these leading families by acquiring rural estates and patents of nobility.[42] In Marseille 771 individuals sat on the town council between 1559 and 1597, drawn from 466 different families, which at least suggests that it did not constitute a segregated class. Of these, some 20 per cent belonged to the untitled nobility (*gentilshommes* and *équyers*), a third worked in commerce and 20 per cent in industry, while only 5 per cent were professionals.[43] These figures suggest that oligarchy was not the norm everywhere.

Two conclusions seem inevitable. The first is that membership of urban councils and related offices in local government was not something the ordinary citizen could aspire to. Such jobs were time-consuming and often unreliable in terms of the income they generated. More importantly, elite families tried to make this their own preserve and installed mechanisms to ensure limited access. More often than not they succeeded. The second is that, despite the sometimes poor financial reward, elite families found the prestige and power of these urban positions, and surely also the opportunities for corruption, immensely appealing. Oligarchy was the rule. Whether or not it increased over time is less obvious, if only because it had been a feature of these institutions for as long as we can observe them. The 'democratic' origins that the

citizen opposition often invoked existed on paper in the urban constitutions and in the mythology of local history, but seldom in the reality documented in the records.

## Popular Politics: Elections and Common Councils

Even though throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period their membership was drawn from a restricted set of families, all municipal governments claimed to be representative in one way or another. They had two core arguments to bolster that claim. First, and perhaps most importantly, they were themselves citizens, and therefore 'mirrored' the citizen community, as Lieven de Beaufort, a Dutch municipal administrator in the eighteenth century, argued. In principle – if not in practice – every virtuous citizen could be selected to participate in local politics. Moreover, the short terms of appointment for many local offices meant that local politicians would be regularly reduced to the status of ordinary citizens. As another Dutch author claimed, this served as a reminder that they were ultimately the same as everybody else.[44] Secondly, they had sworn an oath on the occasion of their accession to office to serve the community as a whole.

Despite these arguments, the representative character of municipal government was regularly contested by the rest of the citizenry, and as a result of such protests, three additional forms of representation emerged. One was the creation of a second-level council that represented the urban community and that had to consent in important decisions, even though it was not in charge of daily operations. A second was the inclusion of citizen representatives, usually guild deans, in the core institutions of municipal government. The third consisted of elections – either direct or indirect – for municipal office. These forms of citizen participation in the political and administrative processes of medieval and early modern towns were much more common than is usually acknowledged by textbook political histories of this so-called predemocratic era. Because guilds and politics are discussed in the next section, I concentrate here on the Common Councils and on municipal elections.

London is an interesting case to start with, because not only did it become the largest city in premodern Europe, it also combined elements of all three forms of citizen participation. London freemen participated in local politics to a degree that immediately belies the idea that

political life was the exclusive domain of oligarchic elites.[45] The government of the City of London consisted of the Lord Mayor, elected annually, and the Court of Aldermen, twenty-six men chosen for life as representatives of the wards of the city. In the case of a vacancy, the aldermen chose their new colleague from among candidates elected by the resident heads of households in the ward. The city's executive was assisted by a legislature of no fewer than 234 representatives of the wards, called the Common Council and elected annually. The Lord Mayor was elected from the ranks of the aldermen, by the aldermen, but nomination was limited to two names selected in Common Hall, the electoral assembly of the liverymen of the City.[46]

The liverymen constituted the upper tier of the guilds; next to the wards the guilds were, politically speaking, the most important civic institutions in London.[47] Around 1700 the City numbered an estimated 8,000 liverymen, who were 'the most zealous guardians of the historic liberties of the London citizenry', according to Gary de Krey.[48] Besides nominating the Lord Mayor, the liverymen elected (in the Common Hall) the sheriffs and other high officials of the Corporation, as well as the City's representatives in Parliament. The lower ranks of the guilds, who were all ordinary freemen of the City of London, together with the liverymen were entitled to elect the members of the Common Council during the so-called wardmotes, district meetings that took place annually on St Thomas's Day. Even the non-citizens, or mere inhabitants, of London, were included in the political process, as they had the right to participate in the selection of petty officers of their precincts and wards; they were excluded, however, from participation in the politics of the City as a whole.[49]

Paris, as a royal town, did not have any such mechanisms of participation, but Nantes, France's sixth largest city, did. In seventeenth-century Nantes the populace was involved in the political process in two ways: through annual elections and through consultations.[50] The elections concerned first and foremost the mayor and aldermen. On 30 April the electoral meeting took place in the Grande Salle of the Nantes town hall. Members of the *grand corps* were invited to these meetings, including royal officers, the former mayors and aldermen of the town, who together constituted the *Grand Bureau*, as well as the representatives of urban institutions and private citizens. Looking at their numbers, the urban community was definitely not a minority participant in these proceedings. On the contrary, in a list from 1685

there are 450 names, but '*plusieurs autres bourgeois et habitants*' (many other citizens and inhabitants) had also been present.[51] These numbers, as well as other indicators, testify to the important role of the non-office-holding part of the civic community.

In Nantes local policies were drawn up by the *corps de ville* in consultation with the local population. During the Wars of Religion the records of the municipality are full of references to *assemblées générales*, in which the officers of the civic militias were prominent participants, but where individual inhabitants of the city also attended.[52] Apart from such general *assemblées* there were also consultative meetings between the *corps de ville* and representatives of various corporative interests, especially the civic militias and the craft guilds. The main topic – discussed at almost half of the meetings – was the preservation and maintenance of local privileges. In French towns, such *assemblées* remained a common feature of civic life, even in the eighteenth century.[53]

In the medieval towns of northern Spain, although urban government had increasingly become the exclusive domain of local elites and elections were suppressed in the process, general assemblies were still held from time to time.[54] Elections were also found in Central Europe at that time. Hungarian royal towns, for example, acquired the right to elect their own town councils during the first half of the fourteenth century. Municipal councillors were often elected in general meetings open to all citizens. These were still active in the late seventeenth century.[55] In 1514 the citizens of Prague's Old and New Towns obtained the right to elect their municipal administrators through a complex system that was clearly designed to create at one and the same time a balanced outcome and to prevent corruption. Every year, three bodies would meet in common session on election day: the departing council, a council of elders and representatives of the commune. The councillors selected eight persons from the elders, the elders selected twelve persons from the commune and the commune selected four persons from the council. These twenty-four would draw lots; eight lots would have the word 'elector' written on them. These eight were then locked into a room, and had to elect the eighteen members of the next council. Their names would then be read out loud to the community by the royal chancellor.[56]

London citizens not only elected local officeholders, but also had their Common Hall, a sort of local parliament. In other towns similar institutions were known as Broad Council, or Common Council, or

under some other name, but with the same political function. In Siena the Common Council consisted of the thrice 100 citizens representing the three districts of the city, plus the consuls of the merchants' and the cloth-finishers' guilds. The members, who were elected for one year, had to be residents and taxpayers of Siena during the previous ten years. The Council could meet several times per week.[57] These numbers suggest substantial civic involvement in local politics.

In York, the Common Council slowly emerged from incidental consultations of craft representatives in the late fourteenth century. These consultations were only transformed into a permanent institution in 1516–17, during a period of crisis when support from the community was especially important. Initially, the thirteen most important guilds were allowed to send two representatives to the meetings, fifteen smaller guilds only one. The original forty-one members gradually expanded to forty-eight, but this number too was more a guideline than a precise indication of the membership, which in practice could fluctuate. From 1632, York's Common Council was elected by the four wards, changing the mode of representation from an occupational to a geographical model, but retaining the underlying principle of representation of the citizen community.[58]

In the Habsburg Low Countries, Antwerp had the *Brede Raad* (Broad Council) with representatives of the twenty-four to twenty-six 'privileged' guilds. On another council, the thirteen districts each had two representatives. In Brussels, the *Wijde Raad* (literally Wide Council) consisted of former aldermen and the deans of the powerful Cloth Guild, but in the Nine Nations council, all other guild deans were represented. These councils had to be consulted on financial and other important issues.[59] In the eastern provinces of the Dutch Republic, Common Councils had similar prerogatives and also acted as electoral colleges.[60]

This discussion of individual towns demonstrates that throughout the period covered in this book various towns and cities had mechanisms that allowed citizens to participate on a regular basis in the political process. It would, however, be helpful to establish a quantitative benchmark to see how widely distributed such representation was. To gauge the relative importance of Common Councils, guild participation and elections we can employ a data set collected by Fabian Wahl, which also allows a measurement of the timing and the quantitative and geographical distribution of local representative institutions.[61] His data set covers 104 towns and cities in Austria

(seven), Belgium (ten), Germany (sixty-seven), France (three), the Netherlands (thirteen) and Switzerland (four). With Germany covering two-thirds of the data, France represented by a mere three towns on the French–German border and Southern Europe and the UK completely missing, this data set cannot claim to be even remotely representative, but it is the best we have at the moment. Two observations follow from the data, one about the relative importance of each form of representation, and one about developments over time. Elections were relatively unusual, found at any time in thirty-one towns in the data set. Guild representation was more common and present in forty-nine, or almost half the towns. It was heavily concentrated in the southern half of Germany, including towns that switched between France and Germany, and in the southern Low Countries. In northern Germany and the northern Low Countries, guild representation was unusual, perhaps due to the prevalence of merchants in this region, once dominated by the Hanseatic League. Common Councils were found in forty-eight towns, all over the area covered by the Wahl data set, without an obvious geographical pattern.

I have supplemented and systematised Wahl's data by collecting similar data about the five largest cities in England, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy, in 1500 and 1700 (Appendix 1). Three of these countries (England, France and Italy) and half of the total of thirty-five towns in my set were not represented in Wahl's data.

Our own results confirm the Wahl data set in showing that representative institutions were more numerous in 1500 than they would be in 1700. In fact, Wahl's data suggest that 1500 was the zenith of urban representative institutions, which took off in the thirteenth century, reached a peak in 1500 and then started to slowly decline (guild participation, elections in the sixteenth century) or stabilised (Common Councils, elections after 1600). From our own data, it becomes clear that in 1500 almost two-thirds (twenty-two out of thirty-five) of Europe's largest towns had formal institutions for citizen representation. In 1700 this was the case in half (seventeen out of thirty-five) of them. Despite a decline, civic participation in local governance still was a relevant factor in many towns around Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Critics have suggested that these premodern elections were superficial and ultimately futile because they tended to produce results

that were socially very similar to the alternative procedures where councils selected their own successors.[62] In both cases, it is alleged, the membership of the councils consisted overwhelmingly of individuals from the wealthier parts of urban society. Such criticism implies a peculiar understanding of modern democracy. Clearly, the profile of modern-day politicians is not identical with their electorate in terms of income, education, gender or social background. If that were so, we would have had more female prime ministers and fewer academics in parliaments around the world. The point about democracy is the mandate that politicians receive from the electorate, not whether they resemble the average voter in all respects.[63]

## Organisations of Popular Politics: Guilds and Neighbourhoods

Elections and representation were but two of the mechanisms allowing citizens a say in local politics. Behind these formal procedures, much more was going on. Popular politics could flourish in premodern towns because citizens were organised.[64] There is more to say on the political activities of civic militias in Chapter 5; here I concentrate on the role of guilds and neighbourhoods in local politics.

Gdansk experienced its first guild rebellion in 1378. In 1416 the guilds dismissed the city council during another rebellion, but failed to consolidate their gains. On the contrary, a new constitution gave the council extensive powers to meddle in the guilds' business. In the middle of the sixteenth century the guilds, in collaboration with local merchants, rebelled once more. In 1651–52 more protests erupted from the guilds and in 1659, when the Polish king visited Gdansk, the guilds filed a twenty-nine-point petition. Similar events occurred in 1677–78. The guilds of Gdansk failed to overthrow the local government, but maintained a vocal political presence in the town. Their demands were self-serving, but also related to general issues concerning the governance of Gdansk.[65]

In Gdansk, the local council was and remained immune to claims for guild participation. In other towns, guild participation was written into the local constitution. Particularly during the fourteenth century, such towns increased rapidly in number. The inclusion of guilds in local government happened especially in Germany and in the

southern territories of the Low Countries. There are examples from other areas, but those were more isolated (London) or temporary. Already in the late thirteenth century the Florentine guilds had made their mark by creating a new office that was to become one of the most important in the city: the triumvirate called *priores artium*, or priors. One chronicler noted shortly afterwards:

> The ordinary citizens were exceedingly encouraged by the election of these three, ... ; and the frank words of those citizens who spoke of their liberty and of injuries suffered in the past so enflamed and emboldened the priors that they promulgated new ordinances and decrees, which would prove very difficult to abrogate. ... And they were called the priors of the guilds.

The priors oversaw the communal finances and ensured equal justice for all and the protection of the '*piccoli e impotenti*' against the '*grandi e potenti*'.[66] However, in the course of the fourteenth century, after swings in favour of, as well as against, their participation in politics, the Florentine guilds ultimately lost much of their influence after 1382.[67]

In Flanders, thanks to their sheer numbers but also as the major armed force in the towns, guilds rapidly gained political prominence. The importance of these two dimensions was forcefully brought home when, following a string of revolts in the previous months, the guild infantry managed to defeat a French army on horseback in the Battle of the Spurs on 11 July 1302. This resulted in a wave of guild revolutions, overturning elite-dominated councils, replacing them with guild deans and consolidating their influence by changing local constitutions. As a result, next to their primary economic functions, craft guilds became political organisations in at least seven major, as well as several middle-sized, towns in the Low Countries.[68] This was also true in many regions of the Holy Roman Empire.[69]

It has been argued that guild politics was simply elite politics in disguise. Those representing the guilds in town councils were recruited from the same elevated social backgrounds as the other councillors. This is a doubtful argument for two reasons. Even though there is plenty of evidence of elite members joining guilds to gain access to municipal office, this did not prevent ordinary guildsmen from accessing high office in many places. More importantly, to represent one's guild one usually had to be elected: candidates, in other words, had to curry favour with ordinary guildsmen in order to obtain their votes. Even if

guildsmen often preferred well-to-do and well-connected representatives, they could still hold them to account.[70]

Neighbourhoods were another urban institution with representative potential. During the early modern period, the city of Ghent, with some 40,000 inhabitants, had around 200 neighbourhoods. When on 11 November 1638 Bartholomeus Dekistmaker was elected by the common inhabitants of the Burgstraat neighbourhood to be their new dean, in a meeting held in the neighbourhood chapel, he was the thirty-first to serve in that office for this particular neighbourhood since 1540. Dekistmaker was a lawyer, and by accepting his nomination he took on a series of important – and probably time-consuming – tasks. For example, neighbourhoods in Ghent were responsible for the registration of new arrivals, for the billeting of soldiers and for collecting funds to maintain the roads and pavements. They also had to organise the general oversight of their own area of the town. If anything, the job of neighbourhood dean, which seems to have been without financial compensation, became more demanding as time progressed. The reason for this was that the Ghent council, whilst trying to get a greater grip on neighbourhood issues, was simultaneously loading the neighbourhoods with an increasing number of duties. As a result, the neighbourhood dean increasingly became the intermediary between the town hall and its constituents, instead of simply the neighbourhood's representative; more and more time must have been spent on coordinating neighbourhood expectations with council regulation.[71] We see similar processes happening everywhere in seventeenth-century North-Western Europe, with neighbourhoods becoming more important and yet more regulated at the same time.[72] Nonetheless, they remained an important channel for inhabitants to raise their voices and their involvement in public affairs.

Neighbourhoods were equally important in Mediterranean Europe. In 1343 Florence was administratively reorganised and subdivided into four quarters, which were each subdivided into four districts or *gonfaloni*. The basis for the division was the organisation of the local citizen militia (*compagnie del popolo*). One of these *gonfaloni* was the Lion Rosso, or Red Lion. This particular district comprised some 530 households in 1427, and was centred on the Via Vigna Nuova. Like the other *gonfaloni*, the Lion Rosso was charged with assessing and taxing its households, as I discuss later in this chapter. At the same time it oversaw public order and the general business of the area, and to this

end irregular meetings were held once or twice a year in the local parish church devoted to San Pancrazio, often on Sundays. The most important purpose of these meetings was to entrust the *gonfalone*'s administration to a group of syndics for the next six or twelve months. These syndics also had to make sure that the district's financial records were in order, to avoid problems with the town hall. From the minutes of the district meetings we know that they were usually attended by between twenty-five and thirty inhabitants, most of them representing the well-off section of the district. They would include members of the Rucellai clan, the most powerful of the Lion Rosso. For them and other patrician families, a solid power base in the *gonfalone* was an important stepping stone for their ambitions in Florentine state politics. Despite the dominance of the upper echelons of society, however, artisans were always present at the Lion Rosso meetings, and although no formal guidelines have been found, the pattern suggests a deliberate policy to include all social classes apart from the paupers, i.e. those sections of society that would be included in direct taxation.[73]

Neighbourhoods have been treated in the literature so far as mechanisms of social integration. They were, however, just as important as vehicles for popular politics as the guilds and civic militias, whose political roles historians have recognised more readily.[74] All three types of organisations shared two features. Firstly, they were often democratic to the extent that their membership came from broad sections of the middle class, and those members usually had a say in the selection of officers and the decisions those officers took. Secondly, the organisations were not only recognised by local authorities, but also employed by those same authorities, to collect information, discharge certain public functions and maintain public order. The organisations of popular politics, in other words, were an integral part of urban governance.

## Instruments of Popular Politics: Consultations, Petitioning, Lobbying, Rebellion

In many premodern European towns, citizens had constitutional ways of voicing their opinions about policies and politicians. In other towns, where such means might be absent or very restricted, local authorities used a range of different instruments to exchange views

about their policies with various sections of the local communities, not necessarily all of them formally organised. In this section four such instruments are discussed: consultations, usually initiated by the authorities themselves, petitions, lobbying and riots, which were almost always initiated by citizens themselves. Apart from the riot, they were considered part of normal political life in premodern towns.

In fifteenth-century Italy, especially the smaller towns held regular assemblies where all heads of households could voice their opinion. In the larger towns, assemblies were much less a routine aspect of local politics, but summoned on special occasions. In Turin, for example, such a meeting was held when the Duke of Savoy had ordered an overhaul of the local government in 1433. It is possible that this was necessitated by exceptional circumstances, but in 1447 the death of the Visconti duke brought about a revival of the Council of Nine Hundred, composed of 150 representatives of each of the city's six districts.[75]

In Angers, besides the annual elections on 1 May, regular *assemblées générales* were held where the parish representatives consulted. Between 1657 and 1789, 338 such general assemblies took place, about three each year on average. Behind the general meetings, moreover, lurked countless meetings of the inhabitants of individual parishes in Angers, where both parish and general city issues were discussed. These meetings were sometimes even attended by servants (*domestiques*), but usually dominated by merchants and artisans. The general assemblies discussed royal taxation, the preservation of local privileges, as well as day-to-day issues such as poor relief, health care, public works and so on. One of Angers' aldermen claimed there was no inhabitant whose opinion was not assessed. One need not necessarily accept that this was literally true, but neither should we overlook the important role of ordinary citizens in the political life of the town.[76]

To judge from the documents preserved in the Amsterdam archives, the most common line of communication between citizens and local authorities in that town was through petitions, many of them filed by the guilds. Hundreds of these guild petitions survive, and many more have been lost, because petitions that were turned down were immediately destroyed.[77] Many of these petitions request a change in the guilds' regulations, usually because new circumstances demand adaptation. In their petitions, significantly, the guilds tried to build a case based on the civic community that included both the authorities and themselves. In 1751, the Amsterdam carriage makers, for example,

were of the opinion that 'they were paying their scot and lot, and therefore were helping to carry the burdens of the town and their guilds'. Other guilds objected that taxation in Amsterdam was substantially higher than in the countryside, or reminded the authorities of their members' contributions to the civic militias,[78] which, according to the wallpaper painters in 1786, entitled them to the 'advantages, that are due to them as inhabitants of this town, and members of their guilds, ... with the exclusion of others, particularly aliens'.[79]

It seems that, indeed, the Amsterdam government generally looked favourably upon these guild petitions. A survey of Amsterdam local legislation – very important in the absence of any significant national legislation – has demonstrated that much of it was created on the initiative of sections of the population directly involved. More than 40 per cent of surviving petitions led to the introduction of a by-law. Even more telling, many by-laws copied the text of the petition verbatim into the Amsterdam statute book. To be sure, guilds were the single most important group of petitioners in Amsterdam; almost half the petitions preserved from the eighteenth century were signed in the name of a guild.[80]

Petitions were, of course, a common phenomenon throughout premodern Europe, and not at all limited to urban environments.[81] All social classes employed them to articulate grievances and demand redress. Local governments considered them an integral part of their governance procedures.[82] The Nine in medieval Siena, for example, were required by law to hold office hours during which citizens could submit and discuss petitions, as well as raise issues in other ways.[83] Sometimes petitions were even solicited by the authorities, as happened famously with the *cahiers de doléances* in France in 1789.[84] Frequently petitioners were individuals and their problems were practical. However, petitions could also be submitted collectively, as in Amsterdam, and address more principled issues, such as the right to gain access to the town's accounts, the regulation of the local economy and so on.[85] Clearly, petitions had the potential to turn into an instrument of popular politics.[86]

To be effective, petitions had to be backed up by lobbying, either by the petitioners themselves or by more or less professional lobbyists.[87] Petitions could also be, and at times were indeed, supported by mass mobilisation. Conversely, petitions could be used to mobilise the population for political causes, for example during the English Revolution.[88]

Possibly the most rebellious era between 1000 CE and the French Revolution was the sixteenth century, when the Reformation was a cause and catalyst of major unrest, not least in towns and cities all over Europe.[89] It has been recognised since 1962, when Bernd Moeller published a small book focusing exclusively on the imperial cities, that in Germany at least, the Reformation was to an important extent an urban phenomenon. In Wittenberg, Luther's home town, Protestantism was introduced without much popular upheaval, but in dozens of other towns, citizen committees used the religious conflict to push through religious as well as political and sometimes social reforms.[90] In the Low Countries the Reformation led to outright revolution and civil war, viz. the Dutch Revolt. In numerous towns, including major centres like Antwerp and Ghent in the south, Utrecht and, ultimately, also Amsterdam in the north, the Reformation was accompanied by major political upheavals, carried by substantial sections of the local citizenry.[91] In England, where the Reformation was first introduced by the king and his government, urbanites were both active participants and opponents of these changes.[92] In 1562, Protestants temporarily seized control of the city of Rouen, starting with a wave of iconoclastic destruction on 3 and 4 May, events for which the 'Ministers and Elders of the Reformed Church in the City of Rouen' swiftly published an apology. The city was duly sacked a second time when it was retaken by government troops, with special attention paid to the homes of the Huguenots.[93] In Paris, the civic militias and the heads of the city's sixteen districts were some of the most prominent activists among the local Catholic radicals known as the *Ligue*.[94]

Perhaps the most famous of these urban revolts of the Reformation era was the Anabaptist seizure of Münster. In 1525, while the Peasants' War was raging, the guilds of Münster had wrestled various concessions from the ruling bishop, concessions that were immediately repealed as soon as the unrest subsided. In February 1532 the Lamberti parish elected the reformed priest Bernhard Rothmann as its new vicar. As we saw earlier, the Münster guilds had a coordinating *Gesamtgilde*, and its leaders, the *Olderlute*, would emerge in the following months as the main actors of a revolutionary movement. By Christmas 1532, the clash between the urban community and the bishop had developed into an armed conflict involving civic militias as well as professional troops. During the next thirty months, Münster would become a laboratory for radical theology as well as social experiments,

including the abolition of private property.[95] Those experiments were supported by foreign Anabaptists, especially from the Netherlands, but sustained throughout by a cross-section of the local population.[96] As in other Reformation upheavals, Münster's citizens were actively shaping their society.

This emphasis on the sixteenth century is not to imply that urban revolts were unknown before the Reformation.[97] Indeed, one need only to think of the Revolt of the Ciompi in Florence in the summer of 1378, a revolt against a guild regime the *Ciompi* themselves had helped to establish.[98] The Dutch Revolt had deep roots in the tradition of urban revolts from the Middle Ages, in Brabant and Flanders in particular.[99] In Münster itself, the Anabaptist revolution had been preceded by earlier revolts, which looked remarkably like that of the 1530s.[100] A recent study of late medieval urban revolts in Italy and the Low Countries concluded that in these regions 'an entire repertoire of discourses, practices, and forms of association crystalised around the conduct of conflict in ways which varied from city to city, but constituted an essential feature of political life in all of them'.[101] Likewise, the easing off of religious conflict in the first half of the seventeenth century did not bring about a let-up of urban political conflict. Another study, this time of French urban conflict, concluded that 'the French Revolution was preceded by a long tradition of urban revolts that contained many of its familiar elements and that links the seventeenth century to earlier and later popular traditions'.[102]

Urban rebellions were directed against two opponents. Locally, citizens were taking on urban elites. They were not necessarily opposed to elite rule as such, but demanded transparency and accountability, and more generally an administration that operated in the interest of the community as a whole, rather than for some sectional interest. Externally, urban citizens insisted on the autonomy of their community vis-à-vis regional and national authorities. In these struggles they often collaborated with local elites, who subscribed to the same programme of urban autonomy.[103] Such conflicts could easily intersect, creating tensions within the citizen–elite coalition.[104] However, from the citizens' point of view, both types of conflicts were essentially about the same issue: creating a political space where they, as citizens, could have an effective voice and agency. In a remarkable number of towns, they managed to achieve this.

## Citizenship and the Politics of Taxation

One area where relations between authorities and citizens were at their most delicate was taxation.[105] Here again, citizens' agency was key. Taxation implies that citizens will part with some of their earnings in return for services to be delivered by the authorities. Listening to modern politicians, one might be forgiven for assuming that the majority of their constituents have no other priority than to reduce the amount of taxes they pay to the lowest amount possible. And of course most people dislike having to pay taxes, but they also tend to appreciate what they get in return for doing so: public services such as education, hospital coverage and public transportation, not to mention police protection, street lighting and so on. This paradox, that people want to enjoy the services provided by government but dislike having to pay for them, is one of the problems that governments have to overcome. In view of recent political discourse on taxation there is another paradox that we need to note: economically successful societies tend to have high levels of taxation. This is counter-intuitive in that most politicians favouring tax cuts argue that these will not only satisfy voters, but also provide a boost to the economy – a double benefit, in other words.

However, the two paradoxes are predicated on false assumptions, as is demonstrated by the modern literature on tax compliance, which suggests that wherever citizenship is organised transparently, tax morale will be high.[106] This is important because it seems that, especially in the early modern period, authorities were obsessed with finances, and would try every trick in the book to increase revenues.[107] So first of all we want to know more about how they did this. But secondly, levels of taxation and the state of public finances in general might help us to understand better the 'quality' of citizenship in various European states. I return to this topic in Part II of this book.

On 7 April 1748, commissioners in the Dutch provincial town of Zwolle were appointed to collect the Liberal Gift, a new tax introduced to cope with a French invasion that was threatening the Republic's southern border. In the eighteenth century the Dutch Republic was operating at the very limits of its fiscal possibilities, making it all the more urgent to involve citizens in the process of raising taxes.[108] In Zwolle the Common Council, representing the inhabitants of the four wards, was crucial for the introduction of new taxes, as became evident in 1748, when attempts were made to create a whole set

of emergency excises on coffee and tea and on tobacco, as well as a new register for the Liberal Gift personal tax. With great patriotic fervour the provincial authorities urged their local colleagues in mid-January to supply the cash necessary to thwart any French attack. In Zwolle the 'friends of the Common Council' approved some of the proposals, but refused to accept an excise on coffee and tea, which was seen as bad for local trade, because the excise was to be levied as an import duty. Only after five rounds of negotiation with the provincial authorities did Zwolle's Common Council finally acquiesce on 11 February, when a compromise proposal was introduced. Instead of the import duty, the excise would be levied through an assessment of Zwolle's households.[109]

The commissioners charged with the assessment were appointed locally. First, eight magistrates, two for each ward or 'street', were appointed who then selected two Common Councillors from the twelve representing each 'street'. Thus a total of sixteen individuals, four for each ward, was commissioned to collect the tax.[110] The Liberal Gift relied completely on voluntary contributions. It nonetheless produced 187,333 guilders in cash and another 60,232 guilders in precious metals contributed by the local population.[111] The overall amount, raised from a population of 12,000, means that each household voluntarily contributed an average of about seventeen guilders, or the equivalent of almost one month in wages for a day labourer.

This example suggests that the Zwolle authorities were relying on several mechanisms to boost tax morale. First of all, citizen representatives were involved in the decision to introduce (or not, as the case might be) new taxes in Zwolle. Secondly, these citizen representatives were involved in the assessment of rate payers. As they lived locally, their involvement also helped guarantee a fair distribution of the tax burden. And thirdly, procedures were put in place to rectify mistakes. Together, these mechanisms provided legitimacy and a degree of transparency to the process of taxation.[112]

The mechanisms Dutch urban authorities applied were by no means unique or even new, as is demonstrated by the assessment procedures in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Siena. In Siena, the subdivision of the town into three districts, or *terzi*, was used as a basic structure. Each *terzo* had about twenty assessors, appointed by the city council from among the inhabitants of that district. In November 1287 there were twenty-one such assessors (or *alliratori*) in Città, twenty in San Martino and nineteen in Camellia. It was their task to produce a tax

register, or *lira*. They were paid a small daily allowance of two soldi for the job, which was expected to last several months. The *alliratori* were supported in their work by notaries and clerics, who acted as secretaries.

The intensity of the job was a result of the scrupulous procedure that the *alliratori* had to observe. All households were first classified on a rough-and-ready basis as either *lira maggiore*, consisting of magnates, *mediocre*, mainly merchants, or *minore*, like artisans and shopkeepers. Subsequently, each household was assessed by all twenty *alliratori*. The six highest and the six lowest assessments were ignored. The final amount of taxation due from the household was arrived at by taking the average of the remaining eight assessments. The *alliratori* were often former members of the town council, but we also find magnates, merchants and artisans appointed to the job. In other words, the authorities made sure that tax assessments could not be portrayed as an attempt by one social class to exploit another.[113] On top of this, public finances were controlled by a committee of four *Provveditori* who again represented the three districts: one from each *terzo*, and the fourth rotating between the *terzi*. Those who had served on the committee were excluded for the next eighteen months from its membership.[114]

In fifteenth-century Florence there were two alternative systems. It is not entirely clear what made the government decide in favour of one or the other, but we must assume that a cost-benefit analysis was part of it.[115] The *catasto* was a major bureaucratic operation, requiring a detailed registration and assessment of all households and their property. Under its predecessors, i.e. before 1427, extraordinary levies had been divided between the town's sixteen districts or *gonfaloni*. The *gonfaloni* were thus made responsible for the assessment of their inhabitants. As in Siena, this was done by a committee of citizens, seven or nine who would all assess every household. The results would then be handed over to the friars of the Cameldolese order, who would proceed, as in Siena, by excluding the highest and lowest assessments for each household, and calculate the average of the rest.[116] For the *catasto*, a committee of ten was selected with the help of the complex mixture of lotteries and elections that the Florentines used for other high offices as well. Eight of the ten came from the seven Major Guilds, but in terms of wealth they had the same background as the councillors. After twelve months they were replaced by a new committee of a similar social profile. As on earlier occasions, the committee began with declarations of wealth by the citizens themselves, which seem to have come in very

quickly. These were then checked by the officials, and adapted where necessary.[117]

The exact procedures urban authorities utilised to raise taxes have not been studied much so far, as financial historians have concentrated on other aspects of the fiscal system. Our three examples, however, would seem to suggest that the mechanisms identified in the modern tax compliance literature were exploited to full effect by urban authorities, in order to optimise revenues. These mechanisms were designed to actively involve citizens both in the decision about the introduction of new taxes, and in the actual process of collecting them.

## Conclusion

Most of the time, urban office was the preserve of local elites. Although their dominance, measured in numerical terms, fluctuated over time, as such it was a permanent feature of urban governance. In the past, historians have seen this as an indication of the exclusion of ordinary citizens from politics. Only in times of crisis, it was assumed, could the latter get a foot in the door, by turning out in large numbers, or even physically intimidating the council members. This chapter has argued that the impact of citizens on urban rulers has been systemically underestimated, because historians have overlooked, or only studied in isolation, the many channels and instruments available to citizens to influence the political process. In some towns, council members were selected through an election procedure among citizens, while in other towns designated seats on the council were in the hands of citizen representatives, often the guilds. Still other towns had a second council, with dozens or even hundreds of members recruited from outside the elite. In other words, many towns had systems of government that formally incorporated their citizens.

In addition, citizens were actively involved in the production and execution of rules and regulations. Petitions were routinely submitted to the local government and routinely converted into legislation. In times of crisis, crowds and committees pressured the council to adopt new policies. The organisation of the citizens in guilds, militias and other civic institutions created a permanent forum for political debates, and an awareness among the elites that their citizens did not take everything for granted.

Urban elites often prided themselves on their own citizen status. On numerous occasions they subscribed to the core values of urban republicanism, as we saw in the previous chapter. Among other civic processes, citizens and their organisations were made an integral part of tax collection. The purpose of that inclusion was, no doubt, to enhance the legitimacy of taxation, but at the same time it was a recognition that urban authorities were powerless without the active involvement of their citizens.

Our data suggest that formal citizen participation reached its zenith sometime around 1500. During the sixteenth century, Reformation struggles led to a reduction of formal participation, as did the consolidation of centralised rule in many countries. This, however, was not a uniform development, and in many places local constitutions continued to provide a place for citizens until the end of the Old Regime. Moreover, informal participation, resulting from civic institutions like guilds, neighbourhoods and civic militias, as well as popular politics instruments like lobbying and petitioning, not to mention rebellion, remained in force and continued to remind local ruling families of the need to keep the citizens' interests in mind – even when at the same time thinking about their own.

## APPENDIX 1

## Urban representative institutions in 1500 and 1700 in the largest towns and cities of seven European countries

I used De Vries 1984, appendix 1 (269–87), to establish which five[118] towns were the most populous in 1500 and 1700 in each of the countries covered by this survey. Institutional data sources are listed below for each town. The presence of a common council, guild participation or elections (or a combination of these) is indicated by 1; their absence is indicated by 0; unknowns are indicated as 'nd', no data.[119]

| Belgium | 1500 | 1700 | source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Antwerp | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Bruges | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Brussels | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Ghent | 1 | 0 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Liège | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |

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| England | 1500 | 1700 | source |
|---|---|---|---|
| London (City) | 1 | 1 | Barron 2004, 131–32; Krey 1985, 10 |
| Bristol | 0 | 0 | Sacks 1991, 161, 167, 173 |
| Exeter | 0 | 1 | MacCaffrey 1958, 33; Sweet 1998, 91n15 |
| Newcastle | 1 | 1 | Fraser 2009; Wilson 1995, 292 |
| Norwich | 1 | 1 | Pound 1974, 101–03; Evans 1979, 28, 39 |

| France | 1500 | 1700 | source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Paris | 1 | 0 | Descimon 1994; Garrioch 2002, 130 |
| Bordeaux | 0 | 0 | Boutruche 1966, 295 |
| Lyon | 1 | 1 | Babeau 1884 vol. 1:86 |
| Marseille | 0 | 0 | Kaiser 1992, 138–39; Guiral and Amargier 1983, 155 |
| Rouen | 1 | 1 | Benedict 1981, 36; Bardet 1983, 100 |
| Toulouse | 0 | 0 | Schneider 1989a, 62; Taillefer 2000, 61–62 |

| Germany | 1500 | 1700 | source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Berlin | 1 | 0 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Cologne | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Dresden | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Hamburg | 0 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Nuremberg | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |

| Italy | 1500 | 1700 | source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Florence | 1 | 0 | Najemy 2006, 389; Litchfield 1986, 67–68 |
| Milan | 0 | 0 | Arcangeli 2006, 171; D'Amico 2015, 55 |
| Naples | 1 | 1 | Sodano 2013, 112–13 |
| Rome | 0 | 0 | Canepari 2017; Nussdorfer 1992, 81 |
| Venice | 0 | 0 | Viggiano 2013 |

| Netherlands | 1500 | 1700 | source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Amsterdam | 0 | 0 | Verkerk 2004, 183; Hell 2004, 247 |
| Den Bosch | 1 | 0 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Utrecht | 1 | 0 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Haarlem | 0 | 0 | Ree-Scholtens 1995, 45, 148 |
| Leiden | 0 | 0 | Brand 1996, 59; Prak 1985, 39 |
| Rotterdam | 0 | 0 | Engelbrecht 1973, 'Inleiding' |

| Switzerland | 1500 | 1700 | source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Basel | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Berne | 1 | 0 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Geneva | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |
| Zürich | 1 | 1 | Wahl 2015a, appendix |

| Europe, totals | 1500 | 1700 |
|---|---|---|
| pop. particip. | 22 | 17 |
| no particip. | 13 | 18 |

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