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Debates over Citizenship and Rights during the Revolution

The Poor and the Propertied

Although the status of Protestants, Jews, and free blacks would soon elicit passionate debates, the deputies agreed with little opposition to exclude servants, the propertyless, and the poor from voting and the less than prosperous from holding office.

Such views were common in the eighteenth century. Locke and most political theorists had argued that property provided an essential basis for participation in the public sphere; they generally overlooked the problem of women who owned property (especially widows and single women), putting them in the same category as the propertyless. Servants were excluded almost everywhere from political participation because they were thought to be dependent on those who employed them and therefore incapable of making independent decisions. Only the independent and autonomous (property-owning men) could participate fully in political life.

Abbé Sieyès, the vociferous opponent of aristocratic privilege, provided the rationale for the distinction between active and passive citizenship. Only active citizens enjoyed political rights; everyone else—women, children, foreigners, the poor, the propertyless, and servants—enjoyed civil but not political rights. On September 29, 1789, the National Assembly voted to divide the male citizens in three parts: the “passive” citizens who enjoyed civil rights but could not vote or hold office because they did not pay a high enough level of taxation; the “active” citizens who could vote at the lowest-level assemblies; and those among the active citizens who were eligible to actually hold office and vote in regional-level elections. Among the few who opposed this decision was Maximilien Robespierre, a deputy destined to play the role of major spokesman for

the government in 1793–1794, the period known as the Terror. In contrast to most deputies, he interpreted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen as a mandate for democratic government.

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ABBÉ SIEYÈS

Preliminary to the French Constitution

August 1789

After having set forth the *natural and civil rights* of the citizens, the plan that we are following leads us to recognize their *political* rights.

The difference between these two kinds of rights consists in the natural and civil rights being those *for* which the maintenance and development of society is constituted and the political rights being those *by* which society constitutes and maintains itself. It would be better for the clarity of language to call the first *passive* rights and the second *active* rights.

All the inhabitants of a country should enjoy the rights of a *passive* citizen: all have the right to the protection of their person, their property, their liberty, etc.; but all do not have the right to take an active part in the formation of the public authorities: all are not *active* citizens. Women, at least in the present state, children, foreigners, those who contribute nothing to maintaining the public establishment, should have no active influence on public affairs. All can enjoy the advantages of society; but those alone who contribute to the public establishment are like the true shareholders in the great social enterprise. They alone are the true active citizens, the true members of the association.

Abbé Sieyès, *Préliminaire de la constitution française* (Paris: Chez Baudoin, 1789). First published in July 1789 but expanded in August. The August version is used here.

THOURET

*Report on the Basis of Political Eligibility**September 29, 1789*

Jacques Guillaume Thouret (1746–1794), a lawyer from Rouen, spoke for the Constitutional Committee of the National Assembly that included among others Sieyès and Rabaut Saint Etienne. His report formed the basis for the subsequent legislation on qualifications for voting and officeholding.

The number of individuals in France is about 26 million; but according to calculations that seem to be very definite, the number of *active* citizens, with deductions made for women, minors, and all those who are deprived of *political rights* for legitimate reasons, is reduced to one-sixth of the total population. One must only count therefore about 4,400,000 citizens qualifying to vote in the primary assemblies of their canton [local administrative unit]. . . .

The Committee proposes that the necessary qualifications for the title of active citizen in the *primary* assembly of the canton be: 1) to be French or to have become French; 2) to have reached one's majority [be a legal adult; the age was set at 25]; 3) to have resided in the canton for at least one year; 4) to pay direct taxes at a rate equal to the local value of three days of work, a value that will be assessed in monetary terms by local officials; 5) to not be at the moment a servant, that is to say, in personal relationships that are all too incompatible with the independence necessary to the exercise of political rights.

To be eligible for office, either at the town or departmental level, one must have fulfilled all the conditions cited above with the sole difference that instead of paying a direct tax equal to the local value of three days of work, one must pay one equal to the value of ten days of work.

Speech of Robespierre Denouncing the New Conditions of Eligibility

October 22, 1789

Few deputies opposed the property requirements for voting and holding office. One of the few who did, Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794), a lawyer from Arras in northern France, made a reputation for himself as a determined and devoted defender of “the people,” that is, for the most democratic possible interpretation (still, however, excluding women) of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and of the constitution under deliberation. In the debate about the status of Jews, for instance, Robespierre insisted on their right to citizenship. In the debate about property requirements, Robespierre invoked the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen as justification for his position.

All citizens, whoever they are, have the right to aspire to all levels of officeholding. Nothing is more in line with your declaration of rights, according to which all privileges, all distinctions, all exceptions must disappear. The Constitution establishes that sovereignty resides in the people, in all the individuals of the people. Each individual therefore has the right to participate in making the law which governs him and in the administration of the public good which is his own. If not, it is not true that all men are equal in rights, that every man is a citizen. If he who only pays a tax equivalent to a day of work has fewer rights than he who pays the equivalent to three days of work, and he who pays at the level of ten days has more rights than he whose tax only equals the value of three, then he who enjoys 100,000 *livres* [French pounds] of revenue has 100 times as many rights as he who only has 1,000 *livres* of revenue. It follows from all your decrees that every citizen has the right to participate in making the law and consequently that of being an elector or eligible for office without distinction of wealth.