

# Direct Voting and the French Revolution

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# Outline of the Lecture

2

10/22/2024

- ▶ The French Revolution
  - ▶ From the Estate-General to the National Assembly
  - ▶ Storming of the Bastille
  - ▶ The Constitution of 1791
- ▶ The National Convention and the Birth of the Republic
  - ▶ The Constitution of 1793 – Referendum I
  - ▶ The Reign of Terror
  - ▶ The Constitution of 1795 – Referendum II
- ▶ The Directory and the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire
  - ▶ The Constitution of 1799 – Referendum III
- ▶ More Napoleonic Popular Votes/Plebiscites
- ▶ Direct Democracy in the Revolutionary Era

# The French Revolution: From the Estate-General to the National Assembly

- ▶ The background of the revolution
  - ▶ The rise of wealthy commoners
  - ▶ The peasants less supportive of the feudal system
  - ▶ Thoughts on social and political reforms widespread
  - ▶ The French government on the brink of bankruptcy
  - ▶ Famine resulting from the crop failure in 1788
- ▶ The Estate-General convened on 5 May 1789
  - ▶ Aims: To increase taxation of the privileged classes
  - ▶ The structure of the Estate-General
    - ▶ the clergy, the nobility, and the Third Estate (the commoners)
- ▶ The birth of National Constituent Assembly
  - ▶ Third Estate declared themselves the National Assembly
  - ▶ Mandate: not to disperse until they had given France a new constitution

# The French Revolution: Storming of the Bastille

4

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- ▶ Great fear of July 1789
  - ▶ The problem of food supply
  - ▶ While Louis XVI recognized the Assembly, he tried to assemble troops to dissolve it
  - ▶ Rumors of an 'aristocratic conspiracy' to overthrow the Third Estate
- ▶ The Bastille was seized on 14 July 1789
  - ▶ Bastille was the symbol of the old regime
  - ▶ Then, there were only seven prisoners
  - ▶ Governor of the Bastille was beaten, stabbed and decapitated
- ▶ The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* on 26 August 1789



# The French Revolution: The Constitution of 1791

- ▶ The new regime
  - ▶ The feudal system abolished
  - ▶ Church properties confiscated
  - ▶ Provinces were transformed into 'departments' administrated by elected assembly
- ▶ The Constitution of 1791
  - ▶ France functions as a constitutional monarchy
  - ▶ The king shares power with the elected legislative assembly
  - ▶ The king retains the royal veto
- ▶ However, instability under the new regime

# The French Revolution: The National Convention and the Birth of the Republic

6

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- ▶ The French army in retreat
  - ▶ France declared war on Austria in April 1792
  - ▶ However, Prussia joined the war in July 1792, soon the Austro-Prussian army advanced rapidly toward Paris
- ▶ Paris revolutionaries rose on 10 August 1792
  - ▶ Convinced that the king and autocrats betrayed France
  - ▶ The Parisian crowd occupied the Tuileries Palace (royal residence), imprisoned the royal family, and then killed nobles and clergy held in prison
- ▶ The National Convention met on 20 September 1792
  - ▶ It proclaimed the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of the republic on 21 September

# The French Revolution: The Constitution of 1793 – Referendum I

7

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- ▶ Factionalism in the National Convention
  - ▶ The Girondin: a middle-class centered republic
  - ▶ The Montagnard: a working-class centered republic
  - ▶ Louis XVI was executed on 21 January 1793
- ▶ The Constitution of 1793
  - ▶ The first republican constitution of France
  - ▶ Established universal male suffrage (over 21)
- ▶ Referendum on the Constitution of 1793
  - ▶ The Convention demanded popular ratification
  - ▶ Officially (declared on 20 August 1793), of 1,784,377 casted votes only 11,531 were against – the approval rate was 99.35%
  - ▶ In reality, the voting was not uniformly organized
    - ▶ In some case, voting was open for more than 10 days
    - ▶ The Constitution was read out before the voting
    - ▶ 'vote by shouting' was accepted



# The French Revolution: The Reign of Terror

8

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- ▶ Hard times for the newly establish Republic
  - ▶ Counter-revolutionary insurgencies occurred
  - ▶ Britain, Prussia and Austria formed the First Coalition against France
  - ▶ The economic difficulties
- ▶ The rise of the Jacobins and the Reign of Terror
  - ▶ The Girondin leaders were driven out of the National Convention
  - ▶ The Jacobins adopted radical economic and social policies
    - ▶ price controls, taxed the rich, brought national assistance to the poor, declared that education free and compulsory, and ordered the confiscation of the property of émigrés
  - ▶ The reign of terror to deal with opposition
    - ▶ the arrest of at least 300,000 suspects, 17,000 of whom were sentenced to death and executed

**guillotine**





# The French Revolution: The Constitution of 1795 – Referendum II

9

- ▶ The demise of the Jacobins
  - ▶ The military advancement against Austria eased the tension at home
  - ▶ Victory made the Terror and the economic and social restrictions pointless
  - ▶ Robespierre, the Jacobin leader, was overthrown in the National Convention on 27 July 1794
- ▶ The Constitution of 1795
  - ▶ Executive power in a Directory of 5 members
  - ▶ Bicameral legislative chambers
  - ▶ Limited suffrage based on property
- ▶ Referendum on the Constitution of 1795
  - ▶ Turnout was lower than the referendum in 1793
  - ▶ Partial official results show that 1,057,390 voted in favour, 49,978 voted against, 1,107,368 participated in the referendum.
  - ▶ Oral voting and written ballot were both allowed



‘To punish the oppressors of humanity is clemency; to forgive them is barbarity.’

# The French Revolution: The Directory and the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire

10

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- ▶ The Directory under pressures
  - ▶ Several revolutionary laws were repealed
  - ▶ The Directory used war to prolong their hold of the power, which made it relying increasingly on the army
  - ▶ In 1799, the Second Coalition of Austria, Turkey, Russia, and Great Britain won the battle against France
- ▶ The coup d'état of 18 Brumaire
  - ▶ Napoleon Bonaparte, a military officers, waged a successful coup d'état on 9-10 November 1799
  - ▶ The directors were forced to resign, the members of the legislative councils were dispersed, and a new government was set up

# The French Revolution: The Constitution of 1799 – Referendum III

11

## ► The Constitution of 1799

- Proclaiming the irrevocability of the sale of national property and by upholding the legislation against the émigrés
- Confer immense powers to the first consul to appoint ministers, generals, civil servants, magistrates, and the members of the Council of State

## ► Referendum on the Constitution of 1799

- The popular vote was held in February 1800
- The turnout was low, though officially it was announced that 3,000,000 votes were cast
- The referendum dispensed with the assembly mechanism and offer an individual (but non-secret) ballot for the first time



# More Napoleonic Popular Votes/Plebiscites

12

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- ▶ 1802 appointment of Napoleon as consul for life
- ▶ 1804 endorsing Napoleon as the Emperor of France
- ▶ 1851 the approval of Louis Napoleon's coup d'état
- ▶ 1852 appointing Louis Napoleon as French Emperor

# Direct Democracy in the Revolutionary Era

13

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- ▶ The electorate was not stable
- ▶ The constitution was a multi-issue document
- ▶ Modern secret ballots were not introduced
- ▶ Public opinion was volatile and easily swung by special events and political leadership

## Reading suggestion for next week's class

- ▶ Trechsel and Kriesi (1996) 'Switzerland: the referendum and initiative as a centrepiece of the political system', in Gallagher and Uleri (eds.) *The Referendum Experience in Europe*, Macmillan Press, pp. 185-208.
- ▶ Bryan, Frank M (2004) 'Introduction: The Methodology of Starting from Scratch', in *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How it Works*, Chicago University Press, pp. 1-24.