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# Direct Voting and the French Revolution

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# **Outline of the Lecture**

#### 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

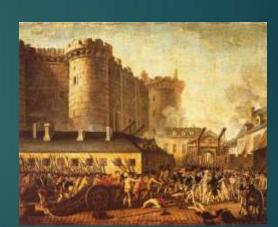
# The French Revolution: Storming of the Bastille

### 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

#### 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

- 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

- 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



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

#### The demise of the Jacobins

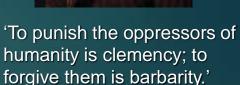
- The military advancement against Austria eased the tension at home
- Victory made the Terror and the economic and social restrictions pointless
- <u>Robespierre</u>, the Jacobin leader, was overthrown in the National Convention on 27 July 1794

#### 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





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

#### 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

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

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



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#### 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

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

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

#### <u>Reading suggestion for next week's class</u>

- 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.

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