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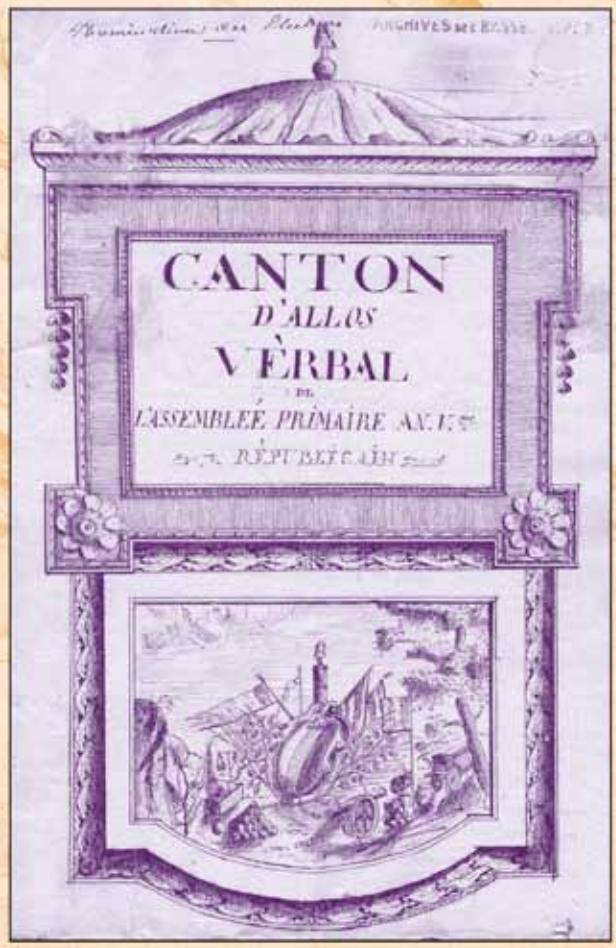
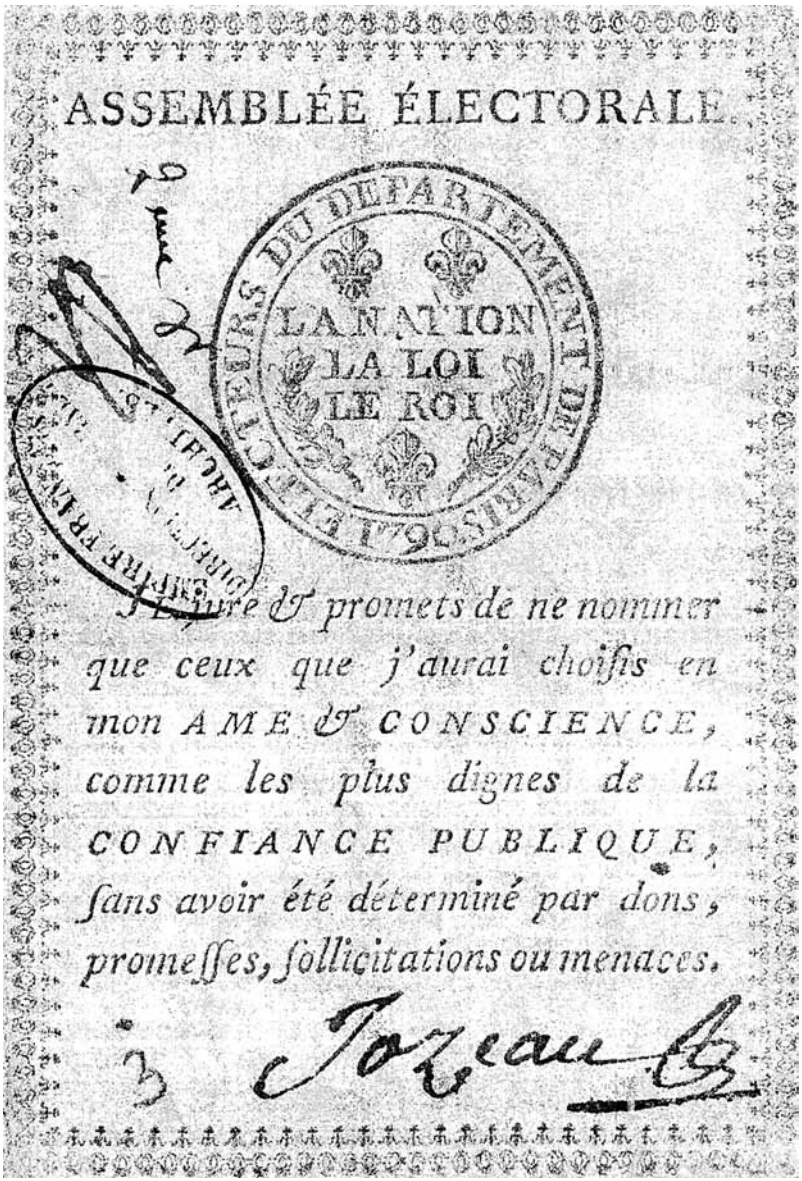
The French Revolution and the Birth of Electoral Democracy

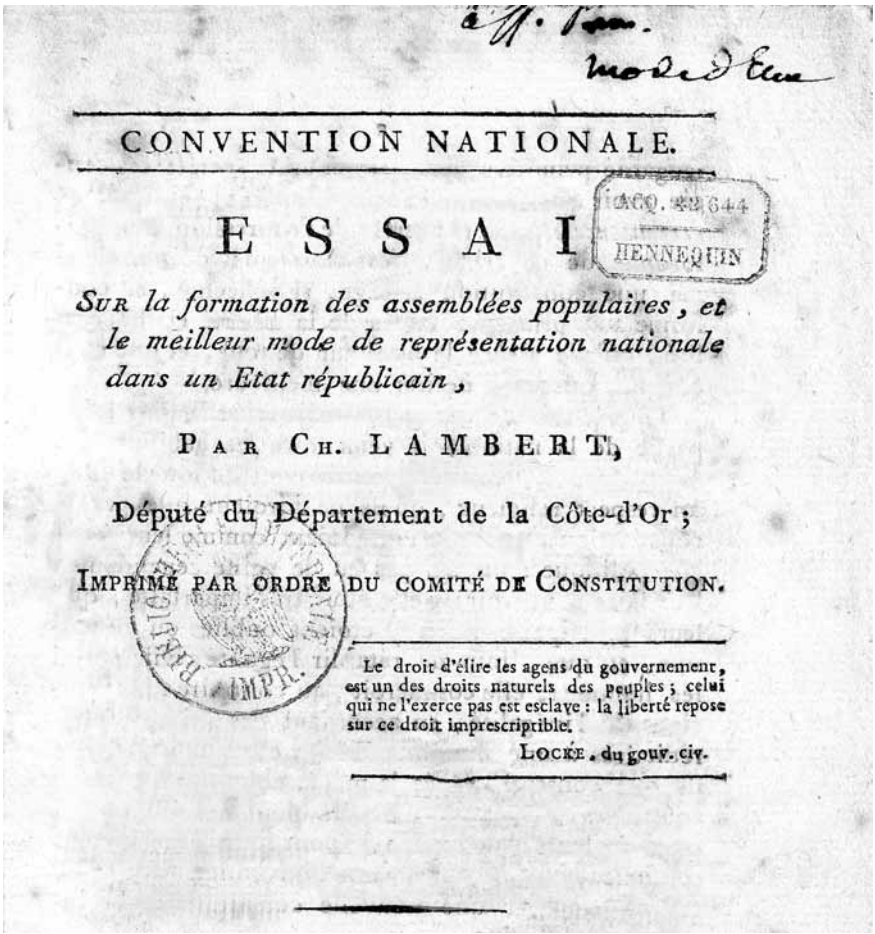
Melvin Edelstein



THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE BIRTH OF ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY



Frontispiece (a) Assemblée Electorale of the department of Paris in 1790. Courtesy of the Bibliotheque Nationale, France



CONVENTION NATIONALE.

ACQ. 22644
HENNEQUIN

ESSAI

Sur la formation des assemblées populaires, et le meilleur mode de représentation nationale dans un Etat républicain,

PAR CH. LAMBERT,

Député du Département de la Côte-d'Or;

IMPRIMÉ PAR ORDRE DU COMITÉ DE CONSTITUTION.

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LOCKE, du gouv. civ.

Frontispiece (b) Charles Lambert, *Essai sur la formation des assemblées populaires*

The French Revolution and the Birth of Electoral Democracy

MELVIN EDELSTEIN

ASHGATE

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For Marilyn and Elizabeth

I want to thank my wife and daughter who accompanied me on my *tour de France*. This book has appeared thanks to their love and patience.

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List of Abbreviations

AD	Archives départementales
AHR	*American Historical Review*
AHRF	*Annales historiques de la Révolution française*
AM	Archives municipales
AN	Archives nationales
Annales ESC	*Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*
AP	Archives parlementaires
BM	Bibliothèque municipale
BN	Bibliothèque nationale
BNUS	Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg
FHS	*French Historical Studies*
JMH	*Journal of Modern History*
RF	*La Révolution française*
RH	*Revue Historique*
RHMC	*Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*

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Introduction

Democracy was invented by the Greeks, but they developed direct democracy. By contrast, modern representative democracy originated in the American and French Revolutions. In a modern democracy, the citizens make laws through their elected representatives. Elections are the only way to legitimize authority, designate public officials, and hold them accountable.

From 1789 to 1799, France experienced a very extensive application of the elective principle. Except for the king, and that only until 1792, virtually every public office was filled by election. Between 1790 and 1799, no less than 20 elections were held at the local or national levels to fill vacant posts or to approve three constitutional plebiscites. An estimated 1.2 million elective public offices were created in 1790. Approximately 4.3 million adult males were enfranchised in 1791 and perhaps 6 million in 1793. With roughly 28 million inhabitants, France dwarfed the United States, the only other country to have extended the suffrage at that time. Never before had so many citizens participated in elections.

The Revolution's transformation of politics can be seen in the changing definition of the word "election" in French dictionaries. When the word appeared in the *abbé* Expilly's *Dictionary* (1764) and that of Bruzen de la Martinière (1768), it referred to the courts dealing with taxes in the jurisdiction of the *élus*. It also referred to the word "Electorate" as those parts of Germany whose sovereigns had the right to elect a new emperor.[1] The *Dictionary of the French Academy* (1762) defined "election" as the "action of electing, a choice made by several persons."[2] It cited the example of the Holy Roman Emperor. "Election" also signified a court dealing with taxes. Although these definitions were repeated in the 1798 edition, a striking change can be seen in the sixth edition (1832–35). "Election" now meant the "action of electing, choice made in an assembly by way of votes." It concluded: "Used absolutely and in the plural form, it is to be understood ordinarily as the Nomination of deputies."[3] In Emile Littré's *Dictionary of the French Language* (1872–77), "election" referred to "a choice that is made of someone in an assembly and by way of votes."[4] He specifically cited legislative and municipal elections. This definition

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[1] Abbé Expilly, *Dictionnaire géographique, historique et politique des Gauls et de la France* (Paris: Desaint et Saillant, 1764), 2, pp. 731–3; Bruzen de la Martinière, *Le Grand Dictionnaire géographique, historique et critique* (Paris, 1768), 2, pp. 748–9.

[2] The ARTFL Project, the University of Chicago.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

reveals the transformation of the word "election" from the Old Regime to the Third Republic.

Although the Revolution was instrumental in the development of electoral democracy, until recently, historians omitted elections in their account of its political history. To understand why this was so and how it changed, it is necessary to provide a survey of the scholarship on revolutionary elections from the nineteenth century to the end of the last century.

Nineteenth-century historians of the Revolution neglected elections. However, the advent of the Third Republic was a turning point. As elections were a prominent feature of the democratic regime, historians became conscious of their relevancy during the Revolution. The Centennial of the Revolution in 1889 provided an additional stimulus to the renewed interest in that founding event. The period between the Centennial and World War I was extremely important for the publication of collections of documents concerning the convocation of the Estates General, Parisian elections, and dictionaries of the deputies to the Legislative Assembly and the National Convention.[5]

Simultaneously, two classic interpretations of the Revolution appeared. Alphonse Aulard argued that the Revolution represented the advent of a democratic republic.[6] However, he equated democracy with the franchise, while neglecting elections. By contrast, Jean Jaurès gave primacy to economic and social history.[7] While he was not especially interested in elections, his evaluation of the social impact of the suffrage and eligibility requirements established at the beginning of the Revolution was much less negative than Aulard's. Jaurès exhorted scholars to do research on the social composition and wealth of elected officials.

Although the turn of the nineteenth century was a golden age for the electoral history of the Revolution, not all histories of the Revolution were celebratory works. Two adversaries of democracy, Hippolyte Taine and Augustin Cochin, who formulated the modern conspiracy theory of the Revolution, emphasized

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[5] A. Brette (ed.), *Recueil de documents relatifs à la convocation des Etats généraux de 1789 d'après les actes conservés aux Archives nationales* (4 vols; Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1894–1915); C.-L. Chassin (ed.), *Les élections et les cahiers de Paris en 1789* (4 vols; Paris: Jouaust et Sigaux, 1888–89); E. Charavay (ed.), *Assemblée électorale de Paris* (3 vols; Paris: Jouaust, 1890–1905); S. Lacroix, *Le département de Paris et de la Seine pendant la Révolution (Février 1791–Ventôse an VIII)* (Paris: Société de l'Histoire de la Révolution Française, 1904); A. Kucsinski, *Les députés à l'Assemblée législative de 1791* (Paris: Au siège de la Société, 1900); idem, *Dictionnaire des conventionnels* (4 vols, Paris: Société de l'Histoire de la Révolution Française, 1916–19).

[6] F.-A. Aulard, *Histoire politique de la Révolution française: Origines et développement de la démocratie et de la République (1789–1804)* (Paris: Librairie A. Colin, 1901).

[7] J. Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française*, ed. A. Mathiez (8 vols; Paris: Éditions de la Librairie de l'humanité, 1922–24).

the centrality of elections in understanding its "disastrous" outcome. Traumatized by the Commune of 1871, Taine loathed the people and feared democracy. He argued that the Revolution's origin should be sought in the "classical spirit" which had been nurtured in the Paris salons and literary societies. A group of doctrinaire rationalists developed a set of abstract ideas divorced from practical realities. The teachings of these impractical dreamers were disseminated by demagogues who brought about a Revolution that otherwise would not have occurred. The Jacobin conquest of power and the Reign of Terror were its logical outcome. The "classical spirit" became the "Jacobin spirit." Taine laid bare the mechanisms by which a determined and unscrupulous minority confiscated the fruits of electoral democracy.[8]

Taine paved the way for Cochin, a Catholic traditionalist hostile to democracy. His work was a sociological account of the production and role of democratic ideology, as well as the role of political manipulation and electoral machines. Cochin argued that French democracy traced its origin to the societies of thought which became models for the Jacobin clubs. He interpreted the voting of 1789 as the manipulation of the electoral assemblies by a militant minority. The key to understanding the electoral results can be found in the regulation of 24 January 1789 governing the elections to the Estates General. The king summoned his subjects according to the French conception of an organic, hierarchical, and corporate society. However, on the one hand, the regulation provided for extensive suffrage, but on the other, it forbade any electoral campaign, declared candidates, or political parties. As a result, "the regulation of 24 January placed the voters not in liberty, but in a void."[9] It was filled by militants from the societies of thought.

Despite the fact that it was impossible for the voters to make meaningful choices, Cochin commented that the *cahiers* were drafted and the deputies named as if by magic. How did this come about? Alongside the real people, there was another group, which spoke and acted in its name—members of the societies of thought. Voters were manipulated by this group, but they were unaware of it. The voters' isolation and inertia were preconditions for success. The electoral regulation facilitated the work of the secret societies and contributed to the success of "the machine." It triumphed by eliminating potential enemies.[10]

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[8] H. Taine, *Origins of Contemporary France*, trans. J. Durand (6 vols; New York: H. Holt, 1885).

[9] A. Cochin, "Comment furent élus les députés aux Etats Généraux," in *L'esprit du jacobinisme: Une interprétation sociologique de la Révolution française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), p. 83.

[10] A. Cochin, "La campagne électorale de 1789 en Bourgogne," in *L'esprit du jacobinisme: Une interprétation sociologique de la Révolution française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), pp. 49–78; idem, *Les sociétés de pensée et la Révolution en Bretagne, 1788–1789* (2 vols; Paris: H. Champion, 1925).