

# Elections in the French Revolution

*An apprenticeship in democracy, 1789–1799*

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Malcolm Crook

*Keele University*



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# Introduction

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When I began work on this project several years ago the study of elections was, to borrow the words of François Furet, ‘a poor relation of revolutionary historiography’.<sup>1</sup> Despite the vast amount of time and ingenuity devoted to the franchise and voting during the French Revolution, electoral issues were attracting little attention from scholars, who were otherwise engaged with ideological and cultural matters. Once the development of citizenship was placed on the historical agenda, however, the revolutionary apprenticeship in democracy began to excite much more interest; elections finally began to receive the consideration they deserve.<sup>2</sup> Patrice Gueniffey, a pupil of Furet, has recently published the first monograph on the electoral history of the Revolution and a research group devoted to pursuing the subject further has started to meet on a regular basis in Paris.<sup>3</sup> I may have set out as something of a lone researcher in this area, but I soon encountered a host of fellow-travellers along the way, to whom I owe an enormous debt.

At first sight it seems curious that a country which not only pioneered democratic elections in the modern world, but also initiated their scientific study, should have overlooked this vital phase of its own past for so long.<sup>4</sup> Some early soundings were taken under the aegis of Alphonse Aulard, in the wake of the first centenary of the Revolution and the

<sup>1</sup> F. Furet, ‘La monarchie et le règlement électoral de 1789’, in K.M. Baker *et al.*, eds., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1987–94), I, p. 375.

<sup>2</sup> R. Waldinger, P. Dawson and I. Woloch, eds., *The French Revolution and the Meaning of Citizenship* (Westport, 1993) and D. Heater, *Citizenship: The Civic Ideal in World History, Politics and Education* (London, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> P. Gueniffey, *Le nombre et la raison. La Révolution française et les élections* (Paris, 1993); I have also used the doctoral thesis from which this book originated (*La Révolution française et les élections. Suffrage, participation et élections pendant la période constitutionnelle (1790–92)*, Thèse pour le Doctorat, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 1989). The study-group, entitled ‘Voter et élire pendant la décennie révolutionnaire’, is led by S. Aberdam and B. Gainot.

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking of the work of François Goguel and the *Cahiers de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques*.



1 The Departments of France in 1790 (excluding Corsica)

consolidation of the Third Republic.<sup>5</sup> The elections to the Estates General of 1789 stimulated a good deal of research, as did the creation of the National Convention in 1792 and the constitutional referenda of 1793 and 1795. Several books tackled electoral issues in surveys of *esprit public* (public opinion), while numerous articles on elections filled the pages of that early house-journal for students of the period, *La Révolution française*. Yet what these early investigations revealed was the low turnout and partisan politics that accompanied the advent of the First Republic.

<sup>5</sup> F.-A. Aulard, *Histoire politique de la Révolution française. Origines et développement de la démocratie et de la République (1789–1804)*, first edn (Paris, 1901). The fourth edition, published in 1909, will be used here.

Right-wing critics eagerly seized upon such publications to show how democracy had been hijacked by a small, determined Jacobin minority. Cochin in particular enjoyed highlighting the illiberal and anti-pluralist practices that he associated with elections from 1789 onwards.<sup>6</sup>

It was doubtless the ambiguities embedded in the first French apprenticeship in democracy and citizenship that bred disenchantment with electoral studies. The rival attractions of economic and social history also diverted research into other areas during the interwar years. The resurgence of the revolutionary tradition suggested that the popular movement in town and countryside had achieved far more through riot and revolt than via votes and resolutions; historians turned their attention from the ballot box to the barricades. A political dimension never disappeared entirely, but it no longer dominated revolutionary historiography as it had in the heyday of Aulard's great, undervalued *Histoire politique*. It was the study of prices and wages, seigneurial exactions, or demographic and social structures that constituted the cutting edge of research in the 1950s and 1960s.

Criticism of these economic and social perspectives, carelessly lumped together and cavalierly dismissed as a 'Marxist interpretation', did have the merit of drawing attention back to political, ideological and cultural aspects of the Revolution. This was no mere retreat, for these dimensions were explored from novel angles. In the 1980s developments of this sort began to coalesce around the notion of an emergent 'modern political culture' in revolutionary France, yet elections remained conspicuous by their absence, prompting the comment from Furet with which this introduction began. Melvin Edelstein's pioneering article on revolutionary electoral sociology, like Jean-René Suratteau's work on elections under the Directory, failed to elicit the response it deserved or the research it demanded, at least in the short term.<sup>7</sup>

The difficult nature of the task involved offers a practical explanation for this continuing neglect. When Georges Dupeux, an authority on the nineteenth century, wrote that 'French sociologists have an advantage over their British colleagues in disposing of a rich documentation on all that has to do with elections', he had obviously not attempted to explore the revolutionary decade.<sup>8</sup> It represents, to put it mildly, a psephologist's nightmare, since electoral records are for the most part located in the

<sup>6</sup> A. Cochin, *L'esprit du jacobinisme*, ed., J. Baechler (Paris, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> M. Edelstein, 'Vers une "sociologie électorale" de la Révolution française: la participation des citoyens et campagnards (1789-1793)', *Rhmc*, 22 (1975), pp. 508-29 and J.-R. Suratteau, *Les élections de l'anVI et le coup d'état du 22 floréal (11 mai 1798)* (Paris, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> G. Dupeux, 'The Orientations of Electoral Sociology in France', *British Journal of Sociology*, 6 (1955), p. 328.



provinces and the series are seldom complete. Elections were conducted in primary and secondary assemblies via a series of multiple ballots which generated a profusion of voting figures. Dupeux might underline the 'extraordinary complexity' of nineteenth-century French politics and the difficulties that stem from 'the existence of numerous political parties and groups'.<sup>9</sup> Yet in the Revolution the absence of declared candidates and party-political labels poses even greater problems of interpretation for the historian.

The techniques employed to investigate the history of universal (manhood) suffrage in France since 1848 are simply not applicable to the democratic apprenticeship of the French Revolution.<sup>10</sup> The statistical side of this study accordingly diminished as these difficulties grew more apparent. Some readers may still be dismayed by the tables they will encounter in the text and a healthy scepticism in their regard is fully justified. Clearly, all the calculations cited here must be handled with great care; they indicate an order of grandeur rather than any degree of scientific precision, despite the inclusion of decimal places. When the data base is so insecure there are strict limits to what the application of psephological methodology can achieve.

A number of historians have attempted to construct a political geography of revolutionary France and I salute their endeavour to do so, though I remain rather dubious about the results.<sup>11</sup> In the absence of overt party affiliations, most of the national deputies chosen in 1791 and 1792 have been categorised according to the positions they adopted *after* their election, for what they *became* rather than what they *were*. In few cases were attitudes they subsequently espoused a factor in their election, especially where differences of opinion *within* the revolutionary camp are concerned. For example, when Barbaroux was nominated by the electors of the Bouches-du-Rhône in 1792 it was as an advanced Jacobin; only later was he denounced as a 'traitor' when his Girondin sympathies became apparent to his 'constituents'.<sup>12</sup>

Under the Directory political choice became a more conscious process, since those in contention had revealed their colours during preceding years. Yet, because national deputies were always elected in a series of ballots at departmental electoral colleges, their selection reflects the con-

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*   <sup>10</sup> R. Huard, *Le suffrage universel en France, 1848–1946* (Paris, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> L. Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 123–48 and, more recently, M. Vovelle, *La découverte de la politique. Géopolitique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1993), pp. 184–218 in particular. Both draw upon the earlier efforts of A. Patrick, *The Men of the First Republic. Political Alignments in the National Convention of 1792* (Baltimore, 1972) and the work of J.-R. Suratteau, cited in the bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> *Journal des départements méridionaux*, 2, p. 600, 12 Feb. 1793.

stantly shifting balance of opinion within these secondary assemblies, not that of the electorate as a whole. The relationship between primary and secondary levels of the voting mechanism is an extremely complicated one, since the politics of cantons and communes were frequently fluid and often opaque. Suffice to say here that abstention, boycott and exclusion rendered the departmental college of the Vendée solidly republican after 1792, despite the incipient or endemic state of rebellion that prevailed there.

The real importance of a wonderfully diverse, sometimes bizarre experiment with elections during the French Revolution lies in what it reveals of those who planned it and others who participated. Virtually every official post in France, whether it was legislative, administrative or judicial, became elective after 1789. Even the military veterans at Les Invalides in Paris were obliged to elect a new chief executive officer and only the kingship remained hereditary until the advent of the Republic in 1792.<sup>13</sup> Yet this study is primarily concerned with who could vote and how they did so, with electoral behaviour rather than elected personnel. During the revolutionary decade the suffrage was modified on four occasions and the voting mechanism was amended almost annually. As a consequence of the multiplicity of elective posts, short terms of office and changes of régime, there were no fewer than twenty rounds of elections in the space of a decade. The results of this veritable explosion of electoral activity were rarely what had been intended or hoped, though neither as unsuccessful nor so irrelevant as some commentators have supposed.

The electoral apprenticeship undertaken during the Revolution was certainly a chequered affair, plagued by the contradiction between a quasi-democratic suffrage on the one hand and an antiquated voting mechanism on the other. The resulting amalgam produced some curious results that call into question the current view of the French Revolution as the progenitor of a new political culture.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, the electoral system encouraged the persistence of archaisms which inhibited the emergence of modernity (construed as a set of twentieth-century norms). Of course, institutional change is no guarantee of altered behaviour and this study will provide some graphic illustrations of enduring old-regime practices in the 1790s. Nor should a flawed machinery be held solely responsible for the eventual demise of elections; neither the social context, nor the circumstances of the 1790s were conducive to the birth of liberal pluralism.

<sup>13</sup> I. Woloch, *The New Regime. Transformations of the French Civic Order, 1789–1820s* (New York, 1994), pp. 62–3.

<sup>14</sup> P. Gueniffey, 'Revolutionary Democracy and the Elections', in Waldinger *et al.*, eds., *The French Revolution and the Meaning of Citizenship* (Westport, 1993), pp. 89–103, makes this point very clearly.

None the less, the operation of these poorly understood elections offers an excellent point of entry into revolutionary politics at the interface between elite thinking and popular practice, between central legislation and local behaviour. This is a subject that must be pursued in the provinces as well as in Paris, for documentation on the primary stages of the electoral process is very sparse in the *archives nationales*. The situation in many departmental archives is no better: the political and topographical cross-section of revolutionary France represented by almost twenty departments in this study was heavily influenced by the availability of material. My original research at Toulon suggested that a rich archival vein was waiting to be tapped, but barren departments like the Vendée were only too common, while happy hunting grounds such as the Côte-d'Or proved all too rare.<sup>15</sup>

Where the electoral *procès-verbaux* are incomplete there is little choice about what to examine but, in order to obtain a broad geographical spread, I usually resorted to sampling more plentiful documentation. This has sometimes distorted my figures compared with the fuller investigations conducted by fellow scholars, though not to an intolerable degree.<sup>16</sup> Parachuting into unknown terrain, to slash and burn a path through the materials, can also be a disorientating experience because, as Peter Jones puts it: 'The electoral process furnished an alternative arena for gladiatorial combat between clienteles, kin-networks and territorial groups', with little relation to national politics.<sup>17</sup> At Berre in the Bouches-du-Rhône, for example, an official explained that violence during polling in the Year VII (1799) stemmed from personal rather than political animosities which went back to the *ancien régime*, though even he was unable to fathom it completely.<sup>18</sup>

The employment of local monographs can only partially compensate for first-hand intelligence, but this was a price worth paying in order to widen the scope of the inquiry beyond a few, detailed and doubtless unrepresentative case-studies. Despite the risk of sacrificing depth for breadth this unique, general study takes account of all types of election from the municipal to the cantonal and departmental, from the Estates General of 1789 to the last polls of the Directory a decade later. The findings have been presented within an essentially chronological framework

<sup>15</sup> M. Crook, *Toulon in War and Revolution. From the Ancien Régime to the Restoration, 1750–1820* (Manchester, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> M. Edelstein has conducted an exhaustive examination of the excellent records conserved in the Côte-d'Or and his (largely unpublished) calculations may conflict with my samples, though not where order of grandeur from one election to another is concerned.

<sup>17</sup> P.M. Jones, *Politics and Rural Society. The Southern Massif Central c.1750–1880* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 214.

<sup>18</sup> AD Bouches-du-Rhône L267, Procès-verbal d'élection, 2 germinal VII (22 Mar. 1799).

to render them more comprehensible, though the approach is thematic rather than narrative. Indeed, separate chapters have been devoted to the suffrage and the departmental electoral colleges. The focus throughout falls upon the origins and operation of the electoral process rather than its outcome: the nature of the personnel who were chosen is a subject which requires separate treatment.<sup>19</sup>

It is always easier to raise issues than to resolve them and this project has proved no exception; this book simply represents the author's latest draft. Many of my conclusions are provisional and will certainly be challenged as more specific information becomes available. I hope to pursue one or two aspects myself, such as the question of candidatures or the attitude of the press towards elections. Moreover, in this respect as in so many others, the experience of the Revolution needs inserting into a wider context so as to assess its particular contribution to the longer-term development of citizenship in France.<sup>20</sup> This was an uneven rather than a linear process, but the apparent reversals of the Napoleonic and Restoration eras had a role to play in the eventual establishment of universal manhood suffrage in the second half of the nineteenth century, though women had to wait another hundred years for the franchise.<sup>21</sup> The democratic apprenticeship in France also invites some interesting comparisons with other countries, such as Britain or the United States, where the transition was equally protracted but evolved in a different fashion.<sup>22</sup> Clearly much remains to be done, but for the moment the focus falls upon the revolutionary decade as France took its first, fateful footsteps towards transforming subjects into citizens.

<sup>19</sup> Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class*, pp. 149–79 and M. Crook, 'Marseille, Aix et Toulon: vicissitudes du personnel municipal de trois grandes villes provençales à l'époque de la Révolution', in B. Benoit, ed., *Ville et Révolution française* (Lyon, 1994), pp. 203–15.

<sup>20</sup> I beg to differ with E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France 1870–1914* (Stanford, 1976), who sees this process as a rather later development. See the comments of M. Edelstein, 'La participation électorale des français (1789–1870)', *Rhmc*, 40 (1993), pp. 629–42.

<sup>21</sup> M. Crook, 'French Elections, 1789–1848', *History Today*, 43 (1993), pp. 41–6, for some preliminary comments in this regard.

<sup>22</sup> F. O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electorate of Hanoverian England, 1734–1832* (Oxford, 1989) and R.J. Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America. A Study of Elections in the Original Thirteen States, 1776–1789* (Westport, 1982), for example.