

Option 3: Liberate France from the Old Regime

Men are born free, but everywhere they are in chains. So began the Enlightenment writer Rousseau's famous work, *The Social Contract*. Like Rousseau, we wonder: why must this be so? Now it is time for us to begin to break the chains. Our ideas are sharply different from those of the past, but they will create the kind of radical change that France needs. We must work to create a new, just, and fair society. The social distinctions of the past too often are used to tyrannize and preserve the privileges and wealth of a few. This must end. We must use all of our rational abilities and reason to improve conditions in France, to end hunger, and to create a society based upon the principles of liberty and equality.

France's new constitution must give the will of the people the most prominent place in the political decisions of France. The king must subordinate himself to the will of the people. We are reluctant to give the king any veto power, because it implies he puts his own opinion above that of the nation. By what right does he claim that power? From God? We think the authority to rule only comes from the people. We must create a society where people are able to advance based on their abilities and talents. All men and women from all walks of life should have the right to participate in politics. France must break the shackles of slavery in its colonies—the freedom of all from birth is one that we hold dear. And let us end the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church in France on religious practice. That tyranny is unjust and serves to fill the pockets of wealthy clergy with money. A new day is dawning in France; we must use all of our energy to forge ahead and remain wary of those nobles and others who want a counter-revolution.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 3

1. All are born free and equal before the law. Adhering to the principles of liberty, equality, and opportunity will allow us to create a better France.

2. We must end the old privileges and false social distinctions that have divided France.

3. The authority to rule France comes from the people of France and not a single person. The purpose of the government of France should be to serve the people.

4. We can use reason and rational thought to reorganize France and make a better society.

Supporting Arguments for Option 3

1. The vast majority of French people have had no voice in political decisions. Increasing participation will appeal to them and give them a stake in making change succeed.

2. Ending unfair privileges and creating a society with equality, opportunity, and justice

as its centerpiece will strengthen France.

3. France has no choice but to attempt radical change. In the past, moderate reforms have been blocked at every turn by those seeking to preserve their wealth and privileges.

From the Historical Record

General Principles

Voltaire, 1765

“Does a dog need another dog, or a horse, another horse? No animal depends on any other of its species. Man, however, has received that divine inspiration that we call Reason. And what has it wrought? Slavery almost everywhere we turn. If this world were as good as it seems to be, if everywhere man could find a livelihood that was easy and assured a climate suitable to his nature, it is clear that it would be impossible for one man to enslave another.”

Ménard de la Groye, member of the National Constituent Assembly, July 20, 1789

“Ah, the good people, the good French people. How slandered they have been by those who have said that liberty would never suit them.”

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, August 26, 1789

“1. Men are born free and equal in rights. Social distinction may be based only on common utility.”

Government of Bas-Rhin in Strasbourg, April 14, 1790

“Until the moment of the most successful revolution, France could be regarded only as a vast body, in which no tie bound the parts. The provinces, isolated from each other, formed to some extent different nations: manners, customs, language, forms of administration all tended to disunite them, and to make them indifferent to each other.

“Today everything has changed. Our rights, our duties, our interests are the same;

the privileges that divided us no longer exist; we are all brothers, all equal, all free: in a word, we are all French.”

Veto

Théodore Vernier, member of the National Constituent Assembly, August 1789

“I have come increasingly to realize that our Assembly is divided and that the nobles and the clergy want to make use of the veto to have all of our reforms rejected.”

Maximilien Robespierre, member of the National Constituent Assembly

“...the person [king] who can impose a condition on the constitution has the right to prevent it [the constitution]; he puts his will above the right of the nation.”

Abbe Sieyès, 1789

“The absolute or suspensive veto, no matter which, seems to me to be no more than an arbitrary order: I can only see it as a *lettre de cachet* [king’s warrant for arrest or execution] launched against the national will, against the entire nation.”

Political Participation

Abbe Sieyès, member of the National Constituent Assembly

“The people of the nation can have but one voice, that of the national legislature.”

Maximilien Robespierre, member of the National Constituent Assembly, October 22, 1789

“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.”

Women’s Role in Politics

Nicolas de Condorcet, philosopher and mathematician, July 3, 1790

“...[I]t would be completely absurd to limit the rights of citizenship and the eligibility for public offices...why should women be excluded rather than those men who are inferior to a great number of women?”

“Mothers, daughters, sisters, female representatives of the nation ask to be constituted as a national assembly. Considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt for the rights of woman are the sole cause of public misfortune and governmental corruption, they have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman....”

Olympe de Gouges, playwright and political activist, Declaration of the Rights of Woman, September 1791

“1. Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility....”

Religion

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, August 26, 1789

“10. No one should be disturbed for his opinions, even in religion, provided that their manifestation does not trouble public order as established by law.”

Zalkind Hourwitz, political activist, 1789

“The means of making the Jews happy and useful? Here it is: stop making them unhappy and unuseful. Accord them, or rather return to them the right of citizens, which you have de-

nied them against all human laws and against your own interests, like a man who thoughtlessly cripples himself....”

Brunet de Latuque, member of the National Constituent Assembly, December 21, 1789

“I have the honor of proposing to you, Sirs, a decree in the following form that requires no further interpretation:

“1. That non-Catholics who have fulfilled all the conditions laid down in preceding decrees in order to be electors and eligible for office can be elected to every level of the administration, without exception.

“2. That non-Catholics are eligible for every civil and military post, like other citizens.”

Slavery

Jean-Louis Viefville des Essars, “On the Emancipation of Negroes,” 1790

“Freedom is the first right that man receives from nature. It is a sacred and inalienable right, and nothing should take it from him. Slavery is therefore nothing more than an abuse of power.”

The Revolutions of Paris (Newspaper), September 5, 1790

“As for the slave trade and the slavery of Negroes, the European governments will find it useless to oppose the cries of philosophy and the principles of universal liberty that germinate and spread throughout the nations.... The new order of things will rise up despite all the precautions that have been taken to prevent it. Yes! We dare to predict with confidence that the time will come, and that is not far off, when you see a frizzy-haired African, with no other recommendation than his good sense and virtues, come and participate in the legislative process at the heart of our national assemblies.”