

Introduction:

In the Enlightenment foundations of the Revolution, many Americans drew hope for "a new era in the history of mankind"—one based on civil liberty, just ownership of land, sound economic principles, and wisely distributed political power. With its wide distribution of property, lack of a legally established hereditary aristocracy, and established churches far less powerful than in Britain, colonial America was a society with deep democratic potential. But it took the struggle for independence to transform it into a nation that celebrated equality and opportunity. The Revolution unleashed public debates and political and social struggles that enlarged the scope of freedom and challenged inherited structures of power within America. In rejecting the crown and the principle of hereditary aristocracy, many Americans also rejected the society of privilege, patronage, and fixed status that these institutions embodied.

The consciousness of the lower middle classes grew to the point where it caused some hard thinking among leaders of the Revolution. By mid-1776, laborers, artisans, and small tradesmen joined the pre-war protests, employing extralegal measures when electoral politics failed. Helped by some middle-class leaders (Thomas Paine, Thomas Young, and others), they launched a full-scale attack on wealth and even on the right to acquire unlimited private property. In the countryside, where most people lived, there was a similar conflict of poor against rich, one which political leaders would use to mobilize the population against England, granting some benefits for the rebellious poor, and many more for themselves in the process.

To be sure, the men who led the Revolution from start to finish were by and large members of the American elite. The lower classes did not rise to power as a result of independence. Nonetheless, the idea of liberty became a revolutionary rallying cry, a standard by which to judge and challenge home-grown institutions as well as imperial ones. Jefferson's seemingly straightforward assertion in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" announced a radical principle whose full implications no one could anticipate. In both Britain and its colonies, a well-ordered society was widely thought to depend on obedience to authority—the power of rulers over their subjects, husbands over wives, parents over children, employers over servants and apprentices, slaveholders over slaves. Inequality had been fundamental to the colonial social order; the Revolution challenged it in many ways. Henceforth, American freedom would be forever linked with the idea of equality—equality before the law, equality in political rights, equality of economic opportunity, and, for some, equality of condition. "Whenever I use the words freedom or rights," wrote Thomas Paine, "I desire to be understood to mean a perfect equality of them. . . . The floor of Freedom is as level as water." In the wake of the American Revolution, the term *democracy* came into wider use to express the popular aspirations for greater equality inspired by the struggle for independence. For poor whites, the Revolution signified an opportunity to challenge the previous domination by a privileged few.

Your task is to investigate the impact of the Revolution on poor whites--yeoman farmers, indentured servants, propertyless men, backcountry frontiersmen, and other working class whites. Many of these men took part in the Revolution, from taking part in the pre-war protests to serving as soldiers in the Continental Army. How did the Revolution open these men to new ideas and help them challenge existing political and social institutions? Did the rhetoric and ideals of the Revolution reach these groups, or did the Revolution prove less than revolutionary for these men? Use pages 221-225 and 230-232 in your book and the sources I have compiled here to analyze the extent to which the Revolution was revolutionary for poor whites.

Alexander Hamilton Links Property to Voting, 1775

Introduction

In the years preceding the Declaration of Independence, dozens of Americans wrote pamphlets discussing an enormous range of political issues. Among those authors figured a young Alexander Hamilton, who, in 1775, wrote a pamphlet entitled "The Farmer Refuted." In it, Hamilton provided a brief summary of the prevailing logic behind restricting the vote to those who owned property. Leading colonists associated democracy with disorder and mob rule, and believed that the vote should be restricted to those who owned property or paid taxes. Only these people, in their view, were committed members of the community and were sufficiently independent to vote. Each of the thirteen colonies required voters either to own a certain amount of land or personal property, or to pay a specified amount in taxes.

Questions to Consider

- How did Hamilton define "a free agent in a political view"?
- What distinguished such a person from other citizens?
- Why, according to Hamilton, was it appropriate to limit voting to those who owned property?

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It is also, undeniably, certain, that no Englishman, who can be deemed a free agent in a political view, can be bound by laws, to which he has not consented, either in person, or by his representative. Or, in other words, every Englishman (exclusive of the mercantile and trading part of the nation) who possesses a freehold, to the value of forty shillings per annum, has a right to a share in the legislature, which he exercises, by giving his vote in the election of some person, he approves of, as his representative.

"The true reason (says Blackstone) of requiring any qualification, with regard to property in voters, is to exclude such persons, as are in so mean a situation, that they are esteemed to have no will of their own. If these persons had votes, they would be tempted to dispose of them, under some undue influence, or other. This would give a great, an artful, or a wealthy man, a larger share in elections, than is consistent with general liberty. If it were probable, that every man would give his vote, freely, and without influence of any kind, then, upon the true theory and genuine principles of Liberty, every member of the community, however poor, should have a vote, in electing those delegates, to whose charge is committed the disposal of his property, his liberty and life. But since that can hardly be expected, in persons of indigent fortunes, or such as are under the immediate dominion of others, all popular states have been obliged to establish certain qualifications, whereby, some who are suspected to have no will of their own, are excluded from voting; in order, to set other individuals, whose wills may be supposed independent, more thoroughly upon a level with each other."

Hence it appears, that such "of the people as have no vote in the choice of representatives, and therefore, are govern'd, by laws, to which they have not consented, either by themselves or by their representatives, are only those persons, who are in so mean a situation, that they are esteemed to have no will of their own." Every free agent, every free man, possessing a freehold of forty shillings per annum, is, by the British constitution, intitled to a vote, in the election of those who are invested with the disposal of his life, his liberty and property.

John Adams to John Sullivan, May 26, 1776

Introduction

In June of 1776, John Adams served as a member of the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration stated that "all men are created equal," yet just a month earlier Adams had discussed more fully the implications of equality in a letter to James Sullivan. Sullivan, a member of the Massachusetts legislature, had written to Elbridge Gerry, who served with Adams in the Continental Congress, about the issue of property requirements for voting. Gerry, in turn, passed the letter to Adams, who responded to Sullivan.

Questions to Consider

- What, according to Adams, served as the proper basis for apportioning political power?
- How, then, could democracy best be preserved?
- What, according to Adams, would be the result of altering the "infallible" link between property and voting?

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Our worthy Friend, Mr. Gerry has put into my Hand, a Letter from you, of the Sixth of May, in which you consider the Principles of Representation and Legislation, and give us Hints of Some Alterations, which you Seem to think necessary, in the Qualification of Voters. . . .

It is certain in Theory, that the only moral Foundation of Government is the Consent of the People. But to what an Extent Shall We carry this Principle? Shall We Say, that every Individual of the Community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly to every Act of Legislation? No, you will Say. This is impossible. How then does the Right arise in the Majority to govern the Minority, against their Will? Whence arises the Right of the Men to govern Women, without their Consent? Whence the Right of the old to bind the Young, without theirs. . . .

I Should think that Wisdom and Policy would dictate in these Times, to be very cautious of making Alterations. Our people have never been very rigid in Scrutinizing into the Qualifications of Voters, and I presume they will not now begin to be so. But I would not advise them to make any alteration in the Laws, at present, respecting the Qualifications of Voters.

Your Idea, that those Laws, which affect the Lives and personal Liberty of all, or which inflict corporal Punishment, affect those, who are not qualified to vote, as well as those who are, is just. But, So they do Women, as well as Men, Children as well as Adults. What Reason Should there be, for excluding a Man of Twenty years, Eleven Months and twenty-seven days old, from a Vote when you admit one, who is twenty one? The Reason is, you must fix upon Some Period in Life, when the Understanding and Will of Men in general is fit to be trusted by the Public. Will not the Same Reason justify the State in fixing upon Some certain Quantity of Property, as a Qualification.

The Same Reasoning, which will induce you to admit all Men, who have no Property, to vote, with those who have, for those Laws, which affect the Person will prove that you ought to admit Women and Children: for generally Speaking, Women and Children, have as good Judgment, and as independent Minds as those Men who are wholly destitute of Property: these last being to all Intents and Purposes as much dependent upon others, who will please to feed, cloath, and employ them, as Women are upon their Husbands, or Children on their Parents. . . .

It is dangerous to open So fruitfull a Source of Controversy and Altercation, as would be opened by attempting to alter the Qualifications of Voters. There will be no End of it. New Claims will arise. Women will demand a Vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their Rights not enough attended to, and every Man, who has not a Farthing, will demand an equal Voice with any other in all Acts of State. It tends to confound and destroy all Distinctions, and prostrate all Ranks, to one common Levell.

State Constitutions & Voting Rights

Introduction

After declaring independence in 1776, states began writing their own constitutions and forming new governments. The American Revolution was fought in part over the issue of voting. The Revolutionaries rejected the British argument that representation in Parliament could be virtual. Instead, the Revolutionaries argued that government derived its legitimacy from the consent of the governed.

This made many restrictions on voting seem to be a violation of fundamental rights. During the period immediately following the Revolution, some states replaced property qualifications with taxpaying requirements. This reflected the principle that there should be "no taxation without representation." Other states allowed anyone who served in the army or militia to vote. Vermont was the first state to eliminate all property and taxpaying qualifications for voting.

Questions to Consider

- Despite the arguments for property requirements, like those made by John Adams, why did many states eliminate or reduce property requirements for voting?
- How might this reduction in property requirements affect poor whites and their involvement in the political process?

Document: New Jersey Constitution (1776): Article 4

4. That all Inhabitants of this Colony of full Age, who are worth Fifty Pounds proclamation Money clear Estate in the same, & have resided within the County in which they claim a Vote for twelve Months immediately preceding the Election, shall be entitled to vote for Representatives in Council & Assembly; and also for all other publick Officers that shall be elected by the People of the County at Large.

Document: Pennsylvania Constitution (1776): Section 6

SECT. 6. Every freemen of the full age of twenty-one Years, having resided in this state for the space of one whole Year next before the day of election for representatives, and paid public taxes during that time, shall enjoy the right of an elector: Provided always, that sons of freeholders of the age of twenty-one years shall be entitled to vote although they have not paid taxes.

Document: New York Constitution (1777): Section VII

VII. That every male inhabitant of full age, who shall have personally resided within one of the counties of this State for six months immediately preceding the day of election, shall, at such election, be entitled to vote for representatives of the said county in assembly; if, during the time aforesaid, he shall have been a freeholder, possessing a freehold of the value of twenty pounds, within the said county, or have rented a tenement therein of the yearly value of forty shillings, and been rated and actually paid taxes to this State...

The Town of Lenox Responds to Massachusetts's Draft Constitution, 1778

Introduction

Residents of the town of Lenox, in western Massachusetts, objected to Article V of the new constitution drafted between 1777 and 1778. Article V granted the right to vote throughout Massachusetts to every male inhabitant, except negroes, Indians, and mulattoes, of at least twenty-one years of age, provided he paid taxes (unless excused by law) and had resided in the town for at least one full year.

Questions to Consider

- Why did the residents of Lenox object to Article V?
- On what grounds did they base their objection?

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Objections against Article the 5th All Men were born equally free and independent, having certain natural and inherent and unalienable Rights, among which are the enjoying and defending Life and Liberty and acquiring, possessing and protecting Property of which Rights they cannot be deprived but by injustice, except they first forfeit them by committing Crimes against the Public. We conceive this Article declares Honest Poverty a Crime for which a large Number of the true and faithful Subjects of the State, who perhaps have fought and bled in their Country's Cause are deprived of the above mentioned Rights (which is Tyranny) for how can a Man be said to [be] free and independent, enjoying and defending Life and Liberty and protecting property, when he has not a voice allowed him in the choice of the most important officers in the Legislature, which can make laws to bind him and appoint Judges to try him in all cases as well of Life and Liberty as of Property — No Person ought to be allowed to vote for any Officer of the Community except he has taken an Oath of Allegiance to the said Community — An Oath is the bond of society and if ever necessary it is necessary in the present case.

Equality and Property in New Jersey, July 30, 1776

Introduction

As in other states, when New Jersey drafted its first constitution, its authors linked service in public office to the ownership of property. Not everyone approved of the connection. The article below, for example, appeared in a Pennsylvania newspaper soon after the New Jersey constitution was made public.

Questions to Consider

- To what, and on what basis, did the author of the article object?
- What connection could the author see between owning property and serving in public office? Why did the connection seem irrelevant in this case?

Document

Although it be granted, on all hands, that all power originates from the people; yet it is plain, that in those colonies where the government has, from the beginning, been in the hands of a very few rich men, the ideas of government both in the minds of those rich men, and of the common people, are rather aristocratic than popular. The rich, having been used to govern, seem to think it is their right; and the poorer commonalty, having hitherto had little or no hand in government, seem to think it does not belong to them to have any.

From this cause, I imagine, it came to pass that the New-Jersey Convention, in their charter, made it a qualification for a member of their Lower House of Assembly, that he be possessed of an estate of five hundred pounds, and of a Member of their Council, that he have an estate of one thousand pound. This I esteem a hurtful remnant of the feudal constitution. Why should these be made qualifications? Are not many, who have not these qualifications, as fit to serve their country in either of these capacities, as any that are worth the money? This I think cannot be denied. The only reason that occurs to my mind, which can be pleaded in justification of this regulation, is that it renders the legislators independant. But according to my observation, many who are not worth so much, are of more independent spirits, and will not be so soon biassed by the prospect of gain, as those in general who are much richer than themselves.

Besides, why should not the same qualification be insisted on for a Judge in any Court, and for any considerable officer, whether civil or military? The necessity of independant men in all these cases is much the same. By these means the government, in every part, would be in the hands of the rich only; and therefore in all reason ought to be exercised *over* the rich only, and the poor, and those in moderate circumstances, ought to be entirely excused from bearing any part of the burden of a government, from the honors of which they are wholly excluded.

In short, I cannot see but that our maxim in this government is perfectly right, and that the experience of more than a century confirms the propriety of it, that any elector hath a right to be elected into any office of state.

Mellen Chamberlain, interview with Levi Preston, 1843

Introduction

Sometime around 1843, a young man named Mellen Chamberlain interviewed Levi Preston, an aging veteran of the American Revolution. Then ninety-one years old, Preston had been in his early twenties in 1775 when British soldiers marched out of Boston to search for arms and rebels in nearby Concord, Massachusetts. In the second interview below, a former Tory (Loyalist) tells why he decided to join the Patriots as a soldier in the Continental Army.

Questions to Consider

- According to Preston, what was his purpose for joining the Continental Army? How is his explanation different from the typical narratives of the causes or purposes of the war, as seen in Chamberlain's questions?
- What was at stake for Preston and other Americans fighting the British? In what ways was the war about fighting for liberty and autonomy?
- What reasons does the Loyalist in the second interview give for joining the war? How and why are his reasons different from Preston's?
- How were both men motivated by improving their social standing or condition?

Document 1: Interview with Captain Preston

Chamberlain: Captain Preston, what made you go to Concord to fight?

Captain Preston: What did I go for?

Chamberlain: Were you oppressed by the Stamp Act?

Preston: I never saw any stamps and I always understood that none were ever sold!

Chamberlain: Well, what about the Tea Tax?

Captain Preston: Tea Tax? I never drank a drop of that stuff. The boys threw it all overboard!

Chamberlain: But I suppose you had been reading Harrington, Sydney and Locke about the eternal principles of Liberty?

Captain Preston: I never heard of these men. The only books we had were the Bible, the catechism, Watt's Psalms, and hymns and the almanacs.

Chamberlain: Well, then, what was the matter?

Captain Preston: Young man, what we meant in going for those Redcoats was this: we always had been free and we meant to be free always! They didn't mean that we should.

Document 2: A wounded American lieutenant at Bunker Hill, interviewed by Peter Oliver, a Tory told how he switched sides and joined the Continental Army:

I was a Shoemaker, & got my living by my Labor. When this Rebellion came on, I saw some of my Neighbors got into Commission, who were no better than myself. I was very ambitious, & did not like to see those Men above me. I was asked to enlist, as a private Soldier ... I offered to enlist upon having a Lieutenants Commission; which was granted. I imagined my self now in a way of Promotion: if I was killed in Battle, there would be an end of me, but if any Captain was killed, I should rise in Rank, & should still have a Chance to rise higher. These Sir! were the only Motives of my entering into the Service; for as to the Dispute between Great Britain & the Colonies, I know nothing of it. ...

A Pennsylvania Watchman, June 10, 1776

Introduction

It is unclear exactly what inspired the piece below, but most likely the debate raging in Pennsylvania over property requirements for voting and office-holding in the state's new constitution provided incentive to put pen to paper. The article appeared in the *Pennsylvania Packet* newspaper and seems to have been written in response to a suggestion that it was improper to include common people — men with little or no property — in political discussions and decision-making.

Questions to Consider

- Does the author seem to support or oppose the inclusion of common people in public life?
- What does the author point out about "uncommon people"?
- The author identifies two kinds of vulgarity. Which did the author consider the worse of the two?

Document

Here I cannot help making a digression from my subject. It was a custom among the Jews on certain occasions, to acknowledge the origin of their families as an antidote to pride. "A Syrian ready to perish was my father," was the confession with which they approached the temple. Suppose the same acknowledgement was demanded from some of our UNCOMMON People. I believe the answer should be, a poor tradesman, a day-labourer, or a vagrant, "ready to perish was my father."--Talk not, ye pretenders to rank and gentility, of your elevated stations.--They are derived from those very people whom you treat with so much contempt. Talk not of their *vulgar* countenances and behaviour. Their vulgarity is seated only in their MANNERS. It occupies a higher place among yourselves. It is seated in your MINDS. This the profane, obscene, and trifling conversation so peculiar to high life abundantly witnesses.

Had you concurred in the present virtuous and necessary measure of instituting a new government, you would have probably continued to occupy your posts and offices, with that additional lustre which they would have received from being the unbiassed gifts of freemen, but you have now forfeited the confidence of the people, by despising their authority, and you have furnished them with a suspicion that in taking up arms you yielded only to the violence of the times, or that you meant to fight for your offices, and not for your country.

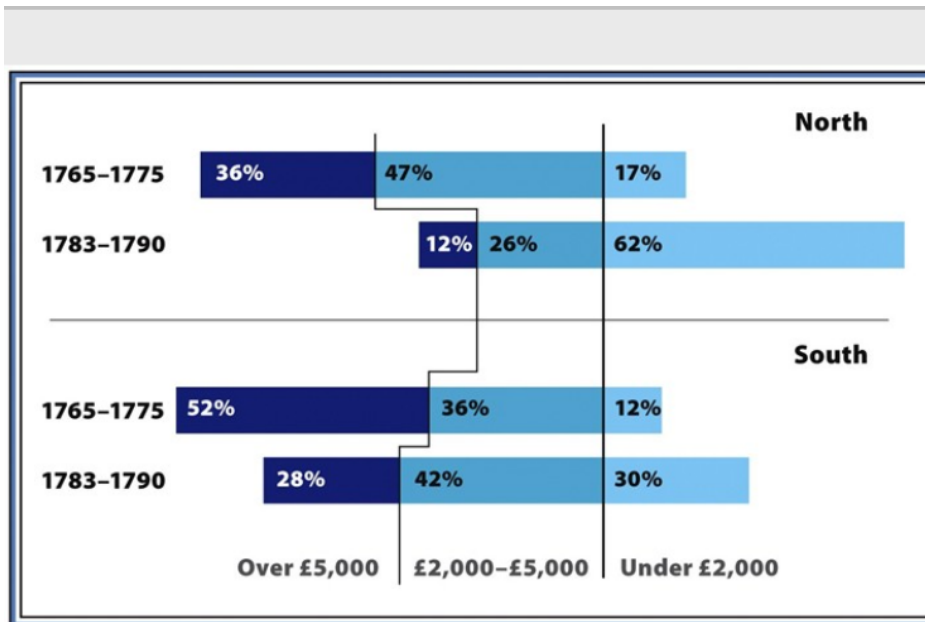


Figure 6.1 Middling Men Enter the Halls of Government, 1765-1790
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Middling Men Enter the Halls of Government, 1765-1790

Before the Revolution, wealthy men (with assets of £2,000 or more, as measured by tax lists and probate records) dominated most colonial assemblies. The power of money was especially apparent in the southern colonies, where representatives worth at least £5,000 formed a majority of the legislators. However, in the new American republic, the proportion of middling legislators (yeomen farmers and others worth less than £2,000) increased dramatically, especially in the northern states.

Noah Webster on Educating Young Americans, 1790

Introduction

Noah Webster is best known for the dictionary he completed in 1828. His *American Dictionary of the English Language*, however, was just one of his many contributions to the cultural independence of the United States. Webster was also a strong advocate of developing an educational system more properly suited to American values and institutions than was the system we had inherited from England. Webster's *On the Education of Youth in America* captures perfectly his determination to create a new way of educating the citizens of a new nation.

Questions to Consider

- Why was education so important to the republic?
- What contrast did Webster note between American forms of government and American forms of education? How did this contrast create problems for the American people?
- How did Webster propose to remedy the situation?

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In despotic governments the people should have little or no education, except what tends to inspire them with servile fear. Information is fatal to despotism.

"In a republican government," says [a] writer, "the whole power of education is required." Here every class of people should know and love the laws. This knowledge should be diffused by means of schools and newspapers...

Two regulations are essential to the continuance of republican governments: 1. Such a distribution of lands and such principles of descent and alienation as shall give every citizen a power of acquiring what his industry merits. 2. Such a system of education as gives every citizen an opportunity of acquiring knowledge and fitting himself for places of trust. These are fundamental articles, the sine qua non of the existence of the American republics. Hence the absurdity of our copying the manners and adopting the institutions of monarchies.

In several states we find laws passed establishing provision for colleges and academies where people of property may educate their sons, but no provision is made for instructing the poorer rank of people even in reading and writing. Yet in these same states every citizen who is worth a few shillings annually is entitled to vote for legislators. This appears to me a most glaring solecism in government. The constitutions are republican and the laws of education are monarchical. The former extend civil rights to every honest industrious man, the latter deprive a large proportion of the citizens of a most

Poor/non-elite Whites

valuable privilege.

In our American republics, where government is in the hands of the people, knowledge should be universally diffused by means of public schools. Of such consequence is it to society that the people who make laws should be well informed that I conceive no legislature can be justified in neglecting proper establishments for this purpose.

When I speak of a diffusion of knowledge, I do not mean merely a knowledge of spelling books and the New Testament. An acquaintance with ethics and with the general principles of law, commerce, money, and government is necessary for the yeomanry of a republican state. This acquaintance they might obtain by means of books calculated for schools and read by the children during the winter months and by the circulation of public papers.

"In Rome it was the common exercise of boys at school to learn the laws of the twelve tables by heart, as they did their poets and classic authors." What an excellent practice this in a free government!

It is said, indeed by many, that our common people are already too well informed. Strange paradox! The truth is, they have too much knowledge and spirit to resign their share in government and are not sufficiently informed to govern themselves in all cases of difficulty...It may be true that all men cannot be legislators, but the more generally knowledge is diffused among the substantial yeomanry, the more perfect will be the laws of a republican state.

Every small district should be furnished with a school, at least four months in a year, when boys are not otherwise employed. This school should be kept by the most reputable and well informed man in the district. Here children should be taught the usual branches of learning, submission to superiors and to laws, the moral or social duties, the history and transactions of their own country, the principles of liberty and government. Here the rough manners of the wilderness should be softened and the principles of virtue and good behavior inculcated. The virtues of men are of more consequence to society than their abilities...

Until such a system shall be adopted and pursued, until the statesman and divine shall unite their efforts in forming the human mind...until legislators discover that the only way to make good citizens and subjects is to nourish them from infancy, and until parents shall be convinced that the worst of men are not the proper teachers to make the best, mankind cannot know to what a degree of perfection society and government may be carried. America affords the fairest opportunities for making the experiment and opens the most encouraging prospect of success.

Changes in Voting Qualifications

Introduction

Before the War for Independence, each colony had the authority to determine who had the right to vote. After the war, that authority passed to the states. The list below notes the minimum voting requirements of each colony/state. (Where a two-house legislature was established, the qualifications for voting for representatives to the lower house are given.) Compare how the qualifications changed after the War for Independence. (Keep in mind that about 80 percent of white, male adults in the colonies owned land at the time of the war. The average value of such holdings was 150 pounds, or roughly \$15,000 in today's terms.)

Questions to Consider

- What do the changes suggest about America's political direction?
- Which groups would have most benefited from the expansion of voting rights?
- How do the newly admitted states compare to the original thirteen colonies?

Document

State	Pre-War	Post-War
Connecticut	Land worth 40 pounds or rentable for 2 pounds yearly	Remained the same
Delaware	50 acres or any property worth 40 pounds	All taxpayers

Poor/non-elite Whites

Georgia	50 acres	Any property worth 10 pounds
Maryland	50 acres or any property worth 40 pounds	50 acres or any property worth 30 pounds
Massachusetts	Property worth 40 pounds or land rentable for 2 pounds yearly	Property worth 60 pounds or land rentable for 3 pounds yearly
New Hampshire	Landed estate worth 50 pounds	All taxpayers
New York	Landed estate worth 50 pounds	Landed estate worth 20 pounds or rentable for 2 pounds yearly
New Jersey	Landed estate worth 50 pounds	Any property worth 50 pounds
North Carolina	50 acres	All taxpayers
Pennsylvania	50 acres or any property worth 40 pound	All taxpayers
Rhode Island	Property worth 40 pounds or land rentable for 2 pounds yearly	Remained the same
South Carolina	50 acres or land rentable for 2 pounds yearly	Remained the same
Vermont	Statehood established in 1791	All adult males
Virginia	25 acres and a house	Remained the same

The Founding Fathers

Introduction

In 1787, realizing that the government under the Articles of Confederation was too weak and ineffective, 55 delegates from 12 state (all except Rhode Island) met to draft what would become the Constitution in order to create "a more perfect union." The following is an overview of the founders who attended the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Questions to Consider

- Were these individuals broadly representative of the entirety of U.S. society at the time?
- How might the backgrounds of these delegates have impacted how the Constitution was written? How might they have felt about some of the key issues of the time, including slavery, voting rights, and representation in government?

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A survey of the economic interests of the (55) members of the (1787 Constitutional) Convention presents certain conclusions:

- A majority of the members were lawyers by profession.
- Most of the members came from towns, on or near the coast,.. .regions in which personalty* was largely concentrated.
- Not one member represented in his...economic interests the small farming or mechanic (working) classes.
- The overwhelming majority of members, at least five-sixths, were...to a greater or less extent economic beneficiaries from the adoption of the Constitution....
- Personalty invested in lands for speculation was represented by at least fourteen members....

Poor/non-elite Whites

- Personalty in the form of money loaned at interest was represented by at least twenty-four members....
- Personalty in mercantile (trade), manufacturing, and shipping lines was represented by at least eleven members....
- Personalty in slaves was represented by at least fifteen members....

It cannot be said, therefore, that the members of the Convention were "disinterested." ...(A)s practical men they were able to build the new government upon the only foundations which could be stable: fundamental economic interests.

* Note: Personalty is any personal property other than land.

Source: Economic Status of the Representatives in Six Colonial/State Legislatures

Introduction

During the colonial period, only a very small number of white men enjoyed the right to vote. Also, political participation was low. There were very few organized political parties and wealthy merchants, lawyers or planters, held most major political offices. As the American Revolution approached and political issues became heated, voter turnout increased. Political pamphleteering and propaganda became more popular and led to an increased knowledge of political events by more of the population. During and after the American Revolution, political offices became increasingly elected positions as opposed to governmental appointments. Following the Revolution, average Americans began to call for expanded suffrage to include a wider portion of the population. "We are all, from the cobbler up to the senator, become politicians," declared a Boston letter writer in 1774. Throughout the colonies, election campaigns became freewheeling debates on the fundamentals of government. Universal male suffrage, religious toleration, and even the abolition of slavery were discussed not only by the educated elite but by artisans, small farmers, and laborers, now emerging as a self-conscious element in politics.

Questions to Consider

- What changes took place in legislatures after the Revolution?
- Were these changes drastic or limited? Did state legislatures after the Revolution become more representative of the population?

N.H., N.Y., and N.J.	1765	1785
WEALTHY	36%	12%
WELL-TO-DO	47%	26%
MODERATE	17%	62%
POOR	0%	0%
TOTAL	100%	100%

MD., VA., and S.C.	1765	1785
WEALTHY	52%	28%
WELL-TO-DO	36%	42%
MODERATE	12%	30%
POOR	0%	0%
TOTAL	100%	100%

Note:

Wealthy.....over £5000
 Well-to-do.....£2000 - £5000
 Moderate.....£500 - £2000
 Poor.....£0 - £500