

# BULLETIN

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### ◇ VOTE ◇

*Dissertation on First Principles of Government (1795) makes Thomas Paine's most forceful case, perhaps, for the right of voting. Paine used the pamphlet in the French National Convention to argue against various reactionary provisions in the proposed Constitution under discussion in July 1795. The following scattered excerpts relate principally to equal rights and voting rights.*

"The true and only true basis of representative government is equality of rights. Every man has a right to one vote, and no more in the choice of representatives. The rich have no more right to exclude the poor from the right of voting, or of electing and being elected, than the poor have to exclude the rich; and wherever it is attempted, or proposed, on either side, it is a question of force and not of right. Who is he that would exclude another? That other has a right to exclude him."

"Personal rights, of which the right of voting for representatives is one, are a species of property of the most sacred kind: and he that would employ his pecuniary property, or presume upon the influence it gives him, to dispossess or rob another of his property or rights, uses that pecuniary property as he would use fire-arms, and merits to have it taken from him."

"Whenever it be made an article of a constitution, or a law, that the right of voting, or of electing and being elected, shall appertain exclusively to persons possessing a certain quantity of proerty, be it little or much, it is a combination of the persons possessing that quantity to exclude those who do not possess the same quantity. It is investing themselves with powers as a self-created part of society, to the exclusion of the rest."

"In any view of the case, it is dangerous and impolitic, sometimes ridiculous, and always unjust to make property the criterion of the right of voting."

"But the offensive part of the case is that this exclusion from the right of voting implies a stigma on the moral character of the persons excluded; and this is what no part of the community has a right to pronounce on another part. No external circumstance can justify it: wealth is no proof of moral character; nor poverty the want of it."

"On the contrary, wealth is often the presumptive evidence of

dishonesty; and poverty the negative evidence of innocence. If therefore, property, whether little or much, be made a criterion, the means by which that property has been acquired ought to be made a criterion also."

"The right of voting for representatives is the primary right by which other rights are protected."

"When we speak of right we ought always to unite with it the idea of duties: rights become duties by reciprocity. The right which I enjoy becomes my duty to guarantee it to another, and he to me; and those who violate the duty justly incur a forfeiture of the right."

"In a political view of the case, the strength and permanent security of government is in proportion to the number of people interested in supporting it. The true policy therefore is to interest the whole by an equality of rights, for the danger arises from exclusions. It is possible to exclude men from the right of voting, but it is impossible to exclude them from the right of rebelling against that exclusion; and when all other rights are taken away the right of rebellion is made perfect."

"[I]t is the nature and intention of a constitution to *prevent governing by party*, by establishing a common principle that shall limit and control the power and impulse of party, and that says to all parties, *thus far shalt thou go and no further*. But in the absence of a constitution, men look entirely to party; and instead of principle governing party, party governs principle."

"An avidity to punish is always dangerous to liberty. It leads men to stretch, to misinterpret, and to misapply even the best of laws. He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression; for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself."

THOMAS PAINE, Paris, July, 1795

---selection by Martha Spiegelman

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