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Government by the People

The American Revolution and the Democratization of the Legislatures

Jackson Turner Main*

AN article with "democracy" in its title, these days, must account for itself. This essay holds that few colonials in British North America believed in a government by the people, and that they were content to be ruled by local elites; but that during the Revolution two interacting developments occurred simultaneously: ordinary citizens increasingly took part in politics, and American political theorists began to defend popular government. The ideological shift can be traced most easily in the newspapers, while evidence for the change in the structure of power will be found in the make-up of the lower houses during the revolutionary years.

Truly democratic ideas, defending a concentration of power in the hands of the people, are difficult to find prior to about 1774. Most articulate colonials accepted the Whig theory in which a modicum of democracy was balanced by equal parts of aristocracy and monarchy. An unchecked democracy was uniformly condemned.¹ For example, a contributor to the *Newport Mercury* in 1764 felt that when a state was in its infancy, "when its members are few and virtuous, and united together by some peculiar ideas of freedom or religion; the whole power may be lodged with the people, and the government be purely democratical"; but when the state had matured, power must be removed from popular control because history demonstrated that the people "have been incapable, collectively, of acting with any degree of moderation or wisdom."² There-

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¹ See Richard Buel, Jr., "Democracy and the American Revolution: A Frame of Reference," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXI (1964), 165-190.

² "Z. Y.," Apr. 23, 1764. Other characteristic newspaper articles praising a balanced government and disparaging a democratic one are, "A Son of Liberty," *Providence Gazette, and Country Journal*, Oct. 26, 1771; *Pennsylvania Chronicle, and Universal*

fore while colonial theorists recognized the need for some democratic element in the government, they did not intend that the ordinary people—the *demos*—should participate. The poorer men were not allowed to vote at all, and that part of the populace which did vote was expected to elect the better sort of people to represent them. "Fabricus" defended the "democratic principle," warned that "liberty, when once lost, is scarce ever recovered," and declared that laws were "made for the people, and not people for the laws." But he did not propose that ordinary citizens should govern. Rather, "it is right that men of *birth and fortune*, in every government that is free, should be invested with power, and enjoy higher honours than the people."³ According to William Smith of New York, offices should be held by "the better Class of People" in order that they might introduce that "Spirit of Subordination essential to good Government."⁴ A Marylander urged that members of the Assembly should be "ABLE in ESTATE, ABLÉ in KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING," and mourned that so many "little upstart insignificant Pretenders" tried to obtain an office. "The *Creature* that is able to keep a little Shop, rate the Price of an Ell of Osnabrigs, or, at most, to judge of the Quality of a Leaf of Tobacco" was not a fit statesman, regardless of his own opinion.⁵ So also in South Carolina, where William Henry Drayton warned the artisans that mechanical ability did not entitle them to hold office.⁶ This conviction that most men were incompetent to rule, and that the elite should govern for them, proved a vital element in Whig thought and was its most antidemocratic quality. The assumption was almost never openly challenged during the colonial period.

Whether the majority whose capacity was thus maligned accepted the insulting assumption is another question. They were not asked, and as they were unable to speak or write on the subject, their opinions are uncertain. But the voters themselves seem to have adhered, in practice at least, to the traditional view, for when the people were asked to choose

Advertiser (Philadelphia), Aug. 29, Sept. 26, 1768, Aug. 14, 1769; *New-York Gazette: and the Weekly Mercury*, Apr. 23, May 14, 1770; Purdie and Dixon's *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), Oct. 27, 1768; *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven), Mar. 17, 1769; *Newport Mercury*, Nov. 21, 1763.

³ Rind's *Va. Gazette* (Williamsburg), June 9, 1768.

⁴ Dec. 30, 1768, in *Journal of the Legislative Council of the Colony of New-York . . . 1743 . . . 1775* (Albany, 1861).

⁵ *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), Dec. 3, 1767.

⁶ *South Carolina Gazette* (Charleston), Sept. 21, 1769.

their representatives they seldom elected common farmers and artisans. Instead they put their trust in men of the upper class. In the colonies as a whole, about 30 per cent of the adult white men owned property worth £500 or more. About two thirds of these colonials of means had property worth £500 to £2,000; their economic status is here called *moderate*. The other third were worth over £2,000. Those worth £2,000 to £5,000 are called *well-to-do*, and those whose property was valued at more than £5,000 are called *wealthy*.⁷ The overwhelming majority of the representatives belonged to that ten per cent who were well-to-do or wealthy. Government may have been for the people, but it was not administered by them. For evidence we turn to the legislatures of New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina.

In 1765 New Hampshire elected thirty-four men to its House of Representatives.⁸ Practically all of them lived within a few miles of the coast; the frontier settlements could not yet send deputies, and the Merrimack Valley towns in the south-central part of the colony, though populous, were allotted only seven. New Hampshire was not a rich colony. Most of its inhabitants were small farmers with property enough for an adequate living but no more. There were a few large agricultural estates, and the Portsmouth area had developed a prosperous commerce which supported some wealthy merchants and professional men; but judging from probate records not more than one man in forty was well-to-do, and true wealth was very rare. Merchants, professional men, and the like comprised about one tenth of the total population, though in Portsmouth, obviously, the proportion was much larger. Probably at least two thirds of the inhabitants were farmers or farm laborers and one in ten was an artisan. But New Hampshire voters did not call on farmers or men of average property to represent them. Only about one third of the representatives in the 1765 House were yeomen. Merchants and lawyers were just as numerous, and the rest followed a variety of occupations: there were four doctors and several millers and manufacturers. One third of the delegates were wealthy men and more than two thirds were at least well-to-do. The relatively small upper class of the colony, concen-

⁷ A discussion of the distribution of property and income is contained in Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965).

⁸ Biographical information is reasonably complete for 30 of the 34. Genealogies and town histories were the principal sources. The *New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers* contain much useful information, especially probate records, and the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* is valuable.

trated in the southeast, furnished ten of the members. They did not, of course, constitute a majority, and the family background of most of the representatives, like that of most colonials, was undistinguished. Probably nearly one half had acquired more property and prestige than their parents. In another age New Hampshire's lower house would have been considered democratic—compared with England's House of Commons it certainly was—but this was a new society, and the voters preferred the prosperous urban upper class and the more substantial farmers.

New York was a much richer colony than New Hampshire. Although most of its population were small farmers and tenants, there were many large landed estates and New York City was incomparably wealthier than Portsmouth. In general the west bank of the Hudson and the northern frontier were usually controlled by the yeomanry, as was Suffolk County on Long Island, but the east bank from Albany to the City was dominated by great "manor lords" and merchants. The great landowners and the merchants held almost all of the twenty-eight seats in the Assembly.⁹ In 1769 the voters elected only seven farmers. Five others including Frederick Philipse and Pierre Van Cortland, the wealthy manor lords from Westchester, were owners of large tenanted estates. But a majority of New York's legislators were townspeople. Merchants were almost as numerous as farmers, and together with lawyers they furnished one half of the membership. The legislators were no more representative in their property than in their occupation. At most, five men, and probably fewer, belonged to the middle class of moderate means. At least 43 per cent were wealthy and an equal number were well-to-do. The members' social background was also exceptional. Ten came from the colony's foremost families who had, for the times, a distinguished ancestry, and two thirds or more were born of well-to-do parents. Taken as a whole the legislators, far from reflecting New York's social structure, had either always belonged to or had successfully entered the colony's economic and social upper class.

New Jersey's Assembly was even smaller than that of New York. The body chosen in 1761, and which sat until 1769, contained but twenty men.¹⁰ Half of these represented the East Jersey counties (near New

⁹ Especially important for New York biographies are the volumes of wills included among the *Collections* of the New York Historical Society, and the *New York Biographical Record*.

¹⁰ In 1769 four new members were added, and six more were chosen in 1772. The *New Jersey Archives* include several volumes of wills. Tax records, the earliest

York City) which were in general occupied by small farmers, but only three of the ten members came from that class. The others were merchants, lawyers, and large proprietors. Although several of these had started as yeomen they had all acquired large properties. West Jersey, which had a greater number of sizable landed estates, especially in the Delaware Valley region, sent the same sort of men as did East Jersey: three farmers, an equal number of large landowners, and an even larger number of prosperous townsmen, some of whom also owned valuable real estate. Merchants and lawyers made up one half of the membership. As usual, a considerable proportion—perhaps forty per cent—were self-made men, but the colony's prominent old families furnished at least 30 per cent of the representatives. Four out of five members were either well-to-do or wealthy.

In contrast to the legislatures of New Hampshire, New York, and New Jersey, Maryland's House of Delegates was a large body and one dominated by the agricultural interest. Like its northern equivalents, however, its members belonged to the upper class of the colony—in Maryland, the planter aristocracy. The 1765 House supposedly contained over sixty members, but only fifty-four appear in the records.¹¹ About one half of these came from the Eastern Shore, an almost entirely rural area. Except for Col. Thomas Cresap who lived on Maryland's small frontier, the remainder came from the Potomac River and western Chesapeake Bay counties, where agriculture was the principal occupation but where a number of towns also existed. About one sixth of the Delegates belonged to the yeoman farmer class. Most of these lived on the Eastern Shore. Incidentally they did not vote with the antiproprietary, or "popular," party, but rather followed some of the great planters in the conservative "court" party. As in the northern colonies, a number of the Delegates were *nouveaux riches*, but in Maryland's stable and primarily "Tidewater" society, fewer than one fifth had surpassed their parents in wealth. The overwhelming majority came from the lesser or the great planter class, and probably one third belonged to the colony's elite families. Four fifths were well-to-do or wealthy. Lawyers and merchants (among whom were

of which date from 1773, supply data on real estate but not on nonfarm property. They have been microfilmed from originals in the New Jersey State Library, Trenton.

¹¹ The *Maryland Historical Magazine* contains a great deal of biographical data. Essential are the unpublished tax lists in the Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, and the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

several of the self-made men) furnished about one sixth of the principally rural membership.

Virginia's Burgesses resembled Maryland's Delegates, but they were even richer and of even more distinguished ancestry. The Old Dominion's much larger west helped to make the House of Burgesses twice as large a body, with 122 members in 1773.¹² Small property holders, though they formed a great majority of the voters, held only one out of six seats. Half of the Burgesses were wealthy and four fifths were at least well-to-do. Merchants and lawyers contributed one fifth of the members, much more than their proper share, but most of them were also large landholders and the legislature was firmly in control of the great planters. Indeed the median property owned was 1,800 acres and 40 slaves. Virginia's social structure was quite fluid, especially in the newly-settled areas, but between five sixths and seven eighths of the delegates had inherited their property. A roll call of the Burgesses would recite the names of most of the colony's elite families, who held nearly one half of the seats.

The planters of South Carolina, unlike the Virginians, were unwilling to grant representation to the upcountry, and its House of Commons was an exclusively eastern body.¹³ The colony was newer and its society may have been more fluid, for in 1765 between 20 and 40 per cent of the representatives were self-made men. The legislature also differed from its southern equivalents in Maryland and Virginia in that nearly half of its members were merchants, lawyers, or doctors. But these figures are deceptive, for in reality most of these men were also great landowners, as were almost all of the representatives; and prominent old families contributed one half of the members of the House. All were at least well-to-do and over two thirds were wealthy. The rich planters of South Carolina's coastal parishes held a monopoly of power in the Assembly.

These six legislatures, from New Hampshire to South Carolina, shared the same qualities. Although farmers and artisans comprised probably between two thirds and three fourths of the voters in the six colonies,

¹² The 1773 legislature was chosen for study because the tax records of 1782, which are the earliest available, would be most nearly valid in determining the property of the members. The Virginia State Library, Richmond, contains the tax records as well as a remarkable collection of local records on microfilm. E. G. Swem, comp., *Virginia Historical Index* (Roanoke, 1934-36), I-II, is useful.

¹³ The *South Carolina Historical Magazine* is essential, as is Emily Bellinger Reynolds and Joan Reynolds Faunt, eds., *Biographical Directory of the Senate of South Carolina 1776-1964* (Columbia, 1964). There are some quit rent and probate records in the State Archives building at Columbia.

they seldom selected men from their own ranks to represent them. Not more than one out of five representatives were of that class. Fully one third were merchants and lawyers or other professionals, and most of the rest were large landowners. Although only about 10 per cent of the colonials were well-to-do or wealthy, this economic elite furnished at least 85 per cent of the assemblymen. The mobile character of colonial society meant that perhaps 30 per cent had achieved their high status by their own efforts; but an even larger percentage were from prominent, long-established families.

Collectively these "representatives of the people" comprised not a cross section of the electorate but a segment of the upper class. Although the colonials cherished the democratic branch of their governments, and although a majority may have hoped to make the lower house all powerful, they did not yet conceive that the *demos* should actually govern. The idea of a government by as well as for the people was a product of the Revolution. It should be noted here that Rhode Island and Connecticut are exceptions to this general pattern, though the upper house of Connecticut was composed entirely of well-to-do men. As for Massachusetts, the number of representatives with moderate properties exceeded that in the royal and proprietary colonies; but the Massachusetts legislature was still controlled by the well-to-do. Of the 117 men in the House in 1765, at least fifty-six were not farmers and thirteen were large landowners; of the remaining forty-eight, thirty-seven were ordinary farmers and the occupations of eleven are unknown. Among those representatives whose economic status can be discovered (about nine tenths), well over one half were well-to-do or wealthy and two fifths of these had inherited their property.

Widespread popular participation in politics began during 1774 with the various provincial congresses and other extralegal organizations. Although the majority of these bodies seem to have been made up of men of standing, both artisans and farmers appeared in greater numbers than they had in the colonial legislatures. There were several reasons for this. Whereas heretofore the more recently settled areas of most colonies had been underrepresented—at times seriously so—the legal prohibitions on their sending representatives to the colonial assemblies did not apply to the extralegal congresses, and they chose delegates when they wished. Moreover the congresses were much larger than the colonial assemblies, and consequently the over-all number of men who could be elected was

greatly increased. For instance, South Carolina's House of Commons contained forty-eight men in 1772, but almost twice that number attended the first Provincial Congress in December 1774 and four times as many were present in January 1775. By 1775 the western districts were sending about one third of the members. Similarly, nothing now prevented New Hampshire's country villages from choosing representatives, and they seized the opportunity. By the time the fourth Provincial Congress met in New Hampshire, four times as many men attended as had been admitted to the 1773 legislature, and nearly one half of them came from the inland counties.

Perhaps an even more important reason for the greater participation in politics by men of moderate means than simply the enlarged and broadened membership of the Provincial Congresses was that the interior areas often contained no real upper class. They had no choice but to send men of moderate property. Furthermore, many men of the upper classes who had previously held political power were not sympathetic with the resistance movement and either withdrew from politics or did not participate in the extralegal Congresses. At the same time events thrust new men forward, as for example in Charleston where the artisans became increasingly active. As the Revolution ran its course, many new men came to fill the much larger number of civil offices, and new men won fame in battle. These developments were quickly reflected in the composition of the legislatures, and by the time the war ended the legislatures were far different bodies from what they had been in colonial days. At the same time democratic ideas spread rapidly, justifying and encouraging the new order.¹⁴

With the overthrow of royal government, the previously unrepresented New Hampshire villages hastened to choose representatives to the state legislature. The number of men present in the lower house varied considerably, for some smaller communities were too poor to send a man every year, while others combined to finance the sending of a single delegate; but during the 1780's between two and three times as many attended as before the war. The House chosen in 1786 had eighty-eight

¹⁴For the development of democratic ideas after 1774, see Merrill Jensen, "Democracy and the American Revolution," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, XX (1957), 321-341. The entrance of many new men into the upper house, and their transformation into more nearly democratic institutions, is emphasized in Main, "Social Origins of a Political Elite: The Upper House in the Revolutionary Era," *ibid.*, XXVII (1964), 147-158. The point will be elaborated in a forthcoming book.

members. The balance of power had shifted into the Merrimack Valley, for fewer than half of the delegates came from the two counties near the coast, and even these included frontier settlements.¹⁵

The socio-economic composition of the New Hampshire legislature also changed. All but four of the 1765 legislators can be identified, but more than one fifth of the post-war representatives are obscure, and the parentage of very few can be established despite the existence of many town histories, genealogies, and published records. Before the war fewer than one third were farmers, exclusive of large landowners but including the men whose occupation is doubtful; by 1786 at least 50 per cent were yeomen and if those whose occupations are unknown are added, as most of them should be, the proportion rises to over 70 per cent. Merchants and lawyers, who had furnished about one third of the members of the 1765 legislature, now comprised only one tenth of the membership. Similarly men of wealth totalled one third of the former legislature but less than one tenth of the latter. The well-to-do element who had dominated the prewar Assembly with 70 per cent of the seats were now reduced to a minority of about 30 per cent. Thus a very large majority of the new legislature consisted of ordinary farmers who had only moderate properties. Ten members of the prominent old families had seats in the 1765 house; by 1786 there were only four in a body two and one half times as large. Even if the newly-represented towns are eliminated, the trend toward the election of less wealthy and less distinguished representatives remains the same, though the degree of change was less. If only the towns which sent men to both legislatures are considered, one finds that whereas farmers formed between 20 and 30 per cent in 1765, they accounted for 55 to 67 per cent twenty years later. Similarly, in these towns the proportion of representatives having moderate properties rose from 30 per cent to more than twice that. Thus the economic and social character of the members in the lower house had been radically changed.

The pattern of change was much the same in other states. New York's society was fundamentally less egalitarian than that of New Hampshire, having more men with large estates and proportionately fewer areas dominated by small farmers. The agricultural upcountry had not yet extended much beyond Albany to the north and Schenectady to the west, so

¹⁵ Strafford County, which contained the commercial center of Dover, extended north through what are now Belknap and Carroll Counties, then just under settlement.

that most New Yorkers still lived in the older counties. As might be expected the changes which occurred in New York were not as striking as in New Hampshire but they were still obvious. By 1785 the counties west of the Hudson, together with those north of Westchester, increased their representation from about one third to nearly two thirds of the total. That fact alone might not have guaranteed a social or economic change in the composition of the Assembly, for every county had its upper class, but the new legislature differed from the old in many respects. The voters selected far fewer townspeople. In the 1769 Assembly some 57 per cent of the members had been engaged primarily in a nonagricultural occupation; by 1785 the proportion had been halved. Farmers, exclusive of large landowners, had made up 25 per cent of the total in 1769; now they furnished about 42 per cent.¹⁶ In contrast, one half of the 1769 legislators had been merchants and lawyers, but now such men held less than one third of the seats. Similarly the proportion of wealthy members dropped from 43 per cent to 15 per cent, whereas the ratio of men of moderate means increased from probably one seventh to nearly one half. New York's elite families, which had contributed ten out of twenty-eight Assemblymen in 1769, contributed the same number in 1785, but in a House twice as large. Meanwhile the number of men who had started without any local family background, newcomers to New York, increased from two to twenty-three. In general, the yeoman-artisan "middle class," which in colonial days had furnished a half-dozen members, now actually had a majority in the legislature. Under the leadership of George Clinton and others of higher economic and social rank, they controlled the state during the entire decade of the eighties.¹⁷ In New York, as in New Hampshire, the trend was the same even within those counties which had been represented before the Revolution. If Washington and Montgomery counties are eliminated, the proportion of delegates who were well-to-do declines from 86 per cent to 60 per cent.

¹⁶ So many men in the 1785 legislature are obscure that the figure cannot be exact, but it is a safe assumption that those who lived in the country and whose occupations are not given in local histories, genealogies, or other published sources, were farmers. Ordinarily men of importance, or business and professional men, are discussed in such sources, so that if one conscientiously searches the published materials, including of course the wills, most of those men who remain unidentified can be confidently termed farmers of moderate property.

¹⁷ As far as the fathers of these legislators could be identified, 12 of the prewar 28 were merchants, lawyers, and large landowners, as were 12 or possibly 13 of the postwar 66.

New Jersey's lower house, the size of which had increased in stages from twenty members to thirty-nine after the Revolution, retained equal distribution of seats between East and West Jersey. As in New Hampshire and New York, the economic upper class of well-to-do men, which in New Jersey had held three fourths of the seats before the war, saw its control vanish; indeed two thirds of the states' representatives in 1785 had only moderate properties. The typical legislator before the war held at least 1,000 acres; in 1785 the median was about 300 acres. Merchants and lawyers were all but eliminated from the legislature, retaining only a half-dozen seats. The colonial elite, once controlling one third of the votes of the house, now had one eighth; the overwhelming majority of the new legislators were men who had been unknown before the war and whose ancestry, where ascertainable, was uniformly undistinguished. Fully two thirds of the representatives were ordinary farmers, presumably men of more than average ability and sometimes with military experience, but clearly part of the common people. Again these changes occurred not just because new areas were represented but because the counties which had sent delegates in the prewar years now chose different sort of men. In New Jersey, the counties of Cumberland, Salem, Hunterdon, Morris, and Sussex had previously been underrepresented. If these are eliminated, we find that the proportion of men of moderate property rose from 20 per cent to 73 per cent and of farmers (exclusive of large landowners) from 23.5 per cent to 60 per cent.¹⁸

Southern legislatures were also democratized. Maryland's House of Delegates expanded to seventy-four by 1785, with the addition of a few members from the western counties. As had been true before the war, most of the representatives were engaged in agriculture, the proportion of those with a nonfarm occupation remaining constant at about 20 per cent. The most obvious change in economic composition was the replacement of planters by farmers, of large property owners by men with moderate estates. If the planter is defined as one who held at least twenty slaves or 500 acres, then they formed 57 per cent of the House in 1765 and only 36.5 per cent in 1785, while the farmers increased from 18.5 to 28 per cent. Wealthy men occupied about two fifths of the seats in the pre-Revolutionary period, one sixth after the war, while delegates with moderate property, who had previously formed only one fifth of the total, now comprised one third. The yeoman farmer class, though still lacking a

¹⁸ Those of unknown property or occupation are excluded.

majority, had doubled in numbers while members of the old ruling families, in turn, saw their strength halved.¹⁹ By comparison with the northern states the shift of power was decidedly less radical, but the change was considerable. It was made more obvious, incidentally, by the great contrast between the postwar House of Delegates and the postwar Senate, for the large majority of the Senators were wealthy merchants, lawyers, and planters, who fought bitterly with the popular branch.

The planter class of Virginia, like that of Maryland, did not intend that the Revolution should encourage democracy, but it was unable to prevent some erosion of its power. The great landowners still controlled the lower house, though their strength was reduced from 60 per cent to 50 per cent, while that of ordinary farmers rose from perhaps 13 per cent in 1773 to 26 per cent in 1785. An important change was the decline in the number of wealthy members, who now held one quarter instead of one half of the seats. Power thus shifted into the hands of the lesser planters, the well-to-do rather than the wealthy. Meanwhile men with moderate properties doubled their share, almost equaling in number the wealthy Burgesses. Similarly the sons of the First Families lost their commanding position, while an even larger fraction of delegates were of humble origins. The general magnitude of the change is suggested by the decline in the median property held from 1,800 acres to about 1,100, and from forty slaves to twenty.²⁰

Thus, although the planter class retained control of the Burgesses, the people were now sending well-to-do rather than wealthy men, and at least one out of four representatives was an ordinary citizen. A roll call of the House would still recite the familiar names of many elite families, but it would also pronounce some never heard before. The alteration in

¹⁹ The proportion of self-made men in the House seems to have increased from one fifth to one fourth, but information on the delegates' fathers is too incomplete for precision. Material on land and slave ownership is drawn from manuscript census and tax records as well as from the usual secondary materials. The median acreage declined from 1,400 acres to 1,000 acres; the median number of slaves owned decreased from about 40 to 20. My figures are on two thirds of the men. Charles A. Barker gives 2,400 acres as the average for the 1771 legislature. *The Background of the Revolution in Maryland* (New Haven, 1940), 384.

²⁰ Data for land was obtained on 78 per cent of the 1773 Burgesses and 83 per cent of the delegates in the 1785 house. Percentages for slaves are 70 and 86 respectively. Tax lists beginning in 1782 were the most important source, supplemented by probate records and statements in secondary sources.

the composition of the Virginia legislature undoubtedly sprang in part from the growing influence of westerners, for counties beyond the Blue Ridge sent many more representatives in 1785 than before the war, while the representation from the Piedmont also increased in size. However, the same shift downward also occurred within the older counties, those which had been represented in 1773. If we eliminate from consideration all of the newly-formed counties, we find that delegates with moderate property increased from 13.5 per cent to 23 per cent, and that wealthy ones declined from 48 to 30 per cent, while the proportion of farmers rose from 13 to about 25 per cent.

The South Carolina constitution of 1778 is noted as an expression of conservatism. Its conservatism, however, was much more evident with respect to the Senate than to the House of Representatives, which was now nearly four times as large. Although the eastern upper class refused to grant westerners as many seats in the House as were warranted by their population, the upcountry did increase its share from not more than 6 or 8 per cent (depending on one's definition of where the upcountry started) to nearly 40 per cent. The urban upper class of merchants, lawyers, and doctors dropped to 20 per cent of the total membership in 1785, as compared to 36 per cent in 1765. The agricultural interest greatly increased its influence, the principal gain being made by farmers rather than by planters. A significant change was a reduction in the strength of wealthy representatives, who made up four fifths of those whose property is known in 1765 and but one third twenty years later. The pre-Revolutionary House of Commons seems to have contained not a single man of moderate property, but the postwar representatives included more than fifty such—probably over 30 per cent of the membership. The median acreage held by the 1765 members was certainly over 2,000 and probably a majority owned over 100 slaves each. The lack of tax records makes it impossible to determine what land the 1785 representatives held, but they obviously owned much less; while the median number of slaves was about twenty-five. The scarcity of such records as well as of genealogies and other historical materials also makes it exceedingly difficult to identify any but fairly prominent men. This situation in itself lends significance to the fact that whereas before the Revolution the desired information is available for seven out of eight representatives and even for over two thirds of their parents, data are incomplete concerning 30 per cent of the postwar delegates and most of their parents. Equally significant is the

different social make-up of the two bodies. The long-established upper class of the province controlled half of the 1765 house, but less than one fourth of the 1785 legislature. Although most of the representatives were well-to-do, the house was no longer an exclusively aristocratic body, but contained a sizable element of democracy. It should be pointed out that South Carolina was peculiar in that the change in the House was due almost entirely to the admission of new delegates from the west. In those parishes which elected representatives both before and after the war, the proportion of wealthy delegates decreased very slightly, while that of men with moderate property rose from zero to between 7 and 14 per cent.

All of the six legislatures had been greatly changed as a result of the Revolution. The extent of that change varied from moderate in Virginia and Maryland to radical in New Hampshire and New Jersey, but everywhere the same process occurred. Voters were choosing many more representatives than before the war, and the newly settled areas gained considerably in representatives. The locus of power had shifted from the coast into the interior. Voters were ceasing to elect only men of wealth and family. The proportion of the wealthy in these legislatures dropped from 46 per cent to 22 per cent; members of the prominent old families declined from 40 per cent to 16 per cent. Most of these came from the long-established towns or commercial farm areas. Of course many men who were well-to-do or better continued to gain office, but their share decreased from four fifths to just one half. Even in Massachusetts the percentage of legislators who were wealthy or well-to-do dropped from 50 per cent in 1765 to 21.5 per cent in 1784.²¹

Significantly, the people more and more often chose ordinary yeomen or artisans. Before the Revolution fewer than one out of five legislators had been men of that sort; after independence they more than doubled their strength, achieving in fact a majority in the northern houses and

²¹ *Economic status of Mass. Representatives (percentages)*

	1765	1784 duplicate towns	1784 total
wealthy	17	8	6.5
well-to-do	33	17	15
moderate	40	55	51.5
unknown	10	20	27

Probably most of those whose property is unknown had only moderate incomes. Similarly the proportion of men from prominent old families dropped from 22 per cent to 6 per cent, college educated delegates from 27 per cent to 9 per cent, and representatives whose fathers were well-to-do from 30 per cent to 10 per cent, the change being greatest in the new towns but occurring everywhere.

TABLE I
ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE REPRESENTATIVES²²

	N.H., N.Y., and N.J.		Md., Va., and S.C.	
	Prewar (percentages)	Postwar (percentages)	Prewar (percentages)	Postwar (percentages)
Wealthy	36	12	52	28
Well-to-do	47	26	36	42
Moderate	17	62	12	30
Merchants & lawyers	43	18	22.5	17
Farmers	23	55	12	26

constituting over 40 per cent generally. The magnitude of the change is suggested by the fact that the legislators of the postwar South owned only about one half as much property as their predecessors. Also suggestive is the great increase in the proportion of men of humble origin, which seems to have more than doubled. Therefore men who were or had once been a part of the *demos* totalled about two thirds of the whole number of representatives. Clearly the voters had ceased to confine themselves to an elite, but were selecting instead men like themselves. The tendency to do so had started during the colonial period, especially in the North, and had now increased so dramatically as almost to revolutionize the legislatures. The process occurred also in those areas which were represented

²² This table analyzes the property of about 900 representatives. The economic status of 85 per cent was discovered with reasonable certainty. Most of the rest were dealt with by informed guesswork. No one was admitted to the wealthy category unless their property was certainly known. Lawyers were assumed to be well-to-do, for almost all of them were. Merchants were also considered well-to-do if they lived in an important urban center, but inland shopkeepers were not. Doctors and judges were distributed on similar principles. Artisans were almost always of moderate property. Farmers and those whose occupation was unknown composed the two largest groups. Those who came from the inland, semi-subsistence communities were almost never well-to-do, the exceptions being conspicuous men, so that if nothing was discovered about them they were almost certainly of moderate means. On the other hand those who lived in the well-developed commercial farm areas were often well-to-do, so they were not assigned to any category unless other information was available. The basis for this procedure was derived from extensive study of property holdings as discussed in my *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*. By such an analysis the proportion of unknowns was reduced to 3 1/3 per cent, most of whom were probably of moderate property. They are eliminated in the table. Percentages for occupation are less accurate, especially those for the post-war South.

both before and after the Revolution, as compared with those which were allowed to choose delegates for the first time after the war.

TABLE II

ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE REPRESENTATIVES FROM PRE-REVOLUTIONARY DISTRICTS

	N.H., N.Y., and N.J.		Md., Va., and S.C.	
	Prewar	Postwar	Prewar	Postwar
Wealthy	35	18	50	38
Well-to-do	45	37	38	42
Moderate	20	45	12	20
Merchants & lawyers	41	24	22	18.5
Farmers	25	50	12	22

Although a similar change may not have taken place in Connecticut or Rhode Island, it surely did so in the states of Pennsylvania, Delaware, North Carolina, and Georgia, which have not been analyzed here.

The significance of the change may be more obvious to historians than it was to men of the Revolutionary era. Adherents of the Whig philosophy deplored the trend. They continued to demand a government run by the elite in which the democratic element, while admitted, was carefully checked. Such men were basically conservatives who conceived themselves as struggling for liberty against British tyranny, and who did not propose to substitute a democratical tyranny for a monarchical one.²³ The states, observed a philosophical New Englander in 1786, were "worse governed" than they had been because "men of sense and property have lost much of their influence by the popular spirit of the war." The people had once respected and obeyed their governors, senators, judges, and clergy. But "since the war, blustering ignorant men, who started into notice during the troubles and confusion of that critical period, have been attempting to push themselves into office."²⁴

²³ Illustrations of this antidemocratic bias among Whig spokesmen are numerous, e.g., "A faithful Friend to his Country," *Independent Chronicle* (Boston), Aug. 7, 1777; "The Free Republican," *Boston Magazine*, Aug. 1784, pp. 420-423; "Constitutionalist," *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), Apr. 10, 1786; "Honestus," *Vermont Gazette* (Bennington), Sept. 18, 1786; "Lycurgus," *Massachusetts Spy* (Worcester), July 12, 26, Aug. 2, 1775; Samuel Chase, *Md. Gazette*, Dec. 11, 1777; "Agricola," *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia), Feb. 6, 1779; "A Citizen of New Jersey," *New Jersey Gazette* (Trenton), Oct. 10, 1785; and *Falmouth Gazette*, Sept. 17, 1785.

²⁴ *American Herald* (Boston), Dec. 11, 1786.

On the other hand democratic spokesmen now rose to defend this new government by the people. A writer in a Georgia newspaper rejoiced in 1789 that the state's representatives were "taken from a class of citizens who hitherto have thought it more for their interest to be contented with a humbler walk in life," and hoped that men of large property would not enter the state, for Georgia had "perhaps the most *complete* democracy in the known world," which could be preserved only by economic equality.²⁵ In Massachusetts as early as 1775 "Democritus" urged the voters to "choose men that have learnt to get their living by honest industry, and that will be content with as small an income as the generality of those who pay them for their service. If you would be well represented," he continued, "choose a man in middling circumstances as to worldly estate, if he has got it by his industry so much the better, he knows the wants of the poor, and can judge pretty well what the community can bear of public burdens, if he be a man of good common understanding."²⁶ "A Farmer" in Connecticut boldly declared it a maxim that the people usually judged rightly, insisted that politics was not so difficult but that common sense could comprehend it, and argued that every freeman could be a legislator.²⁷

The change in men might be deprecated or applauded, but it could not be denied, and some found it good. To Jedidiah Morse the government of Virginia still seemed to be "oligarchical or aristocratical,"²⁸ but to a Virginian a revolution had taken place. The newly-chosen House of Burgesses, wrote Roger Atkinson in 1776, was admirable. It was "composed of men not quite so well dressed, nor so politely educated, nor so highly born as some Assemblies I have formerly seen," yet on the whole he liked it better. "They are the People's men (and the People in general are right). They are plain and of consequence less disguised, but I believe to the full as honest, less intriguing, more sincere. I wish the People may always have Virtue enough and Wisdom enough to chuse such plain men."²⁹ Democracy, for a moment at least, seemed to have come to Virginia.

²⁵ *Gazette of the State of Georgia* (Savannah), Jan. 1, 1789.

²⁶ *Mass. Spy*, July 5, 1775.

²⁷ *Weekly Monitor* (Litchfield), Aug. 6, 1787. For two more examples see "A Watchman," *Pa. Packet*, June 10, 17, 1776; and *Maryland Journal, and Baltimore Advertiser*, Feb. 18, 1777.

²⁸ Jedidiah Morse, *The American Geography* . . . (2d ed., London, 1792), 387.

²⁹ To Samuel Pleasants, Nov. 23, 1776, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XV (1908), 357.