# Change in France, 1788-1791

By 1788 it was clear that France had serious problems. The Estates System, the King and the Queen, Enlightenment Ideas, the American War of Independence, a bad harvest and much else besides had left the country facing collapse.

## The "Estates General"

So in that year, the King summoned Parliament to his palace at Versailles to discuss what to do [see picture]. This was a momentous event – the last time Parliament had met was in 1614!

The Parliament was called the "Estates General" because it contained representatives ("Deputies") from all three estates: the nobility and the clergy sat either side of the King at the front, the Third Estate right at the back(!).

## The "National Assembly" and the "Tennis Court Oath"

- The Third Estate quickly got cheesed off with not being able to hear anything that was being said and stormed out.
- They formed their own Parliament which they called the "National Assembly" (they represented 96% of the population).
- The only problem was that they had nowhere to meet. In the end, they crammed into the **Royal Tennis Courts** and voted that they would meet regularly until the King had agreed to their new constitution (rule book for running the country)
- The King gave in to their demands and for the next two years the National Assembly worked at producing a new constitution aiming to provide "elalité, liberté, fraternité" (equality, liberty, brotherhood) which even today forms the foundation of the French constitution.

## Why did it take so long to draw up a new constitution?

- Writing a new constitution was no easy job. Lots of people – peasants, entrepreneurs, nobles, priests – all had very different ideas about how the country should be run.

## Main Task

- Below are 6 key issues debated by the National Assembly. Choose which option you would have chosen for each question. Your teacher may ask you to think in role as a member of the First, Second or Third Estate.

### 1. How often should the Assembly be elected?

- Every year
- Every 2 years
- Every 5 years

### 2. Who can stand for election to the Assembly?

- Any French man or woman
- Any French man
- Any French man who owns property

### 3. Should the King still be allowed to veto (block) any of our reforms?

- Yes. He is the King, after all!
- Sort of. Let's allow him to delay any reforms, but not block them.
- No. We represent the people and he has no right.

**4. Should the Tax system be changed?**
▪ Yes. The Third Estate should no longer have to pay tax, and the other two estates should pay it all.
▪ Sort of. The wealthier you are, the more you should have to pay.
▪ No. Let's focus on the simplest things first, and deal with the tax system in a few years' time.

**5. Should the Church be allowed to keep its lands and the tithe tax?**
▪ Yes. The King is our real enemy, so let's keep the First Estate happy as far as we can.
▪ Sort of. Let's get rid of the tithe tax, but make a point of letting them keep their lands.
▪ No. Let's take their land, abolish the tithe tax and use the money to pay the country's debts.

**6. Should we force the priests to swear an oath of loyalty to the new constitution anyway?**
▪ Yes. Their first loyalty is to the Pope, who is almost a King himself. We need to be sure we can trust them.
▪ Sort of. Let's insist that they attend the National Assembly so we can at least keep an eye on them.
▪ No. They are men of God and it is unfair to drag them into politics in this way.

**Classroom discussion**
▪ Taking the first question as a starting point, have a class vote to see how many people voted for each of the three options. Be prepared to explain your choices.
▪ At the end of the discussion, your teacher will tell you which option was actually chosen. Highlight this on your sheet.
▪ Repeat the process for the remaining questions.

**Now provide written answers to these questions**
I agreed with the National Assembly that…

I think these were good decisions because…

I disagreed with the National Assembly that…

I think these were bad decisions because…

Overall, if 100% represented the perfect solution, I would give this constitution a rating of:

## Teacher Answers:

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▪ Every 2 years
**2. Who can stand for election to the Assembly?**
▪ Any French man who owns property
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▪ Sort of. Let's allow him to delay any reforms, but not block them.
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