

Module 03: A Revolution for Whom?

Evidence 13: Alexander Hamilton Links Property to Voting, 1775

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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.

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.

Source:

Alexander Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted, or A more impartial and comprehensive View of the Dispute between Great-Britain and the Colonies*. . . . (New York, 1775), in Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-1979), 1:81-165.