

Who Should be a Citizen?

What is a citizen? One definition of a citizen is a free person who owes loyalty to a nation and who receives protection, rights, and privileges in return. In the 1700s the meaning of this definition was challenged by both men and women for different reasons.

PRIMARY SOURCE

In this speech from October 1789, Maximilien Robespierre stated his view on property requirements for holding office and voting.

All citizens, whoever they are, have the right to aspire to all levels of office-holding. Nothing is more in line with your declaration of rights, according to which all privileges, all distinctions, all exceptions must disappear. The Constitution establishes that **sovereignty**¹ resides in the people, in all the individuals of the people. Each individual therefore has the right to participate in making the law which governs him and in the administration of the public good which is his own. If not, it is not true that all men are equal in rights, that every man is a citizen. If he who only pays a tax **equivalent**² to a day of work has fewer rights than he who pays the equivalent to three days of work, and he who pays at the level of ten days has more rights than he whose tax only equals that value of three, then he who enjoys 100,000 livres [French pounds] of **revenue**³ has 100 times as many rights as he who only has 1,000 livres of revenue. It follows from all your **decrees**⁴ that every citizen has the right to participate in making the law and consequently that of being an elector or eligible for office without the distinction of wealth.

¹ **sovereignty:** power; authority

² **equivalent:** same, of equal force

Who should be a citizen? At the time of the American Revolution only free, white adult males who owned property or paid taxes could vote.

In France, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* addressed social distinctions, but opinions differed on how to interpret the document. Read the excerpts from Robespierre and d'Aelders and study Fragonard's painting to see how they viewed citizenship and the continuing struggle for rights.

PRIMARY SOURCE

Etta Palm d'Aelders was a woman active in a reform group called the Cercle Social (Social Circle). D'Aelders expressed her opinions in "The Injustices of the Laws and Favor of Men at the Expense of Women" (December, 1790).

Do not be just by halves, Gentlemen; . . . justice must be the first virtue of free men, and justice demands that the laws be the same for all beings, like the air and the sun. And yet everywhere, the laws favor men at the expense of women, because everywhere power is in your hands. What! Will free men, an **enlightened**⁵ people living in a century of enlightenment and philosophy, will they **consecrate**⁶ what has been the abuse of power in a century of ignorance? . . .

The prejudices with which our sex has been surrounded—supported by unjust laws which only accord us a secondary existence in society and which often force us into the humiliating necessity of winning over the **cantankerous**⁷ and **ferocious**⁸ character of a man, who, by the greed of those close to us has become our master—those prejudices have changed what was for us the sweetest and most saintly of duties, those of wife and mother, into a painful and terrible slavery. . . .

Oh! Gentlemen, if you wish us to be enthusiastic about the happy constitution that gives back men their rights, then begin by being just toward us. From now on we should be your voluntary companions and not your slaves. Let us merit your attachment!

³ **revenue:** income

⁴ **decrees:** authoritative decisions; declarations