In 1788, Louis XVI agreed to call the Estates-General, an assembly of elected deputies that, it was hoped, might offer solutions to France’s economic crisis. It had been 175 years since a king had agreed to call an Estates-General, and much had changed in that time. The Enlightenment had introduced discussion and debate about the nature of political power and rights and had led to greater questioning about the traditional system of social hierarchy and privilege. When Louis XVI agreed to call the Estates-General, he opened the door to sharing power and stirred up further questioning: Who would have political power? How could France reform its abuses in finances, politics, and society?

**Political Discussion and Debate**
- In the spring of 1789, all across France, people gathered to choose deputies to represent the three estates in the Estates-General. According to tradition, people in each estate would meet in village assemblies and draw up **grievance lists** for the deputies to bring with them to Versailles. By calling the Estates-General, the king was, in effect, asking people from all walks of life to tell him what was wrong with France.
- France was abuzz with political discussion, and in Paris, the liveliest place of political debate was the Palais-Royal, an outdoor arcade that belonged to Louis XVI’s wealthy cousin Philippe, the duc d’Orléans.
  - Orleans would soon become engaged in revolutionary politics. In the next few years, he would abandon the title of duke and rename himself Philippe Égalité (“Philip Equality”). Eventually, as a left-wing deputy, he even voted for the death of his cousin the king. But in 1788–1789, Philippe acted as a kind of political impresario of public opinion. In his Palais-Royal, a person could find cafés, gaming houses, brothels, high-class shops, a wax museum, an outdoor exhibit area, and above all, print shops and publishing houses that produced a flood of pamphlets, newspapers, and broadsheets on politics.
  - By 1788, royal censorship had collapsed, and in the last six months of the year, more than 1,500 pamphlets on politics appeared. Almost 2,700 new pamphlets flooded the market between March and January of 1789. The king was warned by his relatives about the dangers of this public debate.
- An obscure priest, the abbé Sieyès, wrote a pamphlet that especially captured France's imagination: “What Is the Third Estate?” Sieyès brilliantly defended the commoners of France as the core of the French nation, the most useful part of society. For Sieyès, it was not hierarchy but commerce and exchange that formed the fundamental bond of society.
  - Sieyès built on the Enlightenment emphasis on utility and useful citizens. He dismissed nobles as “useless,” consumers who didn’t produce anything. They were “foreigners” to the body politic who could not speak for France.
  - As Sieyès built his potent argument, he focused attention on the concept of the nation as sovereign. The nation wasn’t located in the body of the king but in the many bodies of individual French citizens. In this new nation, individuals should be represented by deputies and governed by a legitimate rule of law.
  - When Sieyès laid out his attack on privilege and his daring model of sovereignty resting in the nation, he crystallized public opinion. He also spoke directly to a specific question under vibrant debate: How would representative politics and voting work in the Estates-General? Many leaders of the Third Estate, including Sieyès, vociferously claimed that each single deputy should have his own vote.
- Not everyone agreed with Sieyès, but his ideas about individual political voice and national sovereignty became foundational principles of the French Revolution.

**Grievance Lists**
- In the Third Estate, in the weeks leading up to the Estates-General, any male taxpayer over the age of 25 could take part in drawing up the grievance lists and voting for electors, as long as he wasn’t an actor, a servant, or bankrupt. Some 60,000 grievance lists, known as *cahiers de doléances*, were drawn up across France in the spring of 1789.
- All three estates agreed that the days of absolutist monarchy were over. Everyone praised the king, but they expected a new form of constitutional monarchy. Everyone also agreed that the Estates-General should continue to meet regularly. The nobility and clergy even said that they would pay a little more in taxes. But in exchange, they demanded political voice in a representative body.
- The nobles of the Second Estate didn’t all agree about a crucial question: whether to surrender some share of privilege. Some liberal nobles were willing to give up some privilege, but they faced opposition.
  - Most nobles saw the meeting of the Estates-General as an opportunity. Perhaps they could regain some of the aristocratic political power that they had gradually lost to absolutist monarchs over the last 150 to 200 years.
  - Most of them did not want to reform the seigneurial system that gave them dues and power over their peasants.
- The grievance lists from the Third Estate addressed three primary issues: burdensome seigneurial dues, the tithe collected by the church, and the unfair system of royal taxes. Peasants and urban dwellers called for varied reforms: primary schools for boys and girls, a common system of weights and measures, a more equitable justice system, and more.
Meeting of the Estates-General

- At Versailles, a grand meeting hall had been fitted out for the assembly. On the opening day, May 5, 1789, Louis XVI took his place on a throne under a magnificent gold canopy, surrounded by his queen and high-ranking nobles. More than 2,000 spectators crammed into the balconies. On the main floor, the clergy sat on the right of the king and the nobility sat on his left. Much farther back sat the Third Estate, the commoner deputies.
- On the first day of the meeting, Jacques Necker, the finance minister, gave a tedious speech packed with technical details about the royal budget. Expectations were high, but it became clear that the king and his minister had no clear plan to solve the financial problems of France and no clear program for guiding political reform. The king was good at pageantry, but what about practical ideas?
- The next day, the deputies immediately deadlocked over the first procedure. The king wanted each estate to meet separately and verify its membership. The first two estates were happy to comply: This procedure would set a precedent of voting by estate and secure the dominance of the two privileged orders. But the Third Estate insisted that the entire assembly should verify its membership collectively, with all the estates together. That procedure would imply voting by head, with every deputy having one vote.
- This procedural technicality may sound unimportant, but a great deal was at stake: Who represented the nation? Who expressed the desires and will of the people of France, and how could they voice that will in the Estates-General?
- Weeks passed and the deadlock deepened. The leaders of the first two estates grew more and more unwilling to compromise.
- The first two estates held their meetings behind closed doors, but the Third Estate opened the balconies to spectators. No single politician dominated, but some groupings and leaders emerged, including the abbé Sieyès. The delegation fromBrittany had numerous radicals; among its followers was Maximilien Robespierre. A flamboyant figure who rose to prominence was Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti, le comte de Mirabeau.
- In June, such men as Mirabeau, Sieyès, and the delegates from Brittany edged their fellow deputies toward a plan. First, they convinced a few parish priests, the poorest deputies of the First Estate, to abandon their assembly and join the Third. Then, on June 17, after several days of intense debate, the commoners voted to declare that their assembly represented the nation of France. The king’s failure to lead made the Third Estate bolder.
- They searched for a name for this new assembly and finally settled on the National Assembly. Louis XVI dismissed the proclamation of this National Assembly to represent all of France, but it was, in fact, a revolutionary act, an act that laid the foundation for France’s upcoming experiment in representative democracy.

National Assembly

- The new National Assembly claimed to represent and speak for the nation. Further, the Assembly claimed sovereignty, transferring the political right to govern from the king to itself.
- To cement this claim and give it weight, at Mirabeau’s suggestion, the National Assembly agreed to take on the burden of the national debt and tax collection. The deputies would be responsible for reforming the nation and solving its crisis.
- Three days later, on June 20, the commoner deputies of the National Assembly went to their usual meeting hall but found it locked. They feared a royal coup against their new Assembly, so they met in a nearby indoor tennis court. Fear gave way to anger, and anger to action. Swept up in fervor, the Assembly banded together and took an oath to God and the nation never to disband until they had written a new constitution for France.
- No one had yet posed the delicate question of the relationship of this new National Assembly with the centuries-old absolutist monarchy. The deputies imagined that their constitution would allow them to conduct politics together with the crown, though of course, no one knew exactly how.
- On June 23, Louis called all the deputies together in session. He refused to recognize the National Assembly or to consider any changes to privilege, titles, or seigneurial dues. But he recognized that there was a financial and political crisis and agreed to set up a system for listening to the highest noble elites. Meanwhile, he also began massing royal troops around Versailles.
- The commoner deputies were stunned, but when the master of ceremonies asked them to leave the hall, Mirabeau leapt to his feet and bellowed: “We are here by the will of the people. We will not leave except at the point of bayonets.”
- In the next few days, more clergymen and liberal nobles left the meetings of their separate estates and joined the National Assembly. The liberal nobles were led by the king’s cousin Philippe. Finally, on June 27, the king told the clergy and nobles to join with the Third Estate in the National Assembly. That night, Paris was ablaze.

But beneath the surface lurked doubts. Louis seemed to have surrendered, but no one knew for certain. He had called 30,000 troops to assemble at Versailles. And every day of late June and early July, the cost of bread rose ominously. In other parts of France, bread riots had already broken out. What would the king do next? Would he smash the National Assembly? And what would the people of Paris do?