

## Module 03: A Revolution for Whom?

### Evidence 16: Equality and Property in New Jersey, July 30, 1776

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#### Introduction

As in other states, when New Jersey drafted its first constitution, its authors linked service in public office to the ownership of property. Not everyone approved of the connection. The article below, for example, appeared in a Pennsylvania newspaper soon after the New Jersey constitution was made public.

#### Questions to Consider

- To what, and on what basis, did the author of the article object?
- What connection could the author see between owning property and serving in public office? Why did the connection seem irrelevant in this case?

#### Document

Although it be granted, on all hands, that all power originates from the people; yet it is plain, that in those colonies where the government has, from the beginning, been in the hands of a very few rich men, the ideas of government both in the minds of those rich men, and of the common people, are rather aristocratical than popular. The rich, having been used to govern, seem to think it is their right; and the poorer commonalty, having hitherto had little or no hand in government, seem to think it does not belong to them to have any.

From this cause, I imagine, it came to pass that the New-Jersey Convention, in their charter, made it a qualification for a member of their Lower House of Assembly, that he be possessed of an estate of five hundred pounds, and of a Member of their Council, that he have an estate of one thousand pound. This I esteem a hurtful remnant of the feudal constitution. Why should these be made qualifications? Are not many, who have not these qualifications, as fit to serve their country in either of these capacities, as any that are worth the money? This I think cannot be denied. The only reason that occurs to my mind, which can be pleaded in

justification of this regulation, is that it renders the legislators independent. But according to my observation, many who are not worth so much, are of more independent spirits, and will not be so soon biased by the prospect of gain, as those in general who are much richer than themselves.

Besides, why should not the same qualification be insisted on for a Judge in any Court, and for any considerable officer, whether civil or military? The necessity of independent men in all these cases is much the same. By these means the government, in every part, would be in the hands of the rich only; and therefore in all reason ought to be exercised *over* the rich only, and the poor, and those in moderate circumstances, ought to be entirely excused from bearing any part of the burden of a government, from the honors of which they are wholly excluded.

In short, I cannot see but that our maxim in this government is perfectly right, and that the experience of more than a century confirms the propriety of it, that any elector hath a right to be elected into any office of state.

Source:

*Pennsylvania Evening Post*, July 30, 1776. Downloaded from *The Founders' Constitution*, vol. 1, ch. 15, doc, 19. <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s19.html>.