Louis XVI

Financial mismanagement and marriage unpopularity

- Louis XVI’s marriage to Marie Antoinette increased 3rd Estate resentment because of her Austrian ancestry and lavish spending. She was known as “Madame Deficit” e.g. she spent 400,000 livres on Diamond bracelets in 1776.
- Louis XVI worsened the financial crisis by firing four Controller Generals between 1774 and 1787 including Necker who was popular among 3rd Estate. This brought France to the brink of bankruptcy in 1786 and increased 3rd Estate opposition.

Louis XVI’s absolutist and unpopular political mismanagement

- After Louis XVI’s new Controller General’s (De Brienne) land tax reforms were rejected by the Paris parlement in July 1787, Louis moved the parlement to Troyes in August 1787 and approved his requested reforms himself in Nov 1787 with a lit de justice.
- Louis’ actions to Paris parlement caused an Aristocratic Revolt as in May 1788 the church paid a don gratuit of ¼ the size expected, and in the Day of Tiles, riots broke out in places in support of the parlement.
- Louis XVI called the Estates in May 1789 and doubled the number of the 3rd Estate but didn’t introduce voting by head, restricting 3rd Estate power, creating opposition.
- Louis XVI didn’t address Estates’ wishes after the cahiers were released May 1789 as he wanted Estates to focus tax reforms instead of constitutional change.
- In the July 1789 Paris riots, Louis XVI sent in 20,000 troops and fired Necker as Controller General which increased tensions and caused more violence among the 3rd Estate as they supported Necker and his physiocrat ideas.
- These actions led to 5/6 of the gardes francaises deserting + Fall of Bastille 14th July.

The 3rd Estate under the influence of enlightenment

Enlightenment ideas challenged the ancien regime and spread rapidly through the 18th century especially in urban areas such as Paris. This heightened 3rd Estate opposition towards Louis XVI as they became more politically active and motivated.

Voltaire 1733 ‘Philosophical Letters’ challenged absolute monarchy + Sieyes’ ‘What is the 3rd Estate’ (1789) further politicised 3rd Estate.

The radicalisation and empowerment of the 3rd Estate is highlighted by their seizure of power on 17th June 1789 when they created the National Assembly. The 1st Estate joined the National Assembly on the 19th June, showing growing appeal of the 3rd Estate’s message.

20th June Tennis Court Oath pledged to create a new constitution which would limit the King’s power.

Louis XVI’s 23 June Séance Royale which introduced free press + abolished the Lettres de Cachet was rejected by the National Assembly because his reforms were introduced too late.
The Internal threat to France – the Vendée

Tensions had been mounting in the Vendée because of growing anger towards religious and economic policy, 75% priests in Vendée refused to take Oath of Civil Constitution of Clergy.

Trigger was war conscription – Feb 1793 National Convention imposed a levée for 300,000 French conscripts but when it reached the Vendée on 11th March 1793, peasants fought against the revolutionary government.

Successful revolt – By May 1793 there were 45,000 peasants fighting against the 15,000 government troops.

The fear of counter-revolution caused by the Vendée led to the establishment of the machinery of Terror:

- Representatives on Mission set up March 1793 to oversee conscription and maintain commitment to the war. They also oversaw the 19th March Execution Decree delivered quick execution to known rebels
- Watch Committees were created in a March 1793 decree which ordered French Communes to appoint comité de surveillance

Sans-culottes and the influence of economic failures

The government printed more assignats to pay for war which dropped their value by 50%

Riots – Sans-culottes (led by Marat) attacked grain hoarders and counter-revolutionaries. In February 1793 the National Guard were used to control bread riots in Paris.

1st May 1793 journée – 8,000 Sans-culottes surrounded the National Convention demanding that they pass the Maximum. 4th May a law for maximum price of grain was passed.

Roux and the enragés called for economic terror against the revolution’s enemies who may be hoarding grain.

5th Sep 1793 journée – Angry crowd inspired by Roux appeared before the Commune, demanding bread/higher wages, led to Terror being formally declared on 5th Sep by Jacobins.

Revolutionary Armies – 5th September 1793 National Convention authorised creation of revolutionary army in Paris made up of sans-culottes, the armies would defend the Republic from internal enemies.

The sans-culottes shaped the radicalisation of the Terror – Law of suspects 17th Sep 1793 National Convention passed the law which declared anyone suspected for counter-revolutionary activity would be held without trial indefinitely.

The General Maximum – 29th Sep National Convention passed the law which created a list of fixed food prices for a wide range of foods + wages were set at 50% above the 1790 level.
The elections of April 1797

This election was the first since October 1795 so the decree of two-thirds no longer applied. Only 11 former Convention members were re-elected + 330/750 in Councils were royalists.

Coup of Fructidor September 1797

Between 3rd and 4th September 1797, troops surrounded the Council’s chambers. 53 deputies and the two more royalist directors, Carnot and Barthélemy were arrested.

Elections overturned – The Councils approved election cancelations across 49 departments, removing 177 deputies. The two directors were replaced by committed Republicans.

Significance – The democracy of Year III Constitution was undermined, though the executive overpowered the legislature, the Directory relied on the army to maintain its position.

The Directorial Terror

The émigrés who had returned since Thermidor were given two weeks to leave or face execution – 160 were executed.

After Fructidor, a law was passed requiring all clergy to take an oath of hatred of monarchy or be deported – 1,400 were sentenced to deportation.

Perceived Threat from the Left – Electoral success crushed in coup of Floréal

After the success of neo-Jacobins in elections in April 1798, the Directory ended the Left’s rise in influence to prevent a revolution against the Directory.

Jacobin success in April 1798 elections

437 deputies were to be elected – Jacobins did well on a low turnout. 162 former National Convention members were elected (including 71 regicides).

Limited gains – The Left still had less than 1/3 of seats and moderate Republicans who supported the Directory had a majority.

Floréal coup in May 1798

There wasn’t any real Jacobin danger to the Directory but because of the bloody record of Jacobins, the moderate Republicans didn’t trust them.

The Directory started rumours of a left-wing conspiracy + the law of 22 Floréal got councils to support a reversal of the election results – 127 deputies were purged, 86 neo-Jacobins.

Impact of Floréal coup

Short term, the Directory had maintained its control over the legislature but in the long term, the Directory had shown the rejection of voters’ choices and it alienated many.