

THE DEPUTIES AT THE FRENCH ESTATES GENERAL  
OF 1468 AND 1484:  
A PROSOPOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

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In April 1468, when the deputies of the city of Orléans to the assembly of the Estates General returned after an absence of twenty-five days, they brought with them a considerable portion of their wine supply. Obviously, they had anticipated a much longer session,<sup>1</sup> but, after only nine days, the king, Louis XI, had achieved his aim of getting the Estates General's consent to the reversion to the crown of Normandy, which the king's brother, Charles, had received as an *apanage*.<sup>2</sup> In addition, he had been able to secure the unconditional support of the three estates in his struggle against the coalition of Burgundy, England, and Brittany, and his own concessions had been inconsequential. The last act of the deputies was the appointment of a reform committee charged with examining the complaints and complaints which had been submitted and procuring remedies for them. This committee was elected on April 20, after the official end of the Estates General and after the probable departure of many of the deputies, by another committee that was appointed for this purpose and that consisted of members of the Estates General. No deputy of the Estates General figures, however, among the members of the reform committee. Since such an institution would, likely, have soon infringed upon the competencies of existing institutions, and since it consisted mainly of members of the royal council

and of the parliament and of high nobles and ecclesiastics from the closest circle around the king, it is not surprising that the committee apparently never met, neither as scheduled, on May 1, nor at a later date.

The unexpected brevity of the 1468 session of the Estates General seems to support the view that the king's triumph can be explained as a failure of the Estates, and scholars have repeatedly stressed such failure when considering sessions such as those of 1468 and 1484.<sup>3</sup> However, a prosopographical investigation, until now completely neglected,<sup>4</sup> of those who represented the three estates casts doubt on the validity of such a view.

In the most recent discussion of the Estates General of 1468, Russel Major wrote that "Louis convoked only one meeting of the Estates General during his reign, a step he took for propaganda rather than financial purposes."<sup>5</sup> The financial purposes of the assembly were, however, by no means inconsiderable. The importance of the recovery of Normandy for the crown lay not only in its strategic position but also in the fact that it was the territory with the highest tax revenue. Nor is it satisfying to regard the convocation in 1468 merely as a propaganda measure. When Louis XI decided to convoke the Estates General, after having refused to do so while his enemies of the *ligue du bien public* demanded an assembly of the Estates General in 1465, his political reasons were much more sophisticated. The convocation is only to be understood with reference to the negotiations with Charles the Bold and his allies in Cambrai<sup>6</sup> and to the fact that the king's brother, Charles, had declared, in 1466, that he would leave the decision on the future of Normandy to an assembly of the Estates General in the case that the king decided to convene them.<sup>7</sup>

An enquiry into the composition of the assembly shows that it was no mere body of acclamation but that its approach to the king's wishes was linked with important interests of its own. The summoning letters of 26 February 1468 were addressed to more than seventy *bonnes villes*. Contrary to the assertions of

Comynes<sup>8</sup> and of many modern scholars who rely on him, these towns had not been selected according to their submissiveness to the king's will. They were, rather, the most important French towns and were invited to send one ecclesiastical and two secular deputies. Paris, the largest city, was allowed six deputies: two clergymen and four laymen. Some of the more important cities, such as Tours, for example, were permitted to send three laymen and one clergyman. Besides the approximately two hundred deputies who had been elected by the towns and who belonged to the first and the third estates, there were about two hundred deputies who had been personally appointed by the king. Among them were high ecclesiastical and secular dignitaries, high royal officials, and members of the king's council and the parliament of Paris.<sup>9</sup>

The minutes of the assembly list sixty-four towns which sent deputies but do not mention names of individuals. About half of the appointed members, however, are personally recorded,<sup>10</sup> and I have been able to trace the names of sixty-five of the municipal deputies--fifteen ecclesiastics and fifty laymen--mainly from local records. Their social profile is comparatively homogeneous. Twenty-six out of the fifty deputies of the third estate coming from twenty-three towns were members of the town magistracy as is evident from such titles as *maire*, *consul*, *élu*, *échevin*, *greffier*, *clerc de ville*, *procureur*, etc. Fifteen were royal officials, among them two *lieutenants généraux*, one *lieutenant*, and two *procureurs* of the king. Four were seignorial officials. Seven deputies had a royal as well as a municipal office. They belonged, together with the elected municipal magistrates, to the long-established town aristocracy. The five others are either merchants or other members of the town aristocracy who had no known administrative functions. All of the fourteen towns for which I was able to trace the ecclesiastical deputies were diocesan towns. In twelve of them a leading member of the cathedral's chapter was the deputy elected. Only Châlons sent the abbot of a town abbey and Tours a canon of St.-Martin's. The summoning letters provided for joint election meetings of the clergy and the

third estate, but this provision was not carried out in most cases. The exceptional results of the elections at Châlons and Tours are perhaps a consequence of such joint meetings.<sup>11</sup>

The main opposition to joint election meetings came from the clergy, who feared being out-voted by the third estate.<sup>12</sup> Thus, differences between the estates in the towns prevented a common policy during the period of preparation. That this hardly influenced the king's expectations towards the deputies is borne out by the fact that, when their powers were examined at Tours, the delegations of the towns had to identify themselves as joint delegations. Consequently, many of them had to resort to forged minutes of the election meetings.<sup>13</sup>

My prosopographical analysis starts from the assumption that the sixty-five of about two hundred municipal deputies I have been able to trace are a representative cross-section, the composition of which is determined only by the coincidental survival of records and which includes deputies from towns of every size and importance from all areas of France. If this is admitted, the question arises as to the extent to which a prosopographical approach can confirm or modify the results of previous research based on the history of institutions. I would like to emphasize two results: first, the assembly of the Estates General of 1468 becomes more important within the framework of Louis XI's policy at that period and illuminates the existing distribution of powers; second, the revised electoral procedure for the Estates General of 1484, which was maintained until 1789, appears in a new light. It cannot be fully understood unless it is contrasted with that used in 1468 and discussed but rejected in 1484.<sup>14</sup> I shall return to this point.

The convocation of the towns in 1468 secured wide support for the king, because the recovery of Normandy allowed a tax cut. A majority of the towns could make an immediate profit from this measure, and even those which were exempted from paying taxes were to benefit, because their privileges would become safer. The king was anxious to secure widespread publicity and support

for his measures by means of the assembly of the Estates General<sup>15</sup> and, therefore, in the same way as he had proceeded in convoking the towns, he did not restrict the nomination of those deputies he personally appointed to his staunch supporters but also chose former enemies from the time of the *ligue du bien public*. Somewhat particular was the situation of the clergy, whose representatives were to some extent divided. The interests of the high clergy, especially of the episcopate, probably were not identical with those of the clergy of the towns. Beyond that, municipal or regional interests could be stronger than the common interests of the estates, and this fact found expression in the presentation of separate complaints to the king and his council by the different municipal delegations. This outcome was favored by the king, who did not wish the Estates to present him a common *cahier de doléances*.<sup>16</sup>

The representatives of the third estate and of the clergy who had been elected according to the electoral procedure of 1468 did not understand themselves as representatives only of the interests of their respective estates. An example are the complaints submitted by deputies from Millau and Rodez for the *pais de Rouergue*.<sup>17</sup> The ecclesiastical deputies, on the whole, claimed to represent the interests of their respective diocese.<sup>18</sup>

The king could use these municipal delegations to check opposition from the personally appointed nobility and from the bishops. Moreover, the participation of the town clergy in the delegations elected by the towns increased the weight and the prestige of the representation of the third estate.

The significance of this prosopographical analysis is increased by a comparison with the Estates General of 1484. That assembly was summoned to Orléans for January 1, 1484--a few months after the death of Louis XI on October 24, 1483--to appoint a regency for Charles VIII, who was still a minor, and to discuss reform measures.<sup>19</sup> Behind this decision on the regency was the struggle for power between, on the one hand, Anne and Pierre Beaujeu, the daughter and son-in-law of Louis XI, and on the other, the duke of

Orléans (afterwards Louis XII) and his supporters.<sup>20</sup> Despite the general hatred of the person and the politics of the late king, the Beaujeu nevertheless tried to maintain their power and, thus, ensure continuity.<sup>21</sup>

There were fundamental differences between the assemblies of 1468 and 1484. For the first time in the history of the French Estates General, the latter assembly consisted only of elected representatives of the three estates, a fact which was deeply resented by the bishops.<sup>22</sup> The official lists contain about 250 names, many of them mistaken or distorted. Another thirty-five names I was able to trace mainly in local records, which also allow the identification of the mistaken names. Thus, probably most of the 284 representatives who--according to the king's keeping of accounts<sup>23</sup>--were paid allowances for being present are known by their names, and only about twenty-five are not yet identified.<sup>24</sup>

The basis for any research on the Estates General of 1484 is the unofficial *Journal des Etats* of the ecclesiastical deputy for Rouen, Jean Masselin.<sup>25</sup> His detailed account gives, however, only thirty-one names in connection with the proceedings of the Estates General: fifteen deputies of the clergy, nine of the nobility, and seven of the third estate. A real shame from the point of view of every prosopographer was Masselin's decision not to link particular political attitudes, which he described in a very detailed fashion, with the names of their adherents and not to let the reader of his *Journal* know the actual composition and power of the different pressure groups within the Estates. As a rule, the deputies' names appear only in connection with appointments for committees, and rarely are speakers and representatives of particular political interests named.

Who were these deputies? What were the reasons for the new electoral procedure, and what were its consequences for the election and the course of the Estates General? None of these questions has, until now, been dealt with prosopographically. Nevertheless, there has been no lack of interpretation based on rough analysis of the lists of deputies. Thus,

Russel Major wrote about the deputies to the Estates General of 1484 that "the bulk of those elected were almost certainly unattached to any faction"<sup>26</sup>--the competing parties of the Beaujeu and Orléans. Peter Lewis was more cautious when he wrote in 1962 that "evidence for interference with the choice of members is inconclusive, even when, in 1484, they were all elected." He explains the failure of the Estates General as follows: "Deep-rooted loyalties put the deputies of 1484 at each others' throats in defence of the region they represented."<sup>27</sup> I shall examine this thesis presently.

There had obviously been a controversial discussion in the royal council of the electoral procedure for the Estates General. The summoning letters required the royal *prévôts*, *baillis*, and *sénéchaux* in about sixty royal administrative districts<sup>28</sup> to organize joint election meetings with the three estates in their respective districts in order to select a delegation of three representatives, one from each estate.<sup>29</sup> In the larger districts, each estate was allowed to elect two deputies. The high crown vassals, the dukes and counts of Nevers, Foix, Alençon, Orléans, and Bourbon, were similarly asked to send representatives for their territories.<sup>30</sup> It is obvious that for the two opposed parties much depended on the election of deputies of the right kind, and, thus, it was only consistent for the Beaujeu to try to use all their institutional advantages to get deputies favorable to their cause. Although the exertion of direct influence by the Beaujeu--through a recommendation--can be proved in only one case,<sup>31</sup> there is plenty of circumstantial evidence for considerable influence. Twenty-three of the seventy-nine deputies of the nobility from twenty-one of the sixty-four delegations whose names are known can be found on a list of persons receiving pensions at the end of the reign of Louis XI.<sup>32</sup> Five deputies of the clergy and one of the third estate have to be added. Thus, twenty-nine deputies from twenty-five delegations had been immediately connected with the late king and must, therefore, be seen as representatives who were likely to be partisans of the interests of the Beaujeu

or potentially to be won by them. For that reason, although members of the nobility had suffered most from the politics of Louis XI and were, therefore, the most likely potential supporters of the duke of Orléans, the Beaujeu still had many followers among them. This fact was probably of crucial importance for the political survival of the Beaujeu, especially since the influence of this group of the nobility becomes even stronger if family and client connections with deputies of their own and the other two estates are taken into account.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to such more or less immediate exertion of influence, the electoral procedure itself operated in favor of the Beaujeu. In contrast to 1468, the constituencies now contained several towns which, on the former occasion, had sent their own delegation;<sup>34</sup> moreover, the countryside could now take part. Also, the conduct of the elections was in the hands of the royal officials, as both the final election and the final drafting of the *cahiers de doléances* were held at the seat of the *bailli* or the *sénéchal*. In 1468, only 40% of the identified deputies of the third estate were royal officials, while 60% were town magistrates. In 1484, the percentage of royal officials rose to 77.1% while that of town magistrates dropped to 22.8%,<sup>35</sup> a shift which has to be regarded as a consequence of the new electoral procedure. The shift is even more significant when one considers the fact that there was still some continuity from the Estates of 1468 to that of 1484, partly through representatives who were present at both assemblies and partly through family ties between representatives to both. The social profiles of these royal officials and of the town magistrates reveal considerable differences, primarily a distinct professionalization of the royal officials, as shown by records of university studies and academic degrees;<sup>36</sup> further, they also had higher mobility and were embedded into regional and national social systems. It is evident that the Beaujeu supported the new electoral procedure once they realized that it strongly favored the royal officials upon whom their political calculations depended.



At the beginning of his reign, Louis XI had dismissed many officials and, thus, provoked serious resistance.<sup>37</sup> To his successor, he emphasized the decisive importance of a reliable following in the struggle for political survival<sup>38</sup> and recommended that, despite the large number of controversial appointments he had made in his last years and the number of lawsuits for claims to office that were to be expected, officials appointed by him be confirmed in office. In the interest of continuity and stability, the royal council adopted this recommendation; numerous claims of former officials were dismissed, and only a few special cases were permitted to go to court.<sup>39</sup> That, even though they were not immediate followers of the Beaujeu, the majority of the royal officials thus confirmed seem to have preferred continuity under them to a change of power in favor of the duke of Orléans is borne out by the decision of the regency in favor of the Beaujeu and the reappointment of the royal council with a majority of their supporters.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, even among the royal officials of the third estates there were men who were strongly in favor of increased powers for the Estates General as an institution. The most significant demand of those representatives was for periodic meetings of the Estates General,<sup>41</sup> but this demand, though consented to by the king in his answer to the *cahier de doléances*, had no consequences.<sup>42</sup> In the long run, particular regional interests prevailed and prevented, as Peter Lewis correctly noted, common action of the deputies in the important question of tax assessment.<sup>43</sup> These particular interests and the special position of the royal officials as a powerful group between the king and the three estates explain why the demand for periodic meetings of the Estates General was hardly emphasized after 1484 and why these meetings never materialized--no more than did the reform committee of 1468.

Prosopographical analysis of the deputies of 1484 shows a close network of family ties among deputies as well as among the deputies of the third estate and members of the royal council, the parliament, and the

*grand conseil*<sup>44</sup>--a fact which is substantially important even when family ties are often difficult to assess. Because the royal officials had direct or indirect access to the centers of power, they feared that, in the long run, dangers to their interests might arise from an institution such as the Estates General. Thus, the demand for periodic meetings which would have institutionalized this body was not met, and aims particularly important to later historians were given up. The historian of institutions, from his perspective, notes a failure of the Estates General; the prosopographical and social historian shows that this view is, in a sense, anachronistic.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Archives communales (AC) Orléans, CC 560, fols. 140r ff., ed. in N. Bulst, *Die französischen Generalstände von 1468 und 1484. Prosopographische Untersuchungen zu den Deligierten*, D. Phil. Thesis, *Pariser Historische Studien* (Bonn, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> For further details see N. Bulst, "Louis XI et les Etats généraux de 1468," in *La France à la fin du XVe siècle, Actes du Colloque international du C.N.R.S., Tours, October, 1983*, ed. by B. Chevalier and Ph. Contamine (Paris, forthcoming). The Estates General lasted from April 6 to April 14.

<sup>3</sup> See: P. Lewis, "The Failure of the French Medieval Estates", *Past and Present*, 23 (1962); and his "Jean Juvenel des Ursins and the Common Literary Attitude Towards Tyranny in Fifteenth-Century France," *Medium Aevum*, 34 (1965), 118 ff.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Lewis, "The Failure of the French Medieval Estates," p. 5. L. Stone ("Prosopography," *Daedalus*, 100 [1971], 64) remarks on the explanatory power of the interest-group theory, that "The more oligarchic the political organisation, the more likely it is to provide a convincing historical interpretation," which proves to be applicable to French society of the second half of the fifteenth century.

<sup>5</sup> J. R. Major, *Representative Government in Early Modern France*, Studies Presented to the International Commission for the History of Representative and Parliamentary Institutions (New Haven and London, 1980), p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> On this aspect of convoking the Estates General see Bulst, "Louis XI et les Etats généraux de 1468."

<sup>7</sup> *Document historiques inédits, tirés des collections manuscrites de la Bibliothèque royale*, ed. J.-J. Champollion-Figeac, vol. 2 (Paris, 1843), p. 416.

<sup>8</sup> Philippe de Comynes, *Mémoires*, ed. J. Calmette, Les classiques de l'histoire de France au moyen âge, 2nd. ed. (Paris, 1964), I, pp. 174 f.

<sup>9</sup> For references see Bulst, *Die französischen Generalstände*.

<sup>10</sup> "L'ordre observé en l'assemblée des Etats généraux de France du règne du roi Louis XI, l'an 1467, par Jean Le Prevost, secretaire du roi et greffier esdits états," in *Des Etats généraux et autres assemblées nationales*, ed. Ch. J. Mayer, vol. 9 (Paris, 1789), pp. 209-26; "Récit des Etats-Généraux

tenus à Tours en l'année 1468," ed. A. Cheruel, in *Documents historiques inédits*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1847), pp. 494-99; AC Rodez, BB 3, fols. 50r ff.

11 The second Parisian ecclesiastical deputy was a canon of St.-Germain l'Auxerrois, the second chapter of Paris after Notre-Dame, who later became a canon of Notre-Dame as well. See Archives Nationales LL 121, pp. 234 ff., ed. in Bulst, *Die französischen Generalstände*.

12 See: Bulst, *Die französischen Generalstände*; and P. Viollet, "Quelques textes pour servir à l'histoire politique des Parisiens au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *Memoirs de la société de l'histoire de Paris et de l'Ile-de-France*, 4 (1877), 155 ff.

13 AC Laon BB 50, ed. in Bulst, *Die französischen Generalstände*.

14 "Papiers de Doriole, président de la 'chambre des comptes,'" in Jean Masselin, *Journal des Etats Généraux de France tenus à Tours en 1484 sous le règne de Charles VIII*, ed. A. Bernier (Paris, 1835), p. 745.

15 For the question of the *inaliénabilité* of the duchy of Normandy which was discussed at the assembly of these Estates, see Bulst, "Louis XI et les Etats généraux de 1468."

16 In contrast to the convocation of 1484, the convocation letters of 1468 contained no demand to submit *doléances* to the king. See *Lettres de Louis XI, roi de France*, eds. J. Vaesen and E. Charavay, Société de l'histoire de France, vol. 3 (Paris, 1887), pp. 198 ff.

17 AC Rodez, BB 3, fols. 66r ff.

18 Bibliothèque Municipale Beauvais, coll. Bucquet-aux Cousteaux, vol. 26, pp. 292 ff.

19 P. Viollet, "Election des députés aux Etats Généraux réunis à Tours en 1468 et en 1484 d'après des documents inédits," *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes*, 27 (1866), 33.

20 See M. Harsgor, *Recherches sur le personnel du conseil du roi sous Charles VIII et Louis XII*, vol. 1 (Lille, 1980), pp. 297 f.

21 *Ordonnances des rois de France de la troisième race*, ed. de Pastouret, vol. 19 (Paris, 1835), pp. 59 ff; Y. Labande-Mailfert, *Charles VIII et son milieu (1470-1498). La jeunesse au pouvoir* (Paris, 1975), p. 23.

22 See Jean Masselin, *Journal des Etats Généraux de France*, pp. 392, 406. The demand of the bishops that all of them should participate in questions regarding them was defeated by the Estates, because with this argument virtually everybody could demand to be present.

23 See "Papiers de Doriolle," in Masselin, p. 744. For some districts the lists do not name any delegate at all. For others there were elections of unofficial delegates who accompanied the official ones and who are sometimes also treated as official delegates. It is not at all certain that the number of 284 delegates is really correct.

24 That is, they do not occur in any other source.

25 See n. 14.

26 J. R. Major, *Representative Institutions in Renaissance France 1421-1559*, Studies Presented to the International Commission for the History of Representative and Parliamentary Institutions (Madison, 1960), p. 70. His other book, *The Deputies to the Estates General in Renaissance France* (Madison, 1960), is, despite its title, no prosopographical study.

27 Lewis, "The Failure of the French Medieval Estates," p. 13.

28 See the list in Bulst, "Vers les états modernes: le tiers état aux Etats généraux de Tours en 1484," in *Représentation et vouloir politiques. Autour des Etats-Généraux de 1614*, eds. R. Chartier and D. Richet (Paris, 1982), pp. 18 ff.

29 See Viollet, "Election des députés aux Etats Généraux," 33 ff.; and Major, *Representative Institutions in Renaissance France 1421-1559*, pp. 66 f.

30 J. L. A. Huillard-Bréholles and A. Lecoy de la Marche, *Titres de la maison ducale de Bourbon*, Archives de l'Empire. Inventaire et documents, vol. 2 (Paris, 1874), n. 6830.

31 *Lettres de Charles VIII, roi de France*, ed. P. Pélicier, Société de l'histoire de France, vol. 1 (Paris, 1898), pp. 22 ff. Philippe Pot, Seigneur of La Roche, *grand sénéchal* of Burgundy was one of these deputies elected following the special wish of the Beaujeu. At the end of the Estates he became a member of the king's council: See Harsgor, I, p. 310.

32 "Roole des pensionnaires soubz Louis XI<sup>e</sup>," B.N., ms. fr. 2900 fol. 7r ff. I am grateful to Peter Lewis (Oxford) who mentioned this text to me and gave me a transcription. See his article in *La France à fin du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*.

33 See n. 44.

34 E.g., in the *bailliage* of Vermandois five towns which had elected their own delegations in 1468--Laon, Châlons-sur-Marne, Noyon, Reims, and Soissons--in 1484 had to cope with the election of only one delegation with six members, two from each estate.

35 In this evaluation only the identified deputies (105 out of 116) are considered.

36 See Bulst, "Studium und Karriere im königlichen Dienst in Frankreich im 15. Jahrhundert," in *Studium und Gesellschaft im sozialen Wandel*, ed. J. Fried, Vorträge und Forschungen, 30 (Konstanz, 1984-85).

37 See P. Champion, *Louis XI*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1928), pp. 88 ff.

38 See n. 21.

39 "Procès-verbaux des cinq séances du grand conseil du roi Charles VIII, tenues au mois de décembre 1483," ed. C. Rossignol, in *Bulletin du Comité de la langue, de l'histoire et des arts de la France*, 3 (1855-56), 257.

40 See, for example, n. 31.

41 Masselin, pp. 698, 712.

42 See Bulst, "Repräsentativversammlungen als Mittel der Zentralverwaltung in Frankreich (15. Jahrhundert). Mit vergleichendem Rückblick ins 11. Jahrhundert," in *Histoire comparée de l'administration (IV<sup>e</sup> - XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, eds. W. Paravicini and K. F. Werner, Beihefte der *Francia*, 9 (München, 1980), p. 258.

43 See n. 27.

44 See, for examples, the relations between the deputies from the districts of Carcassonne (Aubusson), Limousin (Comborn), Rouergue (Arpajon, Estaing), and Marche (La Borne). For references see Bulst, *Die französischen Generalstände*.