

The Putney Debates of 1647

Glossary

Agitators	Elected representatives of regiments of New Model Army
Levellers	Radical group, primarily based in London, which released a pamphlet, <i>An Agreement of the People</i> , on the opening day of the Putney Debates, calling for radical change in England, including freedom of religion and accountability for all under the law
New Model Army	Created by Parliament in 1645 to fight against the royalist forces during the English Civil War. Oliver Cromwell and Henry Ireton were among the senior figures in the New Model Army

Background

For twelve days in late October and early November 1647, the General Council of the Army met in St Mary's Church in Putney. The leaders of the New Model Army were joined by agitators and civilian Levellers.

With King Charles imprisoned at Hampton Court, the main objective of the General Council was to decide what should be done with the 'man of blood', and what England's political future should be.

The second day of the meeting immortalised the debates, as it was dominated by a discussion about who should have the right to vote.

Who said what?

The second day of the Putney Debates, 29 October 1647, was dominated by exchanges between Henry Ireton on one side, and several agitators and Levellers on the other.



Colonel Thomas Rainborough, an army officer with Leveller sympathies, eloquently argued in favour of extending the right to vote:

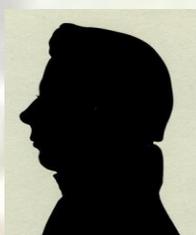
"I think that the poorest he that is in England has a life to live, as the greatest he. I think that **the poorest man in England is not at all bound to that government that he has not had a voice to put himself under**"

Ireton countered, arguing that the vote should remain a right exclusive to landowners:

"In choosing those that shall determine what laws we shall be ruled by, no person has a right to this, who does not have a **permanent fixed interest** in the kingdom...if we take away this law, we shall plainly take away all property and interest that any man has"



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Maximillian Petty, one of two civilian Levellers present, pointed out the unfairness that this would cause to individuals who rented property:

For now only those who have property worth forty shillings are able to vote. A man may rent for one hundred pounds a year, but he has no voice...**it does not destroy property, to give men a voice.**

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Rainborough again defended his position in terms of the natural rights of the individual:

The chief end of this government is to preserve persons as well as estates. **For the preservation of all the native freeborn men, they should have an equal voice in elections**

I would like to know what the soldier has fought for all this while? He has fought to enslave himself, to give power to men of riches, men of estates, to make him a perpetual slave



Edward Sexby, an agitator, reiterated Rainborough's criticism that men prepared to die in defence of a government ought to have the right to vote for the government:

Do you not think it is a sad and miserable condition that **we have fought all this time for nothing?**"

Ireton was unmoved, citing the primary reason for the civil war as halting King Charles' abuse of power:

"I will tell you what the soldier of the kingdom has fought for. **The danger that we stood for was that one man's will was dictating the law.** Every man is capable of trading to get money, to get estates by, in order to make choices about the persons who decide the laws of the kingdom"



Hugh Peter, Cromwell's chaplain, helped to bridge the gap between the differing opinions:

"Upon the will of one man abusing us we reached agreement...I hope it is not denied by any man that any, wise, discreet man that has preserved England is worthy of a voice in the government of it"



Peter's comments paved the way for a consensus to emerge. Late in the meeting, a motion was carried, with only three dissenters, to give the vote in parliamentary elections to all men except servants, apprentices and beggars. The General Council confirmed this four days later.

How radical were the debates?

The fact that the debates took place was a sign of what the revolution had unleashed.

At no other time in England's history had there been a debate about the right to vote at such a level; within two years, the men chairing the discussion would be running the country. It is even more remarkable that the ideas being debated had a chance of being implemented, if the army supported them.

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What happened next?

The debates ended on 8 November, when the General Council ordered Thomas Fairfax to send all the elected officers and agitators back to their regiments until he saw cause to recall them, which he never did.

Three days later Charles escaped from captivity, and within a few months the Second Civil War had begun. In the aftermath of the Second Civil War, some of the Leveller recommendations were put into practice; an English Republic was established, and the House of Lords was abolished. None of the democratic content of the Leveller ideas was implemented, and the Leveller leaders were arrested. In 1649, an attempted mutiny by radical regiments of the New Model Army was crushed. From that moment onwards army democracy, and the Levellers, were finished. The record of the Putney Debates disappeared for over two centuries.

Questions to consider

Why do you think that debates about the right to vote did not continue after the Putney Debates?

Explore the [timeline on the Putney Debates website](#). Why do you think that information about the Putney Debates was lost for over two centuries?

Which later historical developments would you analyse to assess the subsequent influence of the ideas expressed at Putney on the development of democracy in England?

Further reading

[Philip Baker, *The Levellers: People Power, History Today*, 2013.](#)

Philip Baker, *The Levellers: The Putney Debates* (Verso, 2007)