

Multidisciplinary study provides new insights about French Revolution

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New research from experts in history, computer science and cognitive science shines fresh light on the French Revolution, showing how rhetorical and institutional innovations won acceptance for the ideas that built the French republic's foundation and inspired future democracies.

The researchers, including an Indiana University professor, doctoral student and undergraduate, used data-mining techniques to comb through transcripts of 40,000 speeches from the two-year tenure of the National Constituent Assembly, the first parliament of the <u>revolution</u>.

Adopting analytical tools to track word-use patterns, they found the French Revolution's principles, ideals and goals emerged and evolved in the assembly's speeches and debates. They also found that some of the most influential work took place behind the scenes in committees.

"At the beginning of the revolution, there's just a whole lot of newness going on," said Rebecca Spang, a co-author of the paper and a professor of history in the IU Bloomington College of Arts and Sciences. "Eventually, some of it sticks, and people gravitate to it and keep working with it. And that's what we call the revolution."

The study, "Individuals, Institutions and Innovation in the Debates of the French Revolution," was published April 17 in the peer-reviewed *Proceedings of the National Academies of Science*, or *PNAS*. Alexander Barron, an IU doctoral candidate in the School of Informatics, Computing and Engineering is the lead author; other authors are Jenny Huang, a 2017 IU graduate with majors in social and cultural analysis; and Simon DeDeo of Carnegie Mellon University and the Santa Fe Institute.

The French Revolution was one of the most important political transformations in history. It overthrew the monarchy, established a republic and inspired the world. But historians and political scientists



have long debated whether the events of the revolution created its ideals or whether ideals shaped the revolution. By analyzing word patterns from the French Revolution Digital Archive to determine how novel they were and whether they persisted or disappeared, the researchers provided evidence for the argument that debates in the assembly produced the revolution's ideals and principles.

They found that assembly members on the political left used novel ways of speaking, some of which caught on and gained influence, while more conservative members used familiar word combinations to delay change. Members who were charismatic and made their case in new ways were more effective in getting their proposals accepted. But halfway through the assembly, committees gained new power to propose and dispose legislation, and that change proved significant.

"Legislatures simply cannot process every item through discussion," Barron said. "To deal with this bottleneck, they create committees, a transformation that happened organically in the assembly we studied. These committees ended up being centers of power through their specialized knowledge, lessening the effectiveness of charisma in direct debate."

The authors analyzed text from the French Revolution Digital Archive using a method that combined information theory and a statistical approach called latent Dirichlet allocation. They will release the software developed for the project so that other researchers can use it for similar studies.

More information: Alexander T. J. Barron et al, Individuals, institutions, and innovation in the debates of the French Revolution, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1717729115



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