Document One

“At the beginning of the eighteenth century, France had 20 million people living within its borders, a number equal to nearly 20 percent of the population of non-Russian Europe. Over the course of the century, that number increased by another 8 to 10 million, as epidemic disease and acute food shortages diminished and mortality declined. By contrast, it had increased by only 1 million between 1600 and 1700. Also important, this population was concentrated in the rural countryside: of the nearly 30 million French under Louis XVI, about 80 percent lived in villages of 2,000 or less, with nearly all the rest in fairly small cities (those with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants).”

“...Amid these broad economic and population shifts, daily life in the countryside remained much the same. The owners and workers were known as peasants, although they differed in wealth and status. A few could claim to be “living nobly,” meaning they rented their land to others to work, but many were day-laborers desperate for work in exchange for a place to stay and food to eat. Historians have estimated that 90 percent of the peasants lived at or below the subsistence level, earning only enough to feed their families. Consequently, documents on life in the countryside at this time reflect the omnipresence of poverty. One of the most well-known observers of the late 18th century French countryside, Arthur Young, considered these small farms the great weakness of French agriculture. Others commenting on the impoverished peasants blamed the tensions between the rich and poor on the country’s vast social differences.”

Source:

Background:

The image below is a political cartoon created in the 1780’s before the French Revolution. The inscription on the rock reads “Taille Impots et Corvees.” This roughly translates to “cut taxes and labor.”
Document Three

Grievance of a Feminist

“It is the moment of general revolution that a woman who is astonished by the silence of her sex, which should have so many things to say, so many abuses to combat, so many grievances to present, dares to raise her voice in defense of the common cause. She will plead her case before the tribunal of the nation, whose justice already assures her of success.”

“...My claims may at first seem ill-considered; the admission of women to the Estates-General is, one may think, inconceivably and ridiculously pretentious. Never have women been admitted to the councils of kings and republics.” Moreover, even sovereign queens who have governed states have only admitted men to their councils.

Under our current system of government, the strongest have made the laws, subordinating the weakest. But today, enlightenment and reason have demonstrated the absurdity of all this.

Women do not aspire to the honors of government, or to the advantages of being initiated to the secrets of ministries. But we believe that it is entirely equitable to allow women, widows, or girls who possess land or other properties, to bring their grievances to the foot of the throne, and that it is also just to collect their votes, because they are obligated, just as are men, to pay the royal taxes and to fulfill the engagements of commerce.

It may be alleged that all that would be possible to accord them, is to permit them to be represented by proxy, at the Estates-General.

Source:

Since 1614, the French monarchy had operated without choice to a legislature. Kings had managed their fiscal affairs by increasing the burden of the ancient and unequal system of taxes, by borrowing money, and sometimes by selling noble titles and other privileges; however, because noble titles exempted the holder from future taxes, the purchasers of titles were effectively buying an annuity.

It was debt that led to the long-running financial crisis of the French government. It is said that before the revolution, the French debt had risen from 8 billion to 12 billion livres (The French form of money). Extravagant expenditures on luxuries by Louis XVI, whose rule began in 1774, were compounded by debts that were run up during the reign of his even-more-profligate predecessor, Louis XV (who reigned from 1715 to 1774). Heavy expenses to conduct the losing Seven Years' War against Britain (1756–1763), and France's backing of the Americans in their War of Independence, ran the tab up even further.

Louis XV and his ministers were deeply unhappy about Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War and, in the years following the Treaty of Paris, they began drawing up a long-term plan that would involve constructing a larger navy and building an anti-British coalition of allies. In theory, this would eventually lead to a war of revenge and see France regain its colonies from Britain. In practice, it resulted in a mountain of debts.

Louis XV had spent liberally to establish Versailles as a showplace city worthy to be the French capital, in function if not in fact. There, he built a Ministry of War, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs (where the Treaty of Paris (1783) ending the American Revolutionary War was signed), and a Ministry of the Navy.

Edmund Burke, no friend of the revolution, was to write in 1790, "...the public, whether represented by a monarch or by a senate, can pledge nothing but the public estate; and it can have no public estate except in what it derives from a just and proportioned imposition upon the citizens at large." Because of the successful defense by the nobles of their privileges, the king of France lacked the means to impose a "just and proportioned" tax. The desire to do so led directly to the decision in 1788 to call the Estates-General into session.
Causes of French Revolution Document Analysis Slip

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Which cause of the French Revolution do you believe was the most direct cause for the uprising? Explain why in your reasoning.

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