

Support for Napoleon's Empire: Manoeuvring, Manipulating, and Managing Public Opinion

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Abstract

When Napoleon I crowned himself the Emperor of France, he had seemingly brought an end to the First French Republic under the auspices of public support. In his ascendancy from Consul, he had employed plebiscites, invoked his military victories, and appealed to French Catholics. However, the public opinion of Napoleon I was not always as positive as it seemed, requiring political manoeuvring for the purpose of maintaining a visage of popular support. "Support for Napoleon's Empire: Manoeuvring, Manipulating and Managing Public Opinion" is an analysis of the sources and mechanisms of support that allowed Napoleon I to rise from Consul to Emperor of France. Focusing primarily on the period of 1799 to 1804, this essay takes a textual analysis approach, examining secondary sources for two purposes. The first purpose is to determine where public support for Napoleon was legitimate, and where public opinion was managed, while the second purpose is to understand what mechanisms were employed in order to manage this public opinion. The essay begins with an analysis of the negative perception of the Directory among the French population, particularly its economic and democratic instability, to understand why support for a new regime arose. In the next section, the essay examines the plebiscites of 1800, 1802, and 1804, to identify and analyse the mechanisms that created the image of widespread support for Napoleon I, such as the simple design of the plebiscites and the public nature in which they were carried out. Finally, the essay concludes with an analysis of the organic and inorganic support that Napoleon I could draw on from within the French populace, focusing on that which was derived from Napoleon I's military record, the Concordat with the Catholic Church, and a significant propaganda campaign.

Over the course of the 18th and 19th of Brumaire in Year VIII, a tectonic shift occurred in the governmental structure of the French state. Where before there was the Directory, with its elected legislative bodies embodying the gains of the French Revolution since 1789, there now stood a Consulate of three executives, ushered in through an inherently undemocratic coup d'état. Then, within only a few years, the Consulate would give way to an empire, with Napoleon Bonaparte as its dictator. The Coup of 18 Brumaire, while meeting initial resistance from both the Council of Five Hundred and the Council of Elders, was successful and not necessarily unpopular. When, in 1800, the citizens of France were asked to justify the coup by voting for the establishment of a new governmental structure through a new constitution, the result was positive and the citizens appeared responsive. How could it be that the citizens of France, after persevering through a decade of revolution which saw the execution of an absolute monarch and the establishment of enlightened constitutions, were willing to take a significant step backwards from political freedom and towards dictatorship? Furthermore, how could these citizens continue to support the regime when, in 1804, they would be asked to vote on the establishment of a hereditary empire?

While the plebiscites of the years 1800, 1802, and 1804 all revealed significant support for the abolishment of the Directory and the establishment of Napoleon's dictatorship, there is good reason to question the legitimacy of the image of homogenous support which these plebiscites provide. However, this is not to say that Napoleon was devoid of support. To what extent did the French public support the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, and what key factors contributed to their support in his ascendancy from General to Consul to Emperor? In this essay, it will be argued that between 1799 and 1804, despite the existence of opposition, Napoleon expertly manoeuvred, manipulated and managed public opinion in order to maintain significant, if not fluctuating, levels of support which provided his regime with legitimacy. Through an analysis of the unpopularity of and apathy towards the Directory, the processes of the three plebiscites, and the effects that censorship, military success, and the Concordat with the Catholic Church had on Napoleon's reputation, it should become evident as to what extent Napoleon manoeuvred, manipulated and managed public opinion to maintain significant levels of support.

First, it should be understood that the failures of the Directory, with all the unpopularity and apathy it inspired, played a key role in Napoleon and his co-conspirators' ability to seize power in the Coup of 18 Brumaire. There would appear to be three major factors contributing to the unpopular attitude towards the Directory: governmental instability, governmental inefficiency, and the Directory's precedent of undemocratic behaviour. With cognizance of the dangers held by a strong executive with unchecked power, as embodied by the Committee of Public Safety, the Directory's executive body was designed to be weak; for example, yearly elections were held within the legislature to replace some of the five seats in the executive body, and which seats would be up for election was decided by random chance.⁵⁶⁶ Such instability within the executive ensured the constant turnover of interests exercising power, which would greatly damage abilities for coalition-building and cohesive decision making. The problem with this systematic turnover within the apparatus of the state was not missed by observers. French observer Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis would state in the fallout of the Coup of 18 Brumaire that "annual elections put the people in a fever state at least six months out of twelve [...]".⁵⁶⁷ The instability of such a system was a known quantity, and it inspired a desire for change in the strength of the executive. This would also create a consistent cycle of shifting the balance of power from the left of the political spectrum to the right, and vice-versa, which was also existent within the legislative bodies themselves.⁵⁶⁸ This constant turnover in

⁵⁶⁶ Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994), 32.

⁵⁶⁷ Lynn Hunt, David Lansky, and Paul Hanson, "The Failure of the Liberal Republic in France, 1795-1799: The Road to Brumaire," *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no.4 (1979): 737.

⁵⁶⁸ Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution*, 31; William A. Pelz, "The Rise of the Third Estate: The French People Revolt," in *A People's History of Modern Europe* (Pluto Press, 2016), 50.

the executive and legislative bodies of the Directory regime, in conjunction with repeated shifts between the left-wing and the right-wing, ensured that the regime would be characterised by instability.

Despite finding some successes by 1799 in handling the multitude of problems facing the state, such as the economic maladies which were solved by writing off the state's debt and putting an end to the *assignat* currency, the Directory, in part due to its instability, was seen as ineffectual.⁵⁶⁹ There were larger economic anxieties, particularly in the labour market, which had been created by the Revolution and the abolishment of the ancient regime system. For example, the *livret*, a passbook for labourers which was surrendered to employers at the commencement of employment and which tied labourers to their employers and ensured good behaviour, had been eliminated.⁵⁷⁰ The return to such a system would be of great benefit to employers who, with the labourer's *livret*, would be able to exert much more control over the activities of their workers. Furthermore, with the abolishment of slavery in the French colonies, a source of cheap exploitable labour had been greatly damaged. Napoleon was thus seen as an opportunity to restore economic stability, an opportunity which he capitalised on through, among other measures, re-establishing the *livret* and the institution of slavery in the French colonies in 1802.⁵⁷¹ Additionally, the Directory was seen as ineffective at administering to the *départments* of France, and at establishing law and order. Karl Loewenstein hints at an undercurrent of French opinion that held disdain for the weak governing apparatuses of the *départments* when he states that Napoleon, after reorganising the *préfets* administering the *départments*, had provided "a most efficient and impartial administration" within the *départments*.⁵⁷² Such an image of inefficiency prior to Napoleon's restructuring was compounded by the problem of the Chouan rebellion. The peasant rebellion localised in the western *départments* of France had not been entirely defeated, and the violence that the rebellion fostered was a significant blight on the image of the Directory.⁵⁷³ With the numerous problems which the Directory was unable to properly address, further unpopularity with the regime was undoubtedly fostered.

If the Directory was to be an enlightenment system of government in which the rule of democracy was to be respected, then it had failed in this regard as well. Two major undemocratic aspects of the Directory were its willingness to revise electoral results and the prevalence of coups during its existence. Revision of electoral results occurred under the Directory through both subtle and overt methods. If the agents of the Directory felt that there were extremist elements making political gains in the *départments*, propaganda would be issued to discredit the extremists, the divisions among ideological groups within the *départments* would be exploited, and, in more extreme cases, lists of candidates approved by the agents of the Directory themselves would be provided to the electoral assemblies within troublesome *départments*.⁵⁷⁴ Meddling in the democratic affairs of electoral assemblies betrayed the spirit of democracy that the Revolution suggested and that the Directory based itself upon, and would likely be a cause of great distrust.

More extreme, however, was when the Directory annulled electoral results in 1797 and 1798. During the former, known as the Fructidor Coup, after gains had been made by rightists in the legislature, the electoral results of forty-nine *départments* were annulled, excluding 177 deputies from office.⁵⁷⁵ Regarding the latter, known as the Floreal Coup that was prompted by a response to leftist gains, electoral results were once again annulled, barring 121 elected deputies from the offices they were elected

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁷¹ Naomi J. Andrews and Jennifer E. Sessions, "Introduction: The Politics of Empire in Post-Revolutionary France," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33, no.1 (2015): 4; Lyons, 119; Pelz, 51.

⁵⁷² Karl Loewenstein, "Opposition and Public Opinion under the Dictatorship of Napoleon the First," *Social Research* 4, no.4 (1937): 462-463.

⁵⁷³ Lyons, Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution*, 33.

⁵⁷⁴ Hunt, Lansky, and Hanson, "The Failure of the Liberal Republic in France," 741.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

to.⁵⁷⁶ Whereas the subtle methods of revising electoral results were relatively lighter attempts at election meddling, the annulling of electoral results, the barring of deputies from their elected office, and the illegal overextension of power were overt and disastrous for the image of an elected democratic regime. Such examples provoked Napoleon to state to the Council of Elders, upon the onset of the Coup of 18 Brumaire, “can [the Constitution] still offer any guarantee to the French People? You violated it on 18 Fructidor, you violated it on 22 Floreal [...] The Constitution has been invoked and then violated by every single faction”.⁵⁷⁷ The strength in such a statement is that, regardless of Napoleon’s intentions, it was not a lie; the Directory had maintained itself through unconstitutional and undemocratic methods, and thus it could appeal to neither the Constitution nor democratic ideals to defend itself.

Upon the conclusion of the Coup of 18 Brumaire, Napoleon sought to justify his and his co-conspirators’ extrajudicial seizure of power through an appeal to public opinion. To do so, in 1800 he deployed a plebiscite to the citizens of France to vote on whether a new constitution ought to be created to establish a new regime with a stronger executive, a process he would repeat in both 1802 and 1804.⁵⁷⁸ The results suggest significant support for Napoleon’s leadership and, if taken at face value, presents an image of homogeneity among the citizens of France for such support. In 1800, on the question of establishing the Consulate of Three, over 1.5 million citizens voted in support of the Consulate against 1,562 voting no.⁵⁷⁹ In 1802, on the question of Napoleon becoming First Consul for life, an even larger turnout of 3.6 million citizens voted for Napoleon, with 8,272 citizens voting against it.⁵⁸⁰ In 1804, the plebiscite which would return France to hereditary dictatorship with the establishment of the Napoleonic Empire found the support of 3.5 million citizens, compared to the 2,569 citizens who voted against it.⁵⁸¹ Such overwhelming support was crucial to Napoleon’s legitimacy, as he could point to the public opinion of the citizens as his key support in his regime; he used a democratic method to create a deeply undemocratic system. However, as has been stated, there is great reason to doubt, if not the validity, then the ethicality, of these plebiscites. Napoleon, shrewd in his manipulation of the expression of public opinion, had multiple strategies to ensure the results he wanted were provided.

First and foremost, the plebiscites were designed to be as simple as possible. This simplicity worked in two ways. First, the plebiscites were one question: in the case of 1802, the question was “should Napoleon Bonaparte be Consul for life?”⁵⁸² Such a simple question, while at first appearing like an efficient method of collecting public opinion, is actually more insidious on closer inspection. This simplicity betrays an understanding of what actual changes would occur from voting yes.⁵⁸³ While obviously it would give Napoleon the mandate to exert greater control over the Consulate in his lifetime, it does not describe what institutional changes would occur as a result, nor does it explain Napoleon’s intentions for pursuing the lifetime position. Further, in the case of 1800, it is unknown what the result would be if the majority of voters had voted no. Would Napoleon and his co-conspirators return their seized power to the executive of the Directory, and what chaos and instability would result in the meantime? Such unclear outcomes and the simplicity of the question thus would appear to create more upsides for voting in favour than in voting against. Second, the simplicity in responses was also beneficial to Napoleon. Voters did not have any input on the plebiscites beyond providing a yes or a no to the plebiscites’ question.⁵⁸⁴ For example, again referencing the 1802 plebiscite, voters could not accept that

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution*, 39-40.

⁵⁷⁸ Loewenstein, “Opposition and Public Opinion,” 464; Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution*, 111.

⁵⁷⁹ Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution*, 113.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 112.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

Napoleon could receive greater powers than the other consuls but reject a lifetime term for his role as First Consul. Without room for nuance and discussion, the binary options were either complete acceptance of Napoleon's will or the complete rejection of it. Further, there was pressure in place to deter such a rejection.

The second strategy on which Napoleon relied in his use of plebiscites was that of the lack of a secret ballot. There was no way to vote on a plebiscite in private; unlike ticking a box and submitting it to an official, these plebiscites were registers in which individual voters would sign their name in the column pertaining to their vote.⁵⁸⁵ Such a system meant that, if you were to deviate from the clear intentions of Napoleon and vote no, your name would be known publicly to anyone who reviewed the register. For those brave enough to vote no the threat of persecution for such an action was real; having identified one's self as being against the wills of the regime, local authorities and secret police would record your deviation, and would supervise and harass such individuals.⁵⁸⁶ The threat of persecution and repression by the state and its policing apparatuses were thus a strong deterrence on any detractors, representing a serious downside to expressing opposition publicly, and incentivized individuals who did not support the plebiscite to remain in silent opposition. Such an effect suggests that, were the conditions of the non-secret ballot changed, and had there been greater discussion than the binary options had allowed for, the "no" votes on these plebiscites might have been much higher, and betrayed this image of homogeneity.⁵⁸⁷ Thus, as we can see in the results of the plebiscites, Napoleon manoeuvred and managed public opinion into a form that was useful for his purposes; this suggests that if the numbers of supporters for the regime are accurate, there is at least the likely possibility that there was a greater number of dissenters.

Finally, the strength of Napoleon's reputation should not be understated in his ability to command support. There are three reasons for the strength of Napoleon's reputation, the first of which being inorganic. Napoleon, with help from Fouché, the Minister of Police, was adept at state repression and censorship. While initially appearing to a certain degree as liberal in his temperament following the Coup of 18 Brumaire, on December 24, 1800, Napoleon narrowly survived an assassination attempt at the rue St. Nicaise; it is at this point that the machine of state repression was unleashed upon citizens of France perceived as enemies.⁵⁸⁸ Citizens who were perceived as being hostile to the state could face any number of punishments, ranging from arbitrary imprisonment for an indefinite period of time to deportation to a French colony.⁵⁸⁹ While repression would likely not be considered conducive to gaining support for his regime, Napoleon's support was instead bolstered by the lack of expression of opposition towards him. Such repression had this effect, and the opposition was forced into passive acceptance of the regime.⁵⁹⁰ This passive acceptance was further bolstered by the employment of censorship in literature. Much as how the non-secret ballot system utilised in the plebiscites obscured any level of opposition to the regime, the censorship of newspapers and journals continued to portray an image of homogenous support for Napoleon. Censorship was expressed in several ways. Editors were either selected by the state itself or forced to prove their allegiance to the regime, and all drafts had to be submitted to state censors; punishments for producing literature that was unenthusiastic towards Napoleon's regime ranged from fines to imprisonment.⁵⁹¹ Through such methods Napoleon managed to suppress opposition to maintain an image of homogenous support within French society.

⁵⁸⁵ Loewenstein, "Opposition and Public Opinion," 465; Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution*, 112.

⁵⁸⁶ Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution*, 112-113.

⁵⁸⁷ Loewenstein, "Opposition and Public Opinion," 465.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 467-468.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 468.

⁵⁹⁰ Loewenstein, "Opposition and Public Opinion," 468.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 470.

This is, however, not to suggest that there was no organic support for Napoleon. On the contrary, Napoleon's military successes were received positively, and he was perceived as an individual who could restore order in France. In particular, his successes in the second Italian campaign in 1800, as well as his signing of the Treaty of Campo Formio in 1797, were seen as validation for his ability to bring order and glory to France.⁵⁹² Such sentiments, which suggested that Napoleon had saved the Republic and staved off chaos, survived the recommencement of hostilities with England in 1803, and lasted for long enough to impact the success of the 1804 plebiscite at least.⁵⁹³ In conjunction with the aforementioned desire for order that arose from the inefficiencies of the Directory, the ascendancy of Napoleon from General to Consul likely had significant support from the French citizens, who saw Napoleon as a purveyor of order. Among the groups within France that supported Napoleon for this ability to bring order, the two most important were the military and the neo-monarchists. For example, General Soult, when asked how the army would respond to the establishment of an empire under Napoleon, is reported to have said that the army "desired and demanded that you be proclaimed Emperor of the Gauls."⁵⁹⁴ This was echoed by the neo-monarchists who, on Napoleon's return from the second Italian campaign, urged him to establish a hereditary position, which they saw as the best option to maintain order.⁵⁹⁵ Among these groups it should not be a surprise that a strongman representing law and order would be supported. But even among the commonfolk there was support for the order that Napoleon could bring, as evidenced by the thousands of letters he received expressing their support and patriotic zeal.⁵⁹⁶ Thus, it is clear that in large sections of the French citizenry, genuine support for Napoleon arose due to the reputation of his ability to restore order and glory for France.

Finally, there was one last crucial organic cleavage of support which Napoleon's reputation allowed him access to: the followers of Catholicism and Protestantism. After the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790, the relationship between church and state in France became more and more precarious, and was also greatly damaged by the dechristianization efforts undertaken by the Committee of Public Safety.⁵⁹⁷ While he was aware not to allow the church's power to subvert his own, Napoleon saw that the authority of the pope would further cement his leadership in France through appeasing the vast number of Christians.⁵⁹⁸ Napoleon secured a new Concordat with the Catholic church which restored some of its authority while ensuring that it was still limited enough so as to not pose a challenge to his own legitimacy. This balancing act is evident in the Organic Articles of the Concordat, which included provisions that increased Napoleon's control over the lower clergy and secured the recognition of a Protestant minority in France; the net effect was the excitement of the French people for a period of religious peace.⁵⁹⁹ It is plain to see why the reception of the Concordat was so positive: such religious tolerance by the state was alien to the enlightened Revolution, which had oscillated between separation of power and complete dechristianization, while also uplifting the Protestant minority to recognition. Thus, even though in the later years of Napoleon's Empire new problems would arise which challenged this relationship with the Catholic church, Napoleon secured another vital source of support for his regime.

Throughout this essay it has been argued that between 1799 and 1804 Napoleon expertly manoeuvred, manipulated and managed public opinion in order to maintain significant levels of support.

⁵⁹² Philip G. Dwyer, "Napoleon and the Foundation of the Empire," *The Historical Journal* 53, no.2 (2010): 342; Stephanie Jones and Jonathan Gosling, "Coup d'Etat: Brumaire and End of the Directory, 1799: The Precariousness of Hanging on to Seized Power," in *Napoleonic Leadership: A Study in Power* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015): 3.

⁵⁹³ Dwyer, "Napoleon and the Foundation of the Empire," 345-346.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁵⁹⁷ Lewis Rayapen and Gordon Anderson, "Napoleon and the Church," *International Social Science Review* 66, no.3 (1991): 118-119.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 121, 124.

⁵⁹⁹ Rayapen and Anderson, "Napoleon and the Church," 121-122.

The instability, inefficiency, and undemocratic shortcomings of the Directory created an atmosphere of unpopularity and apathy which presented a key opportunity for Napoleon and his co-conspirators to seize power with public opinion on their side. The plebiscites, while displaying a certain level of opposition, purposefully obscured the extent to which opposition existed to create an image of homogeneity, which, in conjunction with the threat of persecution, ensured that any opposition was silent and did not detract from his support. Finally, through his use of censorship, as well as his military and ecclesiastical successes, he maintained control of public opinion and established a significant base of support. As such, it is clear that Napoleon manoeuvred, manipulated, and maintained public opinion to a great extent, and that this was critical to his success in ascending from General to Consul to Emperor. From our modern perspective, as a new war of imperialism erupts in Europe, it is pertinent that an understanding of the role public opinion can play in the devolution from democracy to autocracy is ascertained. If we do not have a proper understanding, how can we ensure that democracy can survive the influence of the autocrats of the 21st Century?

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