



A Civil Body Politick: Governance, Community, and Accountability in Early New England

Gleb V. Aleksandrov*

International Center of Anthropology, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

In the early XVII century, when the New England colonies were established, the English Crown, preoccupied with domestic matters, interfered little with matters of colonial administration. The government system created by the colonists, was inspired to a certain degree by the religious ideas shared by many Puritan colonists but was shaped by political necessity and social conditions specific to the colonies. This created a system characterized by a much higher degree of accountability than in England, ensured by numerous checks on government power, both formal and informal. The same principles, initially applied to governance in individual settlements were later used for the colonies and the Confederation of New England, the first major inter-colonial political union. Early New England serves as an example of practical application of ideas in many ways similar to (and in many ways drastically different from) what we today call democracy as a foundation of ultimately successful government. By modern standards, the representative nature of the New England government was very limited, since it excluded women, Native Americans and other marginalized groups from the political process. It was also deeply rooted in a specific set of religious ideas. Nevertheless, the principles of elected representative government, present in some form in many Western polities, rarely served as a foundation of those political systems, still in most cases monarchies with limited government accountability. In New England these principles formed the core of the government system. This essay explores the formation of the early New England political system, its underlying ideas, both religious and secular, the way it faced some of the challenges encountered in the first decades of English settlement in the New World, and its eventual dissolution under external pressure.

Keywords: early New England, colonial society, Puritanism and political development, British Empire, social cohesion

INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the New England colonies (Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut, and New Haven) in the XVIIth century within the framework of the “good government” concept based on the collective action theory (Blanton et al., 2021). When referring to “good government” we draw primarily on the works of Blanton and Fargher, and earlier works on collective action theory (Levi, 1988; Cook et al., 2005; Blanton and Fargher, 2008). While the concept resists precise quantitative definitions, in broad terms “good government” is defined by its ability to “acknowledge and respond to citizen voice, <its> capacity to provide desired services to its citizenry, such as public goods, and

OPEN ACCESS

Edited by:

Gary M. Feinman,
Field Museum of Natural History,
United States

Reviewed by:

David Manuel Carballo,
Boston University, United States
William Farley,
Southern Connecticut State
University, United States

*Correspondence:

Gleb V. Aleksandrov
galeksandrov@gmail.com

Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Comparative Governance,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Political Science

Received: 29 October 2021

Accepted: 17 February 2022

Published: 14 March 2022

Citation:

Aleksandrov GV (2022) A Civil Body
Politick: Governance, Community, and
Accountability in Early New England.
Front. Polit. Sci. 4:804673.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2022.804673

its capacity to set limits on the ability of those in positions of authority to benefit privately from the state's resources" (Blanton et al., 2021). That does not necessarily mean that such a government must be based on electoral process or resemble contemporary Western polities—as Blanton and Fargher (2008) have shown, good government is a global and trans-historical process, not limited to societies of Western modernity. Numerous mechanisms of good government exist besides election, including various checks on the power of government officials, open recruitment to positions of authority, etc. Our goal is to examine the good government practices and institutions in New England and the conditions which shaped them.

The New England society during the period we focus on, from the founding of the Plymouth colony to the creation of the Dominion of New England, differed in many ways from other European colonial ventures of that era. The colonies were governed by elected magistrates. Formally subject to royal authority, New England settlements were essentially self-governing, and the colonists, not London officials or investors, determined the structure of political institutions. Preoccupied largely with internal matters for most of the century, English authorities had few resources to spare for colonial ventures in the New World, especially for relatively small and not particularly profitable settlements of religious dissidents in New England. As a result, for the better part of a century—1620 to mid-1680's—the colonial political system developed on its own with little outside interference. The resulting polity was in many ways more democratic than most of its Western contemporaries. Obviously, the ideas of civil rights as we know them today were completely alien to XVII century New Englanders, as were the concept of universal suffrage or most forms of religious tolerance. In this context democratic means only that the consent of the citizens—in this case, of the free adult men of the colony belonging to a Protestant religious community—was a necessary precondition for securing political power, and the public had numerous ways to limit the power of government officials and prevent potential abuses.

The New England government, like any political system, was shaped by numerous factors, and it would be impossible to describe it fully within one essay. We will focus on the ideological and social foundations which led to the emergence of accountability as a major element of early New England politics. Two factors distinguish New England from other English colonies—the influence of religion and a specific social structure. We will examine those key issues and attempt to trace their influence on the political structure of the colonies. We will also have to look at the way the early New England political system eventually dissolved.

This essay seeks to present not new information, but a new interpretation of social and political development of early colonial New England by introducing anthropological concepts and ideas to the study of an area which traditionally was mostly explored by historians. European colonies in the New World have relatively rarely attracted the attention of anthropologist studying social development. We believe applying the relevant theoretical approaches, such as the collective action theory,

to those cases may contribute to both further development of the theory, by presenting new and widely varied cases for further study, and to a better understanding of histories of specific societies, by situating them in a broad cross-cultural framework. The importance of a cross-cultural understanding of good government has been shown before (Blanton et al., 2021), and in this regard New England may provide a useful example of, among other considerations, the reasons for eventual decline of a good government.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

English expansion in mainland North America started in 1607 with the founding of Jamestown. Jamestown was first and foremost a commercial operation. While matters of international prestige and potential opposition to Spanish expansion did play a part in securing royal support for the settlement, as did the ideas of spreading Christianity and civilization propagated by colonial ideologues (e.g., Purchas, 1614; White, 1930; Winslow, 2014), the primary goal of the Virginia settlement was profit. The population consisted mainly of young, poor, unskilled male laborers, most willingly entering indentured servitude to improve their economic situation (Anderson, 1991, p. 14–41; Taylor, 2001, p. 117–138, 169, 172).

Unlike Virginia and the Caribbean settlements, New England colonies were not commercial ventures. The investors in England expected the colonies to bring some revenue, but for the colonists the primary goal was to establish a godly society far from the degradation and vices of Europe (Anderson, 1991, p. 100–128). Plymouth settlers moved to the New World collectively, as an established congregation. Those who came to New England later were also driven largely by religious sentiment, and often had familial or social ties to those already in New England. Obviously, not all the immigrants from England belonged to those core socio-religious groups, even the Mayflower had several “independent” settlers, but the congregations formed the core of the New England society, and a person's chance to establish themselves in the colonies often depended on their ability to establish themselves as members of a church. Religion was a powerful source of social cohesion (Demos, 2000; Taylor, 2001, p. 117–143, 166–167).

Colonists primarily interested in setting up a godly society saw their settlement as a permanent one. They brought over their families, sometimes several generations. This created a much more balanced social structure in terms of gender and age distribution. New England settlements resembled English towns, with relatively equal numbers of men and women, with children of all ages and the elderly prominently represented (Anderson, 1991).

New England colonists were relatively affluent. Most were artisans, many had some real estate in England and planned to support themselves in the colonies by renting it out. The modern concept of middle class is not directly applicable to XVII century society, for simplicity's sake it can be said that most New England colonists were middle-class. Some were less well-off than the others, of course, but poverty was not nearly as widespread as it

was in England, nor was it as pronounced (Anderson, 1991; Levy, 2009).

On the other hand, New Englanders were not exactly rich. Even the wealthiest colonists would be considered well-off, but not exceptionally wealthy in England. This was partly a consequence of the dominant ideology, which stressed the importance of community and saw an overabundance of individual wealth as suspect. What New England colonists strived for was “competency”—the ability to provide a decent living to oneself and one’s family and to contribute to the community, but no more than that. Accumulating more wealth than competency required was seen as suspect at best and downright immoral at worst. Most colonists intentionally chose farm work or crafts, seen as honest labor, instead of potentially more profitable ventures, specifically because they did not want to jeopardize their moral and religious wellbeing in favor of material gains (White, 1930, p. 1630; Vickers, 1990; Anderson, 1991, p. 125; Taylor, 2001, p. 172).

In terms of social status, New England was also less stratified than other colonies. Most of the colonists were free men and women, some were minor gentry, but none were aristocrats, members of the highest strata of English society.

Colonial leaders often had some connections among the elites in England, yet their position in the colonies was not necessarily contingent on those connections. Officials were elected by the colonists, and it mattered little how well-connected they were. Their ability to retain power depended not on the generosity of London benefactors, but on the support they could muster among the colonists. Sure, those with friends in high places were useful—they may be sent to England to speak on behalf of the colonies, and they were protected to a degree, on several occasions the transgressions of such individuals were punished by exile instead of harsher measures specifically to avoid the wrath of their patrons (e.g., Dillon, 1975, p. 191–193; *Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay*, 1979, p. 363). But the impact of connections with elites on their standing in the colonial society itself was limited.

Land ownership, still one of the main sources of social status in England, was far less important in New England. Land was one resource the colonists had in abundance. Even though most of the land in New England was occupied by Native Americans, and the colonial leadership had to use some ideological maneuvering to justify appropriating it, a solution was eventually found, and expansion began in earnest (Aleksandrov, 2019). The amount of available land compared to the number of settlers allowed colonists to allot it quite generously. Even the least wealthy colonists owned relatively large (by English standards) plots, and the publicly owned town commons were abundant and accessible to all (Levy, 2009, p. 91).

A New England town was seemingly much like an English one. The differences, though perhaps not obvious at first glance, were crucial. The New England society was the English society devoid of its extremes. Both the upper and lower outliers of the economic and social structure were absent. This lack of social extremes created a remarkably cohesive society. Similar religious views of most colonists also cemented social unity.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUCTURE AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

The title “governor” was used in New England, much like in other colonies, but the position was quite different. The difference was not in the function, governors handled similar problems, but in the fact that governors, as well as local magistrates, were elected, not appointed.

The idea of electing public officials was familiar to the English. Aside from members of the parliament, on the local level some parish officials were elected (Levy, 2009, p. 21). This local political participation became especially important after the introduction of the 1601 Act for the Relief of the Poor (“The Old Poor Law”) (Lees, 1998, p. 19–39).

However, in England local nobility exerted considerable influence on local politics. The requirements for most public offices, even those occupied by commoners, meant that they were reserved to a relatively small group of most prosperous local farmers or artisans. These people were connected to local gentry and nobility by economic, personal, and occasionally even familial ties. The local political system in England was mostly controlled by the local landed elites. In most cases, one had to belong to a group of supporters and clients of the landowner to have any chance of occupying a political office (Dunkley, 1973, p. 838–839; Levy, 2009, p. 91). Decisions made by such officials were largely determined by their patrons. The political influence of nobility did wane in the XVII century with the rise of the new economic elites, but in rural areas the power of landholders still held strong.

In New England many of the key determinants of this system were absent, and new ones emerged. In the early XVII century, the political influence of nobility and gentry was still very much seen as natural and was rarely questioned. In the colonies those were barely, if at all, present—a few colonial leaders did come from minor gentry families, but the majority did not, and even for those gentlemen it’s questionable whether their origins played any part in securing their authority and influence. John Winthrop, for example, was a wealthy gentleman, but the source of his personal authority and public trust was his legal acumen and reputation as a religious thinker. In any case, most colonial governors and magistrates were commoners.

This highlights the difference between New England and Virginia. A full comparative study of these two colonial governments is beyond the scope of this essay, it seems necessary to note that, like New England, Virginia did establish a representative local government. However, there were several major differences between the two government systems. Firstly, the Virginia Assembly was established by the Virginia Company, a commercial association that originally funded the establishment of the colony. Consequently, any legislation proposed and passed by the Assembly was subject to approval of the Company officials. In New England the representative governing body was a natural extension of the colonists’ ideas about a godly society, in Virginia it was set up as an instrument of relieving the growing social tension by outside authorities. In time the role of the Company diminished, but during formative stages, the Assembly was an

extension of the Company's authority more than a tool of political representation for the colonists (Horn, 2005, p. 240; Roper, 2009, p. 79–80). The second important difference concerns the recruitment of officials to the positions of authority. While nominally any free Virginian was eligible to be elected, a ruling elite emerged early on, consisting of largest landowners with close political ties to London, and the access to political offices for most colonists was limited at best (Taylor, 2001, p. 139–140, 144; Billings, 2004, p. 105; Roper, 2009, p. 10).

Jamestown was settled by the poor—much like the early colonial propagandists suggested it should be. Advocates of colonization often specified that the main benefit of settling the New World would be getting rid of the rapidly growing masses of paupers crowding English cities. The leadership, on the other hand, was often in the hands of the very rich. Many colonial investors were, of course, aristocrats and rich merchants. Governors and officials initially were often military men, with direct ties to the members of the upper social strata in England (Taylor, 2001, p. 131). When later local elites developed, their status was based on owning large amounts of land and political ties to London, and their behavior was mostly modeled on English landed elite. Leadership was conditional to the support of English magnates and the profitability of the colony, and the larger population had little say in the matters of leadership (Steele, 1989; Cave, 2011). Thirdly, the governors were appointed from London and not elected.

As we have mentioned, good government, in the sense we are using the term, does not necessarily require elections. Similarly, the presence of a representative body in itself does not imply good government. In the case of Virginia, the growing influence of landed elites and their disproportionate influence over the political process limited the development of good government practices to a certain extent (Roper, 2009, p. 11). In line with the collective action approach, it may be said that Virginia, which relied heavily on production of export goods, was tied to an external source of revenue, also precluding development of good government. However, further study is required to make any definitive conclusions, and the present work is concerned with the specifics of New England.

The absence of aristocracy in New England was not coincidental. The situation with lord Brooke and lord Saye and Sele and their planned move to New England illustrates this perfectly. Both were immensely wealthy aristocrats, members of the highest orders of both political and economic elite in England. Both were also ardent Puritans, and in the mid-1630s have seriously considered moving to New England—which would undoubtedly bring considerable benefits to the colonies. But they had conditions. Specifically, the political structure which was by this point well-established was an issue. The magnates had reservations about the magistrates being elected, about the influence of the church, and most importantly about power falling into the wrong hands. If they were to grace the colonies with their presence and the accompanying wealth, the power had to belong to “gentlemen of the country.” Their position had to be hereditary, of course. The franchise was to be restricted, and the only criteria for voting was, unsurprisingly, land ownership—ensuring that only the owners of the largest domains would have

any say in political matters (Foster, 1971, p. 38; Kupperman, 1989, p. 20–26).

Despite the potential benefits of attracting puritan magnates, the New England colonists adamantly refused to conform to these conditions. John Cotton, one of the most prominent ministers was tasked with composing a response an official response, and also added a more personal letter—which, though incredibly polite, reaffirmed the colonists' commitment to their chosen political order. Cotton's response also advocated theocracy as the most godly form of government, but his understanding of theocracy was rather specific, and he still insisted that “the magistrates are neither chosen to office in the church, nor do govern by directions from the church but by civil laws and those enacted in general courts <...> by the governors and assistants” (Cotton, 1636).

Entrenched wealth was as absent in New England as traditional political elites. Although some colonists were wealthier than others, the wealth distribution was far more equitable in general. The property left in England did generate benefit and provide for some material comforts for the wealthiest but did not translate directly into a significantly higher standard of living. In terms of such basic indicators of higher economic status as housing, wealthier colonists were not that different from their less well-off neighbors—land was easily available, but materials and other resources necessary for construction were limited for everyone. The inherited wealth and property were largely left behind even by those few who had them in the first place.

The situation did of course change as the colonies grew, and a new economic elite, primarily mercantile, emerged by the mid-to-late XVII century. But even these new elites were never as separated from the rest of the population as they were in England. Even if the colonists managed to make a fortune, they were still bound by the same social restraints as their peers. Specifically, the idea of competency as a goal of a godly person in economic terms prevented the more egregious demonstration of individual success. If one showed off their economic success visibly, they would have likely faced the accusations from the community of being self-involved, avaricious and of putting material wealth before God. The dominant ideology actively discouraged excessive accumulation of wealth, ensuring the stability of a more or less equitable congregation would persist even in the growing colonial society not limited to a single religious community (Vickers, 1990). Not only was entrenched wealth largely absent, efforts were made to prevent it from accumulating. Until at the very least the late XVII century, material wealth did not translate into political influence as directly or as efficiently as it did in England. A rich merchant did have considerable resources at his disposal, but, unlike a rich gentleman back in England, was not perceived as inherently more worthy of a political office than a simple farmer or artisan, thus severely limiting his ability to buy his way into a political office. As a result, many if not most magistrates, even governors, were not necessarily rich, and most rich merchants preferred to stay out of politics.

Differences in land ownership contributed significantly to a more equitable distribution of social and political power. In

England, owning a sizable plot of land was a source of both wealth and status. In New England farms of the size that would make most Englishmen envious were available to most colonists for a fraction of the price. Consequently, the status of a landholder could not be exploited for political gain as easily. Unlike the Chesapeake colonies, where larger plots of land were directly allocated by the government, usually to the wealthy and well-connected individuals, in New England land was allocated by town magistrates or town assemblies, which prevented excessive concentration of land (Taylor, 2001, p. 170).

However, another resource was far more scarce and far more important than it was in England, and that was labor. One drawback of the balanced social and economic structure of New England was relative lack of people capable of performing physically demanding labor. Many colonists were well-established, “middle-class” artisans—that is, middle-aged men and women used to labor that required skill and precision, but not necessarily physical strength. And they were often accompanied by families, by the very young and the very old. Farm work, especially clearing out new farmland, required a lot of hard work. As a result, labor was in extremely high demand in New England (Levy, 2009).

A simple solution would be to import indentured servants, like Virginians did. But the New England Puritans were wary of mass influx of poor young men in the colonies, worried it might disrupt their society and lead to all sorts of “mischief.” More importantly, those laborers imported from England would likely be Anglican, or, even worse, Catholic. Employing them would endanger the spiritual wellbeing of the colonists, which the Puritans were drastically opposed to. There were indentured servants in New England, especially in larger towns, but comparatively few and their social life was strictly regulated. Another possibility was using Native American labor resources, acquired by force or coercion—Native American slavery became the foundation of forced labor system in New England, but the numbers of either captives or Native Americans willing to work for the colonists were limited (Newell, 2015).

As a result, the labor of young free colonists became incredibly valuable, resulting in appropriately high wages, much higher than in any other region populated by the English. Laborers, therefore, acquired unusual amount of economic power and influence over the colonial economy. This, in turn, led to a growing political influence of the workers. On the one hand, the magistrates realized the potential for social disruption inherent in laborers’ participation in politics and attempted to control it. Young people, not just indentured servants, but free, local-born men, were often assigned jobs by the magistrates. Enforced apprenticeships for children became a routine and widespread practice. At least until the moment they inherited the land owned by the parents, the young people’s labor was generally in the hands of the town. As Levy notes, children and young servants formed a significant part of the labor force in New England and expanding the rights of the town to control it was vital for the colonies’ survival.

Although the distribution of labor resources was under magistrates’ control, the political participation was not. Laborers en-masse played a significant role in shaping local politics.

Decisions about limiting outside access to town job market were made under clear influence of masses of workers. Given their importance for the colonies’ economy, their political voice, expressed through voting or through public opinion, could not be ignored. If the policies of the magistrates went contrary to the worker’s wishes, they had numerous ways to counteract. The elections were, of course, the primary one. In England the magistrates could always rely on the support of local elites and their clients, in New England this support structure did not exist. Magistrates realized perfectly well that their ability to deal with public discontent was severely limited. There was no higher authority to call upon for support. The only power the magistrates could have potentially used against the masses was the militia—itsself composed of those same workers. This resulted in a political system far more equitable than in England, with much larger segments of the population exerting considerable political influence. A less stratified society led to a less stratified distribution of political power. The magistrates’ positions and titles were similar to English ones, the public had significantly more control over the government.

In terms of economic structure in general, early New England was far more reliant on “internal revenue” (Blanton and Fargher, 2008, p. 112). Production was mostly carried out by individual farmers, and though some of their plots of land were large by English standards, they were not even close in terms of size, number of workers of overall productivity to large plantations in other colonies. No staple cash crop was produced. In the early decades, the revenue generated in these colonies was almost exclusively internal. Later New England did develop certain profitable “external” sources of revenue. Commerce was important and became the foundation of local elites in the second half of the century, introducing a significant external element to the revenue structure. Two other industries, connected to commerce, were more localized—whaling and fishing, sources of important export good, were conducted all over the Atlantic, but many ships and their crews were based in New England itself. Shipbuilding, while providing resources for long-range trade, was also a local industry—an industry which grew immensely by the end of the century and was of crucial importance not just to New England, but to the British Empire as a whole (Taylor, 2001, p. 169, 174; Levy, 2009). The colonies did also draw on resources back in England, by attracting new settlers and investors. So overall structure of revenue could perhaps be best described as mixed. In terms of collective action theory, that may be a contributing factor in fostering the development of good government (Blanton and Fargher, 2008, p. 254). A mixed revenue structure does not guarantee, of course, good government, its emergence is influenced—positively or negatively—by other factors. In the case of New England, the key factor was religion.

RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS

In popular history, the first New England colonists are usually called Puritans. We will refer to them as such for simplicity’s sake, but it’s important to note that early New Englanders

belonged to several denominations and did not necessarily agree completely on dogmatic matters or even church structure (Pestana, 1991; Knight, 1994). They were, however, all non-conformists—that is, they refused to conform to the practices and doctrines of the Church of England, and they were all Calvinists, though interpreting Calvin’s teachings in slightly different ways. The differences between denominations and even specific congregations are a fascinating subject, but this essay is concerned with issues common throughout New England, so for our purposes “Puritans” seems a sufficient designation. Politically, the structure of New England colonies was remarkably similar.

The influence of religion on New England was profound. It was so significant, that some scholars chose to proclaim New England a theocracy, though others have argued convincingly against such suggestions (Fiske, 1899; Zakai, 1986; Foster, 1991; Levy, 2009; Johnson, 2015). To call New England a theocracy would be not necessarily an overstatement, but an oversimplification. The relationship between religious and secular authorities was more complex than simple subordination. Perhaps more accurately it can be described in terms of a limiting influence, of checks and balances. Religious authorities did not necessarily control the secular ones, but certainly influenced their response to emergent challenges of colonial life. The church served as a moral authority, ensuring that politics did not get in the way of the peoples’ desire for a godly life—which was for many New Englanders, the main reason for the colonies’ existence.

The first settlers in New Plymouth were already an established congregation, already united into a single spiritual body. The political system existed to deal with purely secular matters the community was facing, for the congregation to deal with the outside world. The political authority was to be an extension of the congregation itself, not something imposed upon it by the society outside of the religious community. It would be a secular arm of the same collective spiritual body, serving its interest and subordinate to it.

Of course, such institutions would not only originate from within the congregation, but their nature would also be by necessity determined by spiritual beliefs. Particularly, the idea of a covenant was extremely important. Personal relationship with God was based on a personal covenant. The church itself was a result of a covenant between believers, and between believers and God (Rohr, 1965; Stoeber, 1978; Zaret, 1985). Logically, the new collective political body of the congregation would be based on the same idea—a covenant between members of the church to ensure the worldly affairs are taken care of.

This earliest set of political institutions, established by the Mayflower Compact, was indeed theocratic—not in form, but in principle. “Civil body politick” was a necessary extension of the spiritual “body politick.” However, the political and religious spheres were clearly separated. Many matters did not concern religious authorities at all. Taxation, trade regulation, mutual defense, international relations, even marriage were all important, but strictly secular issues. The individual officials, governors and assistants could seek guidance and advice from ministers, like any member of the church, but no minister had

authority over them. If some issues belonged, by the terms of the covenant, to the sphere of political authority, attempting to control them would be as much a violation of said covenant as secular authorities attempting to interfere with the contents of a sermon or with accepting new members into the congregation (Cotton, 1636).

The scope of the newly established political authority expanded relatively quickly. The colonies were growing. Newcomers did of course belong to similar religious bodies, but in secular matters they were independent, so the political authorities were no longer representing just one congregation, but several—still handling the same secular matters for all of them, and necessarily employing representatives from different churches. Despite being based on the theological concept of a covenant, political power was separated from the church.

That doesn’t mean, of course, that the church and its representatives had no influence on politics. At the very least, government officials were still expected to consult the ministers to determine the godly course of action in difficult situations. And consult they did, on numerous occasions. Before starting the war with the Pequot in 1636, for example, and later during most major conflicts with either Native Americans or the French colonies, generally during any sort of crisis. Governors would consult their own ministers, or sometimes assemble notable preachers from several churches to examine specific issues. Their opinion held great weight and their advice was generally followed. Though informal, these church-state interactions often determined the political decisions made by the officials (Winthrop, 1908, p. 186; Cave, 1996, p. 109; Turner, 2020, p. 150, 308–309, 201).

One area where Puritan ministers were unquestionably an authority was the legal system. The influence of the English legal tradition was unquestionable, but the laws had to conform to Biblical principles, and in many cases were based on the Old Testament (including, for example, the legal foundations of slavery, justified by Biblical quotations) (Colonial Laws, 1889, p. 52; Wiecek, 1977). Naturally, the ministers often had to evaluate the legislation from a Biblical perspective. However, once the law was considered sufficiently “godly,” it was passed by the general court which was not subordinate to the church, and was carried out by civil authorities, even if it concerned religious matters [like witchcraft cases, as in the infamous case of Salem (Norton, 2002)].

The relations between the church and the public in general in New England were also different from the English model. New England congregations chose their own ministers, which changed the power dynamics. In England, the Church was an extension of the state, an instrument of controlling the population. In catholic countries the Church was not subject to state power, but was a separate political actor, largely independent from the public as well. In New England, religious authorities were chosen by the public. While ministers could find themselves in conflict with their parishioners on some issues, such situations rarely lasted long—a minister the congregation was unhappy with was dismissed and replaced with another, more agreeable one. A minister’s livelihood depended on the support of their congregation. Ministers were rarely able to dedicate enough time

to provide for themselves and were dependent on the salary the congregation paid them and on donations (Holifield, 1993; Demos, 2000, p. 8; Norton, 2002, p. 16–18, 124). Consequently, in dealing with secular authorities the ministers were likely to act as a conduit for public opinion. The church organization, the religious authority, was as much an extension of the congregation as the elected officials.

The congregation also played an important role in the emergence of a new social hierarchy. In terms familiar to the English the social status of most colonists in New England was relatively similar. But relatively quickly new sources of high social status began to emerge. The status of a full member of the church was very important and provided significant social benefits. Most people were not members of the church. Unlike the Catholic Church, in Puritan churches the status was not easy to obtain. There was a profound difference between a parishioner, someone who attended the services regularly, and a full member of the congregation, one of the elect. To become a member of the church one had to not only attend the services regularly, but also to publicly show their commitment. To do so one had to describe, in full detail, their own spiritual conversion, the moment they personally accepted the Lord as a guiding force in their life. This extended public confession was then judged by the congregation. Success was not guaranteed, and some prospective “saints” were denied the coveted membership, sometimes repeatedly. Since the final decision was made by the congregation, membership was a mark of recognition not just of spiritual accomplishment, but of acceptance by the community. Confirmation was inevitably a social act, and, though it is only speculation on our part, it’s hard to avoid the idea that in many cases denying membership was as much a result of rejection by community as of strictly spiritual shortcomings (though it would be unwise to see the whole process as a purely social one, most New Englanders were fanatically religious even by the standards of their time, and took spiritual responsibility very seriously—undoubtedly in many cases they denied prospective members because they honestly believed they have not yet experienced a true spiritual conversion) (on the community ritual aspect of conversion see Holifield, 1993). Once granted, membership status gave no material benefits, but endowed one with a moral, spiritual, and even political authority recognized by the society in general—they could become selectmen (though some lower local offices were accessible to non-members), their word would carry all the more weight in court, in political debates or in any social situation.

Religion had a profound influence on political institutions of New England. Starting with the fact that they were based on the same ideological foundation as religious authority, on the idea of a covenant. Political structure was, at least initially, an extension of a congregation, a religious and spiritual unity. Despite that, the separation between religious and secular authorities was established early on. Religious authorities did not control any secular matters directly but served as one of the mechanisms of public control over politics, politicians and officials. Both the ministers, who influenced and consulted officials, and the officials themselves, were responsible to the congregation. The very idea of the covenant, an agreement as a foundation of

authority, implied accountability. Rather than dominating the political sphere, religion became one of the key checks on political power and instruments of public control. At the same time, the idea of competency, founded on Puritan theology as well, served as perhaps the most important ideological leveling mechanism, limiting the potential for self-aggrandizement. The perspective of church censure and even exclusion further cemented the effectiveness of the church as a mechanism of preserving social cohesion. An important part of New England social and institutional structure were such leveling mechanisms that prevented aggrandizement by the emerging elites, primarily through a specific religious mindset and the influence of the church community, or rather, community through church.

NEW ENGLAND CONFEDERATION

Perhaps the most notable political development of the XVII century in New England before the creation of the Dominion was the emergence of the New England Confederation. The colonies first decided to act together at the outset of the Pequot War in 1636. The refined version of their agreement, signed in 1643, formalized the structure of the union (Public Records, 1850, p. 9–10; Bradford, 1856, p. 416–423). The council of the United Colonies of New England became a representative body with ill-defined, but broad powers.

Supposedly a representative body where each colony would have an equal voice, the Confederation quickly became a political tool of the Massachusetts leadership, which used it quite effectively to promote its commercial interests pressure the other colonies politically—including, for example, forcing them to provide militia units for demonstrations of power to the natives and even participating in conflicts in which individual colonies had no interest at all (Drake, 1999, p. 166).

No other region of British colonization had similar institution. If any form of colonial “Parliament” was established, it was on the authority of a European government, and limited to a single colony. The reasons for inter-colonial political entity emerging in New England are relatively obvious—the aforementioned lack of attention from England, the non-existence of colonial administration as such, and the Puritan view of the colonies as a godly alternative to the irreversibly “spoiled” English society.

Much like the authority of local magistrates, the authority of the Confederation was limited in many ways. Specifically, it had little ability to interfere with internal affairs of individual colonies, much less individual settlements. Its power, like the power of the local magistrates was held in check by mostly the same mechanisms. Representatives were elected, not appointed, and should their conduct not satisfy the people, they were subject to recall. The same informal checks that limited local authorities applied to inter-colonial ones as well.

However, the matters the Confederation authorities made decisions on were far removed from local concerns, and consequently drew less attention from the public in general. Aside from major decisions, such as declarations of war, most of the day-to-day business was of little concern to an average colonist, especially because their own way of life was not really

in any danger in any case – the local affairs being left to individual colonies.

This created a political space less subordinate to the public control than local authority in New England. The growing influence of Massachusetts in the Confederation illustrates this quite well. On the local level, if a wealthy individual tried to enforce their own will on the others through abusing the powers of a magistrate, they would face considerable backlash and probably won't stay in power for long. On the inter-colonial level, preventing such abuses was considerably more difficult since many informal leveling mechanisms existed primarily on the level of individual towns. The decisions Massachusetts carried out were motivated primarily by economic concerns, they involved using political power to secure economic advantages and financial gain for a limited number of wealthy individuals, the highest strata of Massachusetts merchants. This was the one area where power dynamics more familiar to Europeans at the time played out—the wealthy and powerful using political power to improve their position even further, with little regard to the public interests.

DISSOLUTION OF NEW ENGLAND POLITICAL SYSTEM

The political and social order established in New England survived several major internal crises, including two wars with Native Americans, one of which, King Philip's War, was staggeringly devastating by colonial standards, as well as constant political threats from New York government, several religious controversies, and a number of political crises (Cave, 1996; Drake, 1999). What it did not survive was the attention of the Crown. After the Restoration, the emergent New England way of governing caused concern in London. Eventually, using numerous complaints from Edmund Andros, the governor of New York, as a formal reason, the Crown decided to interfere (Drake, 1999). Dominion of New England was established, a royal governor was appointed, as well as an Anglican bishop, the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter was revoked.

Even though the Dominion proved to be short-lived, the New England political order never recovered. From 1689 onward, the governors and lieutenant governors were appointed by the Crown, not elected. Even though some of the institutions established in the XVII century survived, the political power was no longer dependent on the public. While the governors had to take public opinion into account to an extent, they were accountable not to the people, but to higher authorities in London. At the local level they wielded considerable power, and the magistrates often relied on their connection to the governor or even to London directly to secure their position. Workers managed to retain significant, by British standards, political influence and town meetings were still a major force in local politics (Labaree, 1979). The church retained some of its influence. But the power dynamics in general became much closer to the European norm.

It would be too simple, though, to describe the collapse of the New England political order as just a result of an

outside intervention. The relatively equitable politics of New England depended primarily on one crucial factor—social cohesion, a relative equality of status supported by a communal ideology. Over time, this cohesion became harder and harder to maintain. The first casualty was probably the economic balance. New mercantile elites emerged, and, though they still avoided ostensible demonstrations of wealth and luxury, their economic power by the late XVII century has grown considerably. The new elites were not above using political means to secure economic advantages. On the level of individual colonies this behavior was curtailed by the accountability of political power to the larger population. But as soon as the highest power in the colony was no longer bound by public approval, the elites began to integrate themselves into political power structures and use politics to their advantage. This accelerated the accumulation of wealth and made status differences, both economic and social, more profound and evident.

Similarly, religion as a source of social cohesion was not nearly as effective as it once was. As the colonies grew, the religious uniformity inevitably decreased. The original Puritan communities were soon joined by the Baptists, the Quakers (initially persecuted, but eventually accepted) (Pestana, 1991), followed by the Anglicans, the Presbyterians the members of numerous minor protestant denominations, and later even the Catholics. The ideological basis of the system and one of the major vehicles for government accountability was quickly dissolving.

The creation of the Dominion was a decisive blow for the New England political order. But the forces that disrupted the initially cohesive society were already present within it. There was no effective mechanism, aside from ideology, of controlling the accumulation of wealth by the elites or their ability to employ it to achieve political power. The system of accountability, of formal and informal checks on political power, was established, but it was not nearly as efficient in controlling economic power. Social cohesion led to the emergence of a relatively equitable political system based on accountability. But this system could only exist in a cohesive society. As soon as drastic status differences emerged and the ideological foundations of cohesion no longer bound large portions of the population, the system was no longer tenable.

CONCLUSIONS

The government system in early New England exhibited significantly more accountability than most of its Western contemporaries. This accountability emerged in the newly established colonies due to the influence of both a communal ideology and social conditions. The idea of a covenant served as a model for establishing both a religious congregation and a colonial government, which was viewed, at least early on, as a secular arm of the congregation. Puritan religious institutions played a significant, though not always formalized, role in the political process. Aside from their direct involvement in the development of colonial legislation, puritan ministers consulted the magistrates and governors on many issues, serving also as an

intermediary between the public and the magistrates. Communal ideology based on puritan religion, shared by the majority of the population, prevented excessive accumulation of wealth and slowed down the emergence of economic elites, strengthening social cohesion.

The social and economic structure of the colonies was remarkably balanced. This relative similarity of status and the absence of traditional elites capable of usurping political power, contributed to the creation of an accountable government and secured a significant role of the public in general in politics, further strengthened by high demand for labor, which led to growing wages, growing economic power of workers and, consequently, their growing political influence.

Social cohesion was a necessary condition for the continued existence of a political system which can be considered an example of “good government.” As the colonies grew, the influence of ideology based around a congregation as a social unit waned. The communal ideal of competency as the ultimate economic end goal of an individual lost its importance. New elites, not hindered by the dominating social position of aristocracy or by a communal ideology quickly amassed wealth and status, using them to secure political benefits. The interference of royal authority, the creation of the Dominion, dissolved the New England political order. Some elements of the more equitable power distribution remained, but the new social environment never allowed it to recover after the dissolution of the Dominion.

These developments are consistent with the cross-cultural analysis within the framework of the collective action theory. One aspect that seems to have played a key role in the New England case is social capital. Social capital “gets at the importance of institutions that facilitate cooperation between households <> sharing of labor and dispute resolution” and implies “well-developed practices for local governance and recruitment of officials, common property management and communal ritual cycles that would promote community social cohesion” (Blanton and Fargher, 2008, p. 283). All these key elements were evidently present in New England, from a well-developed local elective governance to an institution focused on maintaining community cohesion, the congregation. Social

cohesion, a necessary foundation of good government in this case, was maintained primarily through religion. The idea of competency and the notion of a religious community were as important, if not more important, than a specific internal source of revenue.

The political developments in early New England were obviously important for the history of the region, and a case may be made for their significant influence on the US. However, the study of these early colonial developments reveals, in our opinion, several key point that may apply to other societies and may inform our understanding of good governance and government accountability in a wider context. The connection between social cohesion, lack of drastic differences in economic status, and government accountability can be seen as a cross-cultural phenomenon, highlighting certain deficiencies in the development of democratic institutions in a contemporary context. Of course, in New England the ideology was inextricably tied to a relatively specific set of religious beliefs, thus limiting its impact on a wider and more diverse society, but this does not diminish the overall importance of an ideology focusing on preventing potential abuses of status and power for the development of an accountable government. Likewise, the concept of social contract as a foundation of the government system, evident in early New England, can be seen as one of the cornerstones of an accountable government system at least in early modernity. The principle was used in New England well-before the idea was articulated by the Enlightenment thinkers and was one of the primary drivers for the emergence and maintenance of good governance.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

FUNDING

This article is an output of a research project implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE).

REFERENCES

- Aleksandrov, G. (2019). Native relations in early British North America and the emergence of imperial ideas. *Soc. Evol. History* 18, 27–46. doi: 10.30884/seh/2019.01.02
- Anderson, V. D. J. (1991). *New England's Generation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511811920
- Billings, W. (2004). *A Little Parliament: The Virginia Assembly in the Seventeenth Century*. Richmond: Library of Virginia.
- Blanton, R., and Fargher, L. (2008). *Collective Action in the Formation of Premodern States*. New York, NY: Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-0-387-73877-2
- Blanton, R., Fargher, L., Feinman, G., and Kowalewski, S. (2021). The fiscal economy of good government. *Curr. Antropology*. 62, 1. doi: 10.1086/713286
- Bradford, W. (1856). *History of Plymouth Plantation*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society.
- Cave, A. A. (1996). *The Pequot War*. Amherst: Univesity of Massachusetts Press.
- Cave, A. A. (2011). *Lethal Encounters: Englishmen and Indians in Colonial Virginia*. Oxford: Praeger.
- Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachussets Bay (1979). *Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachussets Bay*. Baltimore: Corner House.
- Colonial Laws (1889). *The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*. Boston, MA.
- Cook, K., Hardin, R., and Levi, M. (2005). *Cooperation Without Trust?* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Cotton, J. (1636). “Letter to william fiennes, lord saye and sele,” in *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, ed S. Bush (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press).
- Demos, J. (2000). *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dillon, F. (1975). *The Pilgrims*. New York, NY: Doubleday and Company.
- Drake, J. D. (1999). *King Philip's War: Civil War in New England, 1675–1676*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

- Dunkley, P. (1973). The landed interest and the New Poor Law: a critical note. *Engl. Histo. Rev.* LXXXVIII, 836–841. doi: 10.1093/ehr/LXXXVIII.CCCXLIX.836
- Fiske, J. (1899). *The Beginnings of New England: Or, The Puritan Theocracy in Its Relations to Civil and Religious Liberty*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Foster, S. (1971). *Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Foster, S. (1991). *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Holifield, E. B. (1993). Peace, conflict, and ritual in puritan congregations. *J. Interdisc. History* 23, 551–570. doi: 10.2307/206102
- Horn, J. (2005). *A Land As God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Johnson, A. E. (2015). *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*. Pittsburgh, PA: Philosophia Publications.
- Knight, J. (1994). *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kupperman, K. O. (1989). Definitions of liberty on the eve of the civil war: lord saye and sele, lord brooke and the american puritan colonies. *Histo. J.* 1989, 20–26. doi: 10.1017/S0018246X00015284
- Labaree, B. (1979). *Colonial Massachusetts: A History*. Millwood, NY: KTO Press.
- Lees, L. H. (1998). *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948*. Cambridge, CA: Cambridge University Press.
- Levi, M. (1988). *Of Rule and Revenue*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Levy, B. (2009). *Town Born: The Political Economy of New England From Its Founding to the Revolution*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. doi: 10.9783/9780812202618
- Newell, M. (2015). *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists and the Origins of American Slavery*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. doi: 10.7591/cornell/9780801434150.001.0001
- Norton, M. B. (2002). *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Pestana, C. G. (1991). *Quakers and Baptists in Colonial Massachusetts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511528675
- Public Records, (1850). *Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*. Hartford, CT: Brown & Parsons.
- Purchas, S. (1614). *Purchas, His Pilgrimage; or, Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in All Ages*. Reprinted by W. Stansby for H. Fetherstone.
- Rohr, J. (1965). Covenant and assurance in early english puritanism. *Church Hist.* 34, 195–203. doi: 10.2307/3162903
- Roper, L. (2009). *The English Empire in America, 1602–1658: Beyond Jamestown*. London: Pickering & Chatto.
- Steele, I. (1989). Governors or generals?: A note on martial law and the revolution of 1689 in English America. *William Mary Quart.* 46, 304–314. doi: 10.2307/1920256
- Stoeber, W. K. B. (1978). “A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven”: *Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Taylor, A. (2001). *American Colonies*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Turner, J. G. (2020). *They Knew They Were Pilgrims: Plymouth Colony and the Contest for American Liberty*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Vickers, D. (1990). Competency and competition: economic culture in early America. *William Mary Quart. Ser. 3*, 3–29. doi: 10.2307/2938039
- White, J. (1930). *The Planter's Plea, 1630*. Rockport, MA: The Sandy Bay Historical Society and Museum.
- Wiecek, W. M. (1977). The statutory law of slavery and race in the thirteen mainland colonies of British America. *William Mary Quart.* 34, 258–280. doi: 10.2307/1925316
- Winslow, E. (2014). *Good News from New-England*. Cambridge, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Winthrop, J. (1908). *Winthrop's Journal. History of New England, 1630–1639*. New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons.
- Zakai, A. (1986). Theocracy in New England: The nature and meaning of the holy experiment in the wilderness. *J. Relig. History* 14, 133–151. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9809.1986.tb00461.x
- Zaret, D. (1985). *The Heavenly Contract: Ideology and Organization in Pre-Revolutionary Puritanism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Copyright © 2022 Aleksandrov. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.