

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WAS COLONIAL SOCIETY DEMOCRATIC?

Shall we conclude that colonial America was or was not "democratic"? The question is important for its own sake and also because it affects our perspective on the American Revolution and on the subsequent evolution of democratic politics in the United States. In an effort to answer this question, a number of historians have studied the politics of colonial Massachusetts. They wanted to determine to what degree democracy had developed in Massachusetts before 1775 and whether or not the government in that colony was dominated by an elite.

Some historians have concluded that colonial Massachusetts was indeed democratic, at least for the times. By studying voting records and statistics, they determined that the vast majority of white male citizens could vote and were not restricted by property qualifications. According to these historians, class differences between an elite and the masses of people did not prevent the latter from participating fully in colonial politics.

Other historians question whether broad voting rights by themselves demonstrate the existence of real democracy. The true test of democratic practice, they argue, would be whether or not different groups in a colonial town felt free to debate political questions in a town meeting. In the records of such meetings, they found little evidence of true political conflict and debate. Instead, they found that the purpose of town meetings in colonial days was to reach a consensus and to avoid conflict and real choices. These historians believe that the nature of consensus-forming limited the degree of democracy.

A third historical perspective is based on studies of economic change in colonial Boston. According to this view, a fundamental shift from an agrarian to a maritime economy occurred in the 18th century. In the process, a new elite emerged to dominate Boston's finances, society, and politics. The power of this elite prevented colonial Massachusetts from being considered a true democracy.

The question remains: To what extent were Massachusetts and the other colonies democratic? Anyone attempting to answer the question must study voting patterns, social and economic patterns, and other relevant information. After surveying this information, we must determine whether or not it satisfies our own definition of democracy.