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**THEMATIC BLOCK: UTOPIA AND DEMOCRACY**

# New England's Puritan Utopia and Its Limits on Democracy

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***HJEAS***

**ABSTRACT**
This article reexamines the political culture of seventeenth-century Puritan New England by foregrounding the tension between its collective utopian mission and the democratic practices it fostered. Rather than treating congregational autonomy, town meetings, or elective offices as early expressions of popular sovereignty, it argues that these practices emerged as byproducts of an eschatological project grounded in covenant theology. Through close analysis of John Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity* and the ideological premises of Puritan migration, the article shows how their "errand" to build a godly commonwealth gave rise to communal decision-making and accountable offices while simultaneously imposing strict limits on dissent, pluralism, and individual liberties. Examining their institutional structures reveals a hybrid political order, one blending bottom-up participation and elements of popular will with the authority of an "elective aristocracy" charged with safeguarding the community's covenantal destiny. The article then traces how this collective mission broadened and transformed in the eighteenth century, on the frontier and during the Revolution, giving rise to more inclusive forms of governance. Highlighting the paradox of a utopian project that both enabled and constrained democratic life, the study raises broader questions about the compatibility of collective missions and liberal democracy. (BB)

**KEYWORDS:** puritans, seventeenth-century New England, Early American Studies, American democracy, John Winthrop, Utopia, colonial political thought

## Introduction

The notion that America was conceived in utopia evokes both the Puritan redeemer mission and the democratic institutions established in seventeenth-century New England. Commentators often trace the key

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impulses of American democracy to Puritan practices, citing autonomous self-governing communities, participatory town meetings, or elected, impeachable officials. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals inequality of political membership, dictatorship of the *elect*, intolerance, and suppression of individual rights. One interpretation is too celebratory, the other overlooks the eschatological motivations that shaped Puritan governance. Recent scholarship navigates a fine line between portraying Puritan leaders as repressive authoritarians and as democratic reformers, reflecting the tension between their insistence of godly leadership and limited embrace of popular sovereignty.

Intervening in that debate, this paper proposes that the Puritans' collective utopia both brought about and limited democracy: the same impulses that fostered communal decision-making also imposed rigid boundaries on dissent and pluralism. Central to this inquiry is the proposition that the Puritans saw themselves as divine agents on a collective "errand" to fulfill Biblical prophecy. In this context, I argue, democracy was not a goal but the byproduct of their covenant and the Puritan aspiration of inaugurating God's Kingdom through restoring the sacred order modeled on ancient Christianity. Challenges to religious doctrine, government practices, or deviation from social norm—violations of moral righteousness—were perceived as existential threats that jeopardized their mission of apocalyptic urgency.

Through the examination of the foundational premises and the most relevant institutions, the paper explores this central paradox of seventeenth-century Puritan New England: an unresolved conflict between the desire for liberty and the zeal for positive reform (Woodhouse 3–4). The case study also raises a broader question: can collective utopia and democracy coexist, and to what extent can one accommodate the other? We will find that collective utopia, if taken seriously, is inherently repressive, as individual liberties are often sacrificed on the altar of the mission. While the democratic legacy of Puritanism remains ambivalent, this essay also highlights that their pragmatic adaptations ultimately paved the way for more inclusive governance.

### Utopia or manifesto for a sacred mission?

The Puritans, radical Calvinists disillusioned by the course of the English Reformation, sought to purify the Church of England of lingering Catholic elements in its liturgy, doctrines, and clergy—barriers, they believed, to true communion with God (Hall, *Puritans* 158–60). Ministers

viewed their own movement as a redemptive chapter in divine history, interpreting contemporary events through Scripture. They anticipated an imminent clash between the true and false church, though the timeline kept shifting (Gribben 34–37; Hall, *Puritans* 216–17). Favorable reports from the *Mayflower*, resurgence of Catholic practices and enforced conformity within the Church of England, and persecution of Puritan ministers convinced many that England was beyond redemption. They concluded that both the English church and the nation had forfeited their prophetic role. Just when Puritan militancy in Cambridge waned (Bondos-Green 206–08), John Winthrop and associates secured a royal charter in 1629, organized a transatlantic voyage, and recruited fellow Puritans—framing the migration as a providential mission (Dunn, "An Odd Couple" 9–10). Winthrop's lay sermon, *A Model of Christian Charity*, delivered in March 1630,[1] marks the symbolic beginning of the exodus. The first fleet carried approximately 700 Puritans, with nearly 20,000 to follow over the next decade (13).

Thus, while John Winthrop's *Model* is often regarded as a utopian text, it must be understood within this specific historical and theological context. It is not a utopia in the conventional sense, not because the cultural category was unavailable, but rather because it articulated a programmatic vision for carrying out a divine plan. Winthrop exhorted his audience to answer God's calling and outlined the covenantal framework for building New Israel. The *Model* also must be read in tandem with John Cotton's[2] *God's Promise to His Plantation*—another sermon of 1630—which interprets the migration to New England as a typological reenactment of biblical history. Drawing on 2 Samuel and Ezekiel 20:6, Cotton proclaims: "God espies or discovers a land for a people [and] he brought them into a land that he had espied for them" (Cotton, *God's Promise* 3). He proposes that the Puritans were journeying to a land already prepared for them by divine providence. They did not set out to build a utopia; they believed they were fulfilling prophecy.

Winthrop's sermon, then, is not speculative but prescriptive. It lays out the ethical and theological principles that should govern the community—charity, unity, and submission to divine will—not as distant ideals but immediate obligations. The famous "City Upon a Hill" is both aspiration and warning: failure to uphold the covenant would invite divine judgment. For these devout Puritans, the Sermon of the Mount was not merely spiritual instruction but lived physical reality (Van Engen 4). Cotton's notion of "plantation" was not a colonial concept but a powerful theological topos. The Puritans saw themselves as the antitype to the people

of Israel: a chosen people embarking on a divinely sanctioned journey to their new land. According to God's promise, they were to be "planted" in sacred soil to live in peace and in service of God. Crossing the ocean was simultaneously an "errand" into the unknown, a divine call to fulfill prophecy, and a promise of Canaan.

Though it aspired to reform corrupt society, Winthrop's vision was not a promise of social equality or a project driven by democratic ideals but that of a Christian utopia. He affirmed a divinely ordered hierarchy: "[a]ll men being thus (by divine providence) rancked into two sortes, riche and poore." Wealth, he argued, exists to serve charity, guided by "Justice and Mercy," the two "rules whereby wee are to walke one towards another." Echoing Matthew 7:12, he urged aid to others "in every want or distresse" so that each remains "carefull of his owne good." In Winthrop's view, communal wellbeing rests not on equality but on Justice and Equity—principles that remained the cornerstones of Puritan social life—capturing the moral obligation to give "according to his necessity, rather than lend him as hee requires" (Winthrop, "A Model").

Rather than imagining a new society from scratch, Winthrop's sermon outlines a covenantal framework for a community already understood to be part of a divine plan. He described them as "members of the same body," "knit together, in this worke, as one man," bound by shared commitment and mutual responsibility, "[a]lways having before our eyes our commission and community in the worke" while sustaining one another on "strength and infirmity; . . . weale and woe." The laws of the Gospel, Winthrop insists, are "a reall thing not Imaginari" (Winthrop, "A Model"). Seeing themselves as human agents of God destined to inaugurate the millennial kingdom, the Puritans were to follow this blueprint. For them, the New World was not a blank slate but a stage for the realization of God's promises. Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity* was their manifesto, and the eschatological reading of history imbued the mission with urgency and sacred legitimacy.

Surviving the journey was taken as a manifestation of divine providence, a sign of God's special favor. Along the shores of Massachusetts Bay, the Puritan settlers established seven autonomous townships, each a covenantal community. The congregation of saints, self-consecrated for the service of God and one another, immediately set about building Sion. Their theological vision was reflected in naming their settlements, which either offered a reformed version of their English counterparts or invoked Old Testament episodes.

For the Puritans, millennial expectation was not an abstract or distant concern but an urgent one. Interpreting the signs foretold in the Book of Revelation, New England ministers predicted Christ's return by century's end (Gribben 40–44). If the end was near, their tasks were pressing. Puritan theology was correspondingly practical. Rather than centering on remote abstractions, it was grounded in the challenges of everyday life, with God actively involved in its governance, intervening to show favor or sending perils as signs of broken covenant. The stakes were binary: salvation or doom.

This sense of urgency manifested in practices that certainly added to the negative stereotypes and literary imaginations of Puritan life in New England. Known for rejecting traditional holidays, the American Puritans abolished the observance of Christmas and Easter, interrupting labor only for the Sabbath (Hall, *Puritans* 158; Walsh 81–82). They were the Stakhanovites[3] of their age, working the fields even on Christmas day. The demands of survival, bending the wilderness to their will, and their belief that they were building God's Kingdom to usher in the millennium fostered this zealous work ethic. They worked and prayed their way toward salvation, each day as sacred as the other.

Instead of conventional churches, they constructed austere meetinghouses—both physically and spiritually "puritan"—which they did not even deem necessary to consecrate (Walsh 86). This "architecture of negation," however, stemmed from a positive theological conviction: that in New England, the divinely chosen place and time of sacred mission, every location and moment was equally holy (86). While the English Puritan movement was fragmenting, the Winthrop-led colony not only prospered by the end of the decade but also established a unified church and structures of democratic governance. Although these institutions limited self-expression and remained largely exclusive for the first few decades, both democracy and its constraints arose from the high stakes of the Puritan's collective mission.

**Bottom-up democracy and its limitations**

Initially, covenantal theology, rather than democratic ideals, shaped the core institutions of Massachusetts Bay. Puritans held that individual salvation was possible by entering into a covenant with God, keeping his laws, and by mutually upholding one another's faith and obedience to divine commandments (Hall, *Puritans* 159). These covenants, as foundational compacts of congregation/township, defined both social norms and

governance. Membership was restricted to the "visible saints," those able to profess the "work of grace" they had experienced (109). Only the elect, the truly regenerate, could partake in the Lord's Supper. Since they "equated the church with the body of Christ," admitting the unregenerate would, in their view, "pollute the Body of Christ" (Joshua Miller 59). Membership was not only exclusive; it was also stratified, divided into elders and brethren, church officers, and lay members (59). Yet ministers were elected by the congregation, and instead of receiving fixed stipends or tithes, churches were financed through voluntary contributions—a practice Cotton described as "in keeping with ancient Christianity" (Hall, *Reforming* 109). They also restored the preaching ministry and allowed laymen to prophesy at the end of the sermon, ask questions or offer spiritual insights (Hall, *Puritans* 222; Bremer "John Winthrop" 12). While members elected their officers, everyday governance was left to the elders; and although collective action required the assent of both, the elders' voice prevailed in admitting members—judgment on *election*—or excommunication (Joshua Miller 60; Winship 788).[4]

Winthrop's strategic relocation of the charter from London to Boston freed the colony from royal oversight and non-elect shareholders, granting liberty to pursue their sacred experiment of godly society (Hall, *Puritans* 109). Massachusetts was a place where they could restore the church, worship, and minister to their "primitive perfection" (222). Rather than evangelization, they wanted to separate the godly from the ungodly.

Regarding church and state relationship, our starting point is the Puritan settlers' belief that their plantation was in fact the embodiment of the true church, and that eventually Massachusetts would be one with the triumphant church. They did not set out to simply establish a harmonious, perfected society; the project was inherently exclusive. Success was dependent on excluding sinners, the heathen, and anybody who was not among the elect, meaning Quakers, Anabaptists, Anglicans, Indians, or the unregenerate (Perry Miller 686–89). The community was one with the church; congregation was one with the township. Civil government was a practical necessity, one that they conceived as subordinate to the divine project but also tasked to advance its success. The most criticized aspects of the New England Way were direct consequences of this conviction: church influence on civic matters and excluding the non-elect from the polity.

The town government was parallel to that of the church. In the early days of the colony, "church and town government were virtually indistinguishable" (Joshua Miller 60). This overlap reflected the practical

reality of the congregation-settlement, as well as the ideal that one can be the member of the church/polity whose covenant one "publicly affirmed."[5] This excluded non-church members, but, while not democratic in the modern sense, aligned with the Puritan vision of covenantal community: stakeholders with vested interests in the collective mission. While church and state were closely intertwined, ministers were barred from holding civil office, communal affairs were managed through the town meeting—the most iconic institution of Puritan self-government and participatory democracy.

The first and most important business was land allocation (Hall, *Deliberative* 11). Records show that land was not equally distributed—the idea of equity manifested in curious forms. Families more endowed in the first place—wealthier and with more children, both taken as signs of God's favor—received better or larger plots. But the needy were always given enough to survive (11–12). Town meetings also decided on fences and roads and adjudicated disputes. As a matter of practicality, the day-to-day business was soon entrusted to a board of selectmen and other elected officials, such as fenceviewers and hogreves,[6] to keep order and enforce town rules (Jason Miller 13). Initially, freemen composed the General Court (colonial assembly) but growth in membership prompted towns to elect deputies to represent them (Hall, *Reforming* 25; Brown 110).

Covenants functioned as social compacts and mandated annual elections. In the colony's formative years, franchise or office-holding were tied to church membership (freemen),[7] not property. In practice, as Jason Miller's study of the town of Dedham shows, wealth influenced those who actually held office, or what we might call political ambitions today, and contributed to the rise of certain families into influence. Only the better-off could afford to spend time away from their fields, while poorer freemen rarely sought office (17). We should note, however, that the Puritan experiment did shorten the social scale, even though it never aimed at equality. Most migrants were of the "middling" sort. Tocqueville observed that they all belonged "to the more independent classes of their native country," forming a society with "neither lords nor common people" (31). Their foundational goal was not economic advancement but, as Tocqueville emphasized, "the triumph of an idea" (31). Winthrop's vision embraced divinely sanctioned inequality; at the same time, the colony did not align "with aristocratic privilege": both Cotton and Winthrop rejected English aristocrats who sought entry into New England polity bearing inherited titles (Hall, *Deliberative* 14). Freemanship was not based on wealth; Cotton

and other leaders opposed material qualifications (Brown 111). Winthrop also opposed the granting of large tracts of land, arguing that such policy would lift a few while compromising the "independence and dignity of many" (Schaar 499). Although magistrates were chosen from eminent freemen, no formal aristocracy emerged. The term "oligarchical rule" refers instead to a class of wealthier men who gained considerable influence. Winthrop and Cotton themselves referred to elected officials as the "Aristocraticall" element, a term that signified divinely sanctioned leadership by the virtuous elite.

Although the town meetings were forums for public deliberation, they offered little room for dissent, which was viewed as not only disruptive but as a threat to divine favor and ultimately the mission itself. The community exercised self-censure to preserve unity even in economic or administrative questions. Early covenants, steeped in Mosaic law, regulated social norms and punished transgressions—seen as failing the community and their covenant—harshly, with the town meeting as the main forum for policing. Sinners were whipped, or had their "ears cut," banished, or shipped back to England (Joshua Miller 61). Questioning religious ideas or government practices was treated as both heresy and sedition. No freedom of speech existed. One Henry Linne, for example, was whipped and banished for criticizing the colony in a letter to England (61). As Joshua Miller observes, though, the "Puritan lack of tolerance was, in part, a result of the seriousness with which they took ideas" (61); any deviation from the covenanted norms undermined the entire project.

This helps explain the hesitancy surrounding town meetings as genuine sites for public deliberation. Although the Puritans encouraged public discussion, the boundaries placed on dissent constrained democratic development. As Joshua Miller reminds us, citizens "must be able to express their ideas about public matters, and to hear various viewpoints on those issues," but the Puritans "set limits upon it that would be intolerable today" (62). David D. Hall adds that "a God-aligned society is not the same thing as a society aligned with deliberative democracy" (*Deliberative* 14). Yet again, for the Puritans, liberty did not mean individual rights such as freedom of speech or conscience, but rather the freedom to seek God and to practice faith in strict accordance with biblical teachings (Hall, *Reforming* xvi). Privacy, as we understand it today, did not exist (Joshua Miller 61). For these Puritans, liberty was a communal pursuit rooted in the belief that they were appointed to preserve divine order. Their limitations on liberal democracy stemmed not from disdain for liberty, but from a conviction that

true freedom lay in obedience to God's law. Any deviation from accepted doctrines or biblical moral norms was seen not as expression of liberty, but as its abandonment. Peace and unity were also paramount for the success of their sacred project while pluralism of opinion, in their view, invited discord and served the purposes of evil.

Practical arrangements added further constraints. Paula Cossart and Andrea Felicetti argue that while town meetings fostered communal engagement, they were embedded in anti-democratic norms. Seating arrangements privileged affluent families, positioning them to assert influence, serve as moderators, and dominate boards of selectmen, which curtailed genuine deliberation (Cossart and Felicetti 247–49). Jason Miller's study of early Dedham likewise identifies the pattern of "deference politics" in which the dominant view prevailed despite nominal popular participation. He uses the term "Communal Authoritarianism," defined as "a community that is active in policing itself to ensure communal adherence to and progress towards commonly held values, beliefs, and ambitions" (13–14). Avoiding conflict stemmed as much from pleasing God as from the mundane fact that they were all like-minded—bound together by migration, survival, hard work, and sacred ambition. Although some difference in wealth existed, they all lived in the same village with one meetinghouse, one minister, and land lots just behind their homes, and thus no real diverging interests about roads, fences, or defenses (13).[8] Peace and unity were both practical and imperative. In practice, it was a democratic institution without real democracy, since participation existed without real pluralism or equal influence.

While the "democratic" label thus must be applied cautiously to seventeenth-century New England, accountability—both civil and ecclesiastical—was a striking feature of their governance. Puritans kept their leaders on short leash. Officials, including ministers, selectmen, and the governor, were elected annually, ensuring short tenures, and opportunity for retention or replacement. Townsmen also exercised oversight and regularly held their officers to account despite the deference culture (Jason Miller 13, 16; Hall, *Reforming* 55–56). The emerging systems of church and civil governments also provided for impeachment. The congregation could dismiss their ministers, and in extreme cases even excommunicate their elders—a power John Cotton defended on theological grounds as belonging to the brethren (Winship 785, 289, 796). Puritans believed that some individuals were providentially endowed with exceptional abilities, yet none stood above the law, whether Mosaic or civil—their covenants with God

and one another. No influential family or person escaped scrutiny. Winthrop himself was impeached in 1645 for interfering with a local militia election (Schaar 595; Brown 108), and John Cotton's son was dismissed from his pastoral position and briefly excommunicated for adultery (Fitzgerald 40). The institution of annual elections was eventually codified in the *Body of Liberties* (1641), reflecting congregational agitation about the "free libertie of Election and ordination of all their officers . . . provided they be able, pious and orthodox" (Hall, *Deliberative* 9). For the first generation of Puritans, accountability was not merely procedural. The power to elect or dismiss leaders was a vital mechanism for ensuring godly society and communal progress toward the millennium. Later covenants retained annual elections as a foundational principle, though increasingly without the eschatological urgency that had once driven them.

Transition from sacred to secular ambitions was largely organic, prompted by waning theological zeal across generations and by outmigration. Institutional developments also reflected the increasingly civil nature of political economy. The *Body of Liberties* of 1641 offered protections against "unjust or unauthorized actions of the civil state" (Hall, *Reforming* xvi), while the 1648 legal codes—the first in the Anglo-Saxon world to apply equally to all residents of Massachusetts—protected citizens against arbitrary authority, guaranteed speedy justice and local juries. The same framework, as David D. Hall notes, provided for secular marriage and legal divorce, and transferred meetinghouses from church to town ownership.

**Top-down governance of the colony**

John Winthrop and John Cotton stand as the intellectual anchors and most influential leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony's first two decades.[9] Their ideas shaped key institutions: the Court of Magistrates, the embrace of what later scholars describe as "natural aristocracy," the fusion of church and state, and the Congregational Way itself. Although fundamental aspects of the Puritan political economy can be traced to Calvin's *Institutes* and the Geneva Commonwealth (Osgood, "Political I." 3–9), a critical innovation, however, was the transfer of the principle of government by consent from ecclesiastical to secular politics (Osgood, "Political I" 9; Woodhouse 11). One practical catalyst for this shift was the charter itself, which set the rules for the government of a joint stock company and functioned as the colony's initial constitution.

The charter vested authority in the General Court, composed of freemen, who elected assistants, the governor and his deputy (Hall, *Reforming*

25). Winthrop, appointed as its effective governor (administrator of the charter) in 1629, was instrumental in relocating the company's oversight to the New World, thereby securing a remarkable degree of administrative autonomy (Dunn, "John Winthrop" 184–89; Hall, *Puritans* 221). His first political measures as governor reflected a dual impulse: one toward broader participation in governance, the other toward autocratic control. He quickly extended the franchise beyond the original stockholders travelling with the Winthrop fleet to include 116 church members, effectively overriding the charter's definition of freemen (Hall, *Reforming* 25–26; Schaar 495), but he restricted their legislative power just a few months after arrival. Although the charter stipulated that freemen meet quarterly to legislate, Winthrop preferred to rule through the Magistrates (Hall, *Reforming* 25; Dunn, "An Odd Couple" 21). Both sprung from the same conviction about his own role and what is best for the project. As Winthrop himself,[10] this small class were not power-hungry but "sincere zealots" of aristocratic training, convinced that they were better "fitted" to govern for the public good (Gray 689).

Winthrop did not even publicly proclaim the charter's provisions until 1632, when Watertown challenged the colony's tax regime and petitioned for representation (Hall, *Reforming* 26). His deputy, Thomas Dudley, then called for clarification of the "Authoritye" in the Patent (27). This was perhaps a formative moment when covenantal authority clashed with democratic impulses. Winthrop conceded to the demands for broader participation but retained the notion of the divinely ordained leadership charged to carry this mission to success. He viewed the Magistrates as divinely sanctioned, endowed with virtue and judgment, responsible for enforcing moral order (Gray 687, 691–94). Accordingly, the General Court vested adjudicative authority in these Magistrates, who were often backed by ministers.

Portraying Winthrop and Cotton as architects of authority would ignore how the structures of civil and church governance made concessions to popular will. They were not persistently hostile to democracy, despite Cotton's oft-cited assertion: "I do not conceyve that ever God did ordeyne [it] as a fitt government eyther for church or commonwealth" (Brown 105–06). Preference for natural aristocracy did not mean they disapproved of participatory government. Winthrop affirmed the people's right to elect their officials and himself stood for election annually, even accepting defeat.[11] He held that "once chosen," rulers were "spokesmen of God," and the laws, once made, reflected divine guidance (Brown 112). The

foundational premise was covenantal: freemen of the church would elect leaders to guide them in faith and governance—two realms that, for the Puritans, were inseparable. Liberty, in this framework, meant the freedom to submit to righteous authority, and not to act as they wished. It also entailed protection from arbitrary rule.

In 1645, a dispute over the appointment of Hingham's militia leader led to Winthrop's impeachment (Brown 108). He had ruled against the majority will, prompting the townsmen to petition the General Court and accuse him of arbitrary governance. Winthrop defended the magistrates' "negative voice"[12] and was acquitted but used the trial to rearticulate his vision of covenantal authority:[13] "It is yourselves who have called us to this office . . . we have our authority from God, in a way of an ordinance" (Brown 108). He framed true governance by insisting that "[w]e count him a good servant, who breaks not his covenant" (108). This may be understood in my interpretation as a God-ordained social contract. As Winthrop explained, "The covenant between you and us is the oath you have taken of us, which is to this purpose, that we shall govern you and judge your causes by the rules of God's laws and our own, according to our best skill" (qtd. in Brown 108). He clashed with towns and individuals when they resisted "laws not repugnant with the laws of God" (Brown 106), but compromised when deputies demanded legislative power, allowing them to review laws passed by the Court. The *Body of Liberties* reflected this broader consensus, its drafts circulated for review between 1635 and 1641 before being officially issued (Hall, *Puritans* 228).

If leadership was rooted in the covenantal authority, how should we understand Winthrop and Cotton's notion of democracy? In their understanding, democracy was when people ruled themselves, which they considered a bad form of government, neither stable nor sanctioned by the Bible. When Cotton acknowledged that early Christian congregations were certainly self-governing and "almost democratic" (qtd in Joshua Miller 59), he meant that brethren elected their leaders and were not ruled from above. They both preferred what they called a "mixt Aristocratie" in which the people elected their leaders from among themselves (Brown 110; Winship 784)—the elected officials being the "Aristocraticall" element, and the people who elected them the "Democraticall" part. In the congregation, Christ was the church's monarch, the elders its aristocracy, and the brethren the democracy (Winship 784).

On the colony level, "the Deputyes are the Democraticall parte of our Government," because if the power "be in the Deputyes it is in the people"

(Brown 109). As Brown notes, this resembled representative democracies, so far as officials were elected and given the authority to rule (111). Their use of "aristocracy" referred not to hereditary privilege or wealth but to a class of virtuous governors, with the key distinction lying in the "religious tone" (105, 111–12). Elected officials were expected to uphold righteousness, and both Winthrop and Cotton saw political power as divinely sanctioned, serving the colony's apocalyptic mission.

The Antinomian Controversy[14] in 1636, which ultimately led to the banishment of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, marked one of the most fundamental challenges to the colony's vision of collective utopia. Williams criticized the entanglement of church and state and preached Separatist ideas.[15] Hutchinson, drawing on John Cotton's teachings about the Covenant of Grace,[16] questioned the validity of judging election by outward signs, challenging both theological doctrine and the elders' authority to determine church membership (Bremer and Webster 138). Seen through an eschatological lens, dissent and a divided Boston struck at the heart of the mission. The legitimacy of the New England model was rooted in the covenant; thus, theological deviation was political subversion. Winthrop viewed organized dissent as sedition, believing that unity in seeking God was vital to the colony's survival, a view that precluded certain essential liberties (Gray 687–88).

Winthrop's role in the crisis reveals a complex balance between conciliation and control. His contemporaries noted that he often made concessions to matters that did not have this existential dimension (Bremer, *John Winthrop* 245–46). He sought to protect John Cotton and attempted to persuade Roger Williams to moderate his public dissent, reportedly disagreeing with the court's decision to deport Williams and intervening on his behalf (251–52). This allowed Williams to flee and establish Providence. What the episode underscores is that questioning governmental methods or theological foundations was subject to the same eschatological judgment. The legitimacy of the New England model was rooted in the covenant. Challenging religious orthodoxy inherently undermined the political order and thus jeopardized the mission itself. Heresy and dissent were inseparable. Both Winthrop and Cotton rejected the possibility of righteous living outside the doctrinal contours they had drawn from Scripture (Boisen 217).

At the same time, Massachusetts Bay was not a theocracy. As noted earlier, ministers were prohibited from holding civil offices such as town deputy or magistrate, and the governor was not the head of the church. Unlike the English model established by Henry VIII, who fused religious

and civil authority through the Act of Supremacy, the Puritans maintained a formal separation of roles. Prayers reflected the continued belief in the monarch's divine ordination (Gray 685), but in Puritan theology, ultimate authority over the church belonged to God, who "delegated"[17] some power to the congregation of saints (Cotton, "Of the Keyes" 65–67). Since biblical law formed the foundation of the colony, religious leaders were frequently consulted on civic matters (Osgood, "Political I." 23). The church thus wielded significant influence. However, both Cotton and Winthrop agreed that the state had the duty to uphold moral righteousness of God's chosen people. Civil magistrates were expected to enforce religious orthodoxy (Brown 112), creating a tightly interwoven church–state relationship rooted in the colony's founding mission. Winthrop often viewed his own role as divinely appointed to ensure that Massachusetts aligned with the triumphant church.

The famous "wall of separation," later invoked in interpretations of the First Amendment, was first articulated by Roger Williams in a 1644 letter to John Cotton, though with a markedly different meaning and aspiration.[18] He envisioned it as a safeguard to protect the purity of the Church, proposing a wall to protect the "garden" from the "wilderness" of the world.[19] Williams argued that compelling all residents to adhere to state-mandated religious practices would lead the church—built on the rock of divine truth—into the sandy swamp of Anglican corruption (4). His metaphor expressed a desire for ecclesiastical purity, not democratic pluralism. Francis Bremer suggests that Williams underwent theological evolution before embracing religious freedom (Bremer and Webster 277). His vision eventually expanded into a broad, inclusive ideal—a "fraternity of man" (Boisen 218)—but its origins lay in a deeply religious mission to protect the elect from contamination.

**From sacred mission to political myth and legacy**

Tocqueville's 1781 celebratory evaluation, which credited the Puritans with establishing participatory governance, most likely helped construct and perpetuate an ontological myth of American democracy. Tocqueville observes:

> The principles of New England spread at first to the neighboring states; they then passed successively to the more distant ones; and at length they imbued the whole Confederation. They now extend their influence beyond the limits over the whole American world. The civilization of New

> England has been like a beacon lit upon a hill, which, after it has diffused its warmth around, tinges the distant horizon with its glow. (Tocqueville 30–31)

This assessment not only echoes Winthrop's iconic phrasing but also affirms the fulfillment of that prophecy. Conversely, David D. Hall titles a late chapter of his book *A Reforming People* "Already in Heaven?" (159–90). This case study of Cambridge, Massachusetts, illustrates through rich written records the implementation of Puritan ideals and proto-democratic institutions—warts and all—suggesting, in effect, the realization of their utopia.

What town histories reveal is that natural growth, intergenerational tension, center–periphery dynamics, and outmigration gradually loosened the grip not only of the rule of the "saints" but also of the original mission and theological motivations. Existential crises reshaped the premises and promises of New England. While the Puritans failed to maintain moral righteousness—sinned in all manners—and to preserve an exclusively godly society, historians often acknowledge that the byproduct of their mission was a system of government more democratic than any other at the time.[20]

External forces, such as the emergence of more religiously tolerant neighboring colonies[21] and top-down mandates to unify the provinces, certainly accelerated the move toward a more inclusive government. The Williamite settlement following the Glorious Revolution and new imperial policies caused a radical shift in the self-understanding of New England Puritans. The 1689 English Act of Toleration, extended to the colonies by royal decree in 1691, not only curtailed autonomy, but also ended the ideal of exclusive religious community. The Puritans, ever pragmatic, responded by rewriting their own history and recasting their original covenant as part of a larger Anglo-Protestant project (Tucker 482–91). Separatist tendencies were quickly overridden by a new self-image: the bulwark of Protestantism on the apocalyptic frontiers. This shift found theological expression in the Great Awakening in the middle of the eighteenth century, which further liberalized the collective mission. Although Jonathan Edwards, keenly interested in apocalyptic themes, inherited the conviction that the history of New England was both sacred and secular, he extended the covenant to Great Britain, its colonies, and more broadly to America itself (McDermott 34–38). As Sacvan Berkovich observed, this "opened Christ's American army to all white protestant believers" and "liberated the mission from the constraints of regional theocracy" (142, 148).

The growing French Catholic threat reaffirmed the apocalyptic imagination. Just fifteen years before the Revolutionary War, sermons celebrated the 1760 capture of Montreal as a divine intervention and appointed Great Britain and New England as coagents to fulfill a historical mission (Tucker 492–94). This also revealed a more expansive divine plan in which the building of New Israel was no longer confined to New England, nor were the Puritan saints its sole stewards. In true American Jeremiad fashion, crisis became a catalyst for grander ambition. The chosen people were no longer the Puritan elect but the American nation itself.

Although Puritan structures of governance endured in some New England townships,[22] American democracy ultimately evolved by merging these traditions with the liberal institutions born of the Revolution and on the Frontier. It must be noted, though, that many Revolutionary leaders directly engaged with the institutional legacy of Puritan New England or echoed its ideals. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, specifically extolled the merits of the autonomous self-governing congregations as checks on government and imagined comparable "ward republics" as local units (Merriam 35). For the Virginia government, he even contemplated adopting the annual election of the executive, which he ultimately discarded as impractical (33). Repudiating artificial aristocracy based on wealth and birth, Jefferson's "natural aristocracy" parted with Winthrop's belief in divinely ordained "virtue and talent" but held that some were better endowed with the skills of governance (31–32). John Adams extended the ideal of moral community, but as author of the Massachusetts Constitution (drafted in 1779 and still in effect), echoed Winthrop's covenant. Although American democracy did not directly adopt the governmental structures of seventeenth-century New England, its spiritual imagination and institutional architecture were certainly shaped by the negotiated Puritan legacy.

## Conclusion

John Winthrop and his peers envisioned a Christian commonwealth ordained by God, not a political order rooted in popular sovereignty. Their governance model prioritized divine authority over democratic ideals. Yet, their quest to restore ancient Christian purity also gave rise to congregationalism as the sole legitimate church structure, with participatory democracy and elected officials emerging as its corollary. Accountability—much to be envied today—was embedded in the covenant. The Puritan impulse toward collective moral reform, driven by hope of redemption as much as by fear of divine judgment, produced institutions that mirrored

democratic forms while simultaneously limiting them. Political membership was stratified, dissent suppressed, and liberty—at least in its modern sense—subordinated to theological and social discipline. These constraints stemmed from the conviction that challenge to doctrine or practice posed an existential threat that not only weakened cohesion but would jeopardize the entire mission: the collective utopia of realizing God's kingdom on earth. It was a matter of salvation or doom.

Though focused on seventeenth-century New England, this case study also illustrates the tension between collective utopia and democracy. Utopian visions often legitimize repression in the name of order. As with other revolutionary movements born of existential urgency, ideological rigidity and the reforming zeal of the torchbearers bred intolerance and exclusion. What began as a redemptive mission was experienced as dystopia by later generations, a trajectory that bears striking resemblance to communist regimes. The pursuit of a collective ideal often curtails individual autonomy, an outcome fundamentally at odds with democratic principles. New England Puritans, however, adapted to political and historical exigencies. Over time, their exclusive vision gave way to greater pluralism, but the tension between collective purpose and individual freedom remains with us in modern democracies.

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## Notes

1. While the manuscript bears the heading "On Board the Arabella," most historians now agree that the sermon was delivered in Southampton prior to departure. The copy held by the New York Historical Society—now part of the digitized Winthrop Papers—is, as noted by the archive itself, one of those prepared for circulation. It contains blank spaces, occasional unintelligible handwriting, or copyist errors, all of which have been marked and annotated.

2. Puritan minister of Boston, Lincolnshire, and later chief architect of the congregational church of New England.

3. Named after Alexei Stakhanov, a miner of extraordinary productivity and record-breaking results, the Stakhanovite movement, which emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, encouraged an enthusiastic approach to work framing labor as a noble contribution to building the ideal Communist state. The parallel here is more than a linguistic flourish. Communists were expected to be Stakhanovists, working even Sundays, unpaid, towards building their brave new world.

4. Expelling from the community was decided by the congregation, but excommunication in the sense of "delivering to the Satan" was a power given only to the elders.

5. In contrast to the universality of, for example, Catholicism, which allows for attending any mass in any town, this does not only distinguish denizenship from town citizenship but also mutually exclusive church congregations.

6. Fenceviewers and hogreves ensured pigs were properly fenced and thus did not cause damage. Policing soon became an important aspect of selectmen's work as well at times extending into family affairs (Fitzerald 30, 32–35). David D. Hall, by contrast, emphasizes their executive functions, frequent meetings, while noting that their power was deliberately limited (Hall, *Reforming* 55–56).

7. Initially (as defined in the charter), in 1630 freemen were those shareholders in the Massachusetts Bay Company who were also church members; only twelve of the company's original stockholders actually sailed with the first fleet. Winthrop quickly extended this concept upon arrival. The charter also provided for the regular meeting of all freemen in the General Court.

8. Based on town records, Jason Miller's study compares the town meeting dynamics of seventeenth-century Dedham with the much more expansive eighteenth-century settlement. He finds that outmigration and center–periphery tension produced clashing interests and that residents of the outlying areas (farms situated further away from the village) swayed town meeting resolutions for their advantage. Other case studies, for example, the Cossart argument about privileged seating, most often use only eighteenth-century records. As explained later, the foundations of religious and social unity were removed at the end of the seventeenth century.

9. As Camilla Boisen notes in her chapter focusing on the Cotton–Williams debate's relevance for democracy, we can make a distinction between democracy as a way of life and as systemic procedures. The latter, she writes, would "require philosophical justifications that have to originate from all members subject to the power of the institutional system itself" (218). For New England Puritans, Scripture was the source for their everyday civil and church matters. For colonial matters, these were formulated by their leaders, chief ideologues.

10. Winthrop was a devout Puritan from his youth, but he was also poised for leadership. Educated in Cambridge and Gray's Inn, he was a skilled debater, a savvy politician, and a shrewd businessman. As an appointed administrator (governor), he was certain of his calling, that he was divinely appointed to lead the Puritan mission. Winthrop himself staked everything on the journey: he sold his estates, recruited settlers, wrote pamphlets that weighed practical considerations, and distributed them secretly among Puritan sympathizers in the Suffolk area (Dunn, "John Winthrop" 9–10, 14). As proprietor of Groton Manor, he also brought to the colonial project a "paternalistic" worldview and a belief in divinely ordained natural aristocracy of the "pious, learned and experienced," and a "rule of righteousness" preexisting the civil compact (Schaar 497, 502). Despite his

reputation as tyrant, historical records reveal a conciliatory temperament and preference for logical persuasion over militant enforcement.

11. The freemen—shareholders, later male church members—elected assistants, who chose the governor. By 1632, the entire General Court participated in electing officials, with the governor still chosen from assistants. As the number of freemen increased, deputies were elected in 1634 to represent towns, and by 1647, sealed ballots replaced in-person voting (Brown 110). Winthrop served as governor for twelve years out of the first two decades of the colony, losing election in 1634 and relegated to lesser posts until 1637 with other two-year gaps in the 1640s (Bremer "John Winthrop" 5).

12. The phrase "negative voice" refers to the power to veto or overrule a majority decision. In the context of Winthrop's impeachment, it describes the magistrates' ability to set aside the town meeting's vote. The usage derives from early modern English constitutional practice, where the monarch possessed a *negative voice* over acts of Parliament.

13. Winthrop penned his 1644 treatise "Arbitrary Government Described and the Government of the Massachusetts Vindicated from that Aspersion" as legal defense in his impeachment trial. In this, he declares that arbitrary government is "where a people have men set over them, without their choice or allowance; who have power to govern them, and judge their causes without a rule," adding that only God has this prerogative. He refutes the charges explaining that "where people have liberty to admit or reject their governors, and to require the rule by which they shall be governed and judged, this is not an arbitrary government" (Winthrop, "Arbitrary"). The digitized manuscript is available through the Boston Public Library Digital Commonwealth collection, and Winthrop's preparatory notes for this treatise can be accessed in the Winthrop Paper's collection.

14. Popular label for the Free Grace controversy (this latter is generally preferred by scholars of the period). Hutchinson "preached" free grace independent from adhering to the outward laws. The label Antinomian stems from "the abrogation of . . . outward law in favor of an inward law written by the Spirit in the heart of the believer" (Woodhouse 12). Woodhouse also discusses the tension between Mosaic Law (Israel) and the Gospel of Christ (4, 12–13, 17), a conflict that can be read as lying at the very heart of the Puritan paradox.

15. The Puritans who established Massachusetts remained in communion with the Church of England, while Separatists, including those who created Plymouth Colony in 1620, deemed the church beyond redemption and broke away.

16. Cotton's teachings and his role in the debate are discussed in detail by Stoever.

17. This is articulated in chapter VII of Cotton's "Keyes to the Kingdom of Heaven," asking "WHAT that Church is, which is the first subject of the power of the keyes, and whether this Church have an independent power in the exercise thereof, though they be made two distinct questions, yet (if candidly interpreted) they are but one" (65). In response to this inquiry, he proposes three pages later that "*A particular Church or Congregation of Saints, professing the faith*, TAKEN INDEFINITELY FOR ANY CHURCH (one as well as another) *is the first subject of all the Church offices, with all their spirituall gifts and power*, which Christ hath given to be executed amongst them" (68; emphasis in the original).

18. Although the myth surrounding America's first rebel often frames him as a precursor to Jeffersonian ideals—for instance, Camilla Boisen calls him the "earliest pioneer for religious liberties" (217)—and his "wall" is frequently interpreted as a foundational moment in the evolution of American democracy, his vision of separation

initially meant to protect the purity of the church. He even refused a pastoral position in 1631, deeming the congregation insufficiently pure.

19. ". . . abundantly proving, that the Church of the Jews under the Old Testament in the type, and the *Church* of the Christians under the New Testament in the Antitype, were both separate from the world; and that when they have opened a gap in the hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wildernesse of the world, God hath ever broke down the wall itselfe, removed the Candlestick, *&c.* and made his Garden a Wildernesse, as at this day. … [T]herefore if he will ever please to restore his Garden . . . it must of necessitie be walled . . . [to] conclude a separation of holy from unholy, penitent from impenitent, godly from ungodly" (Williams 45–46).

20. The contrast with England in the 1630s is especially stark. Parliament met irregularly, and leaders were appointed. But it should also be recognized that not all splinter colonies were more democratic or tolerant. For instance, William Coddington, assistant and treasurer in the Massachusetts Bay colony government and supporter of the Hutchinsons in the Antinomian controversy, established Newport (south end of Rhode Island) in 1639 as a spiritual theocracy with himself as judge. Only espousing democracy in the 1640s, Coddington's colony eventually merged with Roger Williams's under one charter (Bremer and Webster 57).

21. Herbert Osgood argues that the splinter colonies—first as towns of Hartford, New Haven, Warwick, Providence, or Newport, eventually forming Connecticut and Rhode Island—were created in opposition of the dogmatic rigidity of Massachusetts and were not only more tolerant but in effect put into practice the more democratic impulses of their Calvinist faith ("Political II." 203–06).

22. For example, the town of Douglas still operates within that institutional structure: its Board of Selectmen serves as the executive body, setting policies and calling elections or the town meetings, and appointing many key town officials ("Board").

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