

1.4

British Influences on American Government

Standard 1.4: British Influences on American Government

Explain how British ideas about and practices of government influenced the American colonists and the political institutions that developed in colonial America. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T1.4]

Focus Question: What Were the Democratic and Undemocratic Political Practices that Developed in Early Colonial America?



["Magna Carta 5-cent 1965 issue U.S. stamp"](#) | Public Domain

How did experiments in democracy and democratic government that began in the 13 North American colonies connect to modern day United States governmental ideas and practices? The modules in this chapter explore democracy and voting in colonial America, the impact of Anne Hutchinson's religious dissent, and current debates over extending voting rights to 16 and 17-year-olds.

You can also explore this topic at our wiki page for [British Influences on American Government](#).

Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: The Mayflower Compact, Colonial Governments, and Who Voted in Early America](#)
 - [MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Unpacking Media Coverage of the Royals](#)
2. [UNCOVER: Lucy Terry Prince, Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer: Women's Roles in Colonial America](#)
3. [ENGAGE: Should 16-Year-Olds or 17-Year-Olds Be Allowed to Vote?](#)

1.INVESTIGATE: The Mayflower Compact, Colonial Governments, and Who Voted in Early America

The Mayflower Compact

Signed in 1620 by 41 adult male passengers during the 3000-mile sea voyage from Holland to establish a colony in the new world of North America, the **Mayflower Compact** established a framework for self-government among the colonists.



Signing of the Mayflower Compact, 1620

["The Mayflower Compact, 1620"](#) by [Jean Leon Gerome Ferris](#). Public Domain

The Compact has its foundation in the Magna Carta (1215) that established the idea of the rule of law. The Mayflower Compact asserted it was the people, not a king, who made the law. Here is the [complete text of the Mayflower Compact](#).

Between 1636 and 1671, the Plymouth Colony adopted [The General Fundamentals of New Plymouth](#), the **first legal code** in colonial North America. It included statements about representative

government and individual rights. Its first article was a declaration of self-rule, stating that the people of the colony:

"Do Enact, Ordain and Constitute; that no Act Imposition, Law or Ordinance be Made or Imposed upon us at present or to come, bur such as shall be Enacted by consent of the body of Freemen or Associates, or their Representatives legally assembled; which is according to the free Liberties of the free born People of *England*."

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Analyze the Historical Evidence**
 - Were Pilgrims, the original settlers of the Plymouth Colony, democratic?
 - Here are resources to guide the discussion:
 - [The Mayflower Compact](#), George Mason University
 - [Mayflower Compact](#), Constitutional Rights Foundation
 - [Mayflower and the Mayflower Compact](#), Plimoth Plantation
- **The Mayflower II: Design the First Government on Mars**
 - Imagine a 21st Century Mayflower Spaceship landing on Mars 400 years after the Pilgrims landed in North America. The ship is damaged and cannot return.
 - Make decisions about how to govern the new Mars colony and record those decisions in video as well as a written document. The [Mayflower II](#) learning experience was developed by the Constitutional Rights Foundation.

Colonial Governments

The Virginia [House of Burgesses](#) was the **first legislative assembly** in the American colonies. The assembly met for the first time in Jamestown's church on July 30, 1619. It had 23 original members, including the colony's governor, all of whom were property-owning white men. It was modeled after the British Parliament and members met annually to vote on taxation and set local laws. You can learn more from [Social Studies for Kids: The Virginia House of Burgesses](#).



Photo of "[Interior of the Virginia House of Burgesses](#)"
by [Frances Benjamin Johnston](#), Public Domain

Many settlements in New England practiced government through **town meetings**. Unlike in Virginia where people elected representatives to the House of Burgesses, town meetings were a form of direct democracy. All White men in a community participated in making decisions. You can learn more about town meetings in [Topic 6.10 of this book](#).

The formation of different forms of colonial government was a step toward democratic self-government. ThoughtCo.'s [Colonial Governments of the Original 13 Colonies](#) offers a colony-by-colony overview of the beginnings of these governments.

Who Voted in Early America

Voting, though not uniform in every colony, was done by about 10% of the population. Typically, only free white, male property owners 21 years of age or older could vote. Such individuals might be a member of a predominant religious group, or a Freeholder, meaning the person owned land worth a certain amount of money. Slaves, women, Jews, Catholics and men too poor to be freeholders could not vote ([Who Voted in Early America? Constitutional Rights Foundation](#) 1991).

In some places, women who owned property, free Black people, and Native Americans could vote, but these were rare exceptions. New Jersey's first constitution in 1776 gave voting rights to "all inhabitants of this colony, of full age, who are worth fifty pounds ... and have resided within the county ... for twelve months" (as cited in [National Park Service, 2018, para. 2](#)). It is unclear how many women actually voted. In 1807, the New Jersey legislature passed a law stating no persons were to be allowed to vote except free white men who either owned property worth 50 pounds or were taxpayers.

Colonists generally did not vote for their governors, instead they were appointed by the English king. In Connecticut and Rhode Island, however, voters elected governors. Here is a list of [American Colonial Governors](#).

Pirate Democracy in the Atlantic World

The time period from the 1500s to the mid-1800s was a golden age of piracy and privateering in the Atlantic world, and pirates helped England and France in their imperial competition against Spain in the New World. A pirate is someone who attacks and robs ships at sea; a privateer is a privately owned ship engaging in piracy on behalf of a government or country.

Although pirates sought money and financial gain through plunder and violence, they also severely disrupted Spanish trade and shipments of gold and silver, and in so doing, **promoted English and French colonization in North America**. For a time, noted history researcher and middle school teacher Jason Acosta (2005), “privateering began as a private venture, became backed by the crown, evolved into a money making scheme, and then led to the success of royal colonies like Port Royal and Tortuga” (p. 86). Once colonial trade in items like tobacco, coffee, and tea was firmly established and very profitable and competition with Spain lessened, England and France turned to suppressing piracy as a threat to their empires.

Interestingly, Acosta’s research uncovered evidence of **democratic practices on board pirate ships**. Utilizing primary sources including pirate charters, travel narratives, court hearings, first-hand accounts of captives, and sermons delivered at pirate hangings, Acosta found examples of democracy and separate branches of government on ships. All members of the crew (including Black people and those of different nationalities) could vote. The captain was elected. The crew functioned like Congress and as a jury. The quartermaster served as a judge in settling disputes. Injured sailors (such as loss of an eye or a leg) received financial compensation from the ship’s common fund.

Acosta concluded that pirates, who were largely outcasts from society and victims of oppression (including slavery and indentured servitude as well as the brutal treatment of sailors on merchant and naval ships), **gravitated toward more egalitarian practices where everyone was treated equally**, although often harshly. While pirate democracy may not have directly influenced the writing of the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, it offers another historical example of people seeking to be free from oppressive rulers and unfair social and economic conditions.

Suggested Learning Activity

- **Write a Children's Book**
 - Write a children's book about pirates and pirate ships which explains how democracy works to a younger audience.

What If America Chose a King or Queen, not a President?

The American Revolution was a rebellion against rule by a king, inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of reason, liberty, and natural rights of mankind.

The [Declaration of Independence stated](#): “But when a government continually violates the rights of the people, clearly and with the purpose of exercising absolute power over them, the people have a right and duty to throw off that government. That is exactly what has happened here in British

America, and which compels us to throw off the government of Great Britain. The current King has continually violated our rights, obviously intending to exercise absolute power over us.”

England had a long history of nobles challenging an all-powerful monarchy, beginning with the Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights which set limits on the power of the King to act without the consent of Parliament. Nevertheless, rule by a monarch, a King or a Queen, has been a dominant form of government for centuries; here is a [List of Rulers of Europe](#) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Monarchy rests on the laws of **primogeniture** where the eldest child in a family (and so on in a line of succession) inherits the parent’s estate and title. There are famous monarchs in world history: Louis XIV, Peter the Great, and many women rulers including Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great, and Queen Victoria (see [Great Women Rulers](#)).

There are 29 monarchies ruling 40 countries in the world today, although many of the kings and queens have only ceremonial functions in constitutional democracies. Queen Elizabeth II, 94 years old in 2020, is the longest serving monarch, having begun her reign February 6, 1952. She is Queen of Great Britain, Northern Ireland, and 15 countries in the [Commonwealth Realm](#). Other nations with monarchs include: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bhutan, Oman, Brunei, Cambodia, Luxembourg, Belgium, Swaziland, Sweden, Andorra, Qatar, Denmark, Jordan, Vatican City, Morocco, Lesotho, Netherlands, Bahrain, Japan, Spain, Thailand, Lichtenstein, Monaco, Malaysia, and Kuwait. Some of these monarchs have great power - with the King of Saudi Arabia being considered the most powerful absolute monarch in the world today.

But **monarchy is not democracy**, as Abraham Lincoln reminded the audience during his [speech at Chicago, Illinois](#), July 10, 1858. The idea that the Declaration of Independence does not apply to Blacks, Lincoln said, is the "arguments that kings have made for enslaving the people in all ages of the world. You will find that all the arguments in favor of king-craft were of this class; they always bestrode the necks of the people, not that they wanted to do it, but because the people were better off for being ridden."

Lincoln continued, "let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man—this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position—discarding our standard that we have left us. Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal."

Media Literacy Connections: Unpacking Media Coverage of the Royals

In early 2021, Oprah Winfrey's much-anticipated interview with (Prince) Harry and Meghan Markle aired on television in Great Britain and the United States, creating a huge media event. Online and print media devoted extensive coverage to stories of palace intrigue and family conflict, including revelations about racism within the royal family. The interview followed Harry's and Meghan's break with the royal family in which they voluntarily gave up their royal duties and their His/Her Highness titles. In these activities, you will explore the media coverage of the Royals:

- [Activity 1: Analyze Media Coverage of Harry and Meghan's Interview with Oprah](#)
- [Activity 2: Analyze Movie Trailers About British Kings and Queens and American Presidents](#)

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Create a Counterfactual United States History using Jamboard or Canva**
 - Create a counterfactual history Jamboard or Canva presentation imagining what government and society would be like in the United States today if the authors of the Constitution made the leader of the American government a King or Queen and not a President. **Counterfactual history** involves answering “what if” questions by imagining what might have happened differently if certain actions had occurred.
 - Topics to consider as you design your presentation:
 - Would the United States have a King or a Queen and a royal family? Would the White House be the home of the monarchy?
 - How much political power would the King or Queen have in relation to Congress and the Supreme Court? Would there be a Congress or Supreme Court?
 - What ceremonial roles would the monarchy perform in society?
 - How would the King or Queen use social media to share their views and policies with the nation?
- **Write a People's History**
 - Why were some women and African Americans allowed to vote in New Jersey for a period of time after the American Revolution?
 - Why were all women and African Americans then denied the right to vote?
- **Design a Promotional Flyer for a North American Colony**
 - **Royal colonies** were owned by the king.
 - **Proprietary colonies**, such as Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware, were basically land grants from the British government.
 - **Self-governing colonies**, including Rhode Island and Connecticut, formed when the king granted a charter to a joint-stock company, and the company then set up its own government independent of the crown.

Online Resources for Government and Voting in Colonial America

- [Emergence of Colonial Governance](#) offers a brief background on government in the 13 colonies.
- [Voting in Colonial Virginia](#)

- [American Colonies](#) for a comparative look at colonial governments in the colonies from teacher Greg Feldmeth, Polytechnic School, Pasadena, California.

2.UNCOVER: Lucy Terry Prince, Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer: Women's Roles in Colonial America

In history and social studies classes, most elementary and secondary school students learn little about the roles and struggles of women in early American society. Although mostly invisible in history textbooks, noted one historian, "fine ladies, servant girls, black slave women, middle class matrons, and native American women all contributed to the development of American life" (De Pauw, 1975, p. x). After all, **almost half of the colonial North America population were women.**

Women lived in a patriarchal society. They had no rights, they could not vote, and they could not live on their own. Women had primary roles in child-rearing and maintaining households, but that picture is far from complete. "Women's work," noted Linda Grant De Pauw (1975, p. 3) consisted of 5 main areas of responsibility: "feeding the family; manufacturing the family's clothing and such household essentials as candles and soap; keeping the home, the family, and the family's clothing clean; serving as doctor, nurse and midwife. . .; and caring for children."

Women had central roles in every aspect of colonial life outside the home as well. White women supported the businesses of their husbands, and "it was quite common for a widow to carry on the business after her husband's death" (De Pauw, 1975, p. 26). Women on the island of Nantucket where men engaged in the whaling industry were away for years at a time assumed leadership roles both in family and religious settings. Several 19th century female activists including Lucretia Mott, Martha Coffin Wright, abolitionist Anna Gardner, and women's rights advocate Maria Mitchell "all trace their roots back to the Nantucket Quaker meeting of the eighteenth century" (Kovach, 2015, p. viii).

The [Women's Museum of California](#) has short summaries of several notable women in colonial America, including Anne Hutchinson (discussed below), Mary Chilton (first person off the Mayflower), Anne Bradstreet (first published American poet), Mary Dyer (Quaker martyr and discussed below) and Mary Rowlandson (writer).

Lucy Terry Prince

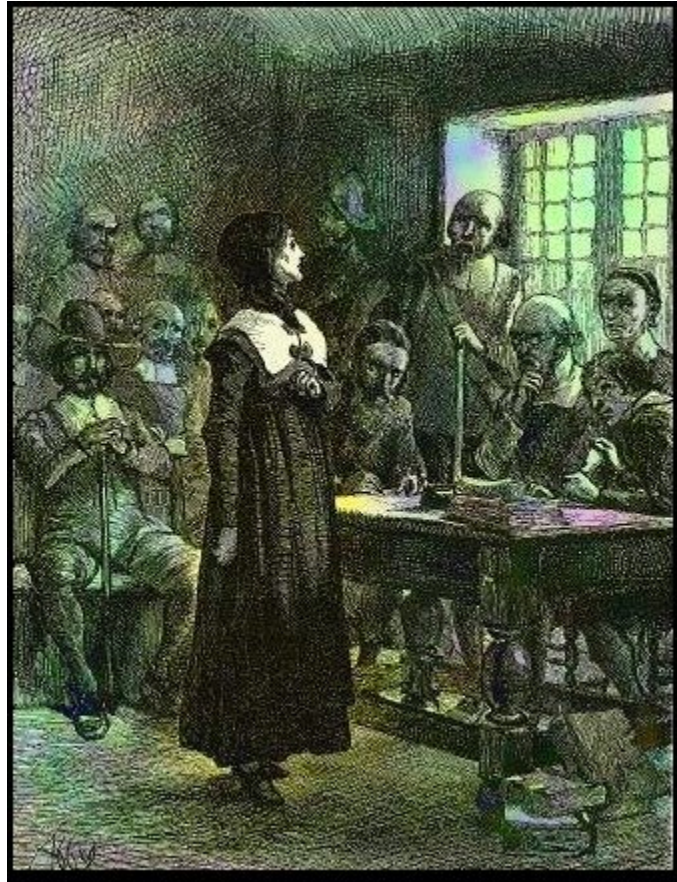
As an infant, Lucy Terry Prince was taken from her family in Africa and brought first to Rhode Island and then Massachusetts where she was sold in slavery. In 1746, while still an enslaved woman in Deerfield, Massachusetts, [Lucy Terry Prince wrote the earliest known poem](#) by a **Black writer** in North America. The poem, [Bars Fight](#), described a bloody encounter between Native warriors and colonial settlers. It was sung or recited till published in 1855. It is the only piece of her poetry writing that survives today. A book about her poetry and here life is subtitled **Singer of History**.

But Lucy Terry Prince's story is about more than her writing. She subsequently married, gained her freedom, purchased land in Vermont with her husband, and raised six children, two of whom served in the American Revolution. In 1803, she successfully argued a case before the Vermont Supreme Court. She died in 1821 at age 97.

You can view a short [video summary of her life here](#).

Anne Hutchinson

[Anne Hutchinson](#) was born in Alford, England in 1591. She emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1634 where she became a religious dissenter and advocate for women in challenging male authority. Through a series of meetings among women in her home, she openly questioned Puritan beliefs about salvation and religious law.



Anne Hutchinson on Trial
by [Edwin Austin Abbey](#), Public Domain

In 1638, following a trial as a heretic, she was banished to Rhode Island on charges of blasphemy and sedition. She later moved to the colony of New Netherlands (now New York) and was killed during an Indian raid. Learn more from the National Women's History Museum's [Biography of Anne Hutchinson](#).



Mary Dyer Statue Outside the Massachusetts State House, Boston, Massachusetts
[Mary Dyer by Sylvia Shaw Judson](#) | Public Domain

Mary Dyer

[Mary Dyer](#), a friend of Anne Hutchinson, was also a religious dissenter, openly advocating the teachings of the Society of Friends or Quakers in opposition to the prevailing religious views of the rulers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Like Anne Hutchinson, Mary Dyer held that God spoke directly to individuals, a view that directly challenged the authority and power of the clergy. In 1656, the colony passed a law banishing Quakers from Massachusetts (a second law added that those who returned to the colony after being banished were to be put to death). Dyer, who returned to the colony in 1660 after being banished was executed after refusing to acknowledge the authority of the law (Bremer, 2012). A statue of Mary Dyer can be found in front of the Massachusetts state capitol in Boston.

The stories of Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer (along with that Roger Williams who was also banished from Massachusetts for his religious views) open a study of the role of **dissent** in American history and government. Hutchinson and Dyer's dissents were religious, but the principle of the dissent rests on the willingness of individuals to oppose laws and practices they believe are wrong. Political dissent has been powerful force for change in United States history, but it is often under taught in schools, especially when the dissenters were women. But the examples of the women's suffrage and women's rights movement, the roles of Harriet Tubman, Claudette Colvin, Sylvia Mendez in the struggle for civil rights, and the efforts of Mother Jones, Margaret Sanger, Helen Keller, Alice Paul, and Dolores Huerta - to name just a few - reveal the legacy of dissent that followed

from efforts of two colonial women who refused to accept the status quo in their society.

Looking at the United States today, what is your definition of dissent? There is more about dissent and protest in [Topic 4/The Role of Political Protest](#) of this book.

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Create a Anne Hutchinson Biography Poster**
 - [Ann Hutchinson and Courage: In the Face of Adversity](#), *Voices of History*, Bill of Rights Institute
 - [Religious Dissent](#), The Huntington Library
 - [Anne Hutchinson: Religious Dissident](#)
- **Stage a Mock Trial**
 - [The Trial of Anne Hutchinson \(1637\)](#) using materials from the Famous Trials website
 - [Trial and Interrogation of Anne Hutchinson](#) from Swarthmore College
 - [Reader's Theatre: The Trial of Anne Hutchinson](#), Huntington Library
 - [The Trials of Mary Dyer \(1659 & 1660\)](#), Famous Trials website
- **State Your View**
 - Why is dissent important?
 - Do people in the United States have the right to dissent?
- **Design Your Plan for Dissent**
 - Would words or actions be most important?
 - Would you speak out in public, march in protest, share your thoughts in writing or songs or videos, change your hairstyle or the way you dress, or take some other actions?

Online Resources for Anne Hutchinson and Women's Roles in Colonial America

- [Anne Hutchinson](#) from the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum
- PRIMARY SOURCE: [Gender and Opportunity in Colonial America](#), California State University Long Beach
- [Early Colonial Gender Roles](#), Teaching LGBTQ History
- [Religious Dissent](#), Huntington Library
- [Dissent and Democracy in Modern American History](#), The Newberry

3.ENGAGE: Should 16-Year-Olds or 17-Year-Olds Be Allowed to Vote?

Passed and ratified in 1971, the [26th Amendment](#) to the Constitution gives 18-year-olds the right to vote in state and federal elections. Many people now support lowering the voting age to 16 or 17 for state and local elections or, in some cases, just local elections. Takoma Park, Maryland was the first city to lower the voting age to 16 in local elections in 2013. In 2020, San Francisco narrowly passed [Proposition G](#), becoming the first major city to extend the voting age to 16 for local elections and ballot measures.



[Image by amberzen from Pixabay](#)

A lower voting age is seen as a way to encourage greater participation by young people in political and civic matters. Opponents of the idea cite the immaturity of youth as a drawback to informed decision-making as voters.

A number of states allow 16-year-olds or 17-year-olds to vote in congressional or presidential primaries. Around the world, 16-year-olds can vote in Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, the islands of Jersey and Guernsey and the Isle of Man; 17-year-olds can vote in Indonesia, North Korea, the Seychelles, and Sudan the Timor-Leste.

[Massachusetts Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley](#) has introduced legislation allowing youth as young as 16-years-old to vote for members of Congress and the President.

The Census Bureau reported that there were 42 million adolescents between 10 and 19 in the U.S. in 2016, a number that is projected to grow to nearly 44 million by 2050. How might the nation's political dynamics change if going forward 16-year-olds and/or 17-year-olds could vote?

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Dialog and Debate:** Should the voting age be lowered in the U.S.?
 - What are the arguments in favor of, and against, lowering the voting age to 16 or 17?
 - Will a lower voting age create greater political interest and civic involvement among young people?
 - Would you support lowering the age requirement for being elected as a member of Congress, a state office, or President?

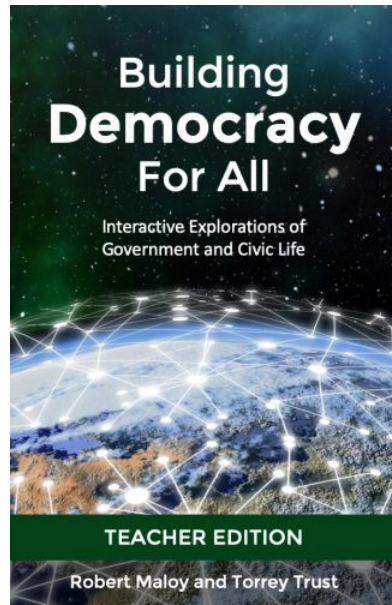
Resources

- [Lower the Voting Age for Local Elections](#), FairVote
- [Why Is the Voting Age 18?](#) CBS8, San Diego
- [Should 18-Year-Olds be Allowed to Vote?](#) PBS Newshour

Standard 4 Conclusion

Investigate explored the first steps of self-government by European colonists that included important founding documents (The Mayflower Compact), political institutions (colonial legislative assemblies), and decidedly undemocratic practices (only men could vote and slavery was legal).

Uncover focused on Anne Hutchinson, a religious dissenter who was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for questioning the authority of the Puritans. **Engage** asked should 16-year-olds and 17 year-olds be allowed to vote in local and state elections?



Maloy, R. W. & Trust, T. (2020). *Building Democracy for All*. EdTech Books.
<https://edtechbooks.org/democracy>