The 1970s and 1980s saw a swelling floodtide of “republicanism” sweep over United States historiography. Republicanism was increasingly perceived as the chief ideological propulsion behind American history and at its peak, this tide carried on its inflated explanatory current groups as disparate as 18th century Virginia planters and 20th century factory workers. A prominent 1993 article exposed the vacuousness with which the concept was being handled, and the tide receded with the rapidity of the dot.com crash.¹

Scholars of Elizabethan and early Stuart England largely sat this boom-bust cycle out. The historians of Anglo-American republicanism routinely began chronologically with the English political theorists of the 1650s, and republicanism’s Delphi Oracle, J.G.A. Pocock, pronounced English republicanism a structural impossibility before that time. But in the late 1980s, scholars began making tentative forays across the Pocockian divide. ²


²J. G. A. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the
detected republican conceptions of the commonwealth underlying privy council decisions in the 1580s and on a practical level steering the operations of town governments. Literary scholars discovered a rich vein of Ciceronian humanism running through the literature of Tudor and early Stuart England and noted how authors could deploy republican motifs in imaginative writing.\(^3\) Scholars now speak of a “gentry republic” in England, “republican office holding,” and a diffused practice of “quasi-republicanism.”\(^4\) In response, critics have accused such scholars of repeating, in effect, the sins of their recent American forebears, slapping the label “republican” on arguments for limited monarchy and resistance theory or on any sign of subjects actively participating in the government of the country.\(^5\) Indeed, one of the most vigorous teasers-out of hints of early Stuart republicanism concedes that, in his view, during this period, “there was no coherent republican tradition.”\(^6\)

This paper will argue that there was indeed a long standing coherent republican tradition

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\(^6\) Peltonen, *Classical Humanism*, 12.
in England and that it was considerably more than an intellectual exercise: the tradition was presbyterianism and in the 1630s its promulgators set up in Massachusetts a self-consciously republican polity. Besides reconstructing a hidden vein of genuine republicanism in England, the paper will bring clarity to the controverted question of what the founders of Massachusetts were up to with their new government while at the same time it will draw attention to long-standing ideological fissures in England, as well as the impact of the political disputes of the 1620s.

Historians have repeatedly remarked on the emphasis made by early presbyterians that their’s was a participatory government opposed to the “absolute rule” of the bishops. As William Fulke put it in the early 1570s, “In the Church, ther ought to be no monarchy or sole absolute government but that is referred peculiarly to our saviour Christe only.” The presbyterian Thomas Cartwright highlighted this point in his famous literary clash with the future archbishop Whitgift in the 1570s, even as he vigorously argued that England was a limited monarchy against Whitgift’s absolutist direction. What I wish to stress, though, is not that the presbyterians saw themselves simply in opposition to tyranny, but that in crucial ways they saw presbyterianism as a prophylactic against tyranny, constituted by the classical republican drive to restrain the corrupting effects of power. Absolute rule, in other words, was not simply the opposite of presbyterianism, it was the defining “other” that gave presbyterianism much of its

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8William Fulke, A Briefe and Plaine Declaration, Concerning the Desires of all Those Faithfull Ministers, That Haue and Do Seeke for the Discipline and Reformation of the Church of Englande (London, 1584), 80-81.
logic.

The centrality of absolute rule to the argument for presbyterianism runs through its critique of the Church of England. Among the many dire failings of that church, the worst and most fundamental was the bishops themselves—“Popelike,” and "proude, pontificall and tyrannous” or “Rebels and traitours unto God,” to repeat standard lines of abuse.9 But if the problems with the Church of England grew out of the problem of corrupt and tyrannical bishops, as presbyterians argued so forcefully, why not simply install godly bishops? If the church could be run by men who labored to see powerful preaching in every parish, sought the advice of their clergy, and took care to see that the church’s discipline worked effectively, the bulk of the presbyterian critique of the Church of England would wither away.

The presbyterian answer was that this problem could not be solved by finding good men. The office of bishop, unwarranted by scripture though it was, was not the fundamental issue, for it was the surface manifestation of a deeper, unavoidable corruption: lust for power. As Cartwright explained, a bishopric was where ambition met with an excess of power, and that lethal combination could only generate tyranny.10

More precisely, the combination generated antichristian tyranny, for so perilous was excess of power that it was the wedge by which Antichrist first entered the church. As the presbyterian foundational myth of the fall of the church had it, Antichrist got his toehold in the church when in a single congregation a minister asserted primacy over the other elders. Soon


some ambitious minister took a further step, falsely arrogating the name of bishop to himself in order to correct other ministers, and the slippery path went downhill from there. Next came preeminence by a single minister in a single city, then power over a number of cities, then power over fellow bishops, and finally power over the entire church: "So did Sathan in his misterie of iniquitie," lamented one presbyterian, "make these staires for the mounting of Antichrist: whereby at the last, he setled him as amongst the starres." ¹¹

If abuse of power was the fundamental, inevitable menace to the church, the ideal remedy was presbyterianism. Although the New Testament remained totally silent on the point, presbyterians thought it obvious that the participatory political structures of the New Testament churches were designed to prevent tyranny. “Common reason” alone, Thomas Cartwright claimed, in the absence of scriptural evidence, “doth teach that contraries are cured by their contraries.” Thus “to abolish the tyranny of the popish government, [it is] necessary to plant the discipline of Christ.” ¹² “Tyranny is avoyyed when no one man (contrarie to the ordinaunce of Christe),” Fulke explained, “shall presume to doe anye thing in the Church, without the advise and consent of others that bee Godlye and wise.” ¹³ Power in presbyterianism was diffused, in other words, not concentrated, with the express purpose of avoiding tyranny.

It was general principle among the presbyterians that collective decisions were always desirable to diffuse power. “One is easier to be corrupted,” warned Thomas Cartwright. For one man, like a bishop, to decide matters of discipline, was in itself tyranny, according to William

¹¹Walter Travers, A defence of the ecclesiastical discipline ordayned of God to be vsed in his Church. (Middelburg, 1588), 90. Cf., Works of Whitgift 2:379.

¹²Works of Whitgift, 2:441.
Fulke,¹⁴ It was for this reason that Thomas Cartwright justified the power of synods—the particular always gave way to the general; individual churches always gave way to many. Similarly, according to the Second Admonition to Parliament, the right way to “to resolve all doubts and questions in religion, and to pacifie all controversies of the churches, [was] to passe from one or few to moe, and from moe, to moe godly and learned”¹⁵

Since blocking tyranny, not removing bishops, per se, was the goal of the presbyterians, suppressing bishops was only the first step to that goal. Presbyterians were well aware that the potential for tyranny and excessive concentration of power did not end as soon as ministers enjoyed parity and shared their power with lay elders. As the Second Admonition to Parliament (1572) bluntly put it, suppose these elders were to “usurpe authoritie over the whole churche whereby we might caste out the tirannie of the bishops, and bring in a new tyrannie of theirs.” The need to forestall that possibility was the reason for another critical element of presbyterianism, as Fulke explained. The elders acted not for themselves; their judgement “may rightly be accounted the judgment of the holy Church.” And this was for two reasons. The first was that they received their positions in the first place with the assent of the church. The other was that the church needed to consent to their decisions. That mechanism, explained the Second Admonition, meant that the elders could not “usurp” authority over the entire church.¹⁶

These presbyterians were no democrats. Fulke put it bluntly. Authority was granted to

¹³Fulke, Briefe and Plaine, 83.
¹⁴Works of Whitgift, 2:244; Fulke, Briefe and Plaine, 98.
¹⁵Works of Whitgift, 1:18; Frere and Douglas, eds., Puritan Manifestoes, 111.
¹⁶Frere and Douglas, eds., Puritan Manifestoes, 119; Fulke, Briefe and Plaine, 84, 86.
church, but its judgment is confused and God is not the author of confusion. Therefore, active
government belonged to the elders.17 Yet presbyterians were no less insistent that the “people”
always retained the right to withhold their consent from the elders’ decisions, and in that case
those decisions were void. While in practice, this system of checks and balances should have
been sufficient, no more than any other political theorists had the presbyterians completely
solved the problem of creating a foolproof route between the Sylla and Charbidys of tyranny and
“confusion.” Only one writer, Walter Travers, even explored the hypothetical question of what
was to happen in this system of checks and balances when eldership and people found
themselves at loggerheads, and the solution to him seemed simple; the eldership kept working on
the problem until the people agreed with them. The same writer seems to have envisioned that,
as a last resort, the churches collectively could override the decisions of a synod. 18

It is no great strain to label what the presbyterians envisioned at the heart of England’s
reformation as a godly republican web of churches. They rejected absolute rule in the church
while remaining vigilant for the signs of abuse of authority, and at least in part to avoid those
outcomes, they wanted power diffused and government by consent. For them, the absence of
absolute power was one indication of the presence of scriptural integrity. By envisioning their
order as a dynamic attempt to prevent the corrosive effects of power, they attempted to solve
what Pocock sees as the basic republican challenge of how to work out a way to remain “morally
and politically stable” in a temporal stream “essentially destructive of all systems of secular

17Fulke, Briefe and Plaine, 83.

18Walter Travers, Walter Travers, A Full and Plaine Declaration of Ecclesiasticall
Discipline owt of the Word of God, and off the Declining off the Church off England
from the Same, (Heidelberg, 1574), 54, 135.
stability,” a challenge that Pocock has labeled republicanism’s “Machiavellian moment.”

Presbyterian printed political theorizing ceased in the 1580s. This was probably a consequence of the heavy countercharges of disloyalty and “popularity” that such theorizing brought down on it. Polemicists subsequently defended their system simply on the basis that Scripture demanded it, without drawing on the rich traditions of classical political theory to explain why.

In the secular political sphere itself, Elizabethan presbyterians were not republicans, nor was there any reason why they should have been. They were, however, aggressive proponents of the rule of law and of limited monarchy. In the 1580s, for the advancement of their cause, they fought for the protection of the laws of England, as they understood them, freedom of speech in parliament, and restraints on the monarch’s prerogative. In developments critically foreshadowing future positions, in that decade, they began associating Roman Catholicism with secular tyranny, while at least one presbyterian, the precocious Dudley Fenner, stressed the duty of princes to defend liberty.

Presbyterians joined naturally enough in the struggles against the king’s prerogatives in the beginning of the seventeenth century, the more so since the Stuart attack on what were seen

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19 J. G. A. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition (Princeton, 1975), viii. Pocock in this seminal work, chapter 11, was more concerned to explain the structural reasons that made it impossible, he felt, for pre-Civil War puritans to manifest a “republican” type of civil consciousness than in exploring what they actually said on commonwealth themes. But more recent scholars have demonstrated how puritan civil activism, of which Pocock was well aware, had humanist roots.

as traditional liberties was accompanied by increasingly militant efforts to make the Church of England uninhabitable for puritans. Ambitious clerics hostile to puritanism and advancing the relatively novel conception of jure divino episcopacy were all too happy to assert the absolute authority of James I, who protected them. Charles I, ascending to the throne in 1625, liked the divine authority of kings and disliked parliament even more than his father, and he tilted the precarious balance of power in the Church of England even further away from Calvinist theology and from a live and let live attitude to discrete puritanism. On top of it all, he married a French Catholic and proved far more aggressively ingenious than James in finding extra-parliamentary ways to separate his subjects from their money.

These monarchical activities took place within an ominous European context. The Thirty Years War ravaging central Europe from 1618 to 1648 was the most dramatic manifestation of what seemed to militant English Protestants as a desperate continent-wide struggle of liberty and Protestantism against absolute monarchy and Roman Catholicism. Charles, given his aggressive assaults on both the status quo of the Church of England and the liberties of his subjects, practically invited his opponents to see England as the latest battleground of this war and fuse together their religious and civic concerns. By the end of the 1620s, the godliest members of parliament were weaving together a tapestry in which parliament, liberty, property, and religion appeared all under attack from a sinister Catholic conspiracy against England, with the king a co-conspirator, albeit perhaps unwittingly.

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21 For a recent analysis of the European context of the English disputes, see Jonathan Scott, England’s Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context (Cambridge, 2000), chap. 2

22 Conrad Russell, Parliaments and English Politics, 1621-1629 (Oxford, 1982), 379-81,
The puritan conflation of religion, liberty, and property did not cease at the level of rhetoric, and its defense did not stay confined within the halls of Parliament. Puritans tended to favor an active citizenry, zealous in pursuit of sound religion and morality, a preference inherited from a broader Christian humanist inheritance. Political consciousness among the people of England was rising in the 1620s, in any case, in response to the struggles among the country’s leaders. In late 1626 Charles demanded an extra-parliamentary massive forced loan from his subjects, with slender prospects of it ever being repaid. This demand was the most blatant example of an arbitrary monarchical run around parliament to date, and Charles practically invited the widespread protest that ensued. His controversial demand for the property of his subjects resulted in the jailing of seventy six gentlemen, the dismissal of four Lords from their local offices and the removal of the Chief Justice for failing to approve the loan.

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The forced loan also resulted in puritan-directed activism in Lincolnshire that has been called “one of the most effective protests against Crown policy in the entire pre-Civil War period.” Prominent future Massachusetts leaders were deeply involved in this protest. It was spearheaded by the earl of Lincoln, active in the organization of the Massachusetts Bay Company, and included a godly group around the earl including the ministers-to-be of Salem and Boston, Samuel Skelton and John Cotton, and future Massachusetts assistants Atherton Hough, Isaac Johnson (the earl’s son-in-law), William Coddington, Richard Bellingham, and John Humphry (another son-in-law), along with future Massachusetts governor Thomas Dudley, then Lincoln’s steward. Dudley coordinated the Lincolnshire protest in 1627 while Lincoln did a spell in prison for a pamphlet he distributed and probably wrote against the loan. Protests against the king’s behavior typically assumed his benevolent intentions and a harmony of interests between him and his subjects— as one member of parliament put it in 1629, while savaging the king’s policies, the king’s “goodness is so clear, that we need not mistrust.” The earl’s pamphlet, on the other hand, did not assume harmony but struggle. It made no acknowledgment of the king’s benevolence; the loan was part of a larger project to “suppresse Parlament” and rob the freemen of England of their liberties. Thus, to pay the loan would be to “make our selves the Instruments of our owne slavery,” and all those who cared for “the good of the common wealth” were refusing it. Both the pamphlet and the successful Lincolnshire protest movement presumed an

Press, 1987), is the standard account.

26Cust, Forced Loan, 171. This paragraph follows Cust’s interpretation.

oppositional politics that would become familiar in the 1640s.\(^\text{28}\)

The issues raised by the loan did not overtly overlap with religious issues, but a significant geographical connection existed between areas of strident protest against the loan and areas of puritanism. That overlap indicates the extent to which fight for true religion and the fight against what was perceived as arbitrary government had become intertwined.\(^\text{29}\) Future members of the Massachusetts Bay Company were among the London merchants who refused to pay the loan. John Winthrop kept his imprisoned neighbor, Sir Francis Barrington, informed of the significant resistance to the loan in the heavily puritan Stour Valley region. “What times are these!” lamented the Essex minister John Wilson to Winthrop early in 1627, “No man knowes what is his owne, or whither that he hath, be not kept for the enemies of god? and of our peace.” A year later, Wilson wrote a supportive electioneering letter to Barrington commending him and the rest of “those worthy Zelots and patriots” for their care of church and commonwealth. Two years later, Wilson left with Winthrop for Massachusetts.\(^\text{30}\)

The ultimately disastrously unsuccessful parliaments of 1628 and 1629 reinforced the ominous lessons of the forced loan for puritans. The latter parliament ended with the speaker of the house of commons held in his chair to keep him from calling an adjournment at the king’s

\(^\text{28}\) State Papers Domestic 16/54/82i, Public Records Office.


\(^\text{30}\) Robert Brenner, Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550-1653 (Princeton, 1993), 226-7; Winthrop Papers,
command. Meanwhile the house passed three resolutions read to it by John Eliot, denouncing innovations in religion and warning of the threat that Charles’ financial designs on his subjects’ property presented to the “Liberty of the Kingdome.” There was widespread concern that this might be the last meeting of parliament for an indefinite period; Charles warned that he would not call another until those he regarded as the ringleaders of parliamentary opposition had been punished and until their followers had “come to a better understanding of us and themselves”--not conditions likely to have puritans waiting in anticipation. Eliot had leisure enough while subsequently imprisoned in the Tower of London to make his own copy of Winthrop’s arguments for the Massachusetts colony.

Thus, by the time of the migration to Massachusetts in 1630, the migration’s leaders and many of its participants had gone through a pressure cooker process in which long standing concerns about arbitrary government in church and state had been both magnified and fused. It

1:337; 2:57; MSS 2644, fol 264v, British Library.

31Notestein, Commons Debates, 244.

19Kevin Sharpe, The Personal Rule of Charles I (New Haven, 1992), 56-7. Stepen Foster, The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570-1700 (Chapel Hill, 1991), chapter 3, discusses English politics of the 1620s and their effect on New England migration from a somewhat different perspective than this article. He sees the intertwining of civic and religious concerns as a calculated move by puritans involving “much clever and desperate politicking” designed to increase their coalition support, and he seems to ascribe this move to the failure of the 1626 York House debate about Arminianism (136-37). But parliamentary militant puritans like Sir Francis Hastings and Nicholas Fuller had resisted the extension of monarchical power from early in James’ reign. Or to be more precise, the peculiar circumstances of English politics, in which absolutist tendencies in the government were continually associated with opposition to puritanism insured that the affinity between puritanism, limited monarchy, and English liberties, although certainly not intrinsically unbreakable, would remain ongoing.

had been driven home to them just how vulnerable both Protestantism and the subjects’ liberties were when confronted by an arbitrary government, and how important it was to be willing to take drastic steps to protect both. Liberty and godliness rose or fell together; puritan ideology now had a pronounced civic as well as a religious dimension. “The free fruition of liberties,” according to the Massachusetts minister and ex-member of parliament Nathaniel Ward, was “the tranquillitie and Stabilitie of Churches and Commonwealths. And the deniall or deprivall thereof, the disturbance, if not the ruine of both.”21 It is surely not coincidental that, according to Thomas Dudley, plans for the Massachusetts Bay colony enterprise commenced in conversations in Lincolnshire in 1627 between him and “friends,” during the height of resistance to the forced loan.22 While we have no record of discussions of church polity among the leaders of Massachusetts before they emigrated, the easy way in which a radical form of presbyterianism was adopted there makes it fairly safe to assume that they were at least comfortable with the system’s operating assumptions.

The Massachusetts Bay Company’s charter gave the company’s stockholders considerable scope for preventing arbitrary government. Granted by King Charles I in 1629, the charter called for the freemen of the company to meet four times a year in a “General Court” to make laws for the company and admit new freemen. In one of those meetings, the Court was to elect a governor, deputy governor, and court of assistants who would meet monthly. Yet for all the freemen’s theoretical power, their role was not so critical in practice. In the short period of


the company’s operation in England, as few as a handful of the hundred or more freemen might show up to the meetings, and according to the charter itself, the presence of either the governor or deputy governor and six of the assistants was enough to constitute a quorum; the freemen were technically not needed at all in order for the government of the company to function.\(^2\)

The leading men who agreed to migrate to Massachusetts in 1630 did so on the condition that the charter and governing powers of the company migrate with them. The company agreed, and the company’s government, along with the charter, arrived in Massachusetts in July, 1630. Governor John Winthrop, deputy governor Thomas Dudley, and eleven assistants who crossed with them, once in Massachusetts, quickly took on the responsibilities of running the new colony as the Court of Assistants.\(^2\) With only two or three freeman in Massachusetts and no stipulation in the charter that any freemen were required at Court meetings, the Court of Assistants seem to have regarded itself at first as an autonomous self-perpetuating board. It provided for the maintenance of the ministers, regulated commerce and wages, punished wrong doers, and supervised the settlement process.\(^2\)

But this self-contained phase of the new colony’s government lasted a mere three and a half months. On October 19, 1630, Governor Winthrop presided over the first American meeting of

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\(^2\)Mass Records, 1:10-12, 45, 47, 50. For a prosopographical study of the Company’s freemen before the migration to Massachusetts see Francis Rose-Troup, The Massachusetts Bay Company and Its Predecessors (New York, 1930), chapter 16.

\(^2\)Revell and Vassall (quickly returned). Isaac Johnson and Edward Rossiter were both dead by October. The others were Sir Richard Saltonstall, Roger Ludlow, Increase Nowell, William Pynchon, William Coddington, Simon Bradstreet, and Thomas Sharpe.

\(^2\)Mass Records, 1:73-78; John Gorham Palfrey, History of New England During the Stuart Dynasty 3 vols., (Boston, 1865), 1: 323.
the General Court, called, according to the Court records, “for the establishinge of the
government.” A “revolution,” Edmund Morgan has called this meeting. What was
“revolutionary” about it was the decision to voluntarily extend the category of freemen to a great
many of the adult males in the colony.

The Court initially limited the new freemen’s powers to removing unsatisfactory
assistants and voting for new ones in case of vacancies during a once-yearly meeting of the
General Court.26 These restrictions crumbled fast, however: yearly elections of the governor and
assistants came in 1632, and in 1634, a reconstituted General Court took over as the colony’s
chief judicial court and legislative body, with the freemen represented by deputies. Yet even the
initial change of 1630 made Massachusetts the only polity within Charles’ realms where the
voters had final control over all of the officials who immediately affected their lives.

Historians’ explanations of this change have ranged widely, from the driving force of
covenant theology to the need to integrate previous immigrants to the Bay into the new colony.
What these explanations share in common is that they are hypothetical, divorced from the recent
English political struggles, and neglectful of the one surviving near-contemporary explanation
for the change in the franchise.27 The colony’s official historian William Hubbard wrote in the

26Mass Records, 1:79-80, 87.
27Some historians see it as the desperate action of “puritan oligarchs.” The colony’s
leaders, these historians argue, felt pressure from the other colonists to give them some
form of involvement. But the Assistants chose to give way to that pressure in the most
limited manner possible, violating the terms of the charter in order to give the new
freemen the minimum amount of control over the government they could get away with.
There is no evidence, however, that the “oligarchs” were responding grudgingly to
pressure from ordinary colonists, and such pressure would appear a fairly precocious
concern in any case; they had only been in Massachusetts for a few months, and raw
survival was the great preoccupation-- no other chartered colony had given voting rights
late 1670s that in 1630 (when he was a nine year old immigrant), “it was supposed by some” that “ambition” would “naturally” incline men “to invade the rights and liberties of others”; therefore the decision by the Court to make the government consensual was “for the preserving the liberty to its inhabitants within the first two years, let alone the first three months. Moreover, the new freemen were not the stock holders envisaged in the original charter, and the Court was under no obligation to them, thus it was arguably not out of line with the spirit of the charter, although certainly out of line with the letter, that the Court in giving the colonists voting privileges to which they were not entitled, did not define these privileges expansively. See James Truslow Adams, The Founding of New England (Boston, 1921), 141-3; Rose-Troup, Massachusetts Bay Company, 109-10; Charles McClean Andrews, The Colonial Period of American History, 4 vols (New Haven, 1934) 1: 434, 438; Richard S. Dunn, Puritans and Yankees; the Winthrop Dynasty of New England, 1630-1717 (Princeton, 1962), 14.

Other, mostly later historians, led by Perry Miller, accept that the assistants were under no obligation to admit any more freemen. That they admitted them anyway was not due to hypothetical pressure from below, these historians argue, but due to puritans’ theologically driven attraction to covenants-- God had made a covenant with the Massachusetts immigrants to be a special people to him, but they could only carry out this divine covenant by making a covenant among themselves to form a new government. There is, however, no evidence that Winthrop and his associates either imagined or had any reason to imagine that they were doing anything so grandiose as making a new covenant and creating a government from scratch. They were proposing to add what amounted at most to a new nonshareholding category of freemen to the company while accordingly changing the voting procedures for the magistrates in line with what they argued was the charter’s intention. There was no new government created by consent at any point in this process. Massachusetts was a “corporation founded by free consent,” but this free consent had taken place in England among its original members, and new members voluntarily demonstrated their consent by joining it. The 1629 charter remained in place as the government’s foundation instrument, and there was not even a symbolic reappointment of the existing officers at this alleged moment of creation. See Perry Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (Cambridge, 1939); Edmund Morgan The Puritan Dilemma; the Story of John Winthrop. (Boston, 1958), 78; Stephen Foster, Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England (New Haven, 1971), 74. I read the Court’s use of the term “establisheing” to mean “making stable,” not “creating.” By contrast, Connecticut was being created from scratch in the late 1630s, and William Hubbard, A General History of New England, from the Discovery to MDCLXX, (1815, rept. Boston, 1848), 309, suggests that it was the principle of an original contract with the people that caused the leaders of Connecticut not to restrict the franchise to church members.
of the people, and preventing any entrenching thereon by the power of the rulers.”28 Once the Court had determined a necessity to guard against arbitrary government, it was virtually a given that the result would involve the ongoing consent of the people.

Unlike the other interpretations, Hubbard’s has a great deal of circumstantial evidence to support it. Winthrop later denounced government, “where a people have men sett over them without their choyce, or allowance” (which was the case initially in Massachusetts) as “Tiranye, and impietye.” Appropriately for a puritan, Winthrop envisioned an active electorate, whose liberty was not a” bare passive capacitye of freedome or immunity, but such a Libertye, as hath power to Acte upon the cheife meanes of its owne welfare.” He surely had in mind the numerous members of parliament jailed by Charles at the end of the 1620s when he assured the colonists in 1632 that the General Court meeting once a year to elect the Court of Assistants was the equivalent of a parliament; the colonists could there “conferr & proponde anythinge” regarding the replacement of assistants and “declare their grevances without beinge subjecte to Question or &c.”29 One of the assistants present at the October 1630 meeting, William Pynchon, later found echoes of the “tyranny” of the forced loan in the effort of the Connecticut government to requisition a canoe of his without his consent.30 The three ministers hired by the company, Wilson, Skelton, and George Philips (see below), who were present in 1630 all at various times before or afterwards demonstrated their opposition to arbitrary government; they probably would have encouraged the change. The “people” at this meeting of the General Court came mostly

28Hubbard, General History, 147.

from regions of the greatest protest against Charles’ activities. In other words, concern about the liberty of the people and the danger of arbitrary government was demonstrably so diffuse among those present at the 1630 meeting of the General Court that there is ample reason to give credence to Hubbard’s claim. The franchise was expanded, however cautiously, to avoid tyranny and ensure accountable government.

It does not seem too far fetched to call this reordering of the government republican, both on theoretical and practical grounds. It made the government entirely answerable to the electorate and it was instituted to prevent incipient tyranny. That interpretation is reinforced by another fast emerging consensus among the Massachusetts freemen– a determination to avoid hereditary rule. Winthrop and some ministers, including Cotton, never lost the sense implicit in the 1630 restructuring of the government that the rulers of the country should have tenure in office for life, subject to good behavior. On the other hand, some freemen as early as 1633 are recorded as thinking that the governor should change every year, and the assistants at least occasionally, lest these positions “be esteemed hereditary.” Winthrop himself was removed as governor in 1640 after alarm that the frequency with which he was reelected was planting the seeds of hereditary government. The famous minister John Cotton was extremely blunt about the evils of hereditary rule in 1635 when he answered Lord Saye and Sele and other magnates contemplating immigration but asking for a hereditary upper house in Massachusetts. “Hereditary power and authority” was not a necessary component of government, Cotton

32WJ, 292, 325.
explained, but it “standeth only by the civil laws of some commonwealths.” It was an illogical concept, Cotton went on to tell his titled audience, since even in commonwealths with hereditary rule power and authority did not descend to all of a person’s heirs. The commonwealth of Massachusetts. Cotton warned, would be subjected to “reproach and prejudice” if it were to give authority and power to someone whom God had not called to such a position. John Winthrop appears to have made the case even more forcefully in a now-disappeared letter he wrote to Lord Saye. Saye interpreted Winthrop as arguing that hereditary rulership led to tyranny. How hereditary kings might escape Cotton and Winthrop’s chains of logic both men left unexplained.

The second major adjustment of the Massachusetts polity occurred at the first meeting of the General Court subsequent to October 1630. On May 18, 1631, officers and “people” voted that from henceforth “noe man shalbe admitted to the freedome of this body politicke, but such as are members of some of the churches within the lymitts of the same.”

33 Saye, after demanding a hereditary upper house in Massachusetts, had made a 180 degree turn in his own colony of Providence Island. He offered to make the wealthier inhabitants of the island freeholders eligible to serve on the colony’s council and elect its governor. This offer was part of an effort to lure the minister Ezekiel Rogers and his congregation there in 1638. Rogers decided instead to go to Massachusetts, and Winthrop subsequently chivied Lord Saye for his inconsistency. Morgan, ed., *Puritan Political Ideas*, 165; *Winthrop Papers*, 3: 266-7. Hubbard, *General History*, 377, appears to have seen the now-vanished letter of Winthrop’s to which Saye and Sele responded. On Rogers, see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Providence Island, 1630-1641: The Other Puritan Colony* (New York, 1993), 255.

34 *Winthrop’s Journal*, 74; *Mass Records*, 1:87. Historians sometimes suggest that the freemen probably did not participate in this decision, but see B. Katherine Brown, “Freemanship in Puritan Massachusetts,” *American Historical Review*, 59 (1954), 869. Most adult male colonists would probably eventually have qualified under the new restriction, and there is a long standing historiographical tradition that sees this franchise as “democratic” in relationship to the English franchise. But historians have recently
churches did not hand out memberships easily to begin with, and the standards grew steadily
more severe in the 1630s. The Massachusetts Bay Company’s freemen, and thus its rulers, were
from henceforth to consist of no one but “visible saints,” a franchise unique in Christendom; the
rule of saints among Protestants had previously only been associated with fanatics like the
Anabaptists of Münster.

Even among the English godly, this change in the franchise requirements was regarded as
unprecedented and dangerous. Presbyterians, whatever their civic preferences, had always
argued that there was no necessary relationship between church government and civil
government. As the scriptures demonstrated, the church existed under a wide variety of civil
administrations. Thus, the requirement that the franchise be limited to “saints by calling” seemed
to thrust the church illegitimately into the center of worldly power. To its godly critics, the
Massachusetts franchise even smacked of Roman Catholicism, in that it fostered the abusive
invasion of the civic sphere by the religious sphere.35 Massachusetts apologists in turn adamantly

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35 A Discourse about Civil Government in a New Plantation whose Design is Religion
(Cambridge, MA, 1663), 8. The title page gives Cotton as the author. Cotton Mather, in a
good position to know as Cotton’s grandson, claimed that the title page was wrong; John
Davenport was the author. Isabel Calder, “The Authorship of a Discourse About Civil
Government in a New Plantation Whose Design is Religion,” American Historical
Review 37 (1932), 267-9, argued that Mather was mistaken, but her argument to me
appears to be more assertion than demonstration, although later scholars have accepted it.
The author’s comment that he finds that debating through writing is “the safest way for
defended the scriptural foundations of their franchise. It was true that the church could live under any civil government, but the bible also dictated the form the civil government should take when the saints had the power to shape it; and it was clear that for the well-being of the church, the saints should rule over the saints-- the apostle Paul would have approved the Massachusetts franchise. Religious and civil spheres were kept separate and no magistrate would lose his position because he had been excommunicated.36

Defend its scriptural basis vehemently as the colony’s leaders might, the Massachusetts franchise was hardly a product of disinterested bible study alone. In early 1631, the colony’s saints had ample practical reasons to discover scriptural instructions about the franchise that no one else had noticed. Over the previous winter, news filtered into Massachusetts that political and religious affairs in England were “as you left them, and rather worser then any whit amended.” 37 News also came in of concern among the godly that the radical neo-presbyterian church order the Massachusetts emigrants were setting up demonstrated a separatist bias.38 On the home front, the Massachusetts authorities had opportunities enough to recognize that not all of those in the colony were necessarily sympathetic to their goals.

These present and potential threats to Massachusetts were sufficient reasons to limit the


37Eliot and the other members of parliament still imprisoned; peace concluded with Spain; Laud commencing his crackdown on the godly ministers of Essex; Alexander Leighton for his recent book calling on parliament to remove the antichristian bishops receiving “12 lashes with a 3 corded ship, one eare cut of, one nostril slit and stygmatized in the face.” Winthrop Papers, 2:322-3, 336.

38Winthrop Papers, 2: 333; Emerson, ed., Letters, 78
franchise to men who had demonstrated a commitment to its church order. Contemporaries explained the franchise change in those terms, and historians have regarded the explanation as adequate.\(^{39}\) John Cotton, for example, summarized this pragmatic position neatly in response to Lord Saye and Sele in 1636; If “worldly men” were to become the majority in Massachusetts, Cotton warned Saye, “as they soon might do,” they would elect worldly magistrates who would “turn the edge of all authority and laws against the church and its members.”\(^{40}\) The saintly franchise insured the survival of pure religion in New England.

Yet it is insufficient to discuss the franchise in terms that are either purely religious or purely pragmatic. The franchise law even at its very origin was swathed in conceptual language

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\(^{40}\) Morgan, ed., *Puritan Political Ideas*, 187. This important document tends to receive only passing notice by scholars. See, for example, Breen, *Character*, 50-51, 54, 74-75, Foster, *Solitary Way*, 38. It receives an extended analysis in Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “Definitions of Liberty on the Eve of Civil War: Lord Saye andSele, Lord Brooke, and the American Puritan Colonies,” *Historical Journal* 32 (1989), 35-57, but Kupperman works out of a framework that repeatedly severely exaggerates the extent to which church dominated state in Massachusetts. Contrary to Kupperman, “Massachusetts leaders” did not “purge” any magistrates in 1637 for unorthodox religious doctrines (25)–the freeholders voted them out of office. Nor was the “key principle” that no magistrate would be removed from civil office because he had been excommunicated ignored at this time (26), for no magistrate was excommunicated in the first place. Nor did ordinary colonists enjoy “access to civil rights only through the approbation of the congregation” (240) The only civil right that approbation of a congregation conferred was the franchise itself. The ministers in Massachusetts did not have any more of a “prescribed governmental role” in Massachusetts than they did in Kupperman’s foil to Massachusetts, Lord Saye and Sele’s colony of Providence Island (23) (influence not being the same as a prescribed role), and the congregational constraints on their power of excommunication gave them in some ways less capacity for civic disruption in Massachusetts than in Providence Island. Criticism of Massachusetts’ intolerance of religious opinions widely regarded as heterodox was a Civil War phenomenon, not a pre-Civil War one, thus such criticism does not necessarily illustrates conflicting definitions of liberty before the Civil War, as Kupperman argues.
that had extra-scriptural origins and pointed to concerns that extended beyond the preservation of
the church, as well as to ideological underpinnings more elaborate than raw pragmatism. The
Court records of May 18, 1631 give a single reason why the Court chose to limit the franchise to
church members; it was “to the end the body of the commons may be preserved of honest and
good men,”41 That explanation, while terse, is full enough to plunge us back into the political
controversies of the 1620s. “Honest” in this context was a common political term, but of pagan,
not Christian origin, stemming back the Latin “honestas,” as used in Cicero’s De Officiis, a
standard guidebook to a life of active participation in the commonwealth for the cultivated
Renaissance gentleman. In the 1620s, “honest,” while a common self-appellation of the godly,
took on a political dimension. It signified the “honest patriot,” a stout Protestant, of course, but
also one who would follow his conscience and defend the public interest by opposing the
arbitrary actions of the Crown— the Lincolnshire anti-forced loan pamphlet, for example, had
addressed itself to “all honest men.” According to a member of the House of Commons in 1628,
one mark of an “honest man” was imprisonment for refusing to pay the forced loan.42

Thus, piety and resistance to arbitrary rule were inextricably wound together by the
1630s, and the Massachusetts audience hearing the Court announce its desire for an “honest”

41 Mass Records, 1:87.

42 Richard Cust, “Wentworth’s ‘Change of Sides’ in the 1620s,” in J. F. Merritt, ed., The
Political World of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, 1621-1641 (Cambridge, 1996),
72; idem., ed., The Papers of Sir Richard Grosvenor, 1st Bart. (1585-1645) (Record
Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 134, 1996), xxvi-xxvii; idem., Forced Loan, 173. For
a comparable use of the term “honest” in the 1640s, see David Underdown, “‘Honest’
Radicals in the Counties, 1642-1949,” in Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas, eds.,
Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History Presented to
The electorate would have heard undertones that resonated far beyond issues of godliness and pure churches. Those undertones were comprised of the anxieties engendered by recent struggles in the English commonwealth, and those anxieties helped to drive both alterations in the franchise - civic concerns were intertwined with religious ones, in other words.

There is an abundance of subsequent evidence demonstrating that the colonists conceived of the innovative godly franchise as a boon to the state, not just the churches. Cotton claimed that the people’s liberty of election gave them the power “either to establish or subvert the commonwealth,” which was all the more reason that the franchise be based on saintliness, not wealth. If the electors needed to be saints, so too did those whom they elected. Cotton rejected out of hand the standard argument, raised by Saye and Sele, that someone could have the civic virtues necessary for magistracy without being a saint. Such men, Cotton said, even with the “best gifts and parts,” no matter how strongly they started, would eventually “turn aside by crooked ways.” Cotton (or John Davenport) warned that these men might appear “civilly honest, and morally just” but you could “have no assurance of their justice. Since all men who had not been converted were “unrighteous,” they would create factions and pervert justice; only “saints by calling” could be truly faithful to either God or man. The only reliable source of civic virtue was godliness. The preacher of the 1638 election sermon, Thomas Shepard, put forth the secular stakes of the godly franchise no less bluntly. A governor who was not a church member would be “an enemy unto the strictness of churches,” and, he warned, “ruine church you ruine

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In other words, according to both Cotton and Shepard, the best commonwealth, even on its own civic terms, was a saintly one, such as was being set up in Massachusetts.

In terms of political theory, why Massachusetts’ arrangements made it the best commonwealth was that it represented the apogee, newly reconceptualized, of mixed government. John Cotton, responding to Lord Saye and Sele’s accusation that Massachusetts’ alleged democratic tilt would “in time, cast the commonwealth into distraction, and popular confusions,” trumped the classical and pagan model of balanced, mixed government with a godly one. The framers of Massachusetts aimed at three things, Cotton explained: “authority in magistrates, liberty in people, purity in the church.” Those three aims reinforced each other, for “Purity, preserved in the church, will preserve well-ordered liberty in the people.” Through edification and discipline, in other words, the churches ensured a responsible electorate which in turn ensured “well-balanced authority in the magistrates.” Although Cotton did not spell this point out, both he and Saye and Sele would understand the magistrates in their role as “nursing fathers” to the churches as insuring the churches’ purity and thereby perpetuating the harmonious balance.45

In other words, according to Cotton, the Massachusetts colonists had come up with a permanent solution to the age-old problem of preventing the decay of republican government both in church and state-- this was not only a Machiavellian moment for Massachusetts’ civil government; that same moment insured that Antichrist would not be able to commence building


45Morgan, Puritan Political Ideas, 172.
the staircase of absolute power in the church. Cotton was not alone in his high evaluation of the
structure of the colony’s government; he noted that what he argued was “the best discerning of
many of us (for I speake not of myselfe).” John Winthrop breathtakingly told Saye and Sele that
the church was not compatible with any other kind of government.46

Given their theoretical ambitions, it is not surprising that the leaders of Massachusetts
described their creation in ambitious terms. It was the equivalent of a borough or town
corporation, claimed the residents of Watertown in 1632. These residents were protesting a tax
imposed by the Court of Assistants on the grounds that “it was not safe to paye monyes after that
sorte for feare of bringinge themselves and posterity into bondage.” The Court persuaded the
Watertown protestors, under threat of punishment, that the Court was more aptly compared to a
parliament and thus could tax.47 Cotton used the same biblical texts justifying the General Court
to Lord Saye and Sele that English republicans would deploy in the 1650s. A “free state” where
the government depends on popular election,” Thomas Shepard called Massachusetts in 1638,
eleven years before Parliament announced that it had abolished monarchy and erected a “free
state.”48 Massachusetts considered itself a “free state,” echoed a hostile witness before the

46Winthrop Papers, 3: 267
47Winthrop’s Journal, 63. Breen, Character, 70, links the freemen’s opposition to the
magistrates to memories of opposition in the 1620s to “Stuart despotism.”
48“Thomas Shepard’s Election Sermon in 1638,” New England Genealogical and
Historical Review, 24 (1870), 362; Calendar of State Papers: Colonial Series, America
and the West Indies, 1661-1668 (London, 1880), 12-13; Morgan, Puritan Political
Ideas,167;Blair Worden, “English Republicanism,” in J.H. Burns and and Mark Goldie
eds., The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700 (Cambridge, 1993), 472. A
Declaration of the Parliament of England (London, 1649), 16; Ferдинando Gorges A
Briefe Narration of the Originall Undertakings of the Advancement of Plantations into
the Parts of America (1658), Mass Hist Col 3d ser, vol 6 (1837), 80
Council for Foreign Plantations in 1662. A “popular state” Winthrop called Massachusetts in 1637, where the people’s power was “unlimited in its own nature.”

Winthrop could scarcely have had King Charles at the forefront of his mind when he spoke of the people’s power in Massachusetts as being unlimited. The relationship of this popular state to the Crown was in fact deeply ambiguous, at least in the colonists’ eyes. Massachusetts’ leaders did not seem to think it lawfully possible for Charles to revoke their charter. As early as 1634 they responded to rumors that a Governor General was coming to take over the colony by fortifying their defenses. The General Court claimed that judicial appeals could no more be taken from it to the King’s courts in England than they could be taken from Scotland or Ireland. The General Court warned the Commission for Foreign Plantations in 1638 that should the charter be surrendered, the “common people” would regard themselves as independent of England. Surviving records of debates as to whether Massachusetts was in fact a “perfecta respublica” and thus independent of England date back to 1644; when they started is anyone’s guess. The consensus opinion appears to have been that although Massachusetts might have had the right to declare independence, because it bought its land from the Indians, the protection of England was desirable, and in any case, the doctrine of the people’s welfare gave it the right to resist any English authority that would operate to its hurt. Of course, Massachusetts puritans never touted their civil polity across the Atlantic in the same way they did their ecclesiastical polity; salvation in the first instance depended on churches, not


governments. Their government, as Winthrop claimed, may have been the only one genuinely capable of preserving true churches, but the intellectuals in their ranks put the bulk of their intellectual labor into theorizing their church order, not their government. Moreover, there is no indication that the Massachusetts settlers, at least when not caught up in millenial fervor, regarded their polity, however ideal in itself, as a viable model for England-- by contrast, they were remarkably indifferent, to say the least, to the disruption caused among the godly in England by their letters back home about their new church practices. In the civil sphere at least, they were opportunists, not revolutionaries.

Thus such significance as their civil polity has for English history is exemplary, rather than causal. If we accept that Massachusetts was a semi-autonomous godly quasi-republic, and self-consciously so, in the 1630s, how does this factor into the recent English historiography of the period, which has had far weightier things to focus on than the doings of a few thousand immigrants on the other side of the Atlantic? By some strands of that historiography, Massachusetts would appear an impossibility. It has been recently argued that there were no serious ideological rifts in early Stuart England. The country was dominated by a moderate monarchical ideological consensus. That position has been vigorously contested, and certainly the determination with which the Massachusetts settlers eliminated the possibility of hereditary rulership suggests, to put it mildly, an extremely broad range of English perspectives on government, one of which clearly was republicanism.51

And since one of those perspectives was both republican and had its immediate roots in Calvinism, it may be worthwhile to glance at the backroad of “puritanism and the rise of liberty,” whig history, a road shunned by all historically responsible, or at least would-be up-to-date people. The anti-teleology historical police forces have been doing their best to demolish the slightest hint that aggressively republican church structures might have some incompatibility with the absolutist pretensions of monarchs. Their efforts are more notable for their noise than their accuracy, but the cumulative impact of anti-whiggery on the removal of Calvinist church government from any larger political narrative has been impressive: the author of a recent sweeping survey of early Calvinism swiftly dismissed out of hand any possible relationship between Calvinist church government and the processes that led to modern secular representative government.52

52 Calvinists were not trying to create new civil political orders; in the political sphere, they were first and foremost looking for stable regimes that would sustain their churches and support their geopolitical goals. It would be anachronistic to expect otherwise. All that is being argued here is 1) that it is not devoid of historical significance that, with very few exceptions, Calvinist church orders did not arise where absolutist monarchs conceived of the churches as an arm of the state, and that, correspondingly, in the one place where Calvinists could create a political order from scratch, New England, the order they created was republican; and 2) that some historians, on the recoil from whig history, have lost all sense of proportion in their desire to eradicate any hint that Calvinist church order might have any effect on secular political choices. Richard Tuck, Philosophy and Government 1572-1651 (Cambridge, 1993) 182-3, and Heinz Schilling, Civic Calvinism in Northwestern Germany and the Netherlands: Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries (Kirksville, 1991) 103, for example, both invoke the support for Dutch Calvinists of the Stadhouder in the political struggles in that realm to prove the disjunct between Calvinism and republicanism. But that example does not demonstrate that the Calvinists were antipathetic to republicanism, only that they had a preference for an aggressively confessional one with a strong executive, such as the stadhouder offered. See J. L. Price, The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century (New York, 1998), 82. Philip Benedict, Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism (New Haven, 2002) 536-37 negates any connection between Calvinism and the encouragement of secular participatory government with a twofold approach. First, he
One would think, however, that it would take an almost superhuman act of ascetic renunciation to refuse any connection between early English presbyterians warning about corruption of power, asserting the need for balanced, non-monarchical government, and calling for princes to do their duty by defending liberty and early seventeenth century radical presbyterians setting up a godly republic. One might even muster some sympathy for the conviction of Charles and his closest supporters in the 1620s that their opponents were closet republicans.53 Certainly, one should now hesitate before flatly asserting, as does another historian, that “a reaction against Calvinist orthodoxy” was “a unifying characteristic of

frames the question narrowly as one of trying to determine if Calvinist church structures “fostered democracy” by encouraging ordinary church members to participate in church government. He concludes that only Congregationalists and Baptists did so. He then rhetorically asks if it can be shown that “members of these churches played an essential role in the unfolding of modern democracy” and concludes implicitly that to ask that question is to answer it in the negative. Benedict’s second approach is to argue that “the most persuasive macrohistorical or macrosociological accounts of the origins of dictatorship and democracy in the West now tend to root the origins of representative government and of institutionalized checks on government power in the common European experience of a feudal, decentralized, corporative Middle Ages. They explain either the survival or dismantling of these institutions over the early modern period by geopolitical and economic circumstances that shaped how the military-fiscal Leviathan grew in each country. Religion plays no causal role in these accounts.” Benedict cites a total of two books to back this claim: Thomas Ertman, The Birth of Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, 1997) and Brian M. Downing, Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe (Princeton, 1992). It seems precipitous, to put it mildly, to dismiss any causal role for religion in that extremely complex process on the ground that two, not-terribly-long but extremely sweeping, synthetic books make no effort to assess religion’s role.

seventeenth-century republicans.”

The colonists’ inextricable linkage of religion and liberty provides a neat bridge from the 1620s to the 1640s, a bridge some revisionist historians emphasizing short term causes of the Civil War have denied existed—“If revolutionary puritanism was a cause rather than a consequence of the Civil War, it was the child of a decade beyond the 1620s,” as one puts it.

The Massachusetts emigrants may not have been revolutionaries (whatever meanings that term may carry), but they were surely impressively alienated from Charles’ government by the end of the 1620s. Moreover, the silence of the archives not withstanding, it is safe to assume that the emigrants were not the only persons in their circles of advanced Protestants to have concluded that England’s constitutional arrangements had proven far from ideal in the 1620s—Saye and Sele, Lord Brooke and others were certainly not drawing exclusively on their understanding of colonies when they proposed to Massachusetts, c.1635, that they might emigrate if the colony set up a two house parliament (hereditary and elected) which yearly reviewed its executive officers, “the better to stop the way to insolence and ambition.”

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56Morgan, Puritan Political Ideas, 163. Sharpe, Personal Rule, 730, in keeping with the argument that there was a broad ideological consensus in England, suggests that Saye andSele and Warwick’s despair at the 1638 ruling that ship money was legal stemmed from realizing the English constitution was against them and that they had “no alternative ideology.” He argues that the fact that Warwick continued to address the king “through the traditional modes of petition and counsel” further demonstrates this ideological consensus (714). But Saye and Sele and Warwick were already clearly thinking of
vehicle for further church reform, but as an alternative to the constitutional inadequacies of the English government.

The ideologically driven nature of Massachusetts’ government has much to say not only about England but about Massachusetts itself. It broadens the matrix of motivation for the immigrants by allowing us to move beyond the old “was it religion or economics” quarrel. One need not enter into the hoary, hazy “define puritanism” debate to note that the colonists’ ideological anxieties and commitments clearly extended beyond the quests for salvation and biblically pure churches that inspire the bulk of puritan scholarship and that this extension played an important role in shaping New England.

And once having gotten a better grasp of the breadth of the anxieties and commitments of the founders, we can flip these back to further understand the foundations of New England’s peculiar church order itself. The leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Company while in England clearly felt comfortable with presbyterianism, although they left no surviving written opinions on this sensitive topic. Yet that comfort in itself is not enough to account for the extremist version of presbyterianism that they created in Massachusetts, a version strongly emphasizing local autonomy, the people’s liberties, and the accountability of their rulers. Historians generally seek to account for Congregationalism within the confines of ecclesiastical history, yet the profound concerns of the settlers, lay and clerical, about arbitrary government and the liberties of the

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57 Their invitation to William Ames to emigrate to Massachusetts (see above) and their strictly limited concern about the church reformation taking place in Salem in 1629 (see Mass Records, 1: 407-8) are the strongest pieces of evidence for their toleration, at the least, of extreme prebyterianism.
people surely played a role. It is not coincidental that George Philips who led the tax revolt in 1632 was said to have had a precocious understanding of congregationalism, and his revolt was only the beginning of substantial documented ministerial resistance to signs of arbitrary civil government. Thus one should look to a common understanding, forged out of presbyterian traditions and recent political experience, of how any political body, secular or ecclesiastical best functioned, to explain how the structures of either evolved in Massachusetts. Republicanism underlay both church and state in Massachusetts.

This godly republicanism underlying both church and state is a salutary reminder that the “republicanism” of the American Revolution has longer and more complex roots than historians appreciate. It has been commonplace since the 1960s to trace the ideological origins of American resistance to the British crown of the 1760s and 1770s to English political theorists of the 1650s. But those writers were amplifying concerns and proposing remedies that were already familiar in Massachusetts. When eighteenth-century New Englanders read in Cato’s Letters of the

58 William Hubbard, General History, 165, claimed that the large scale agitation of the freemen to clip the magistrates’ discretionary power and give themselves a larger role in the government in 1634 had not a little to do with the influence of Thomas Hooker, who arrived late in 1633. The Connecticut Fundamental Orders of 1639, which give more power to the freemen than in Massachusetts, supports Hubbard’s claim. John Winthrop indicated the ministers concerned about hereditary government were at the forefront of the successful effort to block his reelection as governor in 1640. The General Court slapped John Eliot on the wrist in 1634 when he preached that the magistrates had exceeded their powers in making a peace treaty with Indians without consulting the people; they slapped him on the wrist again in 1660 for having the misfortune of his book calling for England to adopt a republican, biblically-inspired government in preparation for Christ’s return appear at the time of the Restoration of Charles II. See Winthrop’s Journal, 136-37, Mass Records, 4, pt. 2: 5-6. Eliot’s book seems to have been circulating as a manuscript since at least 1651. See James Holstun, A Rational Millenium: Puritan Utopias of Seventeenth-Century England and New Enland (New York: 1987), 148, and Alain Macfarlane, ed. The Diary of Ralph Josselin, 1616-1683 (London, 1976), 218.
corrupting dangers of unlimited power and of the necessity to keep magistrates within bounds in order to preserve the people’s liberties, they were learning nothing new, rather they were being reminded of some foundational anxieties behind their ancestors’ emigration. With republican churches whose pulpits regularly sounded with reminders that those ancestors fled arbitrary government in search of ecclesiastical and civil liberty; with critics bemoaning the New England social order as based on “republican mobbish principles and practices”; and with the dangers of antichristian tyranny an ongoing reality in a region that bloodlily contested the borders of the sphere of influence of French Canada, those foundational anxieties underwent continual reproduction. Thus in the 1760s and 1770s as bishops sought to extend their tyrannical rule to America and even erect a “palace” next to Harvard College; as rumors spread of increasing Catholic influence at the British court; and as George III appeared increasingly hostile to the liberties of his subjects, and in the end proved a “Protestant Popish king,” it is hardly surprising that Massachusetts was at the vanguard of colonial resistance. The veterans of the theo-political struggles of the 1620s had done their foundation work well.60

59 The neglect of this point is is probably because the early works that formed what was to become the “Republican Synthesis” in American history, Caroline Robbins, The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman (Cambridge, MA, 1959) Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, MA, 1967), and Gordon Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (Chapel Hill, 1969), started with writers from the English Civil War and Commonwealth period, perhaps because of the then routine insistence that there were no “republicans” in England before the Civil War, while Pocock gave theoretical affirmation to this insistence.