

Creating Good Government in the Colonies

Despite the fact that Europe was largely governed by monarchies at the time North American colonization began, these monarchs didn't have unlimited, unchecked power. Even King Philip II of Spain, arguably the most powerful king in Europe in the sixteenth century, had nobles, bankers and even a weak parliament (similar in theory to the US Congress) that limited his power in a few ways. The king in England was even more limited by tradition, nobles, and his parliament. Some of these limits went back to 1215 when the king of England was forced to sign the Magna Carta that took some of his power to give privileges to the nobles. By the end of the seventeenth century, the power of the English king was even more limited. This gave more power to the parliament.

When English settlers began coming to North America in the sixteenth century, one of the first challenges they faced was developing a governing organization principle for society. Naturally, these English settlers took their laws and customs with them from England to the Americas. Because of the way the parliament had increased in power over the centuries, the colonists were favorable to representative-style government. Of course they were still part of an empire ruled by a monarchy, but local decisions needed to be made locally. Self-government, therefore, was a common feature of colonial life.

Colonial Self-Government

Self-government, however, did not mean that the colonists could govern in any way that they wanted. As we said above, these colonists were still part of the English-centered empire. Let's look at three examples: Virginia, Rhode Island, and Maryland.

Virginia

The first English settlements were actually established by a corporation: the Virginia Company. This company was chartered by King James I in 1606; and it gave the company the right to create settlements in North America. It also granted settlers the same rights as Englishmen in England. In 1619 the Virginia Company went one step further and authorized the settlers to create a self-governing body they called the House of Burgesses. This legislature had representatives from around the colony, and they made their own laws. By 1624 the king had grown tired of this colonial legislature as well as the Virginia Company, so he revoked the company's charter and made the colony of Virginia

a royal colony with a governor he appointed. But the House of Burgesses continued to exist under the rule of the king's governor.

Rhode Island

The colony of Rhode Island was begun when Roger Williams, who had been kicked out of the Massachusetts colony, started what he called Providence Plantations on land given to him by the Native Americans of the area. Roger Williams proclaimed that the land he settled would follow the principle of religious freedom. Others came to the colony after Williams, and by 1644 the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations got a royal charter, though the colony remained self-governing. It had an elected council with a president that enacted and executed laws.

Maryland

The colony of Maryland was founded in 1634 by Lord Baltimore, a powerful English Catholic. He hoped that by starting a colony he would be able to found a profitable colony as well as a place where Catholics, who were persecuted in England, could worship freely. Originally, Lord Baltimore hoped to rule the colony as his own personal possession, much like a feudal lord. But settlers resented this idea and demanded an assembly. The assembly had the power to help create laws and gave the colonists the same rights and laws of England.

The Enlightenment Comes to the Colonies

In the eighteenth century, new revolutionary ideas about how kings and queens should behave toward their subjects were emerging in Europe. European philosophers were suggesting that the monarchs needed to allow for more political and economic freedom. The ideas of checks and balances in government, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion emerged from this movement and became very popular with intellectuals in the North American colonies.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the center of government in England sought to increase its direct influence in the colonies. The colonists resented and resisted this growing influence. Eventually this tension grew so great that war broke out between the colonists and the monarchy. When this break occurred, the colonists were faced with developing their own government without the king. But long before the colonists could draft a constitution, they had to explain why they were breaking from the British government. The document they developed was the Declaration of Independence.



1. According to the article, why was the powers of the Kings limited? (RA)
2. What does it mean to “self-govern”? (RA)
3. According to the article, how did the colonies of Virginia, Rhode Island and Maryland decide to self-govern? How were they similar? How were they different? (RARE)
4. In your opinion, which style of self-governance was better? Explain your answer. (RARE)
5. According to the article, what events lead to the writing of the Declaration of Independence? (RA)