

4.2 Democracy in Massachusetts

Michael Zuckerman

Traditionally, the New England town meeting has been considered one of the foundation stones of American democracy. According to this view, the relatively egalitarian nature of New England colonial society was reflected in the town meeting, where issues of common concern were discussed by the community and a course of action was decided. This was "grass-roots" democracy in which the people were full participants. In the selection here, historian Michael Zuckerman challenges this view, arguing that consensus rather than majority rule governed the political process in local Massachusetts communities.

Consider:

1. *The connection between Puritanism and the emphasis on consensus and unanimity in New England town meetings;*
2. *The arguments that can be raised against Zuckerman's interpretation;*
3. *What connection there is between town meetings and twentieth-century democracy in the United States.*

... Committed to a conception of the social order that precluded pluralism, the townsmen of Massachusetts never made a place for those who were not of their own kind. The community they desired was an enclave of common believers, and to the best of their ability they secured such a society, rooted not only in ethnic and cultural homogeneity but also in common moral and economic ideas and practices. Thus, the character of the community became a critical—and non-democratic—condition of provincial democracy; for a wide franchise could be ventured only after a society that sought harmony had been made safe for such democracy. In that society it was possible to let men vote precisely because so many men were not allowed entry in the first place.

Thus we can maintain the appearance of democracy only so long as we dwell on elections and elections alone, instead of the entire electoral process. As soon as we depart from that focus, the town meetings of Massachusetts fall short of any decent democratic standard. Wide participation did obtain, but it was premised on stringently controlled access to eligibility, so that open elections presupposed anterior constriction of the electorate. Similarly, most men could vote, but their voting was not designed to contribute to a decision among meaningful alternatives. The town meeting had one prime purpose, and it was

