

# From Compact to Constitution

Video One: What is Sovereignty? Study Aid

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## One. What is Sovereignty? An Introduction to Video One

How often do students really stop and think about where power lies in their society and whether their society is stable and thriving? Do they consider the differences between systems like monarchy, oligarchy, authoritarianism, representative government, and pure democracy? Are they aware that American democracy was shaped by some of the brightest minds of the 17th and 18th centuries, many of whom were *Mayflower* descendants? Governments aren't handed down from the heavens fully formed—they're built by people.

These questions about community building and sustaining were central to the vision of Pilgrim leaders like Pastor John Robinson, Elder William Brewster, Robert Cushman, Governor William Bradford, and the freemen of Plymouth's General Court. Their personal libraries reflected their curiosity and intellect, featuring works like Jean Bodin's *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Italy*, and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. They read, thought, and talked about building and sustaining communities.

The opening question—"What is sovereignty?"—offers a great way for teachers to explore changing ideas about who holds power and who gets to participate in government. For example, women weren't allowed to sign the *Mayflower Compact*. Being both women and legally subsumed under their husbands in marriage, they lacked a public voice. While women in 17th-century Plymouth often influenced their husbands privately or played key roles in the church (like Mary Allerton Cushman, wife of the Ruling Elder), by the Revolutionary era, figures like Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren (both connected to *Mayflower* descendants) were prominent political influencers and historians of the period. They pushed for equality, urging the Continental Congress to "remember the ladies." This evolution is just one example of how sovereignty has expanded and contracted over time. It can be explored through the study of Plymouth's legacy.

## Two. Transcript of “What is Sovereignty?”

“We are not even of their congregation. Why should we bend to their will? If we are not under the King’s domain, what are we?”

“Should they seek to go out on their own, this is how we will stop them.”

The passengers aboard *Mayflower* in 1620 were in crisis. They had just been told they could not make it to the Virginia destination granted to them by King James.

How would they navigate this without an authorized government? The answer was a brief social contract that bound them together, remembered by history as the Mayflower Compact. In this moment huddled together aboard the *Mayflower*, these different people would unite under a common cause and agree to work together. They created a new system of power – one derived from the people.

What is sovereignty? It is supreme authority over a body politic. In England in the 1600s, that authority resided with the king. The divine right of kings. The idea that God ordained rulers with their authority dictated lives of subjects to the crown.

In order to settle in the Americas, the king provided permission or a patent for a group, ignoring that indigenous peoples populated the entire continent. These patents were the English legal documentation needed for a colonial venture. The Pilgrims were given permission to settle in the northern parts of Virginia or the mouth of the Hudson River. New England was outside of that. This event in 1620 begs the question, who has the ultimate power within a society?

Throughout time, there have been countless types of rule: Monarchy, autocracy, oligarchy, communism, and both direct and representative democracy. The early 1600s was a turbulent time. Long held political systems were in flux. Plymouth was created within the storm. The *Mayflower Compact* quieted this storm. In the absence of the King’s permission, it empowered Plymouth to form a body of government in which they could craft just laws, elect representatives, and conduct the colony’s business.

Writing several years later, William Bradford, Plymouth’s long-serving governor, realized the power of this document, stating “partly that such an act by them done (this their condition considered) might be as firm as any patent and in some respects more sure.”

The *Compact* served as a civil covenant for decades. It is reaffirmed by the colony’s members as they gather to consider the issues in front of them. Its broad definition of powers provided the flexibility necessary for innovative laws and rights that reflected changing times.

In 17<sup>th</sup>-century Plymouth, voting was a privilege, not a right, completely opposite to how we as Americans think of voting today. Between 1620 and 1627, all adult men in Plymouth who were not indentured servants were stockholders in the colony’s joint stock company. They also

participated in its governance. The colonists used the term freemen, indicating a citizen who had the right to vote and the right to hold office. To reach the status, it was necessary for applicants to petition the freemen of their town. Then, if approved by the colony's General Court. The candidates were evaluated by their neighbors for anywhere from six months to a year before they gave them rights. And rights could be stripped away for misconduct.

Who didn't have power? In general, women had fewer rights than men. They could not hold public office, and with some notable exceptions for widowed women, could not own land or goods. Indentured servants and young men were in the same situation. What Plymouth required of the Freemen was a knowledge of their laws and a knowledge of their duties.

"I shall faithfully submit unto such good and wholesome laws and ordinances as either are or shall be made for the ordering and government of the same and shall endeavor to advance the growth and good of the several towns within the limits of the corporation, by all due means and courses."

Written in 1634, the *Freeman's Oath* expressed and accomplished many of the *Mayflower Compact's* objectives. It assembled a body politic where every voter, every office holder, committed themselves to the rule of law and improving the quality of life for every person in Plymouth Colony towns. The words and aims of the *Freeman's Oath* are reminiscent of John Robinson's letter that was read in Southampton in the summer of 1620. Robinson told his listeners, "Let your wisdom appear in choosing such persons as do entirely love and will diligently promote the common good. As you will see, Plymouth's leadership was thoughtful and strategic throughout the colony's seventy-two-year history.

## Glossary of Terms

**Monarchy:** A form of government where power is concentrated in a single individual, known as a monarch, such as a king or queen. Monarchies can be *absolute* (where the monarch has unchecked power) or *constitutional* (where their powers are limited by laws or a constitution).

**Oligarchy:** A system of governance where power is held by a small group of people, often determined by wealth, family ties, military control, or other forms of influence. In an oligarchy, the general population has little to no role in decision-making.

**Authoritarianism:** A political system where a single authority, whether an individual or a group, wields substantial power, often with little accountability. Freedoms such as free speech, political opposition, and individual rights are frequently curtailed under authoritarian rule.

**Representative Government:** A democratic framework in which citizens elect officials to make decisions and pass laws on their behalf. This contrasts with direct democracy, as representatives act as intermediaries between the people and the policy-making process. Examples include parliamentary or presidential systems.

**Pure Democracy:** Also known as *direct democracy*, this system allows all citizens to directly participate in decision-making, often by voting on laws or policies themselves rather than electing representatives to do so.

**Social Contract:** An agreement among members of a society, or between a society and its government, that outlines the rights, responsibilities, and rules that everyone must follow to ensure order and cooperation. It's based on the idea that individuals give up some personal freedoms in exchange for protection and support from the community or government. For example, people agree to obey laws in return for safety and fairness within their society.

### Discussion Questions

1. The *Mayflower Compact* was a response to an immediate crisis. What challenges might the passengers have faced if they hadn't created this agreement, and how might their story have been different?
2. The video describes sovereignty as "supreme authority over a body politic." Discuss how the idea of sovereignty shifted from the divine right of kings to a government derived from the people?
3. Examine the concept of freemen in Plymouth Colony. How does the process of gaining voting rights and holding office in the 1600s compare to how these rights are granted in the United States today?
4. The video highlights groups who were excluded from power, including women and indentured servants. Why do you think these groups were left out, and how might their participation have changed Plymouth's government?
5. William Bradford described the Mayflower Compact as being "as firm as any patent and in some respects more sure." What do you think he meant by this, and how might it reflect the colony's view of their independence?

## Three. What Is Sovereignty?: Background Essay for Students

When we think of sovereignty, we often picture countries asserting their independence or leaders making decisions for their nations. But sovereignty doesn't just apply to relationships between nations, it is also an important concept within societies. Understanding sovereignty helps us explore how people, communities, and governments share power and responsibility in the places we live.

At its core, sovereignty refers to the authority or power to govern. This can apply to individuals, groups, or governments. Sovereignty helps us answer questions like: Who has the right to make decisions in society? How are those decisions enforced? And what happens if people disagree about who should have sovereignty?

### **Personal Sovereignty**

Let's start with personal sovereignty. Personal sovereignty means having the ability to make choices about your own life. For example, you might decide what clothes to wear, what hobbies to pursue, or what career to aim for. This type of sovereignty is deeply connected to freedom and individual rights. In a fair and just society, people are allowed to express themselves and make decisions that align with their values, if their choices do not harm others.

But even personal sovereignty has limits. For instance, laws and rules exist to prevent people from making choices that endanger others, like driving recklessly or causing harm. This raises an interesting question: How do we balance personal sovereignty with the need for rules that keep everyone safe?

### **Community Sovereignty**

Communities also have their own kind of sovereignty. Community sovereignty refers to the power a group of people has to make decisions about what happens in their shared space. Think about your local school or town. Decisions about what rules to follow, how resources are used, and what projects to pursue are often made by groups, like school boards or town councils. These groups represent the community and make choices on their behalf.

However, with community sovereignty comes the challenge of representation. Are the people making decisions truly reflecting the community's wishes? This raises another important question: How do we ensure that everyone in a community has a voice and that decisions are fair?

### **Government Sovereignty**

Governments often hold the highest level of sovereignty in society. They create laws, manage resources, and make big decisions that impact everyone. Governments get their sovereignty from the people they govern—through elections, constitutions, and other systems that give

them authority. In this way, sovereignty within a society is often shared between the government and the citizens.

But what happens when people disagree with the government? Protests, petitions, and other forms of activism are ways for citizens to challenge government decisions and push for change. This leads to an important idea: In a healthy society, sovereignty should be flexible and open to negotiation. No one group or person should have absolute power.

### **Sovereignty and Justice**

The concept of sovereignty within a society is also tied to justice. Who decides what is fair and what isn't fair? Courts, judges, and legal systems play a big role in determining how sovereignty is exercised. For example, if someone feels that their personal sovereignty has been violated, like if their rights have been ignored, they can turn to the legal system for help.

Justice systems are meant to ensure that sovereignty is applied equally to everyone. In reality, this doesn't always happen. Some groups may have less power or fewer opportunities to assert their sovereignty. This raises another important question: How can societies work to ensure that sovereignty is shared fairly among all people?

### **Why Sovereignty Matters**

Sovereignty within a society is not just a fancy concept, it's something that affects our daily lives. It is present in the choices we make, the communities we belong to, and the governments that represent us. When sovereignty is respected and shared fairly, societies tend to be more peaceful and just. But when sovereignty is abused or concentrated in the hands of a few, it can lead to conflict and inequality.

Understanding sovereignty helps us become more informed and active members of our communities. It encourages us to ask big questions, like: Who has the power to make decisions? How can we make sure everyone's voice is heard? And what can we do to create a fairer and more equal society?

In conclusion, sovereignty within a society is about much more than who's in charge. It's about balancing power, respecting individual rights, and working together to build a better future. Whether it's at the level of personal choices, community decisions, or government actions, sovereignty shapes the way we live and interact with one another. By thinking critically about sovereignty, we can better understand the world around us and take steps to create positive change.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What does "personal sovereignty" mean to you, and can you think of an example from your own life where you've made a decision that reflects it?

2. Why do you think it is important for communities to have sovereignty, and how can a group ensure everyone's voice is heard when making decisions?
3. The essay mentions that governments get their authority from the people they govern. Why is this relationship important, and how can citizens influence government decisions when they disagree?
4. In what ways can balancing personal sovereignty with rules or laws be challenging? Can you come up with an example where this balance was necessary?
5. The essay talks about fairness in sharing sovereignty. What steps do you think a society could take to make sure all groups have equal power and opportunities?

## Four. Freeman in Plymouth Colony: Background Essay for Students

In the early years of Plymouth Colony, adult men held a special status as "stockholders" in the company that financed their settlement. This meant they shared ownership of the colony's assets, its economic risks, and its responsibilities, including participating in the colony's government. Early on, the term "freemen" also came into use. Freeman were citizens of Plymouth Colony who had the right to vote in elections for the Governor and Assistants and to hold office. While all stockholders were considered freemen, not all freemen were stockholders. Women and servants, however, were not eligible for freeman status.

Between 1636 and 1671, the colonists created a declaration called *The General Fundamentals*, which showed their strong desire for self-governance. In it, they stated that no law or tax could be imposed on them unless approved by the freemen or their elected representatives. This declaration is viewed by historians as one of the first demands for a government based on representation and individual rights in America.

Becoming a freeman was relatively simple: a candidate was approved by the freemen in his town and then officially accepted by the General Court. However, there were restrictions. For example, laws passed in 1658 denied freeman status to people who opposed the colony's laws or refused to serve their community. Quakers faced even harsher rules—Quakers could not become freemen, and freemen who became Quakers or helped them lost their status.

Being a freeman wasn't all perks—it came with obligations. Freeman were required to attend town meetings, and fines were issued for missing them. By 1638, freemen could elect representatives, called "deputies," to attend the General Court in Plymouth on their behalf. Men who were not freemen, like taxpayers who swore loyalty to the colony, could also vote for deputies.

*The General Fundamentals* also listed specific rights for freemen, such as protections against unfair punishment and the ability to have charges heard by a jury of their peers. They could make wills, manage their property, and were entitled to challenge jurors in capital cases. Freeman had to take an oath of loyalty to Plymouth Colony and England, and there were fines for refusing to do so—though offenders weren't jailed or banished.

### Glossary of Terms

**Stockholders** - Individuals who own shares or part-ownership in a company.

**Assets** - Valuable resources or properties owned by a person, group, or company.

**Economics** - Related to money, trade, or the management of goods and finances.

**Responsibilities** - Duties or tasks that someone is required to carry out.

**Declaration** - A formal statement or announcement, often related to laws or principles.

**Fundamentals** - Basic and essential principles or rules.

**Governance** - The way decisions are made and the colony or organization is managed.

**Representation** - Acting or speaking on behalf of others, typically in a government.

**Individual rights** - Basic freedoms and privileges that belong to a person.

**Restrictions** - Rules or limitations that control what people can do.

**Quakers** - Members of a religious group known for their peaceful beliefs and practices.

**Obligations** - Things a person is required or expected to do.

**Deputies** - Representatives chosen to act or speak for a group in meetings or decisions.

**Protections** - Measures that keep people safe from harm or unfair treatment.

**Capital cases** - Legal cases where the punishment could involve the death penalty.

**Oath** - A solemn promise, often made in a formal setting.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the Plymouth colonists created *The General Fundamentals*? How did it reflect their desire for self-governance?
2. What do you think were some challenges of being a freeman in Plymouth Colony? Would you have wanted to take on those responsibilities?
3. Why were Quakers excluded from freeman status, and how do you think this impacted the colony's sense of fairness and freedom?
4. How do you think the concept of representative government, like electing deputies, changed life in Plymouth Colony? Can you see similarities to how governments work today?
5. Based on the essay, how did the rights and duties of freemen shape the colony's laws and community values? What lessons can we learn from their system?

## Five. What is a Primary Source?

Primary sources are like time machines. They are things created during the actual time period you're studying. It gives you a first-hand look at what happened back then. For example:

**Diary entries or journals:** Someone writing about their life at the time.

**Letters:** Messages exchanged between people long ago.

**Photographs:** Pictures taken during an important event or era.

**Official Documents:** Things like law, speeches, or contracts.

**Artifacts:** Objects like tools, clothing, or art from a specific time.

Primary sources are unique because they come directly from the past—straight from the people who were there—so they help us understand history in personal way. They are different from secondary sources, like history books, which talk about the past but were not made during the same time. Think of it like hearing the story from someone who was there versus someone telling it second-hand.

### What is an Oath?

An oath is a formal promise or pledge made by a person to do something or act in a certain way. When someone takes an oath, they are making a serious commitment, often calling on God or a higher power as a witness to their honesty and integrity. In history, oaths have been used to show loyalty to rulers, governments, or communities, and to guarantee that individuals will follow laws, fulfill duties, or uphold certain values. Breaking an oath was considered a serious offense, because it went against a person's word and the trust placed in them. In the Plymouth Colony, oaths were used to ensure that residents and freemen would be loyal to the colony, follow its rules, and protect its stability.

### The oath of a Freeman

(Modernized Spelling, Original Punctuation & Capitalization)

You shall be truly loyal to our Sovereign Lord king Charles his heirs & the State & Government of England as it now stands. successors. You shall not speak or do, devise or advise any thing or things act or acts directly or indirectly by land or water, that doth shall or may tend to the destruction or overthrow of this present plantations Colonies or Corporation of New Plymouth, Neither shall you suffer the same to be spoken or done but shall hinder oppose & discover the same to the Governor & Assistants of the said Colony for the time being or some one of them. You shall faithfully submit unto such good & wholesome laws & ordnances & as either are or shall be made for the ordering and government of the same, and shall endeavor to advance the growth & good of the several Colonies plantations within the limits of the Corporation by all due means & courses. All which you promise & swear by the name of the great God of heaven and earth simply truly & faithfully to perform as you hope for help from God who is the God of truth & punisher of falsehood.

## **The Oath of any residing within the Government** (Modernized Spelling, Original Punctuation & Capitalization)

You shall be truly loyal to our Sovereign Lord the King his heirs & Successors. And whereas you make choice at present to reside within the Government of new Plymouth, You shall not do or cause to be done any Act or Acts directly or indirectly by land or water that shall or may tend to the destruction or overthrow of the whole, or any the several Colonies within the said government that are or shall be orderly erected & established but shall contrariwise hinder oppose & discover such intents & purposes as tend thereunto to the Governor for the time being or some of the Assistants with all convenient speed. You shall also submit unto & obey such good and wholesome laws Ordinances & Officers as are or shall be established within the several limits thereof. So help you God who is the God of truth & punisher of falsehood.

### **Glossary of Terms**

**Sovereign:** Refers to a ruler, like a king or queen, who has ultimate authority.

**Heirs:** People who inherit titles, property, or power, usually from family members like parents or grandparents.

**Successors:** People who take over a role, position, or job after someone else.

**Devise:** To plan or come up with something, such as a strategy or idea.

**Ordain:** To officially establish something, often through laws or decrees.

**Corporation:** In this context, a group or organization is formed for a specific purpose, like managing the Plymouth settlement.

**Ordinances:** Local laws or rules made by a government or authority.

**Advance:** To help something grow, improve, or succeed.

**Contrariwise:** On the contrary; in the opposite way.

**Intents:** Plans or purposes behind actions.

**Punisher of falsehood:** A reference to God as someone who punishes lying or dishonesty.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Both oaths emphasize loyalty to the King and Plymouth Colony. Why do you think loyalty was so important to the leaders of the colony?
2. The Oath of a Freeman talks about helping the colony grow and succeed. What actions might a freeman take to fulfill this promise?
3. How does the Oath for Residents differ from the Oath of a Freeman? What do these differences say about the expectations for freemen compared to other residents?
4. Why do you think both oaths mention stopping actions that might harm the colony? What challenges might the leaders have been trying to prevent?
5. What do these oaths reveal about the values and priorities of Plymouth Colony? How do these values compare to what we consider important in communities today?

## Six. Understanding 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Sovereignty Through the Church of England's Homilies

### An Introduction for Teachers

The *Books of Homilies*, published in the 16th century by the Church of England, were collections of sermons meant to be read in churches to educate people about Christian beliefs and moral responsibilities. One of the recurring themes in these homilies was the importance of obedience to rulers, who were believed to be chosen by God. This belief was part of the broader idea of the "divine right of kings," which supported the view that monarchs held authority directly from God and should be obeyed to maintain peace and stability in society.

For students, these homilies provide an opportunity to explore how ideas of sovereignty and loyalty were connected to religious teachings during this time. The adapted excerpts below focus on the responsibilities of subjects to their rulers and the role of God in granting authority.

### Original Language & Adapted Excerpts for Eighth Graders

#### The Duty of Obedience

**Original:** "Let us consider the authority of Kings, and princes, as God himself doth allow them, and commands them to be obeyed, and honoured by their subjects, as the chief and principal powers over them in earth."

**Adaptation:** "We should think about the power of kings and leaders, because God approves of them and tells us to obey and respect them. They are the highest authority over us on Earth."

#### God's Role in Sovereignty

**Original:** "For God hath not only appointed that the highest powers should govern the inferior, but hath also commanded that whosoever resisteth or withstandeth their authority, resisteth the ordinance of God."

**Adaptation:** "God has decided that leaders should rule over others, and anyone who disobeys their authority is also going against God's plan."

#### Peace and Stability

**Original:** "Disobedience and rebellion do bring in their train all manner of mischiefs and calamities... such as famine, war, and pestilence."

**Adaptation:** "Disobeying leaders and starting rebellions often lead to terrible problems, like hunger, war, and disease."

#### The Importance of Laws

**Original:** "Laws are made to bring the people to obedience, to peace, and to unity... without which no realm or nation can prosper."

**Adaptation:** "Laws help people to obey, live peacefully, and work together. Without laws, no country can succeed."

### **The Role of Good Subjects**

**Original:** "Subjects are bound in conscience to obey princes and rulers, not only for fear of punishment, but also for conscience's sake."

**Adaptation:** "People should follow their leaders, not just to avoid punishment, but because it's the right thing to do."

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why do you think the Church believed obedience to rulers was so important during this time?
2. How does the idea of the "divine right of kings" connect to the belief that God chooses rulers?
3. Do you think disobedience always leads to problems like war or famine, as homilies suggest? Why or why not?
4. How might these ideas about sovereignty and loyalty compare to how we think about government and leadership today?
5. What do you think the homilies teach about the relationship between religion and government in England during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries?