Liberty and Limits

Read how colonial documents joined rights, self-government, and faith.

USG.C.2.1.C "Analyze colonial ideas on liberty, the practice of self-government, and the influence of religious thought on foundational documents (e.g., Massachusetts Body of Liberties, Fundamental Orders of Connecticut)."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one legal protection in the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, circle one election procedure in the Fundamental Orders, and number two references to religious thought. Put an X beside one limit on liberty in each document.

Who Could Claim Liberty?

1. In the 1600s, English settlers in New England faced a practical question: Who should make rules for their towns and colonies? They brought ideas about English legal rights, including protections against arbitrary punishment, but also believed a community needed moral order. Many regarded their religious commitments as a reason to organize government. Colonial documents therefore reveal more than lists of rules. They show how settlers connected liberty to public authority and faith. Yet the word "liberty" did not mean equal political power for everyone. Reading these documents closely requires asking both who gained protections and who could govern.

2. Massachusetts lawmakers adopted the Massachusetts Body of Liberties in 1641. It limited officials by requiring a legal basis before they could punish someone or take away property. It also allowed people sentenced by a court to appeal their cases. Its opening linked stable government and churches to liberties that "humanity, civility, and Christianity" called for. This language made religious values part of the case for legal protections. But the document also permitted some forms of slavery, including enslavement of certain war captives and people sold to colonists. Its promise of liberty existed beside severe limits on freedom.

3. In 1639, settlers in three Connecticut River towns adopted the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut. Its preamble said their communities had joined together under God's word and needed an orderly government to manage shared affairs. The Orders set procedures for choosing a governor and magistrates and for holding assemblies where representatives from the towns could make decisions. Religious belief supplied a reason to form the government; elections supplied a way to run it. Yet voting belonged to a limited group of men called freemen. Together, these two documents show colonists building institutions for self-government while defining liberty within boundaries that excluded many people.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Body of Liberties limit the power of Massachusetts officials? Use one protection from the passage.

2. How did religious thought support a different purpose in each document?

3. How did the Fundamental Orders put self-government into practice, and who could take part in voting?

4. How does each document show a limit to the liberty its settlers valued?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-sentence charter proposal for an imaginary settlement. Give one legal protection, explain how officials are chosen, connect a religious value to a rule that applies to people of every faith, and identify a group excluded from voting and the tension this creates.

ANSWER KEY

Liberty and Limits

HIGH SCHOOL · USG.C.2.1.C

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one legal protection in the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, circle one election procedure in the Fundamental Orders, and number two references to religious thought. Put an X beside one limit on liberty in each document. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Body of Liberties limit the power of Massachusetts officials? Use one protection from the passage.	**Officials needed a legal basis to punish someone or take away property. The document also allowed people sentenced by a court to appeal.**
2	How did religious thought support a different purpose in each document?	**The Body of Liberties linked Christianity to legal protections and stable government. The Fundamental Orders used God's word as a reason for the towns to form an orderly government.**
3	How did the Fundamental Orders put self-government into practice, and who could take part in voting?	**The Orders set procedures for elections and assemblies with town representatives. Voting was limited to men called freemen.**
4	How does each document show a limit to the liberty its settlers valued?	**The Body of Liberties permitted some forms of slavery despite its legal protections. The Fundamental Orders established elections but limited voting to freemen.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Residents must receive a public hearing before the council can take their property. Adults who have lived in the settlement for one year will elect council members by secret ballot. Because many residents believe their faith calls them to treat neighbors fairly, the hearing rule protects people of every faith and those with none. People under eighteen cannot vote, so the council will make decisions affecting young people without giving them a direct voice.

Accept other passage-supported explanations of legal protections, religious influence, elections, and exclusions. For the charter, look for four sentences that address all four requested elements and explain the tension created by the voting limit.