

The New York Patriot Movement: Partisanship, the Free Press, and Britain's Imperial Constitution, 1731–39

By Amy Watson

In 1730s New York, a group of partisan politicians led by Lewis Morris aligned themselves with a broader British movement known as Patriotism. Like their counterparts across England, Scotland, and British America, the New York Patriots advocated for a protofederalist imperial system and argued that British subjects everywhere were entitled to certain constitutional liberties—religious freedom, trial by jury, and a free press. The Patriots organized a political party that included a base of urban artisans and an editorial mouthpiece, the *New-York Weekly Journal*. They challenged New York governor William Cosby's executive prerogative over the colony's judiciary and press, culminating in a libel trial for Patriot printer John Peter Zenger in 1735. The New York Patriots' success in winning Zenger's acquittal rallied Patriots across the British Empire: like-minded Britons used the case to bolster free speech against escalating Whig censorship. The rise of New York's Patriot movement shows that eighteenth-century American politics were increasingly becoming linked to British partisan ideas, organizations, and divisions. Ultimately, the Patriots' campaign against Cosby was not a fight against one arbitrary governor; rather, it was an extension of a broader campaign against Whig hierarchical governance across the British Empire.