'Democracy' a packed town meeting report

Book yields many revealing insights to Vermont process

By Richard F. Winters
Special to The Free Press

Frank Bryan's new book, "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works," is splendid in every respect. Bryan is familiar to many Vermonters as an author and University of Vermont faculty member, VPR commentator and widely read humanist. One might even consider Bryan a "professional Vermonter."

"Real Democracy" ought to be read and considered by every Vermont resident. To anyone attending a town meeting, this will be an unusually instructive "read." Bryan justifies why people are there, and he does so in convincing fashion. I know of no other book quite like it—it is a scholarly "page-turner." Each page brims with new and unexpected insights. He generates valuable characterizations of town meetings, and his conclusions about the relationship between democracy in practice in Vermont towns and our nation's democracy should be considered by all.

Another strength of this book is Bryan is both a well-regarded social scientist and a strong advocate for small-scale democracy so the book persuasively joins an author's passion for a cause with dispensation of method.

Every year since 1969, Bryan has been sending students out to 50 or so randomly selected Vermont towns to observe and document town meetings—by recording attendance and what's said on what issues, how the meetings were called, the issue of the meeting, and much more. The result is a massive amount of data collected in three decades on almost 1,500 town meetings. What's more, Bryan is on a shoestring, with no foundation support. This is vital science as practiced on the ground, by a teacher and his students. The outcome is a nine-of-a-kind database.

Size matters

Frank Bryan has put three decades of research into his book on the character and state of Vermont's town meeting.

Spring rite

"Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works (American Politics and Political Economy)" by Frank M. Bryan

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Are there ways to break the town meeting to get more people there?

Bryan examines a number of concerns that factor into the size of meeting place, time of meeting, process and even the size of meeting and the use of Australian-style paper ballots. He finds that an increase in the rate of participation at town meetings
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- During the postwar period, Bryan studied women's activities and saw that few women were "likely to speak out.
- While this is a lot of variation from year to year, in attendance, there is a significant drop in attendance in the 1930s - a long-term decline in resident participation.

Here to stay?

So, how strong is Vermont's town meeting form of local government? On average, Bryan notes, only 20 percent of a town's registered women and 7 percent speak out. This seems appalling when compared with presidential election turnout of approximately 50 percent in Vermont. Yet if Bryan's analysis simply pointed toward the town meeting and instead trimmed down the polls in early spring to vote for members of local boards and, possibly, vote on warrant articles, turnout would not be much greater than 20 percent.

Two other important findings:

- The long ARM vote night is a dying up to the power of towns to decide important matters via vote on the warrant.
- Bryan notes the towns' meeting, which offers all power to residents through voting on many articles and, second, expert participation in the form of more freely elected officers of the town (three new officers, three old teachers) in town (or used dump trucks in a video and probably an organized array of voters as the plebiscite alternative to such simple direct election.

Futher, as Bryan notes, the town meeting provides residents with a practical political education in all sorts of civic values, and these together, along with civic and governmental skills in our schools do not prepare citizens to perform responsible and informed roles of politics.

What's the future of the town meeting in the West of government? In the face of the long-term deep in attendance, certainly, that depends in part on ending the long-term upswing period of power and authority from the towns to the state government. If Vermont is serious about practicing real democracy, then a serious effort may be necessary to carve out for towns the rights to public authority without issues of importance to voters.

Several years ago, John Kenneth Galbraith noted that the idea of political philosophies are more powerful that we are naturally exercises. The visions of reform of those in authority, he noted, are often captive of warp and lines of "social academic scholarship." Let's hope that Bryan's work will thus convince the residents and leaders of Vermont.

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