Size and Conflict in Town Meeting Democracy

An Honors Thesis for the University of Vermont Political Science Department

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Table of Contents

Tables and Figures

Part 1: Introduction

Students of government are often taught that the inspiration for America's democracy came from the government of classical Athens, where almost 3000 years ago the people of this ancient civilization came together to govern themselves according to the democratic principles of equality and justice.[1] They learn that the classical conception of government, with power resting in the people instead of an arbitrary ruler, was the best historical example of legitimate sovereignty because of the popular rule of the people. The surviving philosophical writings of Athenian thinkers like Plato and Aristotle are also considered the basis of political theory that inspired many other elements of our democracy. Clearly, modern democratic governments owe a huge debt to the people of Athens and the other Greek city-states for their wisdom and integrity in creating this form of government.

Students are also taught that the Founding Fathers who convened in Philadelphia in 1787 created a Constitution that established and continues to guide the American government to this day.[2] They drew upon the ideas of preeminent contemporary political philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment as well, such as the social contract theory of John Locke[3], and the system of checks and balances conceived by Charles de Montesquieu[4], to make an institution that is ruled by majority while protecting individual liberty and the rights of minorities. The American people are protected from tyranny of the majority and mob rule by an

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[1] Susan Welch et al. *Understanding American Government: The Essentials* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 2008), 53.
[2] Welch et al. *Understanding American Government,* 58
[3] John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, (New York: Macmillan, 1986)
[4] Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws,* trans. Thomas Nugent (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1878)

intricate balance of power between the three branches of government, and a bicameral Congress, whereby all legislation is subjected to intense deliberation and consideration of conflicting interests.[5] This system has functioned reasonably well for more than 2 centuries and Americans venerate the Constitution and the Founding Fathers for their wisdom.

But how faithful has American government been to its democratic ancestry? As we begin the 21st century in the extreme upper echelon of international power, there is no doubt that the nation has experienced unparalleled economic and military success. However, the political realm is unable to boast similarly praiseworthy achievements. Of course, as a purportedly democratic institution, judgment of American government must be based on the question of whether the polity does what the people desire. The legitimacy of a democracy comes from the power it gives its citizens, who ideally have control over the people making the laws that govern them. A recent study by Public Policy Polling showed that Congress has a disapproval rating of 85%, and that it is less popular than root canals and head lice.[6] The body often referred to as the People's Branch of government has lost the support of its namesake. Americans are clearly not pleased with the work their national legislators are doing.

Perhaps the problem is that Congress is perceived to be doing nothing at all. Congressional scholars noted in 2011, "The widespread consensus was that politics

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[5] Welch et al., *Understanding American Government*, 63
[6] Tom Jensen, "Congress Less Popular than Cockroaches, Traffic Jams", Public Policy Polling, Posted January 8th, 2013, http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2013/01/congress-less-popular-than-cockroaches-traffic-jams.html

and governance were utterly dysfunctional."[7] Americans' displeasure with Congress

and government is typically attributed to the rigid partisan polarization of the

institution.[8] Democrats' and Republicans' inability to find common ground fills the

news on a daily basis. Although some have disputed the difficulty of passing

legislation in times of divided government[9], the results of the 112th Congress show

that it was the least productive session in American history.[10] Mann and Ornstein

blame much of the legislative conflict on the Republican Party's confrontational

political tactics meant to halt the President's policy agenda, although there are

certainly many other explanations.[11] The two parties previously relied on

compromise facilitated by the more diverse political ideologies of their members,

but the regional realignment of the south after the Civil Rights Act caused each party

to become more ideologically cohesive and therefore less willing to cooperate.[12] The

American democratic process needs legislators to work together to govern, and now

that they have lost the incentives for bargaining, uncompromising party politics

have brought the national government to a near standstill, where it is unable to

satisfy the demands of its citizens. This study is rooted in the belief that democratic

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[7] Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than it Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*, (New York: Basic Books, 2012), XII.
[8] Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse than it Looks,* 44.
[9] David R. Mayhew, *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking and Investigations, 1946-2002*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).
[10] Stephen Dinan, "Capitol Hill Least Productive Ever: 112th Fought 'about everything,'" *The Washington Post,* January 9th, 2013, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jan/9/capitol-hill-least-productive-congress-ever-112th-/?page=all.
[11] Other explanations include the polarization of new forms of media like 24-hour cable news networks, gerrymandered legislative districts that make constituencies ideologically cohesive, primaries closed to nonpartisan voters that choose ideologically extreme candidates, and campaign finance reform opening the door to interest groups, among many more. Mann and Ornstein (103).
[12] Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse than it Looks,* 47.

government is not working, and looks into the historical and theoretical literature on the foundational elements of democracy for solutions to this problem.

At first glance it is clear how the political systems of ancient Greece inspired the Founders to design a government that could be controlled by the people. After shucking the authoritarian rule of England, under which they had been subjected to laws and taxation that they had no say in making, it seems natural that the American people would turn to a more democratic form of government through which they could govern themselves. However, democracy in ancient Greece functioned through intense deliberation in assemblies that all male citizens were invited to attend.[13] These assemblies considered and responded to public issues after debates in which all members were allowed to speak, and judiciary bodies consisting of randomly selected citizens settled public disputes.[14] The Greek principle of *isegoria* ensured that all individuals were welcome to speak their mind and make arguments to show their peers the wisdom or dangers in different proposals. In addition, scholars of ancient history argue that Cleisthenes, the Athenian leader typically credited with initiating democratic rule, intended his reforms to resolve the intense civic conflict among the powerful elite that was debilitating Athenian military strength and public life.[15] Unable to deal with political strife of the aristocracy, Cleisthenes and the Athenians achieved stability by letting the people decide. Democratic government began as a means of resolving conflict, not creating it. Therefore the first obvious difference between American government and the Greek

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[13] R. Sealey, "Democratic Theory and Practice," in *The Age of Pericles*, ed. Loren J. Samons II, (Boston: Cambridge University Press), 240.
[14] Sealey, "Democratic Theory and Practice," 244.
[15] Sealey, "Democratic Theory and Practice," 241.

conception of democracy is that the ancients relied on direct and intensive public participation and deliberation from its citizens to resolve civic conflicts and make the policies that governed the land.

The Founding Father's incorporated a complex system of checks and balances into the Constitution because they feared popular uprisings causing their government to descend into mob rule. The legislative process is accordingly fraught with places where a coalition or individual can delay or obstruct action. It has been shown that "the American policy-making system of checks and balances and separation of powers has more structural impediments to action than any other major democracy."[16] Similarly, James Madison famously explained in *Federalist No. 10* that a large republic of many varied interests grappling for power would prevent any one faction from abusing the rights of others.[17] This essay is considered essential to understanding American government and is often said to represent the genius of our democratic system. William F. Connelly and others claim that this factionalism is what the Founders intended and describes the way the two-party system functions in America today.[18] The numerous and diverse interests of US citizens have been condensed into two very equally balanced factions that are only capable of preventing each other from acting. It appears that the American version of democracy provides many opportunities for conflict to arise and depends on groups' inclination to opposition to thwart the tyranny of a majority.

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[16] Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse than It Looks,* 102

[17] James Madison, "The Federalist No. 10," in *The Federalist: A Commentary on the Constitution of the United States,* by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1898).

[18] See William F. Connelly, *James Madison Rules America: the Constitutional Origins of Congressional Partisanship*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

There is evidence that the Athenians were also aware of the vulnerability of public assemblies to demagoguery and mob rule. Methods of persuasion and rhetoric meant to sway the assembly were known as sophistry, which is the topic of one of Plato's well-known Socratic dialogues, the *Gorgias*. In this ancient text Socrates talks with young students of sophistry who want to use it to gain power in the assembly. He argues that it is sycophancy and therefore unjust, and places the responsibility for diverting demagoguery on the individual.[19] An Athenian trying to take advantage of the public through persuasion of the assembly is acting dishonorably, which does harm to his soul.[20] Plato additionally claims that a citizen's personal attachment to his community should make him want what is best for it[21], thus distinguishing between giving the people what they want, "becoming their servant and trying to please them," and advocating difficult but beneficial laws designed to make them better, "battling with the Athenians to make them as good as possible."[22] The most honorable Greek statesmen, he says, earn their virtue by working for the betterment of the community, not exercising their political power for personal gain.

This theory has significant implications for this comparison of democratic government in ancient Greece and America. First, the Athenians either found it was unnecessary or just did not think to include procedural impediments to mob rule in their original conception of democracy. The assembly functioned freely and

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[19] Plato, "Gorgias" in *Gorgias*, *Menexenus, Protagoras,* trans. Tom Griffith, (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 502d.
[20] Plato, "Gorgias," 522c-d.
[21] Plato, "Gorgia*s,"* 507e.
[22] Plato, "Gorgias," 521a.

supremely, deciding the best policies through deliberation and voting. Second, Plato thought that honorable democratic decision-making was not easy and relied to some extent on citizens' emotional and moral interest in improving their community. Clearly the Founders were more fearful of a tyrannical majority than Plato and the ancient Greeks, and therefore included significant constraints on the power of American government.

Finally, the most striking difference between these two forms of government is their disparate sizes. The ancient Greek city-states were exactly what their name suggests, small cities that controlled the public life within them and maybe some of the surrounding hillsides. This demographic order is often attributed to Greece's natural geography, which made transportation over land difficult and therefore restricted the power of organized government to its immediate surroundings.[23] Fleck and Hanssen argue that democratic government emerged when the elite were forced to allow agricultural landholders into the public decision-making process in order to assure that the cities had access to enough resources.[24] This suggests that ancient Greek government was formed by the natural geography of Greece in addition to the people who lived there. If democracy was developed in response to the parameters of the landscape, then there is most likely a meaningful relationship between the two. This means the modern form of democracy in America and many other nations has been taken out of context.

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[23] Mogens Herman Hansen, *Polis: An Introduction to the Ancient Greek City-State*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 34.
[24] Robert K. Fleck and F. Andrew Hanssen, "The Origins of Democracy: A Model with Applications to Greece," *Journal of Law and Economics*, 49.1 (April 2006): 116.

Several scholars discuss this idea in their analyses of modern and historical democracy. In *Size and Democracy*, Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte point out that the political theory on government from the age of Aristotle and Plato up to the Age of Enlightenment always considered democracy in its original form, the small city-state.[25] Prominent philosophers who greatly influenced the Founding Fathers, like Rousseau and Montesquieu, saw more value in "the small, cohesive, highly consensual city-state peopled by equal and substantially like-minded friends."[26] However, at around the time of the Constitutional Convention democratic theory was adapted to fit the larger nation-state that was emerging as the dominant model of statehood. The smaller city-state was too weak in confrontations with larger nations; it did not have the resources and manpower to resist subjugation. The allure of popular government and increased nationalism in the nation-states led to the invention of political representation and then the conception of democracy as it functions today.[27] The American Constitution was a forerunner of this drastic transformation in political thought, which made democracy possible in much larger nation-states. This adaptation also stripped democracy of many of its worthwhile elements, namely the direct participation of citizens in the political process and their subsequent attachment to the community and interest in improving it. Thus it appears as nations became larger and more able to conquer and annex the smaller democracies, they then decided to take and bastardize their form of government.

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[25] Robert A. Dahl and Edward R. Tufte, *Size and Democracy*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 5-8.
[26] Dahl and Tufte*, Size and Democracy*, 6.
[27] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy,* 8-9.

Harvard scholar Jane Mansbridge calls this transformation of democracy the "adversary revolution" that, in accord with Dahl and Tufte, "paved the way for creating democratic institutions on a national scale."[28] Prior to this change in political thought, democratic institutions like the Greek *polis* were based on friendship and community and sought to determine the policies that would benefit everyone the most. Members found equal pleasure in seeing their peers prosper as themselves, so the goal of public decision-making was the common good.[29] Mansbridge argues that the adversary revolution brought the acceptance and institutionalization of conflict into the political process, in which democracy is now a quantification and competition of many individuals' self-interest.[30] Evidence in support of this theory is clearly seen in the current state of affairs in American democracy.

Democracy was radically changed when it was expanded to the vast scale of modern nations. It is widely recognized today that the representative form of government used in many of these countries is not "real democracy," in which citizens are "called to meet in a deliberative, face-to-face assembly and to bind themselves under laws they fashion themselves."[31] The real, original form of democracy has been taken out of context and modified to fit the modern nation. As conflict and disagreement bring American government to a halt, it is time to reevaluate the effectiveness and functionality of this conception of democracy. The

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[28] Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 5.
[29] Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 13-14.
[30] Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 16-17.
[31] Frank Bryan, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

philosophy that produced the system of checks and balances and Madison's trust in the factionalism of a large nation have effectively prevented tyrannical rule by majority, but it has also undermined the ability of citizens to control their government. This betrayal of the central tenet of democracy necessitates an appraisal of the adaptations the Founding Fathers and other political philosophers made to the government of the ancient Greeks.

Mansbridge's theory of the institutionalization of conflict in democracy suggests that these adaptations opened the door to conflict in democratic political systems. Since these changes also facilitated the expansion of democracy to fit larger states, this project will test the relationship between size and conflict in the political systems of Vermont towns. These cases are useful because the town meeting form of government provides the closest possible substitute for the conditions of government in the ancient democracies of Greece. Bryan summarizes the similarities and differences of these two forms of government clearly in *Real Democracy.*[32] Athenian democracy divided the region into demes that were close to the size of Vermont towns, and each deme sent a delegation to the Council of Five Hundred in Athens, akin to the state government in Montpelier.[33] Although these town governments are less autonomous than their Greek brethren because of the federal bodies above them, their use of direct citizen participation and deliberation make them appealing for this study. In addition, the relatively small size of these communities is relevant and valuable to this study because of the argued importance of smallness in fostering strong identity and cohesiveness in groups of

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[32] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 4.
[33] Bryan, *Real Democracy* ,10-11.

people.[34] This study will explore the theoretical virtues of Greek democracy in a quantitative analysis of size, conflict, and town meeting government, and investigate the functionality of this form of government in larger communities to determine if increased size has a negative effect on the character and effectiveness of democracy.

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[34] See Frank Bryan and John McClaughry, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale,* (Post Mills, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1989), 62-66, C.R. Hoffer, "Understanding the Community," *American Journal of Sociology,* 36.4 (Jan. 1931): 623, and Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics,* trans. Roger Crisp, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Part 2: Hypothesis and Previous Work

The vices and virtues of small town New England are stereotypically based on community intimacy; everyone knows each other's personal and private lives, New Englanders have intense pride in their town's history, and a strong disdain for outsiders (flatlanders).[35] I believe that much of this familiarity and community-mindedness comes from two factors. First, the percentage of people who live in rural areas is much higher in northern New England states than anywhere else in the country. Vermont (38.2%) and Maine[36] (40.2%) had by far the lowest percents of population living in urban areas in the 2000 U.S. Census.[37] This means that a larger proportion of New Englanders live in small towns than the rest of the country. Second, the unique form of local government, town meeting, assembles each town's residents once a year to deliberate and democratically decide the community's affairs. I will demonstrate in this section that both of these factors foster cohesiveness and a strong attachment to one's municipality. I argue that these qualities will influence the political decision-making process by causing citizens to prioritize the town's common interest, whereby they seek to improve the community as a whole, over their individual self-interest. This study seeks to clarify the role of size in democratic government and, more specifically, the ability of the governments to resolve conflicting interests in their constituency. My hypothesis is

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[35] Bryan, *Real Democracy,* 124-127.
[36] I personally consider these two states to be all that's left of "real" New England. New Hampshire, the black sheep of the region, had an urban population of 59.3%, the 10th lowest in the country. In addition, the many other political, cultural, and demographic similarities between Vermont and Maine are very intriguing, but that is a subject for another day.
[37] U.S. Census Bureau, "29 – Urban and Rural Population by State," *The National Data Book: The 2012 Statistical Abstract*, last updated June 27, 2012," http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/population.html.

that smaller towns will have less conflict in the local political process because the citizens will be brought together by their mutual interest in making the community better. The best example of this idea comes from Professor Frank Bryan, who told me that whenever he wants to argue against another citizen at town meeting, he always thinks of the next time he might need that person's help pulling his tractor out of the mud and usually reconsiders. Small towns breed forbearance in addition to familiarity,[38] because citizens know that they will encounter and most likely require help from each other frequently throughout the year outside of town meeting, and therefore tend to treat each other with respect. I believe the stronger attachment residents of small towns have with their community makes the democratic process more consensual and agreeable.

The theoretical support for this argument is rooted in the philosophies of the original political theorists, Aristotle and Plato. Aristotle's *Politics* studies the different constitutional forms of the ancient Greece poleis in search of the ideal form of government. His standard of value is the common good, as he states "those constitutions which consider the common interest are *right* constitutions, judged by the standard of absolute justice. Those constitutions which consider only the personal interest of the rulers are all *wrong*."[39] With the remarkable prescience that few but Aristotle can achieve, he then says that governments based on self-interest "deviate from the true standard by not regarding the interest of all, and are thus involved in a dilemma."[40] Whether Aristotle foresaw the idea of James Madison's

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[38] Bryan*, Real Democracy*, 288.
[39] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Baker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 1279a.
[40] Ibid.

factionalism that pits the citizens against each other, and the political conflict that has consequently resulted[41] is insignificant. He clearly believes the purpose of government is finding the policies that are best for everyone, not weighing the competing self-interests of individuals and enacting the heavier side. Common interest is what brings people together to form societies and governments, Aristotle claims, and it is through the pursuit of this noble good that everyone can have a better life.[42] In this piece he also makes the well-known assertion that states must be small enough to allow all citizens to know "one another's characters" and to permit individuals to address the entire assembly by voice.[43] Technology has rendered this second boundary unnecessary for modern governments but the first suggests that familiarity among the citizens of a polity is necessary for good government, and the size of modern nation-states obviously precludes this parameter. However, town meeting democracy, especially in the smaller towns of Vermont, meets both of these conditions and additionally promotes the common good through direct deliberation on matters concerning the community, which Aristotle agrees is the better way to make decisions and prevent an aristocracy from "enrich[ing] themselves from the public property".[44]

Plato's *Gorgias* shares this position on the precedence of the common good over self-interest in government. He demonstrates that the ideal Athenian leader should always pursue the policies that make the citizens better because this is the

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[41] "Partisanship and Stalemates Lead to Record Low Approval of Congress," *CQ Almanac 2011*, 67th ed., edited by Jan Austin, 1-3-1-8, Washington, DC: CQ-Roll Call Group, 2012, http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal-1390-77511-2461941.
[42] *Politics,* Aristotle, 1278b.
[43] *Politics,* Aristotle, 1326b.
[44] *Politics,* Aristotle 1286a.

most just way to govern.[45] His argument relies on a somewhat religious belief in a day of reckoning after death[46], but also defends the responsibility one has to his community.[47] Other scholars also discuss the importance of friendship in the Greek conception of democracy. Horst Hutter describes Aristotle's view of the relationship between friends "as merely a more perfect expression of the friendship underlying the political community as a whole."[48] Hutter contrasts this with the "individualizing and alienating tendencies of modern society"[49] to mark the contentious effects of liberalism on the democratic process. In addition, he claims that democracy in America was partly inspired by the fraternity of the New England Puritan community, who designed the town meeting form of government being studied in this paper.[50] Friendship is important to the Greek conception of government because people typically want to please their friends, i.e. do what is best for their community. This prevented citizens from subjugating the common good to their own private self-interest. Thus, where American government uses checks and balances as well as factionalism to prevent mob rule, the Greeks relied on strong community bonds to foster the pursuit of the public interest. This theory underlies the hypothesis of this project. In smaller towns, citizens are much more likely to be friendly with each other and therefore have one another's interests in mind. This uniformity of interests (everybody wants to do what is best for the community as a whole) suggests there will be less disagreement in the political process.

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[45] Plato, *Gorgias*, 502c.
[46] Plato, *Gorgias,* 526d.
[47] Plato, *Gorgias,* 507e.
[48] Horst Hutter, *Politics as Friendship: The Origins of Classical Notions of Politics in the Theory and Practice of Friendship,* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978), 45.
[49] Hutter, *Politics as Friendship,* 187.
[50] Hutter, *Politics as Friendship,* 186.

Jane Mansbridge's book *Beyond Adversary Democracy* shows many aspects similar to this theory and investigates some ideas that are relevant to this study. First, she makes a distinction between two concepts of democracy, unitary and adversary. Unitary democracy is the form by which close-knit groups make decisions consensually and for the benefit of everyone. This relies on the equality of members and face-to-face deliberation, and she acknowledges that this is only possible in small systems.[51] The adversary form of democracy resulted from the advent of liberalism and capitalism, and weighs the self-interests of citizens in order to resolve conflicts.[52] The adversarial revolution in democratic theory, which added new concepts like representation to allow democracy to function on a larger scale, "symbolizes, reinforces and institutionalizes division"[53] and has caused citizens to accept as fact that there will be opposition to their views. Mansbridge says that modern democracy needs systems capable of performing both of these functions. She attended consecutive town meetings in an unspecified Vermont town for 4 years to assess the ability of this form of democracy, and concludes that it is capable of both the unitary and adversary modes of decision-making, but that "justice was skewed and fairness corrupted by social coercion" taking place before the meeting.[54] This is a fair criticism of town meeting democracy, but I believe that this pre-meeting coalition forming is part of the deliberative process, and perhaps an indication of the adversarial socialization of citizens. *Beyond Adversary Democracy* supports my argument because it shows that conflict in the democratic process

[51] Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 11-13.
[52] Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 16-17.
[53] Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 10.
[54] Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 102-105.

ranges on a scale that depends on the personal relationships between citizens and the strength of their identification with the community as a whole. Previous work on this idea has made clear that "sense of community" is important in determining political behavior, but these effects go in different directions depending on the social context of the study.[55] What Mansbridge ignores, and what I hope to demonstrate, is that the causal variable in determining the attachment of individuals to their community is size.

The problem of how to form a government that prioritizes the common good over the self-interest of the most powerful elite or the most organized coalitions has clearly been around for some time. Aristotle and Plato both suggest that putting the most virtuous and enlightened man in the community in charge may solve this dilemma, but that a man of this caliber is difficult to find.[56] In the nearly 3000 years since this question was first posed, political theorists have yet to come up with a suitable answer. I argue that the solution is size. Empirical evidence to support this thesis, that there is less conflict of self-interests in smaller communities, can be seen in *Size and Democracy*, a study by Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte of how the size variable affects several aspects of democratic government.[57] First, one of the main claims of this study is that in smaller democracies, individuals can see more clearly that the common good is in their interest, while larger systems permit more divergent views on what is good and on the proper goals of government.[58] Diverse

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[55] Mary R. Anderson, "Beyond Membership: A Sense of Community and Political Behavior," *Political Behavior* 31.4 (Dec. 2009): 603-627.
[56] Aristotle, *Politics,* 1284b25, and Plato, *The Republic*, trans. R.E. Allen, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
[57] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy*
[58] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy*, 14.

views are acceptable and probably healthy for a deliberative body, but government needs to be able to reconcile this conflict into coherent policy. Dahl finds evidence showing that larger democracies tend to have a greater number of "organized interests and interest groups" and their political processes are generally more complex. [59] He also discusses the fact that in smaller communities dissenting actions are more visible and there is more social pressure to conform to common norms, but that this element of size would only be noticeable in communities smaller than 100,000 people.[60] All of the towns being studied in this project are well below this threshold, so this effect supports my hypothesis, that smaller towns will have less conflict due to their shared common interest.

Dahl actually looks for evidence to support the relationship I am investigating, and what he finds is kind of a mixed bag. First, he looks at the size of legislative bodies in several democratic nations and American states and shows that the quality of and participation in deliberation, and the capacity of citizen control over government are diminished by larger size. He states that as size increases "the parliament, in short, becomes less and less capable of functioning as an assembly."[61] Second, Dahl explains the results of a study on Swedish cantons that found the voters in smaller cantons to have more homogenous preferences in elections.[62] He ultimately argues that as political power is centralized and ceded to global institutions like the UN and the European Union to increase system capacity that nations will have to improve local systems to compensate for diminished citizen

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[59] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy*, 39-40.
[60] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy*, 42.
[61] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy, 80.*
[62] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy* 105.

effectiveness.[63] In summary, Dahl & Tufte's research suggests smallness in democracy allows citizens more control over their government and tends to cause more homogeneity of interests.

I believe that democratic government is not doing what it should, and that what prevents it from doing this is that democracy was designed to govern vastly smaller communities than it currently does. The academic community seems to agree that this problem of scale creates a predicament for the theoretical and practical foundations on which modern democracy is built, thereby causing its ineffectiveness. Many of these scholars argue that the missing link in modern democratic government is constructive public deliberation.[64] In *Strong Democracy* Benjamin Barber criticizes representative government and liberalism for creating an individualistic political culture and reducing the participatory role of the citizen. He notes that the concept of representation "rescues democracy from the problems of scale" but has contradicted its democratic ideals by becoming a form of oligarchy.[65] The reforms he proposes "strengthen" democracy by providing better opportunities for community deliberation, and he cites the New England town meeting as a potential model for his proposals.[66] Barber's argument echoes a similar tune to the theory on community cohesiveness that informs my hypothesis in this study. He claims that the lack of civic engagement is the main problem of modern

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[63] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy,* 138.
[64] For similar examples of this vein of scholarship, see Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) and Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
[65] Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 290-291.
[66] Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 272-273.

democracy. In the town meeting form of government, citizen deliberation plays a central role, so my research will indicate how well democracy functions when direct public discussion is involved. However, I believe that the qualities of deliberation and democratic efficiency are both dependent on the size of the community.

Size and Democracy laments the lack of research on the correlates of size in democratic nations, and implores political science to study this fundamental relationship more.[67] Frank Bryan noted almost 30 years later that this call was not heeded.[68] It is therefore very difficult to find academic research on the correlates of size and aspects of democracy. Relevant comparative studies show that smaller nations are more likely to form and sustain democratic governments, and this is often attributed to the "spirit of fellowship and community" that smallness supports.[69] Lassen and Serritzlew found that an increase in size has a significant negative effect on citizens' internal political efficacy, which they define as "citizens' belief that they are competent to understand and take part in politics."[70] These findings both suggest that democracy works better in smaller systems, which I hope to show in this project. One study of political polarization in survey responders' views on public spending found that citizens of smaller democracies are more likely to have divergent opinions than in larger nations.[71] This finding contradicts my

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[67] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy*, 28.
[68] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 70.
[69] Dag Anckar,"Small is democratic, but who is small?" *Arts and Social Sciences Journal*, 2012.
[70] David Dreyer Lassen and Soren Serritzlew, "Jurisdiction Size and Local Democracy: Evidence on Internal Political Efficacy from Large-scale Municipal Reform" *American Political Science Review* 105.2 (May 2011): 238.
[71] Erik Lindqvist and Robert Ostling, "Political Polarization and the Size of Government," *American Political Science Review* 104 (Aug. 2010): 543-565.

hypothesis, so I will control for the burden of public spending in my trials to provide for this possibility.

Academic research on town meeting government is similarly lacking. This is very surprising because it is the only form of direct democracy that remains in the world today.[72] On town meeting day, the residents of a community are asked to assemble and decide the questions of local government, which include matters such as zoning laws, property taxes, school budgets, and the salary of the town dogcatcher. This gives the people close control over their government as well as the opportunity to learn and debate each other's views. Any summary of the literature on town meeting democracy would be remiss to begin with any other work than *Real Democracy* by Frank Bryan. This immense project uses a database of 1,435 cases to investigate what causes political participation in Vermont towns. Bryan identifies a strong negative correlation between the size of a town and the percentage of its residents that participate in town meeting.[73] He uses a corollary of Anthony Downs' classic voter's paradox theory, which states that citizens choose to participate in politics despite their knowledge of the extremely low chance that their vote will make a difference in the outcome[74], to argue that smaller towns have more participation because the power of an individual's vote increases with a decrease in the size of the voting body. This investigation tests many other factors of town meeting government to find the variables that effect attendance and verbal participation, several of which are relevant to this study. There is a negative

[72] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 12-13.
[73] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 78-79.
[74] Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy,* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

correlation between town size and the percentage of citizens who speak at town meeting.[75] Similarly, there is also a negative correlation between the size of the meeting and the percentage of citizens who participate in discussion.[76] So more people participate in discussion in smaller towns and smaller meetings. More verbal participation could be interpreted as more disagreement among the citizens, so these findings suggest that my hypothesis, that smaller towns will have less conflict, could be incorrect.

Other major studies of town meeting democracy include Jane Mansbridge's *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, discussed above, and *The New England Town Meeting* by Joseph Zimmerman. In this book Zimmerman provides a comprehensive account of the structural and historical aspects of town meeting in the 6 New England states. His survey research concurs with Bryan's finding that attendance in smaller towns is higher[77], and he also finds that the majority (78%) of town officers believe the decisions made in town meeting are at least "good."[78] Zimmerman claims that conflict most often emerges in town meeting when budget proposals threaten to raise the town's property tax rate.[79] I will therefore control for the effects of budget costs in this study. If there is a relationship between spending and conflict, its influence will be removed from the correlation of size and conflict to ensure the purity of my findings. Smaller investigations into the dynamics of town meeting democracy show that socioeconomic status, a factor known to influence

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[75] Bryan, *Real Democracy,* 178.
[76] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 158.
[77] Joseph Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action,* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 1999), 93.
[78] Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*
[79] Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 172.

participation in national elections,[80] does not correlate with an individual's likelihood of attending town meeting.[81] Town meeting participation is thus a forum of socioeconomic diversity that allows citizens of all social classes equal status in deliberation.

Many scholars have taken up investigations into the role of disagreement and competition in democracy. Unfortunately all of this research appears to use conflict as the independent variable and focus primarily on its effects on participation. This study is more concerned with what causes disagreement in politics, but nevertheless some of these findings are important. McClurg demonstrates that exposure to divergent views has little effect on the individuals in the majority of the given social context, but causes people in the minority to participate less frequently in politics and political discussions.[82] Given the current state of partisan relationships in the U.S. this makes a seriously critical assessment of democratic deliberation. With the factionalism of modern democracy in mind, disagreement shuns the citizens with less support for their argument. It would follow that government needs a way to bring people together in political participation and refocus on finding agreement and common ground. I will determine if size is a factor in this necessity. Other research shows that exposure to political competition cause youth to become more interested and more likely to participate in politics later in

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[80] Richard Murray and Arnold Vedlitz, "Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Voting Participation in Large Southern Cities," *The Journal of Politics*, 39 (1977): 1064-1072.

[81] Victor DeSantis and David Hill, "Citizen Participation in Local Politics: Evidence from New England Town Meetings," *State & Local Government Review,* 36.3 (2004): 166-173, and Vivian Scott Hixon, "The New Town Meeting Democracy: A Study of Matched Towns," Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1971.

[82] Scott D. McClurg, "Political Disagreement in Context: The Conditional Effect of Neighborhood Context, Disagreement, and Political Talk on Electoral Participation," *Political Behavior* 28.4 (Dec. 2006): (362).

life.[83] This suggests, as other scholars have argued, that there may be some value in disagreement in democratic government.

There is also a significant amount of sociological research that supports the argument that smaller communities will have more solidary interests. Philip E. Slater finds that larger groups are likely to be less stable, and smaller groups more likely to inhibit the expression of disagreement and dissatisfaction.[84] Edwin J. Thomas indentified a negative relationship between group size and role consensus, and group size and quality of work performance, meaning that smaller groups tended to agree on the importance of their different roles more, and produce better work than larger groups.[85] Larger size has a negative effect on group cohesiveness, which may be reflected in the bonds that make community and by conflict and division in the political process.

In summary, ancient Greek political philosophy highlights the importance of friendship and community in promoting the common good over individual's self-interest in government. By expanding the capacity of democracy to fit modern nation-states, significant adaptations were made to the Greek conception of government that removed the motives for citizens to consider the public interest over their own selfishness. The supremacy of self-interest is seen in the adversary nature of modern democracy, which has been theoretically established and

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[83] Julianna Sandell Pacheco "Political Socialization in Context: The Effect of Political Competition on Youth Voter Turnout," *Political Behavior* 30.4 (Dec. 2008): 431.
[84] Philip E. Slater, "Contrasting Correlates of Group Size," *Sociometry*, 21.2 (Jun., 1958): 129-139.
[85] Edwin J. Thomas, "Role Conceptions and Organizational Size," *American Sociological Review* 24.1 (Feb. 1959): 30-37.

criticized for its alienating effect on the individual. Empirical research suggests larger size causes disharmony in the political process, but the lack of significant research on the effects of size on governance make this claim tentative. I will now attempt to empirically demonstrate that size positively correlates with political conflict by testing Vermont town meetings, a form of democracy very similar to the ancient Greek model, to show that the extension of democratic government to large states has effectively dissolved the components, such as popular rule and community-mindedness, that made it such an attractive form of societal organization.

Part 3: Methodology

There is considerable variation in the methods political scientists use to measure conflict and disagreement in government systems, most likely because it is an abstract idea that has numerous elements. It can be represented by argument, division, gridlock, or even by events external to the political process like protests or petitions. Studies measuring conflict appear to vary depending on the scale of government under consideration. National scale investigations into partisan polarization and gridlock in Congress look at the amount of significant legislation passed,[86] and the degree to which members vote with other members of their party.[87] Analyses of conflict in the American states use Presidential election results to measure the extent of ideological disagreement.[88] Since much of this information is unavailable for smaller communities, studies at the local and neighborhood levels rely on phone and mail surveys to determine conflict.[89]

Due to the lack of a widely accepted method of measuring political disagreement, I have decided to test the relationship between size and conflict in two separate ways. Both will use size as the independent variable, but operationalize the dependent variable, the level of conflict in town meeting, in different ways. Readily available data from Professor Frank Bryan provides a detailed breakdown of the amount of time Vermont towns spent discussing various proposals at town meeting. My first test compares the amount of argument on

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[86] Manabu Saeki, "Gridlock in the Government of The United States: Influence of Divided Government and Veto Players," *British Journal of Political Science* 39.3 (July 2009): 593, and Mayhew, *Divided We Govern*.

[87] Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse than It Looks*, 45, and Rosenthal and Poole, "The Polarization of American Politics."

[88] Pacheco, "Political Socialization in Context," 422.

[89] McClurg, "Political Disagreement in Context," 355-356.

budget proposals to town size. Longer discussion will indicate more disagreement and argument, and therefore more conflict in the town. Secondly, voting results from town meeting decisions found in two Vermont newspapers' reports on town meeting day will be used to determine conflict. Results that are more equally opposed (closer to 50-50) will clearly show the presence of more conflict. I decided to perform two separate trials for a couple of reasons. First, the difficulty of quantitatively defining and measuring an abstract idea like conflict could create doubts about the integrity of this methodology, so two trials will give it additional support to withstand criticisms. Second, I have already demonstrated the importance of the democratic *process* in town meeting, and measuring just the voting results (the outcomes) will ignore the aspects of the political transaction in the assembly. Therefore, I measure the outcomes as well as the process to develop a more comprehensive look into democracy in town meetings. I argue that both operational definitions measure the dependent variable, conflict, in the political process, because argument, reflected in discussion time, is equally indicative of conflict as disharmony, which will be seen in the vote counts.

In Test 1 I correlate town size and the amount of time Vermont towns spend discussing budget proposals at town meeting, and then control for the effects of wealth and cost. Discussion time will serve as a measure of conflict because towns that have more disagreement will spend more time arguing in town meeting. The data on discussion time comes from a database provided by Professor Frank Bryan at the University of Vermont. Bryan and his students collected this information to measure the attendance, participation, and demographics of randomly selected

town meetings throughout the state from 1978 to 1995.[90] Bryan coded this data to show the length of and participation in discussion on individual warning items.[91] This study will be restricted to cases held within 3 years of a national census in order to ensure the accuracy of the population and wealth information. Historical census information on Vermont towns comes from Vermont Indicators Online,[92] an invaluable database of demographic information provided by the University of Vermont's Center for Rural Studies. There are 94 cases that fit these criteria.

The dependent variable, conflict in the deliberative process, is measured as the amount of time citizens discussed budget referendum proposed and voted on at town meeting. Debate in Vermont town meetings can only be limited by a seconded call to question and a two-thirds vote to end debate; any town resident can speak for as long as he or she wants on any warning item, and when everyone is done the item is put to question. Various types of budgets (highway, selectmen's, general fund, and school) from the database were used, unless the town allowed citizens to vote by Australian ballot and therefore did not have a discussion. The Australian ballot is a different voting system that requires towns to hold an informational meeting before town meeting day to discuss warning items, and then open polls on town meeting day for citizens to vote by paper ballot.[93] It is generally used by larger towns to allow citizens who are unable to attend a daylong meeting to participate in

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[90] See Bryan, *Real Democracy.*

[91] Apparently breaking down 1,435 town meetings into individual voting items was a more time consuming task than he expected. He only made it through the alphabetically ordered database to the towns that begin with M. There is no possible statistical bias in the first half of the alphabet that I can think of.

[92] "Vermont Indicators Online," Compiled by The Center for Rural Studies at University of Vermont, (accessed October 1st-December 5th, 2012). http://www.vcgi.org/indicators/.

[93] Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 84.

the political process, although it has been shown to reduce town meeting attendance and participation,[94] and attendance at the informational meetings is very slim.[95]

I define town size, the independent variable, as the number of voting-age citizens in the town counted in the most recent census. I chose eligible voters because this gives a more accurate representation of the size of the political community could participate in the meeting, since adults and their incomes and property are taken into consideration in the political process and children are not.

Wealth, the first control variable, is operationalized as the town's GDP per capita adjusted for the effect of inflation. Inflation data comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index.[96] I chose wealth as a control variable because of the well-established correlation between voter behavior and socioeconomic status.[97] For a similar reason my second control variable is cost, operationalized as the amount of money in the proposed budget adjusted for inflation and divided by the adult population of the town. Budget total numbers came from Professor Bryan's town meeting database. This gives an estimation of how much each citizen expects to pay in property taxes if the proposal under consideration is approved. I chose these two variables as controls because I believe they will influence how much a citizen is willing to contribute to the community if he/she disagrees with the budget proposal. The amount of money an individual

[94] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 97, 168.

[95] In *The New England Town Meeting*, Zimmerman shows that attendance at informational town meetings ranges from 2.4 to 5.9 percent.

[96] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Consumer Price Index of Inflation," ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/cpi/cpiai.txt (last updated November 16th, 2012, accessed November 21st, 2012).

[97] Richard Murray and Arnold Vedlitz, "Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Voting Participation in Large Southern Cities," *The Journal of Politics*, 39 (1977): 1064-1072.

makes in addition to the amount he is being asked to spend could affect how he/she participates in the deliberation on the budget proposal at town meeting. If so, I want to control for these effects to clarify the relationship between size and conflict. In summary, Test 1 will measure the relationship between size and the indicator of conflict, discussion time.

Test 2 will look for a relationship between town size and conflict in vote totals from Vermont town meetings, and then control for the effects of cost. Many towns' voting results are reported in several Vermont newspapers in the days following town meeting day, held every year the first Tuesday in March, although approximately 15 percent of towns have chosen to hold their meeting on the Monday before, the Saturday after, or a different date for various reasons.[98] I gathered voting results from the archived microfilm records of two newspapers, the *Burlington Free Press* and the *Rutland Herald*, available in the Bailey/Howe Library at the University of Vermont. I chose these two daily newspapers because they contained the best reports on the events of town meeting and together cover a larger majority of towns in Vermont. The *Free Press* provided information on towns in the north, northwest, and central regions of Vermont, and the *Herald* focused on towns in the south. The data used for this test comes from these reports for the years 1989 to 1992. I chose these years because they provided the only centralized reporting on town meeting available that was closest to a census, in order to ensure the accuracy of population figures. Town meeting reporting in these newspapers

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[98] Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 85.

from the years surrounding 1980, 1970, and earlier decades typically do not include a tally of votes taken at the meeting. Since 1990 town meeting attendance has been in gradual decline,[99] so I chose the years surrounding the 1990 census to maximize data availability and participation.

I restricted the data in this test to the results of votes on school budgets because they are consistently reported in the papers, in contrast to others that towns are asked to consider, like highway and selectmen's budgets. Results from some towns were unavailable because they postpone school budget decisions to a day later in the spring when state and federal contributions to the budget are more complete.[100] Budgets can be approved or rejected in Vermont town meetings in 4 different ways, by voice vote, hand/standing, paper ballot, or Australian ballot. After deliberation is ended, the town moderator asks all those in favor to proclaim their support by saying "aye" and then all opposed by saying "nay." Unless the moderator cannot determine the result by these vocal proclamations, or any voter calls for division, the item is passed or turned down by this voice vote.[101] In this test I consider school budgets passed by voice vote to be unanimously approved by the town, because rejecting the opportunity to quantify the vote signifies that voters in the minority accept the assembly's decision.

If there is adequate division in the town meeting the moderator can ask citizens to show their vote and be counted either by raising hands or standing, unless seven voters request that the vote be taken by paper ballot. If the results of a

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[99] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 133-135.
[100] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 102.
[101] Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 90.

hand/standing vote or paper ballot on a school budget were reported in one of the newspapers in the years 1989-1992, it is used as data in test 2. It should be noted that the newspapers do not describe the outcomes of town meeting day in a uniform way. In some cases, they provide detailed descriptions of the debate, budget amount, voting method, and results, but in others they only say whether the budget proposals passed and who was elected as town officials. There appears to be no pattern behind this inconsistency; I believe it depends on what the reporter felt was necessary to include. I can see no statistical bias that will come as a result and am therefore confident that this data is a randomly gathered sample of town meeting results. Nevertheless, I made certain to only include cases that specifically reported the school budget amount, voting method, and decision of the town assembly.

The final way towns can make decisions in Vermont town meetings is by Australian ballot. Towns do this in a number of different ways and use it to decide different items like the election of town officers or budget proposals. Some open the polls on ballot items during town meeting, and then decide other items simultaneously in the traditional town meeting format, while others holds informational meetings the night before and then vote by Australian ballot the next day.[102] The results of Australian ballots on school budget referendums are included in test 2, in contrast with test 1. This is necessary because a large portion of towns (approximately 28%)[103] require budget referendum to be determined by Australian ballot, and excluding them would decrease the size of the sample considerably. Also, I argue that for the purposes of this test, Australian ballot results indicate the

[102] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 94.
[103] Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 87.

conflict in Vermont towns more or less equally to decisions made in the town assembly because they include the opportunity for deliberation at the informational meeting and legitimize the town's decision. The data for the independent variable, town size, comes from Frank Bryan's database of historical Vermont demographic information, and data for the control variable, cost, comes from the budget amount specified in the newspaper reports.

I operationalize the dependent variable, conflict, as the size of the majority that made the decision on the school budget vote. That means that test 2 will show the relationship of size and conflict regardless of the decision, either approval or rejection, of the town voters. For example if there were 75 "aye" votes on the school budget, and 25 "nays", I divided the number of "aye" votes by the total number of votes, 100, and multiplied this value by 100 to turn it into a percent, to calculate the size of the majority. This will show the extent to which citizens of the town agree with each other on the school budget and approximate the level of conflict in the town. Again, in this test I consider voice votes to be unanimous, meaning some cases will have a majority of 100% in support or opposition. While in certain cases this may not seem to be an accurate representation of the town's vote, if the voters in the minority cannot sufficiently argue their case during discussion to mobilize adequate opposition and show division, or then neglect to call for division or fail to cause a paper ballot, this indicates their resignation to the town's decision as well as an extremely low level of disagreement in the town.

The operational definition of town size, the independent variable, is the number of registered voters in the town, because historical data on the amount of

eligible voters (which I use for the size variable in Test 1) was no longer available online from the Vermont Center for Rural Studies when I compiled this data. Professor Bryan was thankfully able to provide the amount of registered voters in all Vermont towns in 1990, which provide a nearly identical substitute.[104] I will also test for the effects of cost, the control variable, on conflict in school budget votes because this may influence citizens' vote on the budget. If they feel the amount is too high or too low for any reason, such as their children attend the local school or they recently acquired heavily taxed property, this will affect their vote independently of town size, so it must be controlled. Cost is operationalized as the budget amount under consideration divided by the amount of eligible voters in the town, to estimate approximately how much each citizen is expecting to have to contribute. This is not an accurate estimate of the amount each citizen will be taxed because school budgets are funded by property taxes that vary based on assessed value, and many towns receive supplementary state and federal assistance, but it is unlikely that a town meeting attendee would be able to calculate his or her exact share of the budget before it is brought to a vote anyway, so this number is most likely similar to what he or she estimates is her personal financial burden for the budget.

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[104] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 65 note 16.

Part 4a: Test 1 Findings

Test 1 contained 94 cases. Descriptive information for this data can be seen in table I and is summarized here. The dependent variable, discussion time on budget items, had a minimum of 0 at a town meeting in Wells, Vermont in 1982, and the maximum was 88 minutes from the 1987 meeting in Georgia. The mean discussion time was 20.2 minutes. Size, the independent variable, had a minimum of 228 eligible voters in the town of Belvidere and a maximum of 3,762 voting-age citizens in Bristol, and the mean size was 1,434. Inflation-adjusted town GDP per capita varied from $11,693 in Brownington to $37,675 in Charlotte, and the average was $20,032. The other control variable, adjusted budget cost per person, ranged $36.13 in Bethel in 1982 to $3,374.87 in Sherburne (now known as Killington) in 1989, and the mean was $392.11.

Table I
Descriptive Statistics for Test 1 Data

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Time	94	0	88	20.22
Size	94	228	3,762	1,434
Town Wealth	94	$11,693	$37,675	$20,032
Budget Cost	94	$36.13	$3,374.87	$392.11

I tested the simple linear relationships between these four variables using standard (product moment) coefficients. The correlation (Pierson's r) and significance of town size and discussion time, and the relationships between these

variables and the controls were all found in this manner and can be seen in Table II, in which the significant relationships (p<.05) are underlined.

Table II
Correlations and Significance of all Test 1 Variables

	Size	Time	Wealth	Budget Cost
Size	X	.295 p= .004	.342 p= .001	-.150 p= .150
Time	.295 p= .004	X	.256 p= .013	.149 p= .152
Wealth	.342 p= .001	.256 p= .013	X	.246 p= .017
Budget Cost	-.150 p= .150	.149 p= .152	.246 p= .017	X

This information shows the hypothesized positive relationship between size and discussion time, correlated at a statistically significant level. Size and town wealth are positively correlated, which means that citizens of larger towns tend to have higher incomes. The positive relationship between wealth and time indicates that wealthier towns also spend more time discussing budget items, which is contrary to what I expected. For the most part, the budget cost control varied insignificantly with the other variables, however there was a positive correlation between the two control variables, which indicates the logical assumption that wealthier towns tend to support higher budget costs per capita. Scatter plots (with trend lines showing the hypothesized relationship between size and discussion time) and the other relationships between the control variables and the dependent variable can be seen in Figures I, II, and III. I have also included a causal guide to the

data, Figure IV, which maps the various correlations discussed above as well as the

relationship between the independent and dependent variables accounting for the
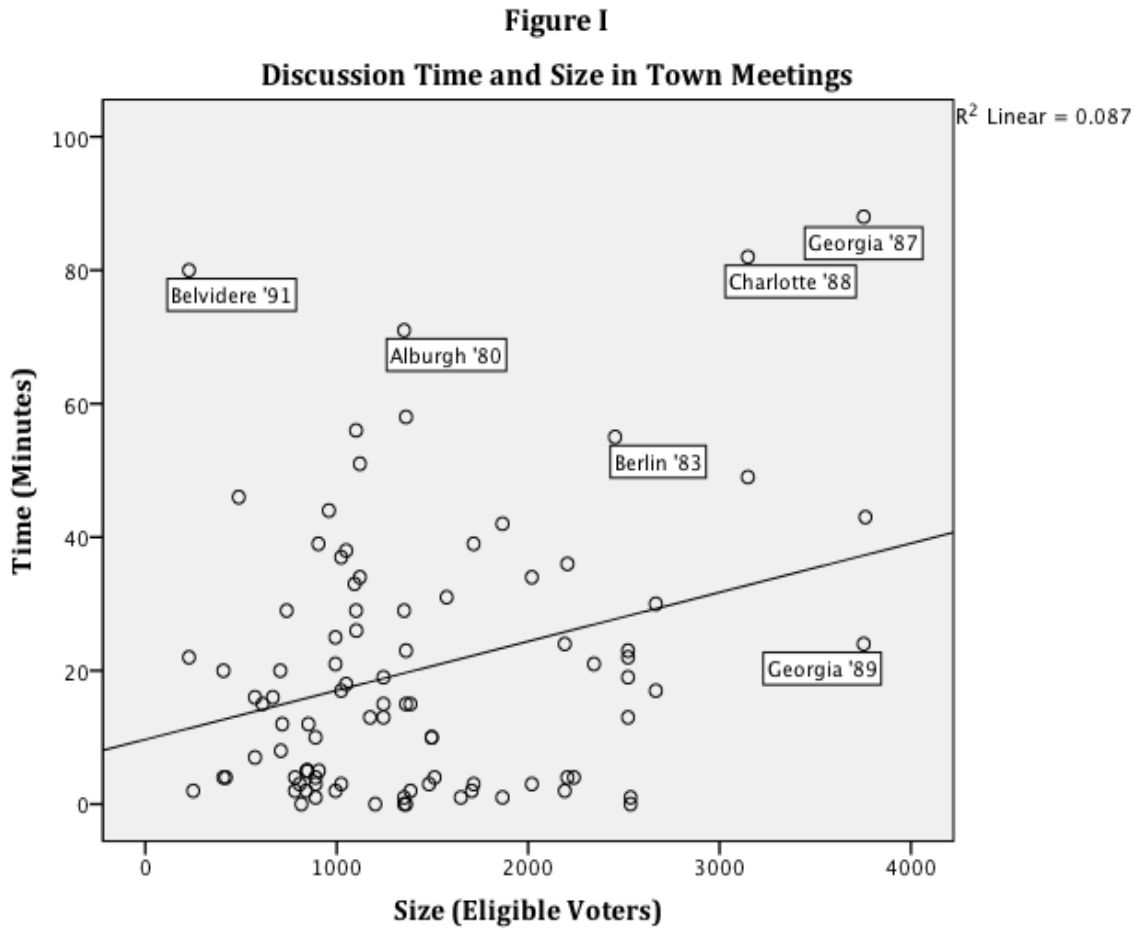
effects of the controls.

Figure I

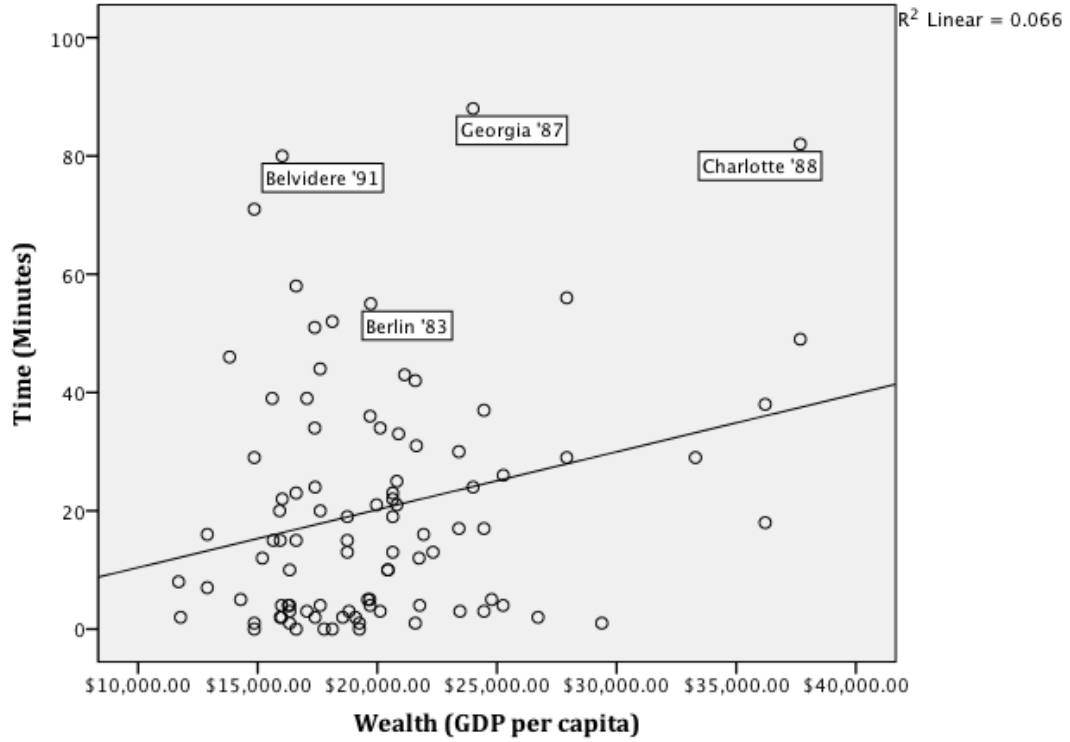**Discussion Time and Size in Town Meetings**

Figure II

Discussion Time and Wealth in Town Meetings

Figure III

Discussion Time and Budget Cost in Town Meetings

Figure IV

Test 1 Correlations with Controls

Wealth (W)

rSW=.342 (p=.001)

rWT=.256 (p=.013)

rST=.295 (p=.004)
rST.W=.228 (p=.028)

rWB=.246 (p=.017)

Size (S)

rST.B=.324 (p=.002)
rST.WB=.262 (p=.012)

Time

(T)

rBT=.149 (p=.152)

rSB=-.150 (p=.150)

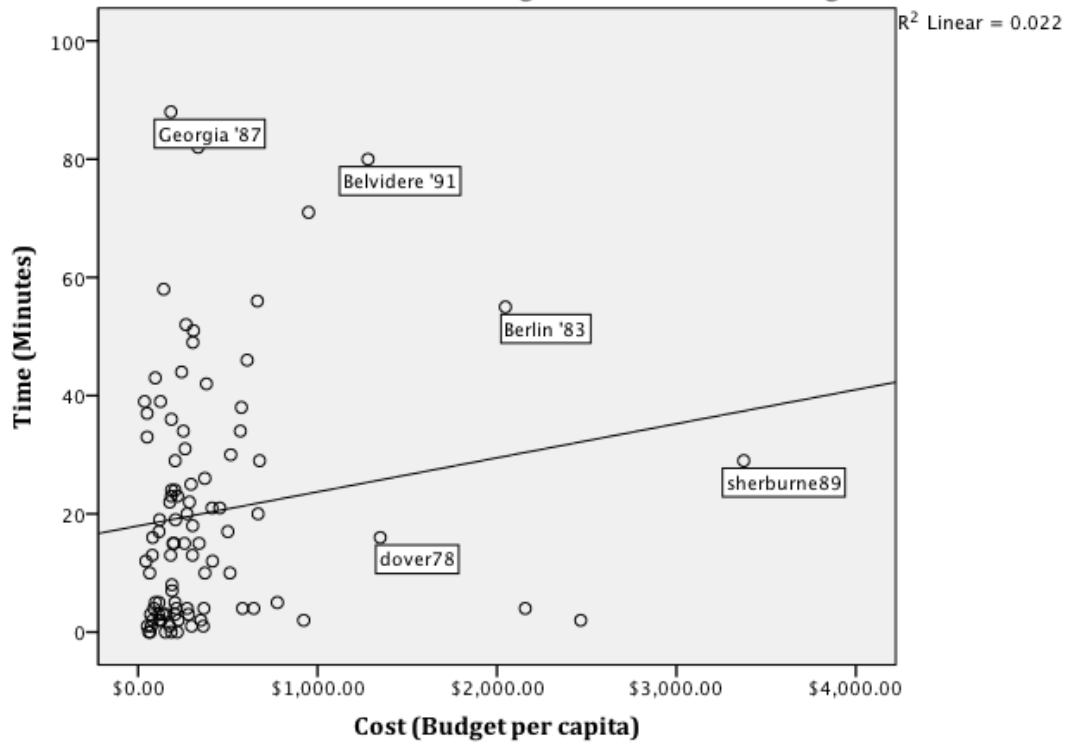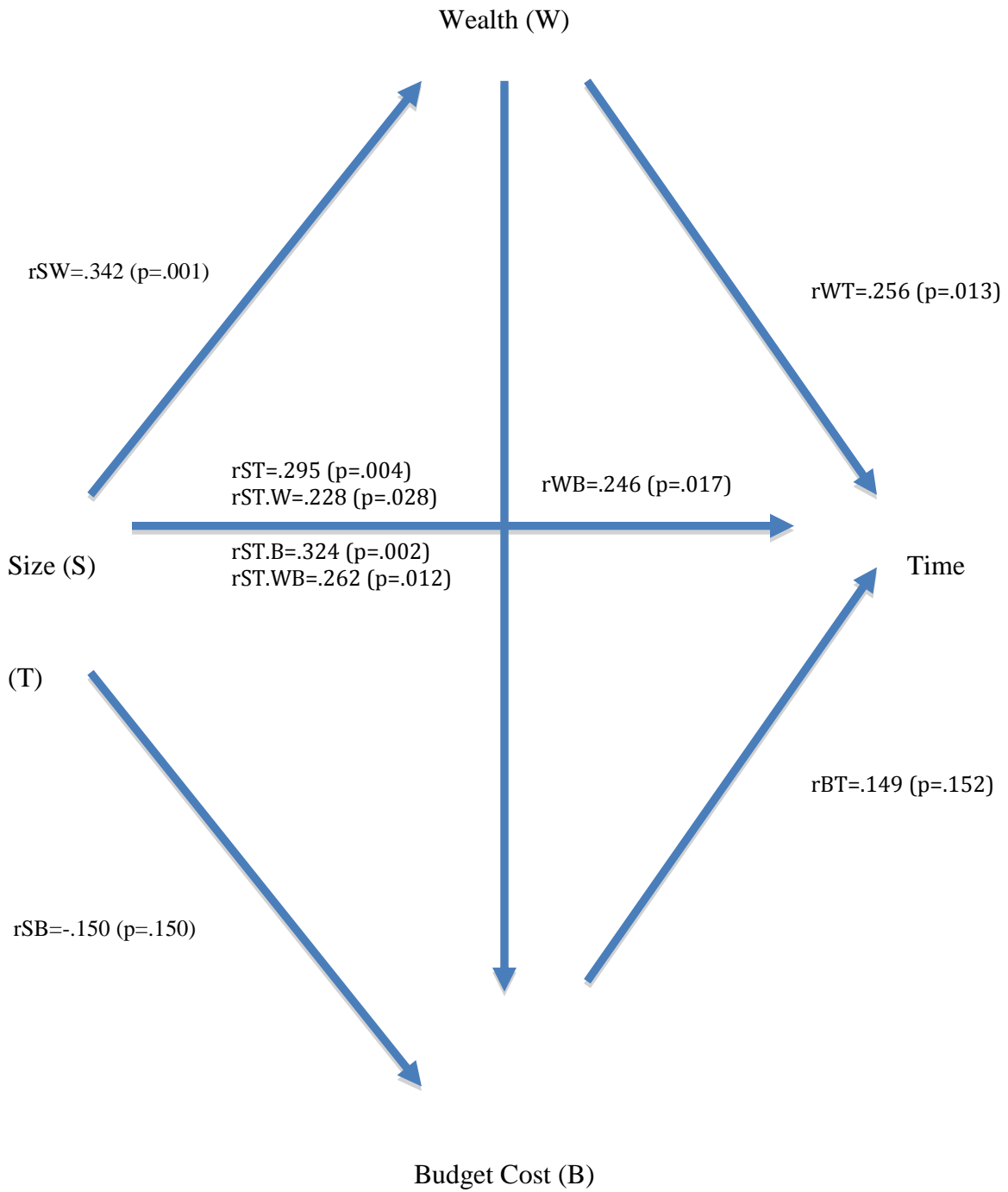Budget Cost (B)

To read the causal map, note that the letter in parentheses signifies the variables in the relationships. So "r" and then the two letters signify the correlation between two variables. The letters that come after the period indicate variables that are under control. For example, rST is the simple correlation between size and time, and rST.W represents this relationship after controlling for the effects of wealth. The number in parentheses is the significance of the relationship. Figure IV shows the significant positive correlations of size and time, size and wealth, wealth and time, and wealth and budget cost. This means that the amount of time spent discussing budget proposals at town meeting increases for larger towns and wealthier towns, that larger Vermont towns tend to be more wealthy than smaller ones, and that wealthier towns pay more per citizen on their budgets than smaller towns. There was no significant relationship between size and budget cost or between budget cost and discussion time. After controlling for wealth, the relationship between size and discussion time is weakened but remains positive, and after controlling for budget costs the correlation is strengthened. Controlling for both cost and wealth slightly diminishes the strength of the relationship between size and discussion time. This indicates that the relationship between size and discussion time withstands the controls; it is still significant after removing the effects of wealth and budget cost from data. Take for example the Charlotte highway budget discussion in 1988. Charlotte is a larger town, and the test indicates that it will therefore argue longer about the budget. It is also a relatively wealthier town, which the model also

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predicts will cause longer discussion time. Controlling for wealth takes away the possibility that Charlotte's long discussion time was caused by the town's deep pockets, and afterwards, since the relationship between size and discussion time is still strong and significant, it is clear that Charlotte's prolonged argument on the budget was a result of its larger size. Based on this information, it can be concluded that town size and wealth positively affect the amount of time spent discussing budget proposals at town meetings, an indicator of political conflict in the town.

Figures I, II, and III show the lines of best fit for their respective correlations as well as the percentage of the variance (R^2) in the dependent variable (time) explained by the independent and control variables (size, wealth, and cost). These findings are all considerably lower than expected. Town size explains only about 9% of the variance in discussion time spent on budget proposals, and wealth describes about 7%. Again, there was no significant relationship found between budget costs and time. I also administered a stepwise multiple regression on this data to gain further understanding of these relationships. The results of this test can be seen in Table III. The regression excluded the wealth control variable because it was statistically insignificant in the equation. Nevertheless this analysis shows that the combined effects of the size and budget cost variables significantly explain about 12.5% of the variance in town meeting budget discussion time. Accounting for the cost of the budget to citizens increased the r-squared by about 4%.

Table III

Multiple Regression Analysis of the Correlates of Discussion Time
(N=94)

Variable	"r"	R^2	Increase in R^2	Beta	Sig. "p"
Size	.295	.087	-	.295	.004
Budget Cost	.354	.125	.38	.324	.002

Part 4b: Test 2 Findings

Descriptive statistics on the data used for Test 2 can be found in Table IV below. The minimum value for the size of majority variable was 50%, a school budget vote in Thetford, Vermont in 1990 that managed to record an exact tie, 184-184. The maximum size of majority recorded was 100%, from the 96 cases that decided their school budget question with a unanimous voice vote, and the mean majority was 77.9%. The amount of registered voters ranged from a minimum of 54 in Granby to the maximum of 5994 in Springfield. The mean town size was 1096 registered voters. The minimum budget cost per capita was $108.79 from Greensboro in1992, and the maximum was $1,761.90 per town resident in the 1992 Bakersfield town meeting. The mean budget cost per capita was $745.05.

Table IV
Descriptive Statistics for Test 2 Data

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Majority Size	246	50%	100%	77.9%
Size	246	54	5994	1096
Budget Cost	246	$108.79	$1,761.90	$745.05

I used the same statistical analyses for Test 2 as Test 1 above. I calculated the linear relationships between all three variables using standard (product moment) coefficients. The correlation (Pierson's r) and significance (p) of town size and size of the majority, and the relationships between these variables and the control,

budget cost, were once again all found in this manner and can be seen in Table V, in which the significant relationships (p<.05) are underlined.

Table V
Correlations and Significance of Test 2 Variables

	Size of Majority	Size	Budget Cost
Size of Majority	X	-.564 p= .000	-.116 p= .070
Size	-.564 p= .000	X	-.085 p= .186
Budget Cost	-.116 p= .070	-.085 p= .186	X

This information once more suggests that the hypothesized relationship between size and conflict is correct. There is a strong negative correlation between the town size and majority variables, which means that as town size increases the group of citizens in majority agreement gets smaller. This indicates the presence of heightened conflict in larger towns. The relationships between size and budget cost, and budget cost and size of majority were both negative but not significant, which means that the control variable did not have an effect on the relationship between town size and size of majority as I expected. I have included Figure V to illustrate the weak correlation between cost and majority size, and labeled some of the outlying cases. Figure VI depicts the linear relationship between the amount of registered voters and the size of the majority, and I have also included Figure VII to show the logarithmic curve that represents this relationship. I believe the logarithmic curve represents this trend better because it explains more of the variance in the data.
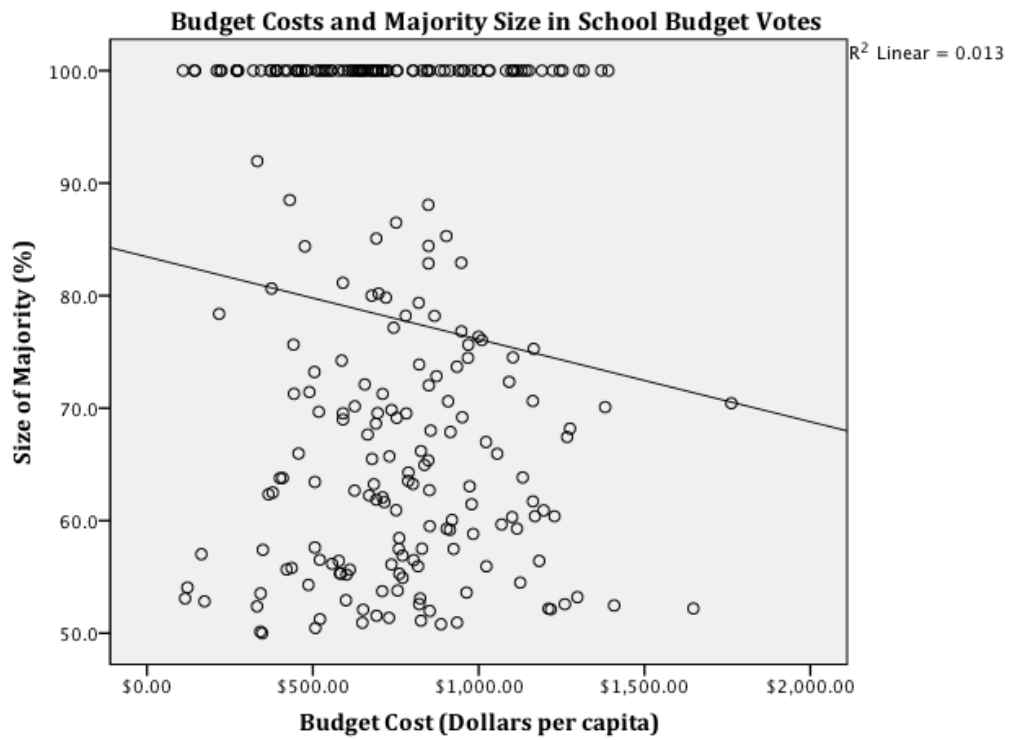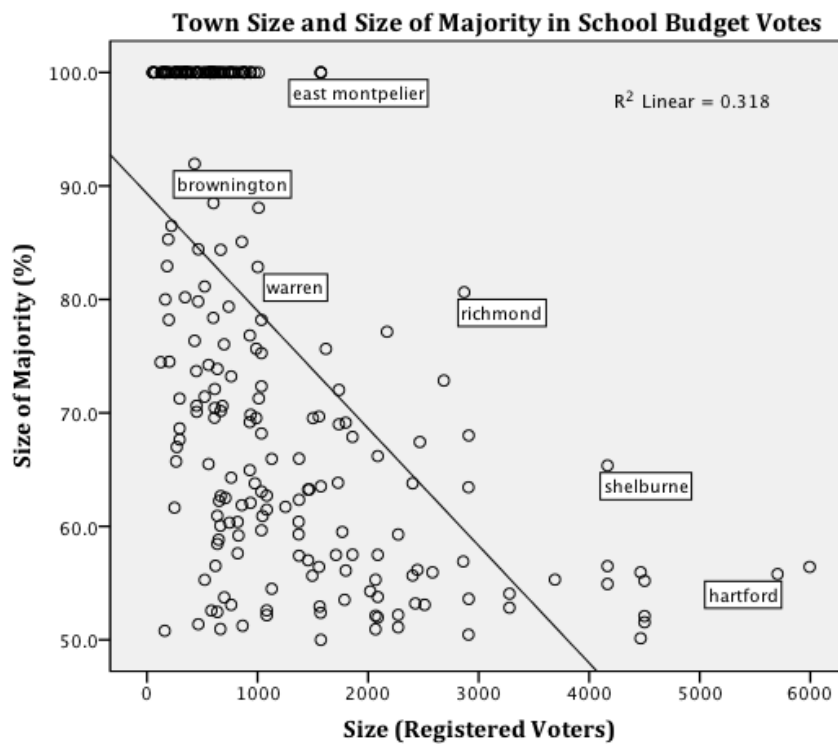
Figure V

Budget Costs and Majority Size in School Budget Votes

R^2 Linear = 0.013

Size of Majority (%)

Budget Cost (Dollars per capita)

Figure VI

Town Size and Size of Majority in School Budget Votes

R^2 Linear = 0.318

east montpelier

brownington

warren

richmond

shelburne

hartford

Size of Majority (%)

Size (Registered Voters)

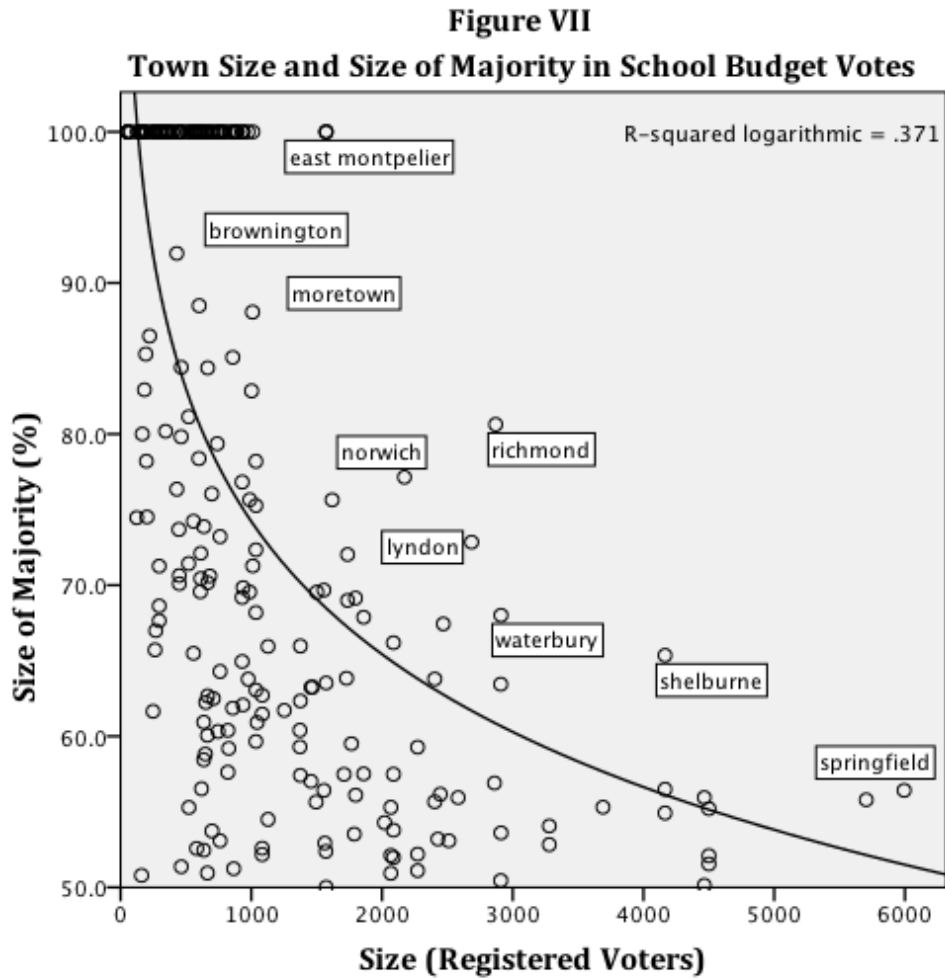**Figure VII**
**Town Size and Size of Majority in School Budget Votes**

Furthermore, Figure VIII shows another causal map of the simple correlations of the Test 2 variables including the effects of the control variable, cost. This is the same format as the one used in Test 1, but with only one control.

Figure V shows the slightly negative correlation between budget cost and size of the majority, as well as the low percentage of variance in majority explained by the control. The R-squared value is only 1.3%, but remember the p value for this correlation is .07 so this relationship is insignificant. This signifies the absence of a relationship between these two variables. On the other hand, Figures VI and VIII

Figure VIII

Test 2 Correlations with Controls

Cost (C)

rSC=-.085 (p=.186)   rCM=-.116 (p=.070)

rSM=-.564 (p=.000)
rSM.C=-.58 (p=.000)

Size (S)   Majority (M)
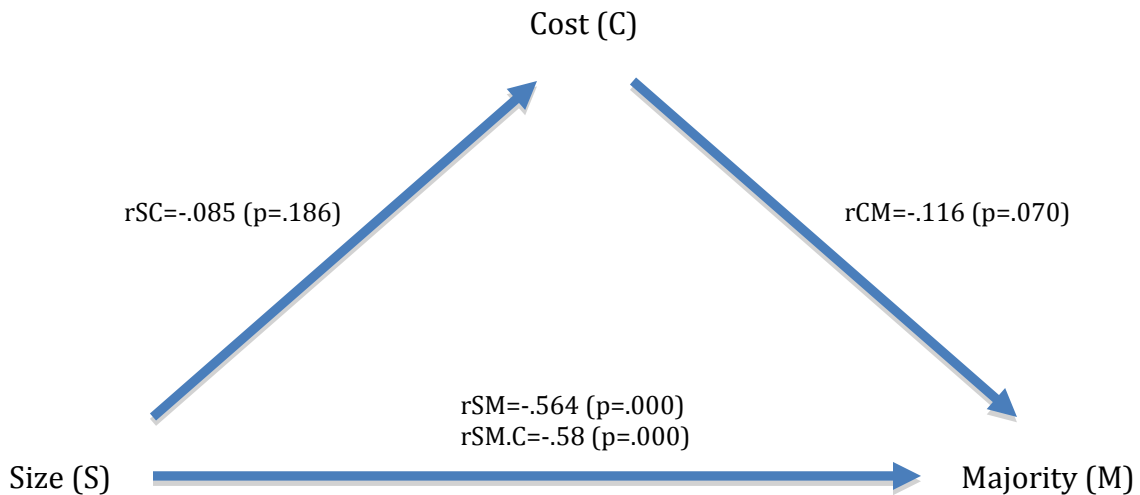
show the strong relationship between the town size and size of majority variables. The percentage of the variance explained by the linear relationship is 32%, and the logarithmic equation describes 37%. The large cluster of cases at the top of each scatter plot is the group of unanimous voice votes. This represents 98, or 39% of the total 246 cases. Because of the likelihood that my methods will be criticized for counting voice votes as unanimous decisions, I have included graphs of these relationships excluding the cases with 100% size of majority in addendum.[105] Without these voice votes, the relationship is very similar but the R-squared values are slightly diminished. The causal map in Figure VIII displays the same

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[105] See Appendix A, page 61.

relationships described above, in addition to the connection between town size and majority size after controlling for the effects of budget costs. The correlation is strengthened from -.564 to -.58. This means that the relationship survives the control test intact. In summary, this information indicates that the size of a town has a significant negative effect on the extent to which citizens agree with each other. In larger systems of town government, the citizens tend to be more balanced in the size of their opposing groups.

The final analysis of Test 2 data is a stepwise multiple regression, the results of which are contained in Table VI. This shows the slight increase in percentage of variance explained by accounting for the effects of budget cost. The R-squared value increases from 32% to 35%.

Table VI
Multiple Regression Analysis of the Correlates of Majority
(N=246)

Variable	"r"	R^2	Change in R^2	Beta	Sig. "p"
Size	-.564	.318	-	-.564	.000
Budget Cost	-.587	.345	.027	-.578	.000

Part 5: Discussion

The Vermont town meeting data suggests that the hypothesis was correct; smaller communities have less conflict in local democratic government. This relationship is seen in the amount of time they spend discussing proposals, a sign of argument and hostility, and in the way they vote on matters of importance to the community. The findings also withstand the controls done to test the possibility that financial cost may affect conflict in addition to size. Cost of town budgets was not correlated with conflict in either test, suggesting that citizens considered the financial burden of their decisions a responsibility to their community more than a personal affront. The context of community size therefore plays a large role in how well real democracy functions to decide the common interest.

The opportunities for criticism I see in my study are the presumption that voice votes indicate unanimity in Test 2, which I defend with the figures in Appendix A showing that nearly the same relationship exists when they are removed from the sample[106], and the lack of more control variables. I hoped to submit these correlations to more rigorous control tests, such as percentage population under 18 in the test on school budget votes, but the dearth of historical census data on Vermont towns precluded these precisions. The database I was using, Vermont Indicators Online, was taken down for lack of support from the University of Vermont. My persistent entreaties for access to the information to the provider, the Center for Rural Studies, were met with indifference.

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[106] In addition, Jane Mansbridge also considers voice votes to be a form unanimous, consensual decision-making in *Beyond Adversary Democracy.*

In Test 2, I prefer the curvilinear model for describing the relationship between size and conflict for two reasons. First, the linear model places a definitive boundary on the maximum size that allows democracy to make decisions at approximately 4,000 registered voters. At this point it predicts the size of the majority will diminish to 50%, meaning that perfectly balanced disagreement will prevent the people from making a decision. The linear model also continues below the 50% threshold, which does not fit into the methodological framework of the study. Second, the effects of size on other aspects of democracy have previously been shown to be concentrated in the extremely low end of the spectrum of town size. Frank Bryan found that town meeting attendance decreased exponentially with increases in size because of the diminishing returns of voter power as the size of the electorate increases.[107] Furthermore, Dahl notes "the characteristics we think describe conflict in smaller systems are associated in a significant way only with very small systems – with towns, say, having a population of under 10,000."[108] This suggests that the important causative elements of size are only visible in the smallest communities. In larger systems the relationship between size and conflict is still valid; it is just unseen because the ability of community bonds to be meaningful in large polities is already gone. The curvilinear model for Test 2 predicts the size of the majority to shrink to a deadlock at around 6,000 registered voters, which suggests that this is the upper limit of size for purposes of democratic government. After this point conflict will prevent citizens from agreeing on the issues before them, thus rendering popular rule and democratic government incapable.

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[107] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 78-79.
[108] Dahl and Tufte, *Size and Democracy*, 94.

This finding on the limit of democratic community size is clearly below the population of all of the world's nations today, but what about the communities in which democratic government was born? Plato placed the size of the ideal *polis* at 5,040, citing the need for the city to have the resources to support itself, and to allow all of the citizens to be familiar and friendly with each other.[109] The actual population of the Greek city-states is evidently the topic of considerable academic debate.[110] No one will ever know for sure, but archeological evidence allows an informed guess. After surveying the many proposed methods of estimating the population of ancient cities, Bowman and Wilson calculate that the average classical Greek city-state had a population between 1,600 and 2,500 people.[111] In his exhaustive study of the available information on the ancient Greek *polis,* Hansen concludes that over 80% of them had more than 1,000 citizens[112] and exceptionally large *poleis* (about 8% of the total) probably had up to 7,500 adult males[113], the Greek equivalent of the registered voters variable in this study. However, democracy as we know it today is more closely associated with the way government was practiced in the Athenian *demes*.[114] These were smaller administrative units of Athens that democratically decided local issues, where citizens could be heard by their peers in a body that has been called "the center of their lives."[115] The population of the *demes* has also been difficult for classics scholars to estimate, but

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[109] *Laws,* in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. By B. Jowett (New York, 1937), Vol. II: V, 738, 742; VI 771.
[110] Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 8.
[111] Bowman and Wilson, *Settlement, Urbanization, and Population*, 29.
[112] This figure includes women and children, who could not participate in politics. Hansen, *Polis* (76)
[113] Hansen, *Polis*, 83-84.
[114] Bryan, *Real Democracy,* 8-9.
[115] R. K. Sinclair, *Democracy and Participation in Athens,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 51.

most determine that the average size of the Athenian *demes* was less than 1000 people.[116] The importance of community relationships was certainly heightened by the small size of these units.

These assertions have a very interesting implication for this study because of the similarity of Test 2's prediction for the upper boundary of size in democracy and the estimated size of the communities in which democracy was originally used. This form of government seems to be inextricably reliant on the demographic aspects that inspired it. It could be said that democracy sprung from the land – was a natural occurrence resulting from the geographic, demographic, and cultural conditions of the environment of the ancient Greek communities – and is therefore tied to this specific niche in ancient history. Perhaps we are trying to make democracy work outside of its natural habitat and have therefore condemned it from the start.

This research tells me that the ability of democracy to function properly depends on the small size of the people it governs. In larger communities the strong personal relationships between citizens that encourage them to act in the interest of improving the polity as a whole break down, and instead the people fight to get the best of one another. This theory argues that the factionalism of James Madison turns democratic government on the scale of nation-states like the U.S. into a weak shadow of its former standard, the virtues of which brought people together into civilizations that showcased mankind's capacity for empathy and cooperation rather than reducing it to base creatures characterized by greed and hostility. Classical

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[116] See A.W. Gomme, *The Population of Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.,* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1933) or John S. Traill, *The Political Organization of Attica: A Study of the Demes, Trittyes and Phylai, and Their Representation in the Athenian Council*, (Princeton, NJ: American School and Classical Studies at Athens, 1975).

Greek democracy worked because its people wanted the best for their community, not for themselves. The determinant factor in bringing government closer to this ideal is size.

Further research into the nature of democracy and size should assess this theory on a larger scale, perhaps in the voting tendencies of the U.S. states, to see if the correlation I found is visible at this level. I also wish there was a better way than surveys to measure the extent to which voters act in their own interests or for the common good. Developing a method to show this would clarify the effects of size on the political behavior of individuals. Finally, it appears to me there will be an incidental aura of apathy surrounding the findings of this project. Even if the argument and empirical support are convincing, there will probably be a type of "well, what can I do about it?" reaction because the modern democratic state is so heavily institutionalized in the world. If nothing else, I hope that this project causes people to revitalize the importance of their relationships in their public community at the local level and beyond, because it is only through improved fellowship and cohesiveness that we can make honorable progress as a civilization.

Part 6: Works Cited

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Figure IX
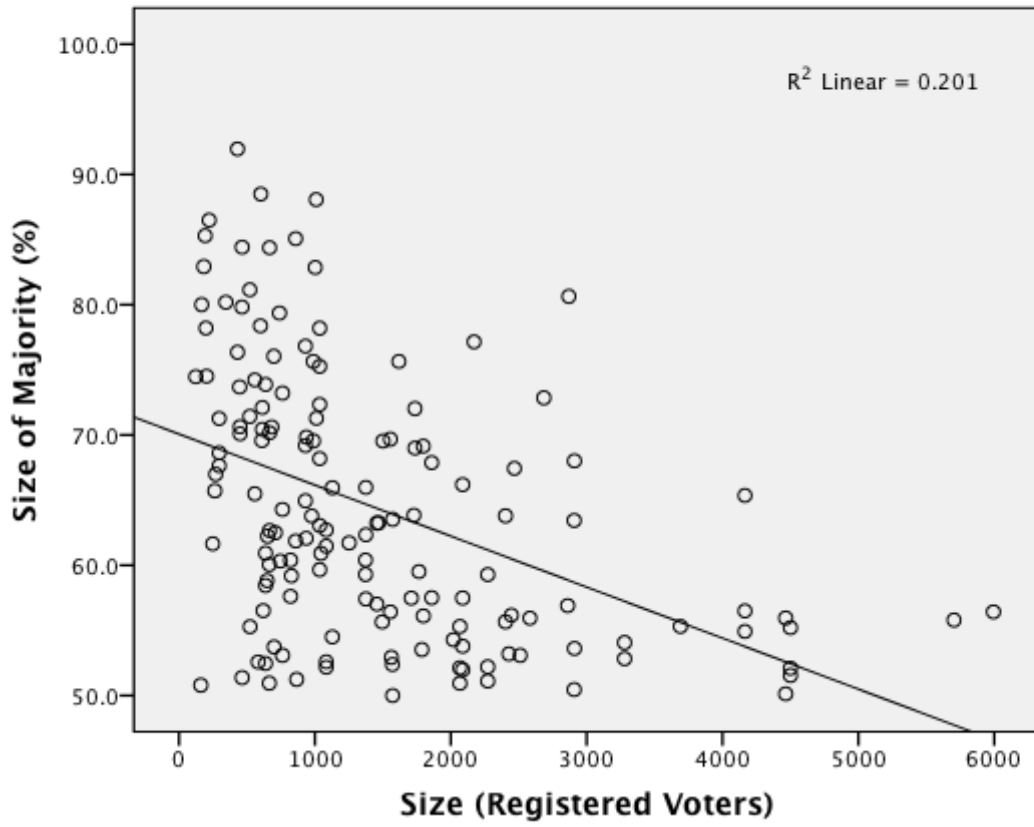**Town Size and Majority Size in School Budget Votes**
(Unanimous Votes Excluded)

Figure X
Town Size and Size of Majority in School Budget Votes
(Unanimous Votes Excluded)