

BOOKS

'Democracy' a packed town meeting report

Book yields many revealing insights to Vermont process

By **Richard F. Winters**
Special to The Free Press

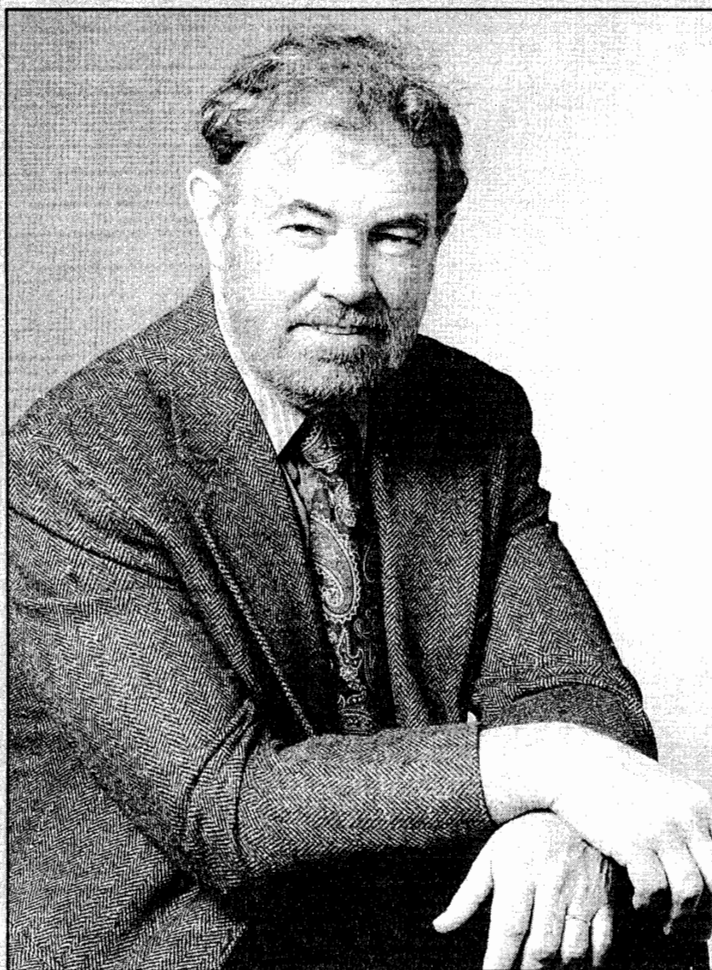
Franks Bryan's new book, "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works," is splendid in every respect. Bryan is familiar to many Vermonters as an author and University of Vermont faculty member, VPR commentator and widely read humorist. One might even consider Bryan a "professional Vermonter."

"Real Democracy" ought to be read and considered by every Vermont resident. To anyone attending a town meeting, this will be an enormously 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-flipper." 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: 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 dispassion 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, who speaks on what issues, how the meetings vote, the tenor of the meetings, and much more. The result is a massive amount of data collected over three decades on almost 1,500 town meetings. What's more, Bryan did it on a shoestring, with no foundation support. This is social science as practiced on the ground, by a teacher and his students. The outcome is a one-of-a-kind database.

Size matters



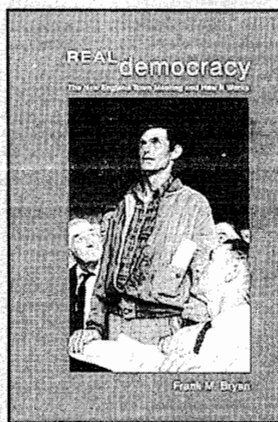
Frank Bryan has put three decades of research into his book on the character and state of Vermont's town meeting.

Spring rite

- "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works (American Politics and Political Economy)" by Frank M. Bryan
- Publisher: University of Chicago Press
- Pages: 320
- Price: \$19

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

Bryan examines a number of controllable factors that range from the size of meeting place, time of meeting, joined/not-joined with school district meetings and the use of Australian (or paper) ballot. He finds that the rate of participation at town meetings



Size matters

What, then, is the state of democracy in Vermont's towns? The variation in meeting attendance is considerable. The typical meeting draws about 20 percent of voters, but attendance ranges from 3 percent to 70 percent. The perverse impact of size of town on attendance is the most unambiguous result of Bryan's analysis. As the numbers of registered voters in towns rise, attendance rates fall. Thus, larger towns, the size of Shelburne (4,500 registered voters), average about 300 in attendance (6 percent of voters), while the smaller towns, the size of Newark (250) typically report 100 voters (40 percent or more). There are very few findings in all of political analysis as systematic and as strong as Bryan's size principle. The principle is represented by a dramatic curve where attendance-as-percentage-of-registered-voters rapidly drops as the size of the town grows.

A couple of factors surely account for this. First, as the size of the towns increases, the value, or perceived impact, of the single individual's vote falls. Moreover, each of a small town's decisions — many of them large and lumpy, such as the purchase of a dump truck or hiring a new teacher — may have a sizable effect on a citizen's tax bill. Bryan also points out that civic duty gets aroused in the small town when one neighbor asks another to go to meeting to help pass an article — or retrospectively, when the absent resident is told at the gas station, "... didn't see you at town meeting last week."

Intriguing findings

What doesn't affect participation? Level of education, occupation, percentage of home ownership don't seem to have much impact at all. Similarly, towns with histories of strong support for liberal issues and high turnouts in general elections don't necessarily have higher turnouts at town meeting.

Two other important findings:

ian (or paper) ballot. He finds that the rate of participation at town meetings doesn't seem to respond to most of these elements, with the exception of Australian ballot, which tends to dampen attendance.

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■ During the period Bryan studied, women attended at a rate a bit below men, and women were less likely to speak out.

■ While there is a lot of variation from year-to-year in attendance, there is a significant drop-off in attendance in the 30 years — 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 residents attend and 7 percent speak out. This seems appallingly low when compared with presidential election turnout of 70-percent-plus percent in Vermont. Yet if Vermonters simply junked the town meeting, and instead trooped down to 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.

The long-term answer might lie in shoring up the power of towns to decide important matters vis-a-vis the state.

■ Coming Monday: Profile of **Frank Bryan** in Living

From this perspective, the town meeting, first, conveys more power to residents through voting on many articles; and, second, enlists participation in more finely grained issues of interest from education (hire new teacher) to roads (buy used dump truck) to a wider and probably as representative a set of voters as the plausible alternative such as simple direct elections.

Further, as Bryan notes, the town meeting provides residents with a practical political education in an era when civics classes are in decline, or absent altogether, from most schools. Civics and government classes in our schools do not prepare citizens; we prepare observers and consumers of politics.

What's the future of the town meeting form of government, in the face of the long-term drop in attendance? Certainly, that depends in part on ending the long-term upward leaching 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 over issues of importance to voters.

Seventy years ago, John Maynard Keynes noted that the ideas of "political philosophers ... are more powerful than is commonly understood." The voices and actions of those in authority, he noted, are often captive of words and ideas of "some academic scribbler." Let's hope that Bryan's book will thus captivate the residents and leaders of Vermont.

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