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PHOTO: JERRY COOKE/CORBIS

A Town Hall meeting in Cornish Center, N.H., 1947.

REAL DEMOCRACY?

AS THE NEW HAMPSHIRE primary approaches, forecasters predict a steady increase in lofty talk about the glories of witnessing "democracy in action."

True, watching senators and generals trying to win over a grandmother in the parking lot of a Dairy Queen in 10-below weather can stir the civic heart of the most hard-bitten cynic. But Frank M. Bryan, a political scientist at the University of Vermont at Burlington, is here to remind us of one thing: For all the excitement of the primaries, what we're seeing isn't "real democracy" at all.

Real democracy, Bryan insists, is what the ancient Athenians did—citizens coming together under one roof to debate and resolve their problems face-to-face, not simply going to the polls to elect leaders. It's also what New Englanders do each year at town meetings across the region.

These days, laments the 62-year-old nearly lifelong Vermonter, only classicists study direct democracy. Political science, he scoffs, is an "urban profession" with little interest in the doings of small-town rubes, even if what those rubes

Forget the New Hampshire primary circus, says political scientist Frank Bryan. The best hope for American democratic revival is the humble, fractious, much-maligned town meeting.

BY CHRISTOPHER SHEA

are doing can help save American democracy.

In his new book, "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works" (Chicago), Bryan tries to fill the void. With its Norman Rockwell cover illustration and endorsements big-name scholarly advocates of participatory democracy (like Harvard's Robert Putnam), the book is simultaneously nostalgic and up-to-the minute. It

rhapsodizes over the good sense and independence of New England political bodies that helped fuel the Revolutionary War, while also tapping into a growing body of contemporary work arguing that American democratic habits must be reinvigorated from the bottom up.

Thirty years in the making, "Real Democracy" contains the first substantial data about town meetings across Vermont, the state most closely associated with the tradition, analyzing 238,603 acts of participation by 63,140 citizens in 210 different towns. Who goes? Who speaks? Do issues get resolved? Do face-to-face meetings with one's neighbors breed feuds, ill-will, and cliquishness, as some scholars have suggested—or a kind of civic bliss?

Bryan, a former Golden Gloves boxer and rodeo rider who laments that the academic life leaves too little time for hunting and fishing, is well-known to generations of students for his often gruffly expressed views. He has long sung the praises of smallness ("Democrats hate big business. Republicans hate big government. I hate big," he likes to say) and decried the up-scale "theme-parking" of the Green Mountain State (an at- **TOWN MEETINGS, Page H5**

Christopher Shea writes a biweekly column for Ideas. E-mail: critical.faculties@verizon.net.

titude summed up in the title of his 1983 humor book, "Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats").

He lives on a 70-acre homestead in rural Starksboro (pop. 1,900), about 25 miles Southeast of Burlington. "I don't want to be cast as a gentleman rural-farmer type," he pleads. "That would be pretentious."

Bryan calls the town meeting "New England's greatest contribution to America," an assessment shared by many great thinkers over the centuries. Tocqueville said New England town meetings "are to liberty what primary schools are to science. They bring it within the people's reach." Hannah Arendt thought they represented, simply, "public happiness."

On his return to Russia in 1994, Alexander Solzhenitsyn gave a farewell address to the town meeting of Cavendish, Vt., praising it (in Russian) as the "sensible and sure process of grassroots democracy where the local population decides most of its problems on its own, not waiting for higher authorities" – the lack of which he called Russia's "greatest shortcoming." (H.L. Mencken, on the other hand, called town meetings the source of "some of the most idiotic decisions ever come to mortal man.")

Historically, the reputation of town meetings has been tied to New England's fortunes. British lords hated them, blaming them for the Boston Tea Party; American patriots exalted them for similar reasons. As Northeasterners headed West during the 19th century, however, fewer and fewer Americans looked to New England for their democratic ideals. (By the mid-1930s, Bryan writes, Vermont's population and economy had declined to the point that the Roosevelt administration proposed a scheme to "reclaim" 51 percent of Vermont as national forest and parkland and relocate the population of entire upland towns to larger settlements.) While Minnesota and Wisconsin adopted weaker versions of the town meeting systems, most of America opted for representative local government centered on counties, not towns.

Yet the ideal of the town meeting persisted. In the 1940's and '50s, a popular radio program called "Town Meeting of the Air" – its slogan: "Which way, America? Fascism? Communism? Socialism? Or Democracy?" – encouraged the formation of small affiliated discussion groups across the country. In the 1960s, as progressive back-to-the-landers flooded into Vermont, the left



PHOTO/SALLY MCCRAY

began to celebrate its town meetings as exemplars of "small is beautiful" democracy.

But by the 1970s and '80s, according to Bryan, the meetings were discredited as they became tools of national movements, with activists encouraging towns to vote to impeach Nixon or declare themselves nuclear-free zones. Today's presidential candidates pay lip-service to the tradition by holding "town meeting"-style debates and forums across the country. The Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq is even holding "town hall meetings" in large cities to educate Iraqis about democracy.

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Yet for all the mythology of the town meeting, there hasn't been much data about them – which is where Bryan comes in. Since 1969, when he taught at tiny St. Michael's College (his alma mater), in Winooski, Vt., Bryan has sent students fanning out across the Connecticut River Valley and up into the hardscrabble towns of the Northeast Kingdom to observe town meetings, keep time, record their impressions, and above all count, count, count. In all, he has information on 1,435 meetings in 210 towns, from 1970 to 1998.

Typically, towns hold one meeting a year, usually in March. Most are open to all adult registered voters. Some towns conduct all their busi-

ness from the floor, voting on it then and there. Others hold mainly informational sessions, and let citizens vote all day (or the next day) using something Vermonters call "Australian ballots," which the rest of the planet just calls "ballots."

How long is the average meeting? Three hours, 48 minutes – longer during the day, shorter at night. How many people show up? Anywhere from 94 of 130 registered voters (in the Northeast Kingdom town of Newark in 1974) to a paltry 36 out of 3,600 (in upscale Jericho, a bedroom community of Burlington). On average, 20.5 percent of Vermonters brave the March cold to sit on hard chairs and debate public affairs.

Considering the latter figure, Bryan admits,

Hannah Arendt said the town meeting represented 'public happiness.' H.L. Mencken denounced them as 'idiotic.'

"Plato would not be pleased." To boost direct democracy – and attendance – he suggests several reforms: Convene meetings during the day, if not on a statewide "town meeting day" holiday then at least on Saturday. Decide all town affairs then and there, with no outside balloting. ("I just think voting is an incredibly 'thin' form of democracy," he says.) And if a town is too big to get all of its citizens under one roof – like Howard Dean's hometown of Shelburne, pop. 7,000 – break it down into smaller self-governing units.

Some scholars have argued that town meetings discriminate against the poor, against women, even against the shy. But Bryan says his data show Vermont's meetings are relatively inclusive. Forty-six percent of meeting attendees are women, and they make up 36 percent of the speakers – a number that increases each year (and beats most state legislatures, not to mention the US Senate). Most startling – at least to political scientists, who generally argue that the richer you are the more likely you are to participate in virtually any political activity – Bryan finds that the aggregate wealth and education level of a given town does not predict attendance.

Bryan's work "shows you how ordinary people can do politics – and do it well," says Harvard political scientist Jane J. Mansbridge, whose 1980 book "Beyond Adversary Democracy" examined self-governance in a single town in Vermont. "There's still a lot of feeling out there that ordinary people can't run their own lives."

Bryan's book arrives as interest in local civic capital and "deliberative democracy" — as contrasted with the old-fashioned adversarial style — is surging. Stanford University recently lured the political scientist James S. Fishkin, who studies how decisions change when citizens discuss them in small groups, away from the University of Texas and gave him his own research center.

During this year's primaries, Fishkin will collaborate with PBS's Lehrer NewsHour on a series of "deliberative polls," in which voters will be asked their opinion only after participating in group discussions. In their forthcoming book, "Deliberation Day" (Yale, March), Fishkin and Yale law professor Bruce Ackerman call for a new national holiday marked by similar forums, to be held just before the presidential election.

Bryan argues that the legacy of town meetings explain why New England is at or near the top of the nation in many measures of "civic capital" — including social tolerance, voting rates, and charitable contributions.

But not everyone in Vermont sees town meet-

ings the way Bryan does. Barbara Corliss, a 43-year-old administrative assistant in Proctor (pop. 1,900), just led an unsuccessful campaign to allow citizens who didn't turn up for the annual meeting to vote on the town budget. (The proposal was defeated this month, 87 to 54.) Town meetings, she argued, can penalize workers with odd schedules or the homebound elderly — and they make it too easy for passionate minority interests to control town affairs. "The smaller the meetings, the easier it is to sway a vote," she says. "The phone chain gets going with people saying, 'We've got to go and vote this down.'"

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, a political scientist at the University of Nebraska who frequently butts heads with deliberative-democracy advocates, agrees that time-consuming mandatory discussions can skim off "the people who want to be involved but are not activists." She adds, "I would be shocked if the 20 percent [who show up at Vermont town meetings] were truly representative of the population."

Bryan doesn't have income or educational data for individuals at meetings — only for whole towns. So he can't really say whether the people who attend town meetings represent a cross-section of the towns he studied. Still, he writes, "I would bet my house or car" on it.

Bryan insists that at the meetings he has witnessed, a dairy farmer is just as likely to out-argue a retired investment banker. "I have in my files hundreds of pictures of town meetings," he says. "Just pick one out at random and look at the people sitting there. You see — I'm not sure I should say this, maybe you shouldn't quote me — people with no teeth, you see fat people, you see rednecks, you see people in suits, L.L. Bean-types who just moved into town. You tell me they aren't 'the People.'"

He looks back fondly on the days when Vermont towns, not the federal or state government, decided whether to offer algebra or kindergarten and what safety net to offer to their poor. Were he a philosopher king, he says, he would devolve more and more power to the towns (while acknowledging the need for basic national environmental and civil rights laws).

With his flinty Yankee humor and his dreamy remembrances of Old Vermont, Bryan is clearly vulnerable to the charge of fuzzy nostalgia. But Harvard's Jane Mansbridge defends him on that score: "Bryan comes across as a sort of romantic," she says, "but he didn't fall out of the sky as a romantic. He experienced town meetings. And when you experience town meetings, you come to respect them."