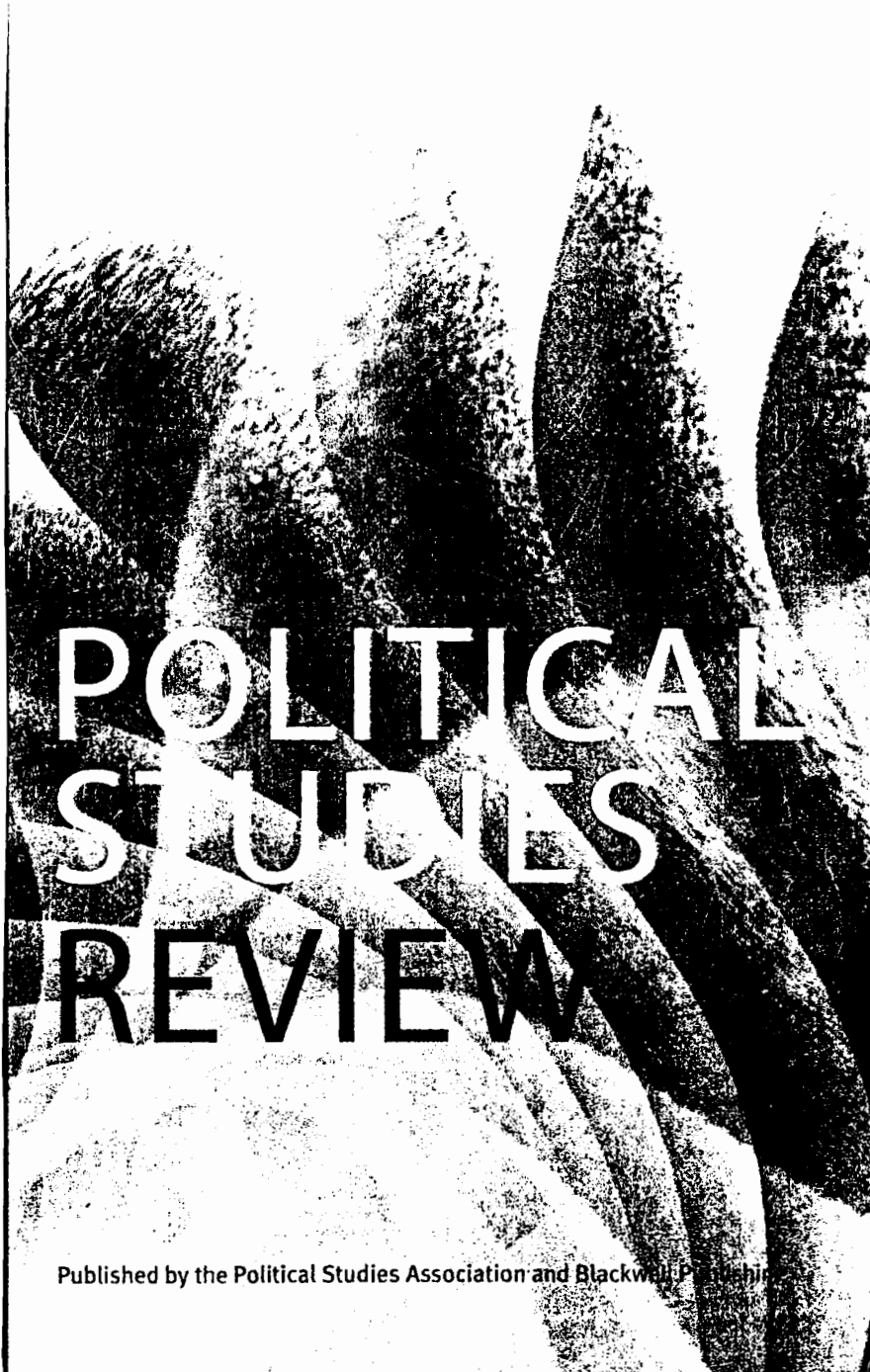


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POLITICAL STUDIES REVIEW

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**REAL DEMOCRACY: the New
England Town Meeting and how
it works**

by **Frank M. Bryan**

Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press,
2004, 312, \$19.00, ISBN 0 226 07797 7

Readership: Undergraduates,
advanced undergraduates and
postgraduates

Rating: *****

Reviewer: **ANTHONY O' HALLORAN**
(*University College Cork*)

This book provides a wide ranging and comprehensive account of how direct democracy works in the town halls of New England. Consisting of twelve chapters its range and depth is extremely impressive. Drawing on over three decades of research and involving direct observation of a total of 1,389 town hall meetings, the author leaves few stones unturned.

The chapters explore themes ranging from history and methodology to attendance, scale, community context and participation. Combining detailed empirical analysis with that of quantitative descriptions, each chapter offers rich and revealing insights into aspects of the New England Town Meeting. Concluding that scale matters, he establishes a clear link

between higher participation and smaller scale meetings.

Frank M. Bryan's book is very different in several respects, which makes it all the more refreshing. It is to the author's credit that he straddles the boundaries of qualitative and quantitative research with such ease. Empirical work does not clash with a sometimes-passionate writing style. The author makes no secret of his passionate commitment to town hall democracy. His obvious love of numbers is equally undisguised.

Passion and enthusiasm for the task at hand in no way interferes with his empirical rigor. Major deficiencies will not be discovered in this book. However, some readers may find the author's approach excessively autobiographical. Similarly, some of his asides, whilst fascinating, could be deemed irrelevant by a harsher critic.

The author informs us that he wanted to write the definitive book on town hall democracy as early as in the summer of 1972. Doubting he could ever achieve this task he consulted his friend Jane Mansbridge. Undeterred, she replied 'Then it will become your life's work, Frank' (Preface). Town hall democracy became the author's life's work. Frank M. Bryan has clearly produced the definitive text on New England town hall democracy. In time, the book may very well become a classic.