

CHAPTER VI

ATTENDANCE: THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY

Again, because of its smallness, the physical reality of community was present to the individual in a way that is difficult for us to grasp, accustomed as we are to conceiving of the state in abstract terms.

—L. B. Carter¹

As the structure of governance sets the legal environment of town meeting democracy the nature of community sets the social and economic environment. Hints from the literature on the linkage between structure and real democracy were skimpy indeed. But the literature on connections between community life and political participation is wide and deep. Here too, however, there are the familiar limitations. One is the predominance of representative democracy as the fundamental construct and the emphasis (understandably) on the voting act as its operational definition. As a *first order* paradigm real democracy is hard to find. However, nearly all major studies on political participation in general (as opposed to strict voting studies) have (especially since Verba and Nie's watershed volume was published in 1972) treated real democracy-like variables (going to rallies, participating in public forums, etc.) either in theoretical terms and/or as

¹ L. B. Carter, *The Quiet Athenian*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

components of inclusive, additive participation constructs.² Often these scales are disaggregated for analytical purposes and helpful insights are available. But seldom does attendance at and public participation in group deliberation take center stage. Studies of the causal agents of deliberation in legislative settings with the power to make law (i.e., town meetings-type democracy) are, of course, almost nonexistent.³

A second difficulty is even more serious. Nearly all the research on political participation uses individual level data and does not concern itself directly with the context of community. An exception is the work of Robert R. Huckfeldt and John Sprague who center a small cadre of political scientists laboring at the difficult task of stitching community context variables into the complex quilt of political behavior. Beginning with an important article in the *American Journal of Political Science* in 1979, Huckfeldt initiated a stream of literature that is moving steadily toward an explanation of the nexus institutions and processes between community and individual. This work, like that of those dealing primarily with individual level association has been a source of insight and in many ways of caution.⁴

² See for instance for more recent examples, Norman H. Nie, J. Junns, and K. Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Stephen J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*, (New York: Macmillian, 1993); and Signey Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism and American Politics*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

³ A recent interest in political deliberation, however, has added a new and hopeful component to the participatory literature. Although the settings of deliberation in these studies varies widely and the context is seldom conflictual in the manner of open town meeting debate under the gun of impending decisions, studies offer exciting perspectives on town meeting-like debate and discussion. See especially J. Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996); J. Bohman and W. Rehg, *Deliberative Democracy essays on Reason and Politics*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997); James S. Fishkin, "Bringing Deliberation to Democracy," *Public Perspective* 7 (December 1995/January 1996): 1; and Benjamin I. Page, *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁴ For a review of this research, see: Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, "Citizen, Contexts, and Politics," in Ada W. Finifter, *Political Science: The State of the Discipline, II* (Washington, D.C.: The American Political Science Association, 1993). See also: Robert R. Huckfeldt, "Political Participation and the Neighborhood Social Context,"

To enter the flow of Huckfeldt's findings I would have had to limit my study to a handful of towns and focused, not on a descriptive analytical treatment of town meeting democracy, but the behavior of several thousand individuals in towns that held town meetings. Because of this I emphasize again that I have used individual level studies of political participation and the community context efforts of Huckfeldt and others to make analysis and description more interesting and not as models for paradynamic insights. My claim is simply that the first thing one would want to know about the connections between community and town meeting democracy is the nature of a large number of potential aggregate associations between town characteristics on the one hand and the behavior of the citizens in their town meetings on the other.

To get this process underway three sets of variables were fashioned to map the broad outlines between community life and real democracy. The first is comprised of socioeconomic "status" variables. These measure the familiar upscale/downscale continuum. The second is a cluster of community dynamics indicators that gauge the stability/mobility factor in a town's population and the presence or lack of community "boundriness" that seems to be attached to each town.⁵ These are designed to compare towns on the their potential to be unique polities rather than

American Journal of Political Science 23 (August 1979): 579-592; Huckfeldt, *Politics in Context: Assimilation and Conflict in Urban Neighborhoods*, (New York: Agathon, 1986); Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, "Networks in Context: The Social Flow of Political Information," *American Political Science Review* 81 (December 1987): 1197-1216; Robert Huckfeldt, Paul Allen Peck, Russell J. Dalton, and Jeffrey Levine, "Political Environments, Cohesive Social Groups and the Communication of Public Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (November 1995): 1025-1054; Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, *Citizen, Politics, and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵ Surprisingly and importantly for the civil society literature, there is evidence that community boundriness (attachment) may be not associated with length of residence through ties to formal local associational memberships. While length of residence has no direct impact on membership in local associations, it is positively related to community attachment both directly and through the intervening variable of friendships. Membership in local organizations has its own impact on community attachment independent of either length of residence or friendships. See: Amy Liu Qiaoming, Vernon Ryan, Herbert Aurbach and Terry Besser, "The Influence of Local Church Participation on Rural Community Attachment," *Rural Sociology* 63 (Fall 1998): 432-450; John A. Beggs, Valerie

pockets of random citizens happening to live in the same political space. Included also is a category called community “hardship.” Here the hope is to identify towns where it would simply be more difficult to practice real democracy. The third set of variables switch from the social and economic factors that shape country life to the political factors. Measures of political activity are formed and sent out to discover if there is a connection between a town’s ballot box politics and how it practices real democracy. Following the consideration of these three sets of indicators, an assessment will be made of the effect of the passage of time on real democracy over the past thirty years. Finally the towns themselves will be visited to gauge how these formulations work out when the meetings are aggregated to the town level.

WITNESS

The Thetford Covered Bridge

Article 12 on the agenda for the [Thetford] town meeting posed the question: Should the bridge be repaired, or should it be replaced by a concrete span? The lone businessman in Thetford Center wanted a bigger bridge so his trucks could cross it safely, and the selectmen seemed sympathetic to his viewpoint. Most townspeople figured the old covered bridge would be the loser. Noel Perrin, a Dartmouth College professor of English, described the fate of Article 12 with particular interest because he lived next to that covered bridge and was attending his town meeting that year:

We got through the first eleven articles in less than an hour. Then we spent the rest of the morning arguing—“debating” is too elevated a term for town meeting style—Article 12. Sentiment gradually mounted for keeping the covered bridge, chiefly because of the brilliant fight put up by an old man who had been our rural mail carrier for fifty-one years—had taken the mail through that bridge in a horse and sleigh, then a 1911 Cadillac, and finally a Jeep station wagon. It came near time to vote. Then one of the proponents of the new concrete bridge got up, holding a formidable list in his hand. He is a leader in town. He told us he liked the old wooden bride as well as anyone—but he wasn’t sure we realized how much it would cost to repair it. And he began reading specifications and prices from his list: the number of new 12” X 12” bridge timbers required, and what each would cost; numbers and prices for joists, and so on. The total kept mounting; we taxpayers began having second thoughts.

Then a young fellow in back stood up, a workingman with a lumberjack's shirt on and a three-day growth of beard. "I don't know where he got them prices from," he said, "but I know this. I work up to the mill in ely, and we can sell you all that stuff a hell of a lot cheaper than what he said." Every head turned to stare. Undeterred, he went from memory through each item the other man had mentioned, repeating the figures and then quoting the lowest price his mill could offer.

After that we voted. Usually we have voice votes to save time, but this was an important decision, and the selectmen passed out slips of paper. "We wrote 'Yes' if we wanted a new bridge, 'no' if we didn't. We filed by the ballot box and dropped the slips in, and when we finished the selectmen counted them. It took fifteen minutes. The first Selectman then walked to the microphone. "Guess we're keepin' it," he said. "Twenty-one 'Yes,' hundred and twenty-one 'No.'" There was a brief roar of triumph. Then we had lunch.⁶

UPSCALE/DOWNSCALE: SO WHAT?

First off what about the vaunted SES hypothesis? Do "upscale communities" have populations more involved in real democracy than communities where the people are more apt to live working class life styles? On my first cast I tested the independent effects of income, education and occupation on attendance. These were then combined into a composite SES score with the attendant hypothesis that it would be positively associated with attendance at town meeting. Finally a more inclusive and reliable factor score was developed to fold these variables into one compact indicator.

A second consideration with less uniform conceptual underpinning is socioeconomic heterogeneity. On the one hand the degree to which the community is sub-divided into a number of distinct groups ought to increase participation in politics since there is substantial evidence that political participation is related to membership in groups. Also, heterogeneity is one of the raw

⁶ Sonja Bullaty and Angelo Lomeo, photographers, with text by Noel Perrin, *Vermont in All Weathers* (New York: Viking Press, 1973): 18-19 as printed in Charles T. Morrissey, *Vermont: A Bicentennial History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1981): 176-177.

materials often associated with political conflict, which in turn ought to be tied to participation. On the other hand (beginning with Aristotle) many social scientists have argued that direct, open, face-to-face democracy is diminished by the conflict SES heterogeneity in a community often inspires.⁷ People shy away from public disagreement. Political participation in open forums like town meeting will breath easier in the consensual atmosphere found in homogeneous communities.

These are complex relationships and they carry two methodological concerns. One is the problem of what the statisticians call “multicollinearity,” that is the likelihood that some variables (such as income and education) are too interrelated to allow a independent test of their association with a third variable, in this case participation in real democracy. There are several ways to guard for this, the most attractive of which is to create “factor scores” which collapse a large number of variables into a single discrete indicator. Two is the recurring curse of the ecological fallacy which makes it impossible to be accurate about the link between community variables and the behavior of individuals within the community. What is being treated here is community behavior not individual behavior and I again caution that the methodology used in this book is best described as theory driven analysis rather than causal modeling.

The second question is how to treat Census data. Here again there were two problems. First is the 1970 Census. Its counts did not take adequate samples of the population in many of the smallest Vermont towns. While data was neatly (and temptingly) reported for indicators like median family income, educational attainment and so forth it was hopelessly unreliable for a good

⁷ In his definitive account of early New England towns, the University of Pennsylvania’s Michael Zuckerman puts heavy emphasis on the linkage between social homogeneity and early town meeting “democracy.” In a recent interview he claims that these early town meetings (controlled by the church hierarchy) were “a device to mobilize consensus, to maximize homogeneity.” Heather Stephenson, “New England’s Early Town Meetings were Anything but Democratic,” *The Rutland Herald* (March 5, 2000): B1,B8. See also: Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms*, (New York: Random House, 1970).

percentage of towns. There was no alternative but to drop town meetings studied prior to 1975 from this particular part of the analysis. Whenever Census data are involved, the 190 meetings held between 1970 and 1975 were therefore excluded leaving 1250 cases in the data base.

What to do with town meetings held at mid-decade between the 1980 and 1990 Census readings and those meetings held after 1995 when the 1990 Census data had cooled and the 2000 benchmarks were not yet available? I considered two solutions. The first was to pool towns into two groups surrounding the decennial years 1980 and 1990 and to exclude the towns studied in 1984, 1985, 1986 and 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 from either group. This would insure that Census data used for the analysis were gathered reasonably close to the year the town meetings being studied were actually held. Thus town meetings from 1977 through 1983 (there were 444 of them in the sample) would be matched with 1980 Census data for the town in which they were held and town meetings for the years 1987 through 1992 (there were 365 of them) would be matched with data from the 1990 Census.

Another solution would be to pro-rate the data for the towns of town meetings held in 1984, 1985 and 1986 by splitting the difference between the statistics reported in 1980 and 1990. Thus a town with 22 percent of its work force classified as professionals and managers in 1980 and 28 percent so classified in 1990 would be estimated to have 25 percent in 1984, 1985 and 1986. The meetings held in 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997 would simply use the 1990 Census data.

My judgment is that the loss of cases caused by rigorous adherence to temporal fixes for the Census data made the two-cluster solution less acceptable than using all the cases. Fewer cases would not greatly affect the socioeconomic analysis as such. But by dramatically limiting the number of meetings in the multivariate equations, it would compromise nominal and ordinal

variables, which depend on large numbers of cases to insure that some of the cohorts are adequately filled. Beyond this (and most importantly) an inspection of the data itself and the process of running parallel statistical routines revealed that either option could have been used without altering any of the findings which involved Census data one iota. Thus it seemed far the better course to maintain a single data base and maximize the number of cases.

The Core Factors: Education, Occupation, Income

Consider Goshen and Granville, mountain towns deep in the heart of central Vermont's most rugged terrain. Our sample turned up two meetings each for these towns held between 1987 and 1992. Since their population counts were nearly identical, size is not in play. Located about half way up the state between Massachusetts and Canada,⁸ Goshen begins at the crest line of the Green Mountains and slopes west. Most of the town is in the Green Mountain National Forest. It is a land of peaks that block the morning sun with names like Horrid, Waste, Hogback, and Romance. From them one can watch sunsets bathe the long green and blue carpet of the Lake Champlain Valley as it folds into the foothills of New York's Adirondack range. The people in Goshen live in two little hamlets, Goshen and Goshen Four Corners, one near and one exactly on Route #73—a major (by Vermont standards) road that extends over the Green Mountains (through Brandon Gap) to the east. Route #73 also runs west down into Brandon, which has 15 times the population of Goshen and connects to Route #7, Vermont's major north-south highway in the

⁸Goshen is one of Vermont's smallest towns. Part of it was originally in a town named Philadelphia, chartered in 1780 to impress the Colonial government in anticipation of statehood. But Philadelphia was a bust. It was one of the roughest places to live in Vermont. (If we were going to sacrifice some real estate kissing up to the national government, it sure as hell wasn't going to be prime land.) It only lasted 34 years. In 1814 its northern half was "given" to Goshen. Two years later the rest was grafted onto the town of Chittenden.

western half of the state. This makes it a manageable commute south to Rutland (Vermont's second largest "city") and north to the college town of Middlebury.

Over on the eastern slope of the mountains and a bit to the north is the town of Granville. In terms of rugged terrain, it is Goshen squared. Granville drops quickly into a deep valley between parallel ranges of the Green Mountains. There it marks the headwaters of the White River system which finally empty into the Connecticut far to the southeast, feeding the river that ends where America's largest city begins. Northfield Mountain's steep ridge runs the entire length of the eastern third of the town, cutting it off from the sun. There is no road over it. One can drive down Route #100 (a good road) to Rochester and over Rochester Gap to Bethel and from there to the Interstate, but it's a long haul even in good weather. Going north up through Granville Gulch leads to the towns of Warren, Waitsfield, and Fayston. In these towns nearly everyone houses or feeds or in some way services skiers in the winter and upscale rural loungers the rest of the year. Everywhere in Granville the mountains edge up to the highway. There on a tiny ribbon of topsoil created by a million beaver damming the little brooks that spawn the White River over a period of 10,000 years, live the people.⁹

⁹ One of the student team members who went to the Granville meeting of 1987 wrote the following: "Granville is a nice little town. I stress the word little because we drove right through it before we even knew we were in it." But he liked his day in Granville, was amazed at how their one-room (K-5) school (next door to the church where the meeting was held) could be so modern ("a microwave oven, typewriters, computers with printers, a VCR, a TV and a copying machine") and impressed with the discussion. "I found the meeting really interesting and I probably would have enjoyed it more if it wasn't seven and a half hours long." David Dale, "Granville Town Meeting 1987," (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, March 1987). Another student, who studied the Granville town meeting in 1994, Lee Hannauer described the town as follows: "Granville is a small and beautiful Vermont town seemingly isolated from the rest of the state. The first part of Granville one encounters is the Granville Gulf Reservation, a beautiful valley road running through six miles of wilderness. The view is spectacular, especially with the freshly fallen March snows." But the description of the town meeting was less than spectacular. After a well-reasoned "thick" analysis, Hannauer concludes: "Though it pains me to say so, I think town meeting is a dying tradition in Granville." This after recording data for a meeting that was attended by 38 percent of the town's registered voters in which 75 percent of the attendees participated verbally is clearly a worrisome prognosis for the future of town meeting. Lee Hannauer, "1994 Granville Town Meeting," (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, March 1994).

About the time the meetings we are comparing occurred, there were 220 people living in Goshen and 313 in Granville. In Goshen 36 percent of the population over 25 years old held college degrees, well above the statewide average of 25 percent. In Granville only 11 percent had college degrees. Of the 210 towns in the data base Goshen ranked 19 on college graduates and Granville ranked 146. The median family income in Goshen was \$38,750, \$6,889 above the average town and \$11,875 more than Granville's.¹⁰ Granville's median family income (\$26,875) ranked 135 and Goshen's ranked 22nd. Reflecting this difference is the percent of what the Census calls "managers and professionals" in the work force. Goshen ranked 2nd on the list of 210 and Granville ranked 156. These populations generated a turnout rate of 30 percent of the registered voters in Goshen and 40 percent in Granville. This translates into a sizeable gap in the size adjusted attendance effort ratio (SAAER) because Granville had more registered voters than Goshen and was, therefore, expected to have less attendance. The SAAER averaged 117 for the two meetings in Granville (114 and 120) and .87 in Goshen (.90 and .84). If variables identifying the upscale nature of social and economic life in a community are supposed to predict increases in political activity, of the public life of the community, something is wrong.

Are these towns an exception or do they reflect a fundamental fault in the expected relationships between community, society, and political participation? To find out the following measures were established:

(1) An education index for each town. This was done by scoring each town's percentages in the seven basic Census cohorts for education and then combining the scores to arrive at the total index. Thus if 100 percent of a town's population over 25 years old held post graduate degrees (the

¹⁰ \$11,875 will go a long way in Granville, Vermont.

highest educational attainment classification used by the Census) the index would register seven, the strongest possible ($100 \times 7 / 100$). If 100 percent had less than a 9th grade education (the lowest educational attainment classification used by the Census) the index for the town would be one, the weakest possible ($100 \times 1 / 100$). If half the population over 25 years old fell in the third group (they held a high school diploma or its equivalent) and the other half fell in the fourth group (they had attended but not graduated college) the town's score would be 3.5 ($[50 \times 3 = 150 / 100 = 1.5] + [50 \times 4 = 200 / 100 = 2]$).

For example the town we studied with the lowest Educational Attainment Index (EAI) based on data from the 1980 Census was the farming town of Troy located high in the north country just under the Canadian border. The town's score was 2.28. By 1990 the index had improved to 2.66 but was still the lowest of the 210 towns in the data base. The town with the highest EAI (4.31 in 1990) was Norwich, a valley town leaning on the foothills that move up and away from the Connecticut River one bridge and a mile or so from Hanover, New Hampshire, home of Dartmouth College and its several high tech ancillaries.

(2) The occupation categories used by the Census do not reflect a clear conceptual hierarchy. Are, for instance, "precision production" occupations of higher or lower "status" than "technical sales" occupations. Any index constructed from the data would therefore contain an array of troubling assumptions.¹¹ Here I took the simple but safer course and cast the occupation statistics as the percent of a town's work force employed in managerial occupations and the professions. The town scoring lowest was Whiting, a farming town on the (more or less) flat clays

¹¹ For obvious reasons there is a paucity of work on the relationships between specific occupation types and participation. An exception is the literature on farmers which indicates they vote more than your average citizen. Warren E. Stickle, "Ruralite and Farmer in Indiana: Independent, Sporadic Voter or Country Bumpkin?" *Agriculture History* 48 (October 1974): 543-570.

of the Champlain Valley basin. We studied the town meetings there in 1980, 1982, 1983, 1987, 1990 and 1995. The population in 1990 was 407. There were 269 registered voters and only eight percent of the work force was estimated to be in managerial or professional specialty occupations by the Census. The town with the largest percent in the professional and managerial occupation category was, again, Norwich.

(3) There seemed to be no reason not to use median family income (standardized in 1990 dollars) to measure the wealth of a community's citizens, although it is compromised somewhat in towns with a heavy concentration of dairy farmers. Farmers farm with income not for it and precious little is left to be reported to the IRS at the end of the year. Yet the alternatives were so strongly correlated with median family income that the best bet seemed to be to stick with the more familiar manner. In 1987, 1990 and 1991 when we recorded the events of the town meeting in Belvidere this rugged hill town of only 230 people situated in the hard woods north of the Lamoile River averaged \$19,519 per family. In the town of Shelburne on Lake Champlain the families had over triple the income to spend, \$60,118 each.

When attendance data for each of the 1250 town meetings in the 1977 to 1998 pool were matched with these three variables our worst fears for the SES hypothesis are confirmed. A town's socioeconomic characteristics add very little in the way of predicting its democratic inclinations. Table VI-A contains the coefficients that tell the story. All three variables (education, occupation, and income) are associated with turnout at town meeting. But the association is in the wrong

[TABLE VI-A ABOUT HERE]

TABLE 6 A

direction. The higher the average education of a town's citizens the lower the attendance at town meeting. Income goes up and attendance goes down. Towns with higher percentages of managers and professionals in the work force have smaller percentages of registered voters at town meeting.¹²

Perhaps the SES hypothesis can be saved by the identification of another variable that snuck into the relationship and confused the situation. The best candidate for such an intervening influence is town size since larger towns (which we know are strongly associated with lower attendance) score higher on SES variables than do smaller towns which have much higher attendance. Median family income, for instance correlates positively with town size (.54) and negatively with attendance (-.46). When a town's median family income was correlated with the size adjusted attendance index (look at column four in Table VI-A) the negative relationship between income and attendance is reduced to a whisper,¹³ although it is still negative. That is, the higher a town's income, the lower town meeting attendance becomes. Weaker negative associations between attendance and the EAI¹⁴ and occupation are also pretty much wiped out when the size of a town is taken into account, although in the end they register positive coefficients.¹⁵

¹² Results from a study of direct (referenda) democracy in Switzerland reflect other findings that the more demanding the form of participation and the lower the overall turnout, the greater the turnout gap between the classes with upper classes the beneficiary. "In Switzerland both factors come together. Its direct democracy is demanding, and participation rates fluctuate wildly. So, especially when participation is low, the choir of Swiss direct democracy rings in upper or middle-class tones." Wolf Linder, *Swiss Democracy* (2nd ed.), (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998): 95.

¹³Note that once again the relationship, which explains only a single percent of the variance in attendance, is statistically significant because of the large "N" in our analysis.

¹⁴ One study of the correlates of voter participation that compares the act of registering to vote with voting (or non voting) after registration, finds that the impact of education is "overwhelmingly focused on the registration stage." Given that registering to vote requires a larger investment of time and effort than voting itself, one might argue that town meeting attendance (which requires a greater investment than registering) ought to be more associate with education levels. See: Richard J. Timpone, "Structure, Behavior, and Voter Turnout in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 92 (March 1998): 145-158.

¹⁵ Samuel Popkin and Michael Dimock have argued that non-voting is not a function of district of government or dissatisfaction with government performance but rather caused by lack of political knowledge—what is going on in

Since all three variables (education, income, and occupation) are associated with one another it seemed reasonable (given the importance of the SES hypothesis) to combine them into a single summary measure that will provide a final check on the relationship. To do this I factor analyzed the three variables in a principal component routine and used the factor scores for each town as its index of socioeconomic status, which is called ISES. It ranges from a low of -2.28 in Athens, to 3.16 in Norwich. A hard look at the distribution of the towns along the index makes it clear to one closely familiar with Vermont that if the “upscale-downscale” nature of a town’s population has anything to do with attendance at town meeting this measure would tell the tale.

I arranged the towns in three scatterplots. The first (Plot 1 in Figure VI-A) shows the relationship between town size and the ISES. Although there is much variation in the distribution, it is clear that bigger towns are more apt to score higher on socioeconomic status variables. The simple correlation between the two is $.41$. Note the towns of Goshen and Granville described earlier. Their 1987 meetings are identified by their population and SES factor scores. Goshen’s socioeconomic status variables are far more powerful than predicted by its size. Granville’s are about right. Next (Plot 2) the decline of the percent of registered voters attending as the ISES

government, how candidates feel about it and how government institutions might function to do something about it. Importantly the relationship *holds when formal education is controlled*. This kind of finding rips at my gut, reminding me once again of the limits of this study while pointing the direction for an investigation I cannot imagine having the resources to undertake. Do small town people know more about what is going on in their small town than large town people? Do they better understand how their town’s leadership stands on issues that concern them? Do they more fully comprehend how to use the institutions of government to get things done? If so, could this be an important explanation for the steep decline in attendance at town meeting or towns grow larger, qualifying and reinforcing the pure mathematics of the model I have used in this book? See: Samuel L. Popkin and Michael A. Dimock, “Political Knowledge and Citizen Competence” in Stephen L. Elkin and Karol Edward Soltan, ed. *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999): 117-146. Another construct I find integrating with special applications for small towns and face-to-face democracy is strength of personality. We have studies indicating that “personality strength plays a role in promoting social capital that goes beyond SES, political interest, or information variables.” See: Diетram A. Scheufele and Dhavan V. Shah, “Personality Strength and Social Capital,” *Communication Research* 27 (April 2000): 107-131. Vermont town meetings are full of people who simply seem to have the extroverted personality to participate in public forums. I also believe that small towns produce more of these “local characters” than large towns.

increases is demonstrated (“r” = -.33). One of Goshen’s meetings stands out as being far more heavily attended than its SES predicts.¹⁶ The flat association between size adjusted attendance and the ISES appears in Plot 3. When community size is controlled the weak negative link between attendance at town meeting at upscale communities disappears. The meetings held in the upscale little town of Goshen which were visible well above the line of best fit in Plot 2 have slipped into the bog of indistinguishable meetings laying along the line of best fit in Plot 3. Higher turnout in Goshen’s meetings was caused by its size not its socioeconomic standing. Turnout was a function of their size not the status of their residents.¹⁷

To see this relationship more clearly, look at Plot 4 of Figure VI-A. The number of cases has been limited to the 93 meetings studied in 1987. In this array Granville and Goshen can be more clearly seen. Granville, at the lower end of the SES ladder, scores well above its predicted turnout while Goshen, much higher up on the scale of socioeconomic status variables, falls significantly lower on size adjusted attendance effort. This is not to make the case that a community’s SES is *inversely* related to attendance at town meeting. It is simply to indicate that no association exists between the two at all. In short there is no connection between a town’s position on the status scale and its propensity to turn out citizens for town meeting.¹⁸ This, given the power

¹⁶Two meetings in the town of Ripton share Goshen’s high SES, high turnout (with size left uncontrolled) relationship. These two towns abut one another high in the Green Mountains. An incredibly beautiful little road (especially in early October)—Route #32, the “Goshen-Ripton” Road—joins them and will bring you out a stone’s throw west of the Robert Frost Interpretive Trail in Ripton if you’re headed north. The fact that Ripton and Goshen score about the same on ISES will surprise no one who lives in these hills.

¹⁷ In his study of the Israeli Kibbutz (one of rare analogues to town meeting) Rosner found no relationship between attendance at the governing assemblies and demographic variables in general and, more specifically, with education. Menachem Rosner, *Participatory Political and Organizational Democracy and the Experience of the Israeli Kibbutz* (Haifa: The University of Haifa, 1981): 13.

¹⁸ While finding a strong relationship between socioeconomic heterogeneity through the intervening variable of issue networks (see below page ____), Jack McLeon and his colleagues made the important discovery for face-to-face democracy that demographic variables were not associated with increased participation (attendance and

of the expectation, is finding aplenty.¹⁹ A persuasive explanation for this is suggested by Brady, Verba and Schlozman in their examination of the intervening variables between SES and participation. One of these a cluster of civic skills (the other two are time and money) and some of these skills are not strongly related to SES. They are tied instead to affiliations with institutions that are more or less independent of SES. My hunch is that in small towns the *town* itself and more importantly the town *meeting* itself are uniquely powerful places of civic instruction. They are the intervening sources of civic capital that neutralize the SES variable.²⁰

[FIGURE VI-A ABOUT HERE]

speaking) in public forms. Jack M. McLeod, *et al*, "Understanding Deliberation," *Communication Research* 26 (December 1999): 743-774. Berry and his colleagues found that at the aggregate level: ". . . demographic characteristics would not seem to explain why some cities have higher community participation than others." But their individual level data showed that "lower SES people are significantly underrepresented and higher SES people are significantly over-represented among community participants." Significantly the only group to be advantaged by the presence of opportunities for face-to-face neighborhood democracy is the middle class. Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thompson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1992): 82-83. This conforms to my observation in Vermont town meetings. My definition of middle class extends to working class people with very modest education and income levels, however.

¹⁹Huckfeldt has offered a reasonable explanation for this. In his pivotal study of the impact of neighborhood context on political participation published in 1979 he found that higher class surroundings stimulate additional participation among higher class people. But they discourage participation among lower status people. Huckfeldt, "Political Participation," 588-591. Would this mean that towns with higher proportions of high status people, who tend to attend town meeting more, trigger a negative turnout by lower status people? Or, if the reverse were also true and high status people tend to participate less (than they otherwise might) in low status towns (and I have not been able to determine if they do) the combination of these dynamics might strengthen the potential for a non-relationship. The curvilinear nature of this model cries out for small group research or simulation exercises. The findings would also weigh heavily on the heterogeneity variable. The face-to-face nature of town meeting democracy adds a further complication. All my instincts tell me that lower status people ought to participate *verbally* less in higher status settings. But I see no consistent evidence that it is so. As for attendance I think the relationship both ought to be and is less commanding. Again, the particular character of Vermont communities (where high status people tend to be newcomers who try like the devil to *diminish* their "status"—so much so it's often hilarious) adds complexity to the equation. If only Huckfeldt would ride into town with a gang of graduate students.

²⁰ Alas it is but a hunch and until resources are available to provide individual level data, we will never know for sure. With all the graduate students in southern New England are there none who like the outback as much as I like the Red Sox? See: Henry E. Brady, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participants," *American Political Science Review* 89 (June 1995): 271-294.

figure 6 A

Socioeconomic Diversity

There is substantial theoretical energy in the socioeconomic diversity construct. Many argue the importance of socioeconomic variables lies not in their direct connection to participation but rather in the degree to which they contribute to a conflictual environment which in turn causes people to participate in politics. Places where class status is chunky rather than smooth are places where contested issues are more apt to abound.²¹ Looked at this way towns that are uniformly “upper” class or uniformly “working class” will have less internal conflict and the consequent increase in political apathy will put a damper on attendance at town meeting.²² Under the “conflict” model (if SES heterogeneity does raise the potential for conflict) towns with more diversity will have higher attendance and towns with more homogeneous socioeconomic environments will have lower attendance.²³

²¹ One of the clear expressions of the thesis is Matthew Crenson’s. From his study of neighborhood politics in Baltimore he argues that citizen involvement is increased by the existence of social differences. Matthew Crenson, *Neighborhood Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983). Curt Ventriss in his essay on political participation from the public manager’s perspective puts it this way: “Neighborhood action is invigorated not only when neighbors know one another, but also when a little distrust exists among them.” This is a model explanation of the diversity → conflict → participation model, leavened by a neighborhood context where familiarity is high not low. Curtis Ventriss, “Emerging Perspectives on Citizen Participation,” *Public Administration Review* (May/June 1985): 433-440.

²² In 1968 Alford and Lee’s important study of turnout in American cities found higher participation in cities with more “explicit class or ethnic differences.” But the aggregate nature of the study precluded (as it does here) a fine tuning of the arrangement of class cleavages, education levels (lower) and political structure, other important correlates of high turnout. Robert P. Alford and Eugene C. Lee, “Voting Turnout in American Cities,” *American Political Science Review* (September 1968): 796-813.

²³ The hypothesis is well put by Blau’s observation in 1977 that “associations with people who have different backgrounds and experiences are likely to make people more tolerant, broaden their horizons, and provide intellectual stimulation.” Peter M. Blau, *Inequality and Heterogeneity: A Primitive Theory of Social Structure*, (New York: The Free Press, 1977): 22. McLeod and his colleagues extend the logic: “. . . we may also reason that heterogeneity leads to increased interpersonal relations and discussion. It is this dynamic process that can lead to higher levels of interpersonal discussion and, subsequently, to a greater willingness to participate in a forum on a community level.” In his study of discussion networks and open forum participation in Madison, Wisconsin, McLeod found a strong relationship between heterogeneity within these networks and anticipated higher

The assumption, however, that town meetings are considered by the townspeople to be legitimate arenas for the resolution of conflict is open to question. Another model, the “consensus model,” is backed by equally strong theory. People avoid conflict it is said, especially public conflict. The best setting for real democracy is class homogeneity.²⁴ This presents what statisticians call a “two-tailed test” of the original model: attendance will be high, for instance, in either uniformly working class or uniformly upscale communities. In short in the vacuum created by the lack of an *additive* linkage of SES variables to higher participation, it is important to redefine the notion in terms of the *complexity* of the socioeconomic environment. As complexity increases, there are theoretical reasons to believe that it might cause participation to vary in either direction.²⁵

To test this the towns were classified according to the degree to which categories of people were evenly divided in each community,²⁶ producing an index ranging from 0 to 1. A perfect score

participation (attendance and verbal participation combined) in public issues forums. He concludes: “Its impact on forum participation is both direct (unmediated) and indirect, mediated by issue discussion and reflection.” McLeod, *et al*, *Understanding Deliberation*, 743-774. Other studies which link heterogeneity with increased incidence of discussion spiced with conflict are: M. A. Krassa, “Political Information, Social Environment, and Deviants,” *Political Behavior* 12 (1990): 315-330. M. MacKuen, “Speaking of Politics: Individual Conversational Choice, Public Opinion, and the Prospects for Deliberative Democracy,” in J. A. Ferejohn and J. A. Kuklinski (eds). *Information and Democratic Processes* (Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 1990): 59-99 and Jack M. McLeod, Mira Sotirovic and R. Lance Holbert, “Values as Sociotropic Judgments Influencing Communication Patterns,” *Communication Research* 25 (October 1998): 453-480.

²⁴ The homogeneity model has a long pedigree beginning with Aristotle. A leading text specifically devoted to rural government taught that for a town meeting government to “get along quite well” (which would presumably mean attendance was high) it would need a “stable and homogeneous population.” Lane W. Lancaster, *Government in Rural America*, (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1952): 42-43.

²⁵ This is an important example of the critical heuristic difference between the study of real democracy and representative democracy. The privacy of the voting booth *by design* eliminates the theory that conflict can be a bad thing for participation. In fact much of the literature argues that conflictual elections produce higher turnout. There are no studies that look for *lower* voting in class divisive situations. Given anonymity behind the curtain, people are more apt to express conflictual opinions in the form of their vote. But standing up or speaking out in public actually puts conflict on *display*. Now and then I have heard Vermonters, for instance, say things like: “I’m not going down there [to town meeting] anymore. All they do is argue and fight.”

²⁶ John L. Sullivan, “Political Correlates of Social, Economic, and Religious Diversity in the American States,” *Journal of Politics* 35 (February 1973): 70-84.

of one means each *category* of social groupings is equal in the town. The variables I used were education (college graduates vs. others), homeowners vs. renters, people above the poverty line vs. people below the poverty line, occupation (managers and professionals vs. blue collar workers and farmers vs. others), native Vermonters vs. those born outside Vermont. My index thus contained five categories of data and eleven components within those categories. A perfectly heterogeneous community would have 50 percent native Vermonters and 50 percent out-of-staters, 50 percent with college degrees and 50 percent without, 50 percent would own their homes and 50 percent would rent, 50 percent would be above the poverty line and 50 percent below, and the work force would be one third farmers and laborers, one-third managers and professionals and one-third would work in other occupations. It is obvious that a score of 1 is nearly impossible since, for instance, only a handful of towns have half their citizens holding college degrees. The score for the town with the least diversity was set to 0 and the score for the most was set to 100.

Small towns in the dairy counties of Franklin and Addison were most apt to be homogeneous; towns like Sheldon, Franklin, Highgate and Whiting. But there were other very homogeneous towns of a far different hue: tiny Baltimore in the southwest and rugged Canaan in the northeast, Stamford on the Massachusetts border in the south, and the quarry town of Wilmington in the center. The location of the most heterogeneous towns was harder to predict but they often were rural towns near more cosmopolitan centers. Ripton and Goshen both near Middlebury are examples. Many were rural towns which balance a homegrown Yankee subculture with a unique brand of rural chic such as Strafford with its famous meeting house and Craftsbury with its equally famous common. But there were ski towns like Warren and Fayston and hard rock Kingdom towns like Stannard as well.

The index was both empirically successful and intuitively satisfying in identifying towns that were substantially different from one another. It separated, for instance, mountain towns like Ripton where high income and low income and loggers and professors must balance interests, from towns down in the Lake Champlain Basin like Whiting where an agricultural culture dominates and Hancock, next door to Ripton, which is equally rugged and mountainous and nearly farmerless but lacking in professors. Yet it was wholly unsuccessful in identifying towns with high and low levels of town meeting attendance. When town size is controlled the Pearson's "r" correlation coefficient is just about as small as it can be and still register at all, $-.01$.²⁷ Neither the "heterogeneity leads to conflict which stimulates attendance" model or its opposite, the "heterogeneity leads to conflict which in turn depresses attendance" model prevailed. In Figure VI-B Plot 1 the heterogeneity index is plotted against size-controlled attendance. What we have is a flat out wash.²⁸

[FIGURE VI-B ABOUT HERE]

²⁷ Actually because the heterogeneity index and town population correlated at only .06 (Pearson's "r") which, although statistically significant (at .05) due to the large number of meetings in the sample, was too small to bias the heterogeneity/attendance relationship. Beginning with Wirth's classic essay in 1938 studies have long shown that size is associated with SES heterogeneity but the towns in the sample are much too small to provide a test of many of these findings. See: Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (July 1938): 1-24. For a review of this literature and a probe of the connections between size, heterogeneity and attitude constructs, see: Thomas C. Wilson, "Community Population Size and Social Heterogeneity: An Empirical Test," *The American Journal of Sociology* 91 (March 1986): 1154-1169.

²⁸ In his remarkable Ph.D. thesis done at Syracuse University in 1958, Stanley Wilson investigates the potential for community and governance at the extreme edge of the population continuum, the ten smallest towns in Vermont. Here is what he says. The town of Victory (with 49 inhabitants) "is approaching a point where a real community will cease to exist primarily because of a lack of population." The town of Stratton (with 59 inhabitants) "is rife with contention." Yet "the diversity of opinion which outwardly denies the existence of a community has an underlying vigor which may result in a larger, more enterprising town community." The bottom line, says Wilson, is: "a small population does not necessarily mean the absence of a town community nor does it imply an ineffective town." Stanley T. Wilson, "The Structural and Functional Capacities of Small Towns in Vermont," (Doctoral Thesis, Syracuse University, 1958): 146.

figure 6 B

COMMUNITY DYNAMICS

When Robert Rogers led his starving band of raiders back from their attack on the Saint Francis Indians in Canada on October 5, 1759, his route carried him overland through northern Vermont. Ten days after leaving Saint Francis he and a handful of men still left alive struck the Muleghan River southeast of Newport, Vermont, and struggled down river toward a place now called Bloomfield where the Muleghan empties into the Connecticut. Although the wilderness in those days was incomprehensible to the modern imagination, Rogers must have known what he was doing for both the major east-west highway through the region (Route #105) and a main line of the Canadian National Railway still follow his route down the Muleghan.²⁹

Two hundred and eleven years, five months later (March, 1971) three of my students traveled 150 miles from Winooski, Vermont, down that same passageway to attend Bloomfield's town meeting. Since it is situated on the Connecticut River where Vermont meets New Hampshire and the east-west rail and road transportation routes intersect the north-south routes, one might expect Bloomfield to be quite active. It is not. The major north-south road in this part of northern New England was built across the river in New Hampshire as was the rail line. Besides. It's too far north. Except for a little logging and a few farms along the river there is no economic activity at all. The country is too rugged for tourists. A little store (Debanville's) crouches where the bridge

²⁹I have spent a good amount of time hunting and fishing in this area. When standing alone at certain spots on the river in the evening quiet it is still possible to sense how it must have been in those bygone days. One cold night in November I got turned around deer hunting and stumbled out of the woods on the Canadian National line. It was an eerie sight. The tracks glistened away to the north under an early moon. I wondered what Robert Rogers would have thought. One could almost hear the thunder of the great engines roll through bog and slash back when the railroads were alive in the forests of the north country. Cold, wet and hungry I followed the track back to Route #105 and then hitched (this is a part of the world where people pick up scruffy strangers at night carrying a 30-30 carbine) to a place called the Bear Mountain Lodge, a bar and dance hall attached to a five unit motel. It being a Saturday night the place soon became merry with a charm uniquely fashioned by French Canadian loggers dancing to fiddle and guitar.

crosses the Connecticut into New Hampshire. It's been selling food, ammo, Eagle Claw hooks and beer for as long as I can remember. Whoever first fashioned the advertisement "If we ain't got it, you don't need it," must have had Debanville's in mind. There is also a cemetery and a church (Methodist) in Bloomfield. That's it.

Population Growth

Of the 1441 meetings we studied between 1970 and 1998, none was held in a town that had lost population faster in the preceding two decades than the one held in Bloomfield in 1971. When the moderator brought it to order at 10:00 a.m. on March 2 there were 195 people in Bloomfield, down 33 percent from the 291 in town in 1951. One hundred and eight were registered to vote. Thirty-three of these (19 men and 14 women) were in attendance at town meeting. Eight men and eight women participated at least once during the meeting which lasted an hour and forty minutes. The percent of registered voters in attendance (33) was low for such a small town. The SAAER was only .81. For every 10 persons that ought to have been present at town meeting only eight were.

In 1784 (eight years before Bloomfield became a town in 1792) Joshua Isham of Colchester, Connecticut, put down stakes (quite literally) in St. George, Vermont, which is far to the west of Bloomfield in the now highly settled Chittenden County. He was immediately victimized by one of the state's earliest land swindles. In 1963 Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire had chartered the town in honor of King George III to 64 "grantees." But other towns made claims on the land and instead of receiving 360 acre lots Isham and the other original settlers ended up with 30 acres each and St. George became one of Vermont's geographically smallest towns. In 1791, the

year the Republic of Vermont joined the United States, there were 57 people in St. George.³⁰ Follow this: even though St. George is situated in Vermont's most populous county, and only a stone's throw from its largest city, the town's population had grown to only 108 by 1960. One hundred and seventy years, 108 people; less than one per year.

But over the next two decades the town's population leapt upward. The result was that of all the towns we studied, the one that had gained the most population in the 20 years prior to the year the meeting was held was St. George for its meeting of 1980. Between 1960 and 1980 St. George's population increased from 108 to 677. Twenty eight percent of the registered voters attended the 1980 meeting. This was below what would be expected for a town its size. The meeting lasted four hours and forty-seven minutes. Thus both the fastest growing town (St. George) and the town losing population the fastest (Bloomfield) had poorer attendance at town meeting than their size would predict.

Does this reflect a pattern? Studies indicate for both individual and community level data that population mobility is negatively associated with political involvement, especially in local politics.³¹ To the extent that a community is growing and larger percentages of its population tend to be newcomers political participation levels will be lower. In one way it stands to reason. New

³⁰W. S. Rann, ed., *The History of Chittenden County, Vermont*, (Syracuse, New York: D. Mason & Company, 1886): 666-688.

³¹ This finding has an early adherent (Lancaster, *Government in Rural America*, 42-43.) and in 1972 Verba and Nie, through their integration of the concept with community boundness and suburban growth, developed a more explicit argument. Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972): 232-247. If one assumes that familiarity *does not* breed contempt (and I do) and that less contemptuous relations among citizens where cooperation is more likely are apt to draw more people to face-to-face political institutions (most of the scholarship makes this assumption but I have my doubts—the more I *trust* my neighbor, the more apt I am to let her go to town meeting while I go muskrat hunting), then Axelrod's formulation that "cooperation requires that individuals have a sufficiently large chance to meet again so that they have a stake in their future interaction" should mean that swiftly growing communities will have lower percentages of citizens attending town meeting. Robert M. Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984): 20.

arrivals in town need to register to vote, develop a stake in the community, and establish those interests and connections that lend themselves to local political activity.

On the other hand, a community undergoing rapid population growth is subject to political problems and opportunities that might promote rather than still political activity. The energy emitted from the problem of population growth—from zoning to building new classrooms on the school—ought—if democracy's strong—spark increases in political activity. Also, in the case of Vermont's town meeting democracy there is another countervailing force at work. The draw of small town life that brought many outsiders to Vermont after 1950 included a large dose of attachment to human scale processes, including politics. There is little danger of exaggeration in the claim that one of the reasons small towns in Vermont grew so fast in the 70s and 80s was because a new kind of migration dynamic was taking place in America. The people were trying to find their way back home. They were seeking out institutions like town meeting.

My attack on the problem reflects the ambivalence in the theory. I measured town population dynamics in four ways. The first two were the percent population increase over the single decade preceding the town meeting (short-term population growth) and the last two decades (long-term population growth). I also measured population change as distinguished from growth. Thus under this method a town loosing ten percent of its population would be equal to a town gaining 10 percent. Finally I traced the amount of variation in the rate and direction of population change. Thus a town that lost 10 percent in the first decade and then gained it back plus a 20 percent increase from its original total in the second decade would score higher than a town that simply gained 10 percent in the first decade and 10 percent in the second.

Unfortunately the flow of the data does not allow a complete testing of these notions. That is because population change in Vermont since 1950 has been almost universally defined as uninterrupted population growth. Only eight percent of the meetings we studied were held in towns that had lost population in the two decades prior to town meeting. The average meeting was held in a town that had had a 50 percent increase in population. These increases over time hid very few ups and downs. This means all of the variables are very highly correlated. The lowest correlation in the four variable matrix of associations is $R = .85$ between population increase and population variation. The best we can do, therefore, is to see if a town's rate of population increase is associated with attendance at its town meeting.

At first glance it seems to be. A bit. The Pearson's "r" between the percent of registered voters attending town meeting and the percent population increase in the town over the two decades preceding the meeting was $-.14$. But even this tiny relationship disappears when town size is controlled. This is because the greatest increase in town population in Vermont occurred between 1970 and 1980. Thus the meetings held after 1980 occurred in towns having the greatest population increases. But towns selected for analysis after 1980 were by definition bigger than the towns we studied in the 1970's (often they were the same towns) since all towns had grown over the period. Consequently, when town size is controlled for all the meetings over the 26-year period of the study with the size adjusted attendance effort ratio the relationship drops to $-.08$. Plot 2 of Figure VI-B arranges the meetings studied near the taking of the 1990 Census (1989-1991). This small cluster of meetings clearly demonstrates that the fate of attendance in individual town meetings is not in any direct way tied to the population increase of the town in which they were held.³²

³² An important study of voter turnout and mobility estimated in 1987 that turnout would increase by nine percentage points if the influence of moving from one place to another could be neutralized. Nearly all the meetings

Three other indicators related to population mobility were also tested, the percent of a town's population born outside Vermont—the flatlander statistic, the percent of a town's population living in the same house they were living in five years before the Census was taken, and the percent of a town's population that had moved into town in the five years prior to the Census count.³³ None of these produced more than trivial association with attendance at town meeting.

Towns where more than half the population were not living in the house they were in five years prior to the Census were apt to be ski resort towns like Fayston or towns with or near colleges (Johnson and Ripton). But there were also swiftly growing towns with increasing numbers of families living in mobile homes like where I live in Starksboro or Bradford, a town which borders my home town of Newbury on the south. Towns where most people had stayed put in the five years prior to the Census satisfied my intuitive expectations as well. The Kingdom town of Stannard, the town of Washington in the central Vermont highlands, Isle La Motte in the islands of northern Lake Champlain and the rugged town of Belvidere all had at least 80 percent of their populations in the same house. But that statistic tells us nothing about their town meeting democracy. Nor did the percent of a town's population that had moved into the town in the five years prior to the Census, another statistic identifying towns with clearly different growth patterns. Taken together or in

in the data base were held in towns undergoing population increases, sometimes minor, sometimes dramatic. But my measure of turnout is based on registered voters and the act of re-registering is the principal “stumbling block” to voting among new movers. This caused me to check my “eligible voter” variable (although I distrust its accuracy) as a hedge on my earlier claim that the correlation between the two potential dependent variables was so great it would make little difference in my correlational models. It didn't. Peverill Squire, Raymond Wolfinger and David P. Glass, “Residential Mobility and Voter Turnout,” *American Political Science Review* 81 (March 1987): 45-65.

³³A town's population was estimated for each year between the Censuses by assigning to each year 10 percent of the population loss or gain over the decade. These approximations seemed far more accurate than using, for instance, the 1980 population count for 1984 or the 1990 Census count for 1988. Moreover this technique very closely matched the estimates made by the state for town population growth in selected years.

combination both of these measures indicate that attendance at town meeting is oblivious to short-term community dynamics.³⁴

Flatlander to native Vermonter: “Lived here all your life?” Reply: “Not yet.” If there is a dominant paradigm in modern Vermont culture it is the contrast between newcomers (flatlanders) and native Vermonters (woodchucks or simply “chucks”). Towns are typically cast by the degree to which either of these categories predominates. The suspicion has always been that native Vermonters care more about their town meetings than the newly arrived “from away.” That suspicion is wrong. Town meeting democracy is not by these data more popular with “Vermonters” than newcomers. The popular myth suggests that it is the descendants of people like the yeoman citizen of Arlington in Norman Rockwell’s famous painting who practice town meeting democracy the most. But the correlation coefficient between native Vermont population and higher attendance at town meeting was $-.03$ when population size was taken into account.³⁵ In a nutshell there seems to be no community level evidence that town meeting democracy is more popular in towns where chucks like me abound.³⁶ (See Plot 3 of Figure VI-B.)

³⁴ Scholarship has generally reported that the influence of mobility on participation is generally limited to a two-year period. For an interesting treatment of the interface of education, mobility and participation, see: Timpone, “Structure, Behavior, and Voter Turnout in the United States,” 152.

³⁵This is as good a place as any to remind ourselves of the danger of the ecological fallacy. What these data only show is that towns with greater percentages of flatlanders do not have lower attendance at town meeting. We may suggest, but not claim, that this is because flatlanders are as apt to go to town meetings as “real” Vermonters. My suspicion is that they are more apt to attend especially in the first few years after their arrival. My friend, Mountain Man Hob Bartlett, once opined to me quite the opposite, however, as we discussed the ecological fallacy while watching an ox draw in the town of Tunbridge. His view was that the arrival of the downstaters actually drove more real Vermonters into town meeting in a desperate attempt to use the government to protect themselves and their property.

³⁶So jealous are Vermonters of their pedigree that the legislature recently considered a bill that would have allowed persons like myself who was born across the Connecticut River in a New Hampshire hospital (actually in my case it was a “county farm”—part lock up, part alms house) of parents living in Vermont at the time to claim a Vermont birthright. Although I was conceived in the Northeast Kingdom town of Canaan where my parents lived, and was brought to term hard on the headwaters of the upper Connecticut and mom could see Vermont from her room at the county farm, I must bear the shame of suspicious parenting and trudge through life with a New Hampshire birth

WITNESS

The “Jericho Recyclers” Go to Town Meeting

About halfway through the meeting was interrupted by the opening of the stage curtain right behind the selectmen’s table, revealing an elaborate game-show set, around which pranced “The Jericho Recyclers” an acting troupe unequaled in their gall, who insisted on playing out a game show which would involve anyone in attendance at the meeting who wanted to answer questions about recycling. If answered correctly, contestants would win an environmentally safe prize (which a good percentage of the crowd would probably throw away as soon as they went home anyway, creating more waste).

Unfortunately, and yet quite predictably, the show met with little cooperation, and went over about as well as an added agenda item. People wanted out. Scanning the room I saw a couple of men I knew to be farmers who were visibly less than pleased with this unforeseen waste of time. The climax of the show was when the players ran around the gym, distributing recycle-wheels, with which one can compute exactly what to do with certain recyclable materials, as well as determine how to dispose of certain toxic wastes. These discs, I noticed, nearly covered the floor as the meeting adjourned.

These kids had the right idea, but they just plain went about it wrong. Most of the townspeople were starting to think about lunch, getting home to their soap operas, and even getting back to the farm to finish the day’s chores. Few wanted to be preached to by a bunch of recent college graduates who were acting very goofy, and yet in a way, a little bit condescending. And the ultimate irony was the waste the players were producing with the useless hypna-recycle wheels. (I ended up with four or five myself.)

One interesting aspect along the lines of “old meeting-new meeting” is the age of the attendants. There were a lot of old folks (55+) and a lot of young folks (25-30), but few in the middle. I attribute this to the new wave in Jericho, the younger IBM families who are not given the day off...I would hypothesize that the young folks attend because town meeting is new to them, and they are curious to see what it is all about, and perhaps they are actually eager to make a change or two if they can. The older folks, the Yankee Elite of Jericho, are there to block these changes...

In Jericho a significant number of people are working at the professional level and they ... are too busy to show up. Under “new business” I supported a friend of the family who introduced a possible agenda item for next year which would move Jericho’s town meeting to Monday night. But this will be a tough issue, and unless enough professionals get a hand in the voting (which in many cases might mean taking the day off), it will never change.

Tradition in Jericho decomposes about as well as a Styrofoam coffee cup.³⁷

certificate. In order to make sure that people like me did not contaminate this analysis as we do the character of the state I ran the correlation between native Vermonters and attendance at town meeting after excluding towns along the Connecticut River. Norwich, Vermont, for instance, has the lowest percent of natives since nearly all Vermonters who live there go to the Mary Hitchcock Hospital at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire to give birth. I excluded 15 towns which contributed 67 town meetings to the sample. Believe me when I pushed the key to see what the computer would say on this question I half expected a monstrous Pearson’s “r” to leap out at me screaming “See! You geo-bastards do contaminate the broth!” Fortunately the elimination of the 67 meetings in those towns where so many “Vermonters” live under false pretenses did not change the coefficients.

³⁷Kevin P. McGonegal, “Jericho 1991 Town Meeting and the Crisis of the Yuppie,” (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, March 1991).

Community Boundriness³⁸

Down in the southeast corner of the state where Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts meet is the little town of Guilford. A couple of hundred years ago Ethan Allen rode into town with a crowd of his “Green Mountain Boys” and threatened to “lay it as desolate as Sodom and Gomorrah” if it did not subject itself to his will. They must, he thundered, abandon their plan to secede from the Republic of Vermont and join Massachusetts. Allen’s will prevailed (as it often did) and Guilford remains in Vermont; a town of 1941 people rich in its history and (one hopes) satisfied with the outcome of the infamous “Guilford Raid” so many years ago. Guilford was in the sample of towns studied in 1992 and at their town meeting 12 percent of the registered voters were in attendance on average throughout the day. This was one percent more than was predicted by their size.

Guilford, like many other places in Vermont, is a small town adjacent to a much larger town, in this case the town of Brattleboro with a population of 12,241. To what extent does Brattleboro sap the community strength from Guilford—economic, social, cultural—and thereby jeopardize interest in the community’s political life as well? Or, consider the towns of Cornwall and Weybridge (populations 1101 and 667 respectively) immediately to west of the town of Middlebury up in the Champlain Valley county of Addison. Middlebury has 8034 people, a McDonald’s, several shopping centers, the union high school, a movie theater, and Middlebury College and the many cultural amenities associated with it. What chance do Weybridge and Cornwall have of maintaining their community identity, what Verba and Nie called their

³⁸ The term originated with Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, 229-247.

community “boundriness” caught as they are in the socioeconomic magnet field emitted by Middlebury?

Many of the towns we studied are like Guilford, Weybridge and Cornwall. But there are an equal number that lie far from the influence of larger towns, where it is very clear to the traveler when one is “coming into town,” where the boundaries of the community are etched not only in topography but also in social and economic institutions—a mom and pop store, a couple of gas stations, a clustered village center. Canaan, which borders both Canada and New Hampshire and is thus the most northern and eastern town in Vermont’s wild Northeast Kingdom, the island town of Isle LaMotte in Lake Champlain which saw European settlement as early as 1642. The valley town of Granville (see above page ____) sandwiched between ranges of the Green Mountains where “Granville Gulch” opens up a bit and allowed some farming and logging activity to spring up long ago are examples of places where community boundriness would not seem to be a problem for democracy.³⁹

³⁹ There is evidence that “neighboring behavior” is related to participation and, moreover, that its link is more substantial than that of demographic variables. Most of this evidence, however, comes from research in voluntary civic organizations such as block associations, neighborhood improvement groups and community development organizations. In a study of the Waverly-Belmont neighborhood in Nashville Chavis and Wandersman were able to explain 23 percent of the variance in participation in bloc associations with several interactive “sense of community” variables. David M. Chavis and Abraham Wandersman, “Sense of Community in the Urban Environment: A Catalyst for Participation and Community Development,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 18(February 1990): 55-81. This substantially exceeded similar models based on standard demographic variables in the earlier work of Florin and Wandersman. See: P. Florin and Abraham Wandersman, “Cognitive Social Learning and Participation in Community Development. A Comparison of Standard and Cognitive Social Learning Variables,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 12 (1984): 689-708, and Wandersman and Florin, “A Cognitive Social Learning Approach to the Crossroads of Cognition, Social Behavior and the Environment,” in: J. H. Harvey (ed.) *Cognition, Social Behavior and the Environment*, (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1981): 393-408. It was the inclusion of neighbor relations that made the difference. I wish I could prove that more “neighboring” goes on in the places I would identify as the most “boundried” towns in Vermont but I can’t. I do know, however, that most of the people in these places would be perplexed at the use of “neighbor” as a verb. A review of an important sequence of research in community participation by a cadre of social psychologists is: Paul Florin and Abraham Wandersman, “An Introduction to Citizen Participation, Voluntary Organizations, and Community Development: Insights for Empowerment Through Research,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 18 (February 1990): 41-54. For the relationship between community boundriness, SES, and political information, see: Kasisomayajula Viswanath, Gerald M. Kosicki, Eric S. Fredin and Eonkyung Park, “Local community Ties, Community Boundriness, and Local

I operationalized the definition of community boundriness in four ways. First two Census variables were recruited to get a sense of work force characteristics: the average minutes spent driving to work by those sixteen years old or older who do not work at home and the percent of the work force who worked outside town. As these indicators increased it was hypothesized that sense of community would decrease and attendance at town meeting would go down. There are a host of small towns in Vermont, for instance, where over 90 percent of the work force was employed out of town. These range from the smallest town in Vermont, Victory, with its population of 50 scattered over 40 square miles in the hill and bog country of the Northeast Kingdom to St. George (population 705) in the Chittenden County SMSA with a ten-minute commute to Burlington. There are other towns where less than 30 percent work in another town.⁴⁰ Middlebury and the ski resort towns of Stowe and Sherburne led our sample in terms of workers staying in town for their jobs.

Two other indexes were created to get a handle on the notion of community boundriness. One was based on the actual road miles from each town in our study to a town of 5000 people or more. This was called rural isolation.⁴¹ In two cases towns in other states were used as destination

Public Affairs,” *Communication Research* 27 (February 2000): 27-50. The causal sequence reads: length of residence leads to local political knowledge which leads to increased political activity. L. L. Pearson, “Desert Storm and Tundra Telegraph: Information Diffusion in a Media Poor Environment,” in B. S. Greenberg and W. Gantz (eds.), *Desert Storm and the Mass Media* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1993): 182-196. For the link between local media, community boundriness and participation, see: J. M. McLeod, K. Daily, Z. Goo, W. P. Eveland, J. Bayer, S. Yang and H. Yang, “Community Integration, Local Media Use and the Democratic Process,” *Communication Research* 23 (1966): 179-209.

⁴⁰For those unfamiliar with New England it is important to understand that, with almost no exceptions (in Vermont, for instance, we have a few small unsettled regions called Gores and a few unincorporated towns) it is impossible to leave one town and not be in another. It is not like the rest of the country where large numbers of people live outside an incorporated municipality and come only under the jurisdiction of the county for local governmental services. In Vermont the counties are nearly defunct and serve primarily to organize the court system and as a base for Census data which is used primarily by interest groups to obfuscate reality when and if it suits them.

⁴¹ Verba and Nie’s findings were quite explicit on the matter: “As a community loses its clear border and identity, it should become more difficult or less meaningful for the individuals to participate in . . . Isolation and small size seem to work together to increase participation.” This is especially true for the “communal” activity component of their participation index. Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, 240, 241, 245.

points. Lebanon, New Hampshire, was combined with the old depot town of Hartford, Vermont, to reflect the fact that the urban area that has developed where the White River empties into the Connecticut is an interstate region serving a host of towns on the Vermont side.⁴² North Adams, Massachusetts also serves as the nearest large town for several communities in Southern, Vermont. After the actual miles from a town meeting town to an urban center were determined, I weighted them to reflect the fact that an increase in ten miles distance from 25 to 35 miles in Vermont is “worth” more than an increase from say, 10 to 20 miles, since the 25-mile point is a fair estimate of acceptable commuting distances in most of the state. As the number of weighted miles to a town of 5000 or more increased, rural isolation (and thus community boundriness) was also said to have increased.⁴³

⁴²White River Junction is the incorporated village within the town of Hartford that is the familiar port of call to most visitors to the region. This has been a major communication hub for centuries and the two rivers, the Connecticut and the White, were essential pathways during the French and Indian Wars for raiding parties from both Canada and the Colonies. In a land that knew only trees, they appreciated the rivers especially when they were iced over. From the north they came down Lake Champlain to Burlington where they found the mouth of the Winooski. They followed the Winooski east to the Montpelier region (home of the state capital now) and then traveled overland (a few miles) south to the head waters of the east branch of the White which took them south and east to the Connecticut and then down river to places like Deerfield, Massachusetts. On windy March afternoons fishing through the ice where these two great rivers meet the Mountain Man and I have listened for the cries of war parties in the late afternoon when dusk begins to sneak into the valley. I am not altogether certain that they still cannot be heard if the conditions are right.

⁴³Creating the rural isolation index was very time consuming and quite a tricky business in Vermont since the state provides no matrix of road mileage between towns and many of the roads between the little hill towns and the bigger places involve short cuts and other nuances that demand a familiarity with the state's outback. My thirty plus years experience traveling in Vermont (beginning in 1957 when I traipsed aground the state for the State Geological Survey—three summer vacations as a high school student) came in handy. Where I had questions there was always a friend or acquaintance to consult. Once I had determined the actual road miles that a reasonable person would have to travel to get from the town meeting town to the “urban” place of 5000 or more, the final index was computed as follows:

$$\text{If } M < 26 \text{ IRI} = M$$

$$\text{If } M > 25 \text{ and } < 36 \text{ IRI} = 25 + ((M - 25) \times 2)$$

$$\text{If } M > 35 \text{ IRI} = 45 + ((M - 35) \times 3)$$

Where: M = actual road miles between the town meeting town and the urban center of 5000 or more.

IRI = index of rural isolation

The second was the distance variable (the IRI, Index of Rural Isolation) combined with the ratio of the population of the town holding the town meeting to the population of the larger urban place. I called this index simply the Index of Community Boundriness (ICB) and it credited both size and distance from an urban place. Thus the town with the most “boundriness” would be a larger town some distance from an urban center. Larger towns of, say 1500 to 2500 population, possess the critical mass of people to have free standing social and economic institutions and, if they are some distance from a larger place, tend to use and develop them, while people from very small towns are more dependent on other, larger places even if they are far away. The town with the least boundriness, of course, would be a very small town immediately adjacent to an urban center. To create the index I standardized both contributing variables and then combined them so that the town with the most “boundriness” scored 100 and the town with the least boundriness scored 0.

The results were intuitively satisfying to one familiar with the state and its communities. The little town of Baltimore next to Springfield in southwestern Vermont and the town of St. George only eight miles from Burlington scored lowest on boundriness. That makes sense. Canaan is the most boundaried town in Vermont because of its size (with 1196 people it is twice the size of St. George) and its separation from any competing larger town. Stowe was the second highest because of the ratio of its size to the closest competing urban place. Table VI-B lists community boundriness data for these four towns based on the 1990 Census:

[TABLE VI-B ABOUT HERE]

None of these variables behaved as expected. First of all neither the rural isolation nor the community boundriness index produced coefficients of enough strength to warrant attention. Honing in on the four extreme examples of community boundriness discussed above helps explain

table 6 B

why. Of the two most “boundaried” communities one, Canaan, which appeared in the sample four times when the 1990 Census data was used, averaged only seven attenders for every ten predicted by its size, while the other, Stowe, which appeared four times also, performed as expected averaging 16 attenders for every 10 predicted. At the other extreme, where very low attendance was anticipated, one of the towns, St. George, also matched expectations with an eight-meeting average of only six attenders for every 10 predicted. But little Baltimore (which matched St. George on lack of boundriness) did significantly better. It fell in the sample only twice in the recent period but at those two meetings it had nine attenders for every ten predicted. This “now you see it now you don’t effect” was apparent over the entire array of 1434 meetings studied.⁴⁴ A sample of 200 of these meetings were arrayed in Figure VI-B Plot 4, which matches size adjusted turnout with community boundriness. The Stowe meeting in 1990 comes closest to where it should be, relatively high turnout on the high end of community boundriness. But Bloomfield, Canaan, and Johnson are not. At the lower end of boundriness, meetings also seem completely estranged from the hypothesis.

The percentage of the work force working out of town showed a flicker of life and operated in the correct direction. With town size controlled, as this percentage increased turnout at town meeting went down. The correlation coefficient, however, was only -.12. The “time to work” variable was the cruelest of all. It was as strong as “working out of town.” But it traveled in the wrong direction. The longer it took people to drive to work, the better attendance was at town meeting. Perhaps a long commute to work tempted people to stay in town and go to town meeting.

⁴⁴The correlation coefficients (Pearson’s “r”) with attendance were as follows: Rural Isolation .03; Community Boundriness .06.

But such speculation can't hide the fact that the attempt to empirically identify community boundriness and then use it to predict variations in town meeting attendance simply failed.⁴⁵

Hardship Variables

A final set of community life variables involved what might loosely be called structural negatives. These are characteristics of a community that would make attendance at town meeting more difficult, irrespective of the townspeople's inclination to participate or not participate. In towns with very low population densities, for instance, it stands to reason that the citizens are scattered around more and it will be harder for them to get to town meeting. As an example consider the towns with the two best attendance scores for 1992, Athens and Newark. Populations of the towns are about equal but Newark is almost three times as big, 35 square miles as opposed to only 12.⁴⁶ Could this have something to do with the fact that Athens' attendance was significantly stronger than Newark's?

The measure of choice for population density for most of social science is a jurisdiction's population per square-mile. Actually it is more a measure of convenience than choice. Without very detailed maps and a lot of time to spend over them, dividing an area's total area by the number of people living in it is usually the best one can do. While population per square mile is quite

⁴⁵ Using individual level data Berry and his associates found a strong relationship between "sense of community" and participation in urban neighborhood assemblies. Berry, *et al*, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*, 236-243. It could (I suspect it *is*) the case that my measure does not catch aggregates of citizens with a distinct sense of community attitudes. I can establish the contexts. I cannot explore their internal dynamics. Gerald M. Pomper and Loretta A. Sernekos find what they call "bake sales" variables key components in their model for participation decline. In distinctly communitarian language they call for a rebuilding of American communities with references to town meeting and the work of Jane Mansbridge. Gerald M. Pomper, and Loretta Sernekos, "Bake Sale and Voting," *Society* 28 (July/August 1991): 10-16.

⁴⁶The City of Newark, New Jersey, would require a geographical expanse three and a half times the entire state of New Jersey to have the same population density as the town of Newark, Vermont.

reliable (both populations counts and geographic area are precise and trustworthy numbers) and has the advantage of simplicity, its severe conceptual limitations make it quite dangerous indeed. In Vermont many towns feature huge tracks of land. But often they are filled with wildlife, not people. The citizens are clustered where two streams meet, in a protected valley or at the juncture of two ridges.⁴⁷ In other towns where topography permits (or, in the case of agriculture, encourages very strongly), the people are scattered all over the place.

To get a better sense of the actual scatteredness of a town's population I used population per mile of maintained roadway. Since secondary town roads tend to be places where people live rather than passageways to somewhere else, and since major state roads that are cut through towns are so good that people like to live along them too, miles of roads is a profoundly more precise quantifier of *livable* territory than square miles itself. Compare for example the Northeast Kingdom town of Lunenburg compared to the Champlain Valley town of Bridport. Both towns have about the same territory (45 square miles) and have population sizes that are almost perfectly identical at about 1100. The population per square mile statistics tells us, therefore, that the population density is the same, about 25 persons per square mile. But Bridport is a mostly open farming community with 72 miles of roads connecting the people who live there. There are farmers in Lunenburg along the fertile Connecticut River Valley. But most of the town is forested, wilder, less "settled" over the face of the land. This is reflected by the fact that it has 35 percent fewer miles of maintained highway.

I checked out 25 pairs of towns and in each instance the population per road mile test proved to be a far better match of my sense of the situation than the population per square mile indicator.

⁴⁷Often called a "village" Newbury Village or a "corner" as in Taft's Corner, or a "bend" as in Greensboro Bend or a "center" as in Thetford Center. Or a "ridge" as in Monkton Ridge.

The best example is provided by comparing the two Rutland County towns of Wallingford and Mount Tabor. Again both have equal areas of 42 square miles. Since Wallingford has about ten times as many people (2184 instead of 213) the PPSM measure rates it ten times as densely settled. Mount Tabor contains some of the most rugged terrain in Vermont, a good chunk of the Green Mountain National forest and the ridge line of the Green Mountains chain itself. There are some excellent high trout ponds and a healthy black bear population.

The key is this. Nearly all the people in Mount Tabor live clustered in a little pocket under the steep west flank of the hills where route National Forest Highway #10 links up with western Vermont's chief north-south highway (Route # 7) after cutting its lonely way through the mountains from the east. Mount Tabor has only 8.4 miles of road in town, while Wallingford has 62.4. While the population per square mile figure has Wallingford 940 percent more densely settled than Mount Tabor, the population per road mile differential is only 40 percent, a remarkable improvement. In short if the "scatteredness" of a town's population (what Morton Krenzel called the "social cost of space") has any bearing on its town meeting attendance, it seems clear that fact has a better chance to appear in the population per road mile measure.⁴⁸

The two other structural negatives I used come more directly from the Census. One is a dependent population statistic based on the percentage of the town's population over sixty-five

⁴⁸ Kirkpatrick Sale argues that density along with small size helps improve participation. Many urban scholars such as Jane Jacobs agree, arguing that density and the "hustle-bustle" of the crowd are key components of public safety, helping behavior and a sense of civic space that fosters participation. Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale*, (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1980). Jane Jacobs, *the Economy of Cities*, (New York: Random House, 1969). These are fundamentally aggregate models, however. Individual level studies of the link between community population density and political participation are scarce as hen's teeth. One conceptual bridge that is useful is the helping behavior literature. There, the findings indicated that "crowding" is negatively associated with social participation. Dale O. Jorgenson and Fred O. Dukes, "Deindividuation as a Function of Density and Group Membership," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 34 (July 1976): 24-29; C. Korte, "Helpfulness in the urban Environment," in A. Barum, J. E. Singer and S. Valins (eds.), *Advances in Environmental Psychology: The Urban Environment*, (Hinesdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1979).

years old (hypothesized to have a negative impact on attendance for obvious reasons). The other is the percentage of the town's population of school age since town meeting day in Vermont is almost always a school holiday and the children are at home.⁴⁹ I also used a statistic meant to gauge the number of wage earners in town. This was a combination of the Census figures for blue-collar workers and service workers, the two cohorts of the occupation data that represent those kinds of workers who would most likely not be able to take a day off from work to attend town meeting.

Once again when the size of the town was controlled levels of real democracy shook off the influence of these predictors. The percent of wage earners in a town's work force was very mildly linked ($r = -.10$) with lower attendance.⁵⁰ A trace of connection ($r = .11$) was found between attendance at town meeting and the percent of the population under 18 and over 65 years old. But it was in the wrong direction. While this coefficient is not strong enough to warrant speculation as to why towns with higher percentages of the young and the old in their populations are more apt to have higher attendance at town meeting, it clearly squashes the reasoning that suggested attendance would be lower in such towns.

Population density produced the strongest relationship ($r = -.23$) but it too is in the wrong direction. Those towns where the people are more clustered on the land as measured by the population road mile statistic tend to have lower attendance at town meeting. Towns where people are more apt to be spread out over a more extensive road system have higher attendance. If distance

⁴⁹With apologies to the many, many Vermonters over 65 who are damned they will never be dependent on anything.

⁵⁰An association of this size was nevertheless statistically significant at the .01 level.

and isolation are an impediment to attendance at town meeting this fact has slithered through the analysis undetected.⁵¹

Community Life Variables In Combination

To summarize these relationships variables from each category (socioeconomic status, community boundriness, and hardship), which explain at least one percent of the variance in attendance when town size is controlled, were introduced into a single stepwise multiple regression equation. When this is done population density as measured by miles of road per citizen leads a very weak list of connections to real democracy. The more people are scattered along miles of roadway and not clustered in specific locations, the higher the attendance at town meeting. This closes the gap between the percentage explained by size (60 percent) and the ultimate solution (100 percent of the variance explained) by two percentage points. Four other variables: dependent population, educational index, time to work, and out-of-town workers combine to explain only 2.7 additional percentage points. (See Table VI-C.)

Combine community life variables with the structural variables discussed in the preceding chapter and they take a back seat to the Australian ballot, which by itself adds three percentage points of variance explained. In this context population per road mile and time to work contribute about a percent and school meetings and out-of-town workers about a half.

⁵¹I suspect that population per road mile is a variable that reflects an issue not a condition of life. As the miles of roads per person (the reverse of people per road mile) increases it means the people are more scattered over distances of "back roads." The conditions of these roads are thus more important to them. Since, after education, roads are the single most important issue to come before a town meeting, this variable should increase attendance if issues matter more than the accessibility of the meeting place.

Education is very weak and the dependent population variable (once education has been entered) adds over a half a percentage point of explanation.⁵²

[TABLE VI-C ABOUT HERE]

Enough. We have prowled around in the underbrush of community life causation at length. Thickets of variables that in other times and places have produced either theoretical or empirical ties to political participation have been flushed out with almost no success. From the educational levels of the citizens to their spatial distribution over the land, from the income they earn to the location in which they earn it, from the place of their birth to their longevity in the community, it was impossible to find any *robust* relationships between the social and economic character of a town and its turnout at town meeting. Connections do exist. But they are frail.

Roughly put the attempt to predict the attendance at a town meeting beyond what it would ordinarily be given its size from what is known about the social and economic characteristics of the town netted sparse results. A broad array of predictor variables and high-powered statistical techniques did not do the job. Through this fog bank of data only about four percent of the shoreline was visible. Not a happy circumstance for a sailor seeking port. For the scientist, however, success is as often found in expectations denied as expectations fulfilled; providing the expectations were reasonable in the first place. In this case they certainly were. The literature bulges with findings

⁵² As is the practice, I suspect, with most scholars who seek to wring clarity from complex statistical routines, over the years I have hedged my bets on operational definitions, engaged in seemingly endless reformulation of the equations and hemmed and hawed no end over this and that in order to be sure nothing was left askew that might shed light on conundrums left standing. I am left with two notations. The fact that town meeting attendance is marginally enhanced by the presence of “dependent” populations in town is explained by the observation that older citizens are more committed to town meeting and overcome whatever “hardships” others like me may perceive to be in their way. Hundreds of student essays over the years confirm this by commenting on the age of those in attendance. I accept this even though (I have noticed as I have gained thirty years in age since this study began) students tend to set the bar for “old” lower and lower as time passes. I also suspect that the time-to-work variable which is associated with increases in attendance is a surrogate for “community boundriness” defining clear cut communities (which increase attendance) better than my measure did.

table 6 C

that verify a connection between *kinds* of societies and the political behavior of those societies.

Real democracy, however, seems to float relatively free of these standard currents.

ELEMENTS OF POLITICAL CULTURE

If direct democracy does not dance to the melody of community life, perhaps it moves to the cadence of community politics. Certainly socioeconomic influences are conceptually more distant from town meeting democracy than influences from the political system itself. Political variables have often been spotted emerging from social structure on their way to more immediate causative implications for governance. These indicators may prove more productive in the search for the correlates of turnout at town meeting than beating the antecedent bushes of community life.⁵³ Accordingly, four variables were tested, the participant culture of representative democracy, the ideological posture of the community, the partisan division of the electorate and progressivism, defined by support for Vermont's socialist/independent phenomenon—Bernard Sanders.

Ballot-Box Participation

The variable with the most theoretical stuffing is the participatory behavior variable, which in a representative democracy is nearly always dominated by the polling booth. One possibility is

⁵³ It is both a justification for the descriptive intention of this book and a major frustration with this first exploration of real democracy that I can only scratch the surface of the important work to be done. For instance the relationship between individual social status, class groupings and political response is as Robert Huckfeldt, a leading scholar of the contextual apparatus of politics, said many years ago, “complex” and “requires an understanding of the linkages between individuals and groups.” Robert R. Huckfeldt, “Political Loyalties and Social Class Ties: The Mechanisms of Contextual Influence,” *The American Journal of Political Science* 28(1984): 399-417. Understandings of these linkages as they impact participation in town meeting democracy reside only in my intuition. Alas, they will remain there for I am too old now to begin the projects necessary to test their validity. Huckfeldt is a central figure in an important nebulous of research that came out of the 1970's to probe the connections between community, group and individual in matters political. Perhaps in the future some of the students reared in Huckfeldt and his colleagues will take up the task as it pertains to political behavior in real democracy settings.

that people who turn out at the polls to vote year after year develop a participatory mentality urging them to attend town meeting. Or it could be the other way around. Either way, this two-tailed assumption will shed light on the hinges between local and macro level, real and representative, and public and private participation. On the one hand the citizen acts in private for someone to politic for her on matters of importance to a wider, more distant society. On the other hand she acts in public, politicking for herself on matters of immediate impact to her community. A fascinating ancillary question is this: does the size variable, which works so well explaining attendance at town meeting do likewise for state and national elections? If it does not, the rational participant thesis could be, of course, reinforced.⁵⁴

To get started an electoral turnout base was established for each of the towns that had a meeting in the sample. Each town was given a score based on the percentage of voters that participated in the two general elections for governor closest to the year or years the town had a town meeting in the sample. Since Vermont is one of only two states to elect its governor every two years the turnout base measure takes into account levels of voting in both a presidential election and an “off year” election.

The obvious question is what is the gap between indirect and real political participation in Vermont’s towns? The mean of the average percent of the registered voters who voted in the two

⁵⁴ The predicted model for attendance at town meeting I use here is based on a mathematical model that is attached to the probability of any given individual “making a difference,” an individualistic, power-enhancing motivation. But there is clear reason to believe that “making a difference” supports the communitarian model as well. It might be that citizens of a small town believe they are more “needed” in the decision-making process. Much like we often go to campus meetings (such as department meetings or to hear visiting scholars outside our field) out of a sense of civic duty. The smaller the numbers one anticipates, the more one is apt to believe one’s presence will *by definition* help, not oneself, but the commonweal. Or it could be there is something to the notion that small is beautiful in community building, that there are mystic cords of linkage to the civil order that challenge definition but nonetheless correlate negatively with increasing community size. But one thing is clear. If correlations between turnout for state and national elections vary positively and strongly with small towns, then a pure rational voter option is precluded and the communitarian option is enhanced.

elections closest to each meeting in the towns that held the meetings we studied was 68.2. The average attendance at town meeting was only 20.5 percent. Indirect participation is over three times as great as real participation. The highest turnout at the polls for a town with a town meeting in the data base was 90.5 percent. The very highest turnout we recorded at town meeting was 72.3 percent. The lowest turnout at the polls was 29.6 percent. The lowest turnout at town meeting was 1.07 percent. More than three times as many citizens vote as attend town meeting. If it's quantity you want, representative democracy is the way to go.⁵⁵

Do these different kinds of participation respond to similar impulses? Is direct democracy simply a higher stage of participation, a more "costly" act (to use the terminology of the political economist) than stopping by the polling place on your way home from work? Is it this increased cost that causes the drop off in participation? If so we would expect a correlation between those towns on the lower end of the electoral participation scale and those on the lower end of the real democracy scale. These linkages should prevail across the range of turnout at the polls and attendance at town meeting.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Of course town meetings are held *every* year and statewide elections every two years. An average of 68 percent voter turnout in general elections on off and presidential years combined is also very high when compared to national standards.

⁵⁶ There is a substantial and (thankfully) dynamic literature on this most essential of questions. In one sense it speaks to what is perhaps the best hope political scientists (most recently led by Putnam and the growing number of scholars being drawn into his gravitational field) have generated for the salvaging of the American republic in my lifetime. By resuscitating *civil* society at the grassroots we can rescue *political* society at the center. Critical to this is the potential of a positive "spillover effect" from face-to-face democracy at the periphery to representative democracy at the center. John McClaughry and I put it this way in 1989: "As the watersheds of community democracy are sucked dry, the rivers of citizenship that fed our great national institutions grow ever more shallow, and the American republic is withering away. In short the republic cannot survive without representative bodies that are credible and competent. Representation is founded on citizenship. But citizens cannot be factory-built or found in electronic villages. They must be raised at home. That rearing takes place in real polities: places where community and politics meet, where individuals learn the *habit* of democracy face to face, where decision making takes place in the context of communal interdependence." Frank Bryan and John McClaughry, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale*, (Chelsea, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1989): 3. At the time we wrote there was mixed evidence on the spillover effect from workplace to representative democracy. But we thought the nays had it. See for instance: Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy*, (Berkeley,

The very lowest turnout base figure came from the town of Eden in the autumn elections of 1978 and 1980. Eden, which had a population of 612 in 1980 lays on the east slope of the Green Mountains in north central Vermont north of Stowe. It is there that the Gihon River wanders away from Eden Lake toward its meeting with the Lamoile in Johnson. Eden sent an average of 42 percent of its registered voters to the polls in these two general elections. For comparison one of the very highest turnout scores for two subsequent elections took place in Cornwall a decade later when 84 percent of the registered voters (exactly twice the amount that voted in Eden) went to the polls in the elections of 1988 and 1990. Cornwall is in the prime farming country of the Champlain Valley just west of Middlebury. In 1990, 993 people lived there. Eden's town meeting was in the sample for both 1979 and 1980. Cornwall's are there for 1989 and 1990. Eden averaged 27.6 percent attendance for its two meetings and Cornwall averaged 25.1 percent. The town with the very lowest ballot box turnout in the entire sample of 1440 meetings averaged higher attendance than the town with one of the very highest voting rates. At first blush it does not bode well for the thesis that indirect and real democracy are linked.

But remember Eden was considerably (39 percent) smaller than Cornwall. It ought to have had higher turnout. When we take account of the size differential between the two towns we find

California: University of California Press, 1985); J. Maxwell Eiden, "Political Efficacy at Work: The Connection Between More Autonomous Forms of Workplace Organization and a More Participatory Politics," *The American Political Science Review* 75 (March 1981): 43-58; Edward Greenberg, *Workplace Democracy*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Robert Lane, "From Political to Individual Democracy," *Polity* 17 (Summer 1985): 623-648. As for electronic villages, the technology and (appropriately) the science were too embryonic. Our conclusion that real democracy (town meeting) would do the trick was, I am afraid, a simple assertion based on experienced, leavened intuition and hope (desperate hope). Indeed, the only evidence from town meeting we had at the time was negative. But the hope has a pedigree that begins generally with de Tocqueville and (more specifically) as early as 1918 when C. D. H. Cole pointed out that participation in a large centralized state wouldn't work unless citizens had an opportunity to learn "the rudiments of self-government with a smaller unit." C. D. H. Cole, *Self Government in Industry*, (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1918): 234. The best summary of the scholarship on this critical paradigm is: Steven L. Schweizer, "Participation, Workplace Democracy, and the Problem of Representative Government," *Polity* 27 (Spring 1995): 359-377.

that the Size Adjusted Attendance Effort Index for the two meetings in Eden averaged only 1.02 while Cornwall's two meetings averaged 1.36. It seems that the town with one of the highest turnouts at the polls did have a much stronger performance at town meeting than the town with the lowest voter turnout. All, however, is still not well for the linkage thesis. This is because Cornwall's size-controlled attendance of 1.36 is heavily influenced by the 1989 figure, which was a very high 1.66. In 1980 Cornwall dropped back down to 1.06, very close to that of Eden's in 1979.

A comparison of the attendance at each of the 1436 town meetings with the electoral turnout of the towns in which they were held at the time they were held is obviously needed. If the linkage hypothesis is to prevail those towns with relatively high levels of ballot box activity ought to be those towns with relatively high attendance at town meeting. If that is the case we would expect a statistical relationship between the two kinds of participation and we would expect that the electoral turnout base would be linked to community size in the fashion of town meeting attendance.

If this happens, of course, there must be something at work other than the actual size of the decision-making arena since the size of the decision-making arena *does not change* from town to town for statewide elections. The probability of changing the outcome of the governor's race by casting a vote in Vermont's general election is the same from the polling booth in the little town hall in Athens⁵⁷ as it is standing before a voting machine in the city of Burlington. What that something might be is political socialization. If as Jefferson said town meeting is a schoolhouse of democracy that teaches citizenship, perhaps lessons learned at the town hall instill an urge to ballot box activity. Or perhaps the habit of small town human scale interaction so fabled in the literature of the American experience sustains a culture of participation that transcends rational calculation as to

⁵⁷Actually the Town Clerk's Office in Athens, Vermont, is in the kitchen.

outcomes and is independent of more formal education and its concomitant influences. One thing is for sure. The rational voter hypothesis will take it on the chin if the size of the vote *casting* arena is as important a stimulator of political activity as the size of the vote *counting* arena.

But voter turnout is related neither to town meeting attendance nor to the size of the town in which the votes are cast.⁵⁸ The Pearson “r” correlation coefficient for the relationship between attendance at town meeting and turnout at the polls is -.06. This profound disconnect between real and representative democracy is dramatically demonstrated in Figure VI-C. Some town meetings held in places like Waitsfield and Charlotte had high participation in both town meeting halls and the polling booth in general elections. And in others like Moretown, Middlebury and Pawlet both were low. But there were just as many instances (Craftsbury and Eden on one end of the distribution and Waltham and Weybridge on the other for instance) where attendance and turnout in the two settings were way out of whack with a theory of connectedness between representative and real democracy. All in all the line of best fit in Plot 1 of Figure VI-C shows that we would be about as successful predicting town meeting attendance by the color of the eyes of the town moderator as we would be by the town’s turnout percentages in general elections.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ In their study of 46 Massachusetts towns with open town meetings DeSantis and Renner reported a simple correlation coefficient of .38 between town meeting turnout and “municipal election” turnout. This leads them to conclude that “. . . communities exhibiting greater citizen involvement are likely to have citizens willing to commit to both the high and low initiative types of participation. Once energized in their civic responsibility, citizens may be more likely to stay engaged in several different ways.” While their study suffered from the usual methodological difficulties (turnout at town meeting was based on mailed questionnaires to town clerks who then estimated turnout in ordinal data categories) and the N is small, this positive correlation is intriguing. Unfortunately no controls were introduced so it may be a function of variation in other variables. Even though limited to simple correlation coefficients this is the only other quantitative comparative town meeting study I have ever come across. Victor S. DeSantis and Tari Renner, “Democratic Tradition in New England Town Meetings: Myths and Realities,” (Paper delivered at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois.)

⁵⁹ In their groundbreaking study of neighborhood democracy in five American cities Berry, Portney, and Thompson find no significant relationship between participation in the five cities they studied with strong institutional opportunities for face-to-face community involvement and the ten control cities where such opportunities were not available. They conclude: “This is significant because one of the purposes of the city-wide system of citizen

[FIGURE VI-C ABOUT HERE]

Thus, as expected, there is no association at all between the size of the town and voter turnout at the polls. The “r” between the number of registered voters in a town and the percentage of these voters who cast ballots on election day is .05. It is .09 when the base 10 logarithm of registered voters is used. Contrast this with the relationship between these same two variables and attendance at town meeting when it was substituted for the percent that go to the polls. The two coefficients between size and participation are .65 and .77 respectively. The rational voter model as an explanation for higher turnout at town meeting has been strengthened (but not proven) by these findings.

Given the fact that the literature establishing the connection between socioeconomic status and political participation was generated by studies of indirect democracy it is not surprising to note that those Vermont towns with higher scores on the traditional SES measure do have substantially higher levels of voter participation.⁶⁰ After controlling for town size education correlates at .07 with attendance at town meeting. It correlates at .51 with turnout in the fall elections. Income correlates at .06 with town meeting attendance and .42 with electoral turnout. Managers and professionals correlated at .08 and .42. While size is all important in predicting participation at town meeting,

participation is to bring the inactive out of their homes and into the political life of their neighborhoods. Clearly, this has not necessarily happened to any greater extent in the five cities than elsewhere.” Berry, Portney, and Thompson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*, 81. Verba and Nie also reported countervailing aggregate and individual level findings but suggested a spillover effect was possible. Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, 243.

⁶⁰It is, however, a bit of a relief. Finding typicality in anything Vermont bothers me no end. But it is pleasant to know as a political scientist that the object of my lifetime's work is not so hopelessly eschewed from the American experience as to make it suspect in the eyes of political scientists who have the misfortune of living outside the state. With education explaining 26 percent of the variance in turnout at the polls and 28 percent when size is controlled the Vermont case adds to the long list of evidence that status matters when predicting the voting act. For every half a point increase in the education index the turnout at the polls in the average town increases five percentage points. Also, given the strong relationship between education and voting at the individual level, this evidence suggests an ecological disconnect is not hidden like a serpent under the aggregate data.

figure 6 C

scatterplots 2 and 3 of Figure VI-C demonstrate that education is what is important in predicting participation in representational systems. When the size variable is used to predict turnout at the polls nothing happens. But when turnout at the polls is matched with a town's education index, a decent upward slope is revealed that reflects a reduction in variance of 26 percent. For town meeting attendance, however, it will be remembered that the education index produced a flat line. These data serve to demonstrate that the empirical disconnect in the two kinds of democratic expression is anchored in two separate and perhaps causal variables, the size of a community (for real democracy) and the socioeconomic status of the citizens in it (for representative democracy).⁶¹

Political Ideology

In 1986 Vermont placed an Equal Rights Amendment to the state constitution on the ballot for the November election. Like much of the everyday conversation in Vermont it was brief and to the point: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the State of Vermont or any of its political subdivisions on account of the sex of the individual." In Strafford, a quintessential Vermont hill town of 850 people in the rugged uplands of Orange County where the land gouges its way downward toward the Connecticut River Valley, 67 percent of the voters agreed. Two years later on town meeting day Strafford cast 49 percent of its votes in the five-way

⁶¹ The aggregates of our analysis, of course, could pass by each other (especially in the bigger towns) like ships in the night. What is needed, of course, is individual level data. There is a way to do this. When a citizen attends town meeting her name is checked off. The same thing occurs for the statewide primary general election held every two years. By looking at the checklists in each town it would be possible to determine whether or not those who attend town meeting are more apt to vote in statewide elections. Since names are available an interview schedule could be easily developed. The logistics of such a study are overwhelming. Again I issue a call for a graduate student (we don't have them in northern New England) who isn't afraid of snow and can identify the name Kitty Wells. Meantime I will try to have some limited findings available for Volume II where I will treat town meeting as a decision-making (legislative) institution.

Democratic presidential preference primary for the underdog, helping the whitest American state lead the nation in its delegate percentage for Jesse Jackson. Only seven of Vermont's 246 cities and towns would be stronger for Jackson. Strafford ranks very near the top in voting for Democratic candidates for statewide office. In our sample of towns for the town meeting study only two ranked higher. Finally in a three-election average of votes cast for socialist candidate Bernie Sanders, who finally won a seat in the U.S. Congress in 1990, Strafford's vote for Sanders was 45 percent when the state itself averaged 35 percent—this in the face of Strafford's strong proclivity for regular Democratic Party candidates.

Up north in the town of Concord the situation is remarkably different. Concord is a valley town situated above the fall line of the Connecticut River. Here the water flows fast enough to gurgle and draw trout and the great peaks of New Hampshire's Presidential range of the White Mountains edge closer from the east. The 534 registered voters of Concord were not impressed with the campaign for the ERA. Only 79 of them (28 percent of those who voted that year) voted yes. In the Presidential primary of 1988 Jesse Jackson could squeeze only 3 votes out of the entire town. Gary Hart did better with 4. Concord is even more Republican than Strafford is Democratic. Republican candidates for national and statewide office seldom get less than 75 percent of the vote. Bernie Sanders' vote over the years in Concord has been dismal.⁶²

While there is admittedly considerable conceptual slippage over time it is fair to say that in the accepted parlance of American politics Strafford, Vermont, would be considered a very liberal

⁶² In 1982 in his essay on Concord's town meeting, my student John Romualdi, wrote: "Many times during the meeting I noticed that regardless of the validity of the arguments at hand, the vote would swing toward the side of the argument which had the support of the elder or more respected citizen. Often this elder person would mold the argument so that it would look like a question of respect for heritage and tradition versus radical, sweeping change. Since the majority of those in attendance were over thirty, the former would carry the popular vote in the end." John Romualdi, "Town Meeting Essay: Concord 1982," (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, May 1982).

community and Concord would be considered very conservative. To summarize this concept and establish a precise quantitative indicator with which to score the communities of the data set I factor analyzed a cluster of electoral results including but not limited to the Jackson and ERA votes. Percentages of the vote received by clearly conservative and clearly liberal candidates in the primaries of both parties were used along with other general election results where appropriate. In a large data set containing a complex array of variables factor analysis is a handy tool for identifying “dimensions” that are not readily apparent to the naked eye. That is to say it can reveal how many different characteristics there are about the cases in the data that set them apart from one another in unique groups. It also points out which variables are most influential in defining these distinguishing characteristics.

I use factor analysis here simply to summarize a dimension (or factor) that pretty obviously separates one town from another in Vermont. In other words I loaded the dice by providing the factoring routine with only those variables (in this case elections) associated with the liberal-conservative element in American politics. My purpose was measurement rather than enlightenment⁶³—to confirm and codify the liberal-conservative dimension and place the towns of the study on a continuum from one extreme to the other.

The results were startling consistent with my naked eye estimates. The most liberal town turned out to be Norwich, which is a ridge or two east of Strafford right across the Connecticut River from Hanover, New Hampshire and Dartmouth College. Norwich scored a 2.69. Strafford

⁶³It goes without saying, of course, that if the data had produced more than one factor or if the factor that did emerge was not defined by the expected election results (that is the Jesse Jackson and pro ERA vote loaded strongly with the Reagan vote), there would be ample cause to question the sanity of the Vermont electorate.

was second with 2.49. Abutting Norwich to the west it too is in the Dartmouth College watershed.⁶⁴ It also has a heavy dose of new upscale settlement. Ripton, a hill town east of Middlebury College and home of the prestigious Bread Loaf Writer's Conference came in third. Ripton was followed by Plainfield which has Goddard College and a continuing cadre of progressive thinkers. Calais (next door to Plainfield) and Sharon (next door to Norwich and Strafford) followed.

Concord was the most conservative with a score of -2.13. The neighboring town of Waterford was second at -2.11. The other three towns in the top five most conservative were similarly clustered in the hills of the Northeast Kingdom. All five towns are linked to each other by common borders. All five are in a pocket of geography that trails off away from Vermont toward New Hampshire. This is the part of the Kingdom that doesn't pay much attention to the fact that it's a part of the Kingdom. It is a truly wild place—as authentic as one can get in Vermont.

Political science has failed to establish a clear deductive argument for supposing the nature of political ideology might forecast the nature of political participation. The literature is full of bits and pieces. For instance Verba and Nie tell us that “Political beliefs that we have found to have an impact on the political activity of the mass public tend to be conservative ones, and they affect the participation rates of strong Republicans, particularly . . . those from the upper-status level.”⁶⁵ Twenty years later another study concluded “self identified liberals and self identified conservatives are slightly more active than the population as a whole, with ideological moderates somewhat below

⁶⁴Driving down out of the hills in the early morning from Strafford to Norwich in the autumn is a quintessential upland New England experience wherever there are hills and valleys (which is just about everywhere). The bright sun and glorious colors of the highlands are lost as you drift downward into the cool white damp of a fog so thick the presence of a neighbor's farm is known only by the sound of her rooster. I spent the autumn mornings of my youth fog bound (until 9:30 or 10:00 a.m.) in a little valley town by the river 25 miles to the north of Norwich. Most of my friends came down from the hills. Today we still argue about the merits of the deep mists that mark the boundaries of our most tender memories.

⁶⁵ Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, 228.

average in activity.”⁶⁶ Given the scarcity of published evidence, the ambiguity of established theory, and the fact that we are interested here in the behavior of communities while most of what little we do know comes from micro-level analysis, it would be fool hardy to claim an interest in our findings that transcends simple description. On the other hand it would take a wholly unnatural fear of induction to keep anyone with even the slightest intellectual curiosity from establishing the following hypothesis: communities that differ so radically in their support for political candidates and causes must somehow reflect this in their attendance rates at town meeting. The direction of this reflection ought to be in favor of more participation in more liberal communities. Liberals at least say they like the *idea* of governance.

Perhaps they do but their town meetings are no more heavily attended than the town meetings of communities that again and again vote for candidates who by and large have more negative views of the public sector. The correlation coefficient produced by comparing the factor score for liberalism with town meeting attendance is only .07. When town size is controlled it changes direction and becomes even weaker -.03. A sample of 200 meetings drawn from 1980-90 (the years closest to the elections that created the factor) are plotted in Figure VI-D. Random selection produced a slight upward slope in the data but the standard error is huge, .321, reflecting a tiny R^2 of .02. As an example my hometown of Newbury and my current town of Starksboro each have two meetings in the display. Starksboro is much more liberal than Newbury, but its attendance is consistently lower. Meetings in Norwich behave as the hypothesis predicts. But meetings in Calais, Ripton and Plainfield do not. Concord, the most conservative town in the sample is actually above average on attendance effort at town meeting.

⁶⁶ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Norman H. Nie, “Citizen Activity: Who Participates? What Do They Say?” *American Political Science Review* 87 (June 1993): 303-319.

[FIGURE VI-D ABOUT HERE]

The gravitation of a community to one ideological pole or another might also be a measure of conflict or lack thereof. Here again the argument takes on the two forms discussed above in terms of socioeconomic divisions. The first is that the communities most evenly split ideologically at the polling booth will have more conflictual political cultures overall which in turn will intensify conflict on local matters. The other possibility is that people will shy away from the spark and snap of such conflict as it dances across open meeting halls where ideological polarization has exposed conflict which may have otherwise laid dormant.

If either possibility were real, the distribution of the cases in Plot 1 of Figure VI-D would have been curvilinear; that is, turnout would have been either higher (if town meeting is a facilitator for resolving conflict) or lower (if town meeting deflects conflict) in the *middle* of the distribution. But it was not. Nor was such a tendency evident when all the meetings are used in the display. It is surprising that towns differing so much on the ideological homogeneity of their polling booth records show no response to this in their attendance rates at town meeting. In short neither the direction nor the intensity of a town's commitment to ideological positions is tied to the rate at which its citizens practice real democracy.

Partisanship and Party Competition

There is little evidence to suggest that members of one party tend to vote more than members of another and what does exist is often contradictory—or at least election-specific. Moreover, what connections are found between partisan alignment and political participation (such as Republicans are more apt to vote than Democrats) often vanish when variables like education and

fig 6 D

income are taken into account. There is even less evidence that partisanship matters at all in local politics. Yet at the broadest level we are asking the question do differences in the participatory politics that define our representation system affect the practice of real democracy? Clearly party alignment is the single most important predictive variable used by political scientists in their studies of representational democracy. It is therefore a key component of the answer to this broader question.

To judge the direction of a town's partisan character on town meeting attendance I averaged the Democratic percentage for Governor by town in the three general elections closest to each town meeting and called it the Democratic Base variable. I then matched it against town meeting attendance. The Democratic Party in Vermont made a dramatic breakthrough in the 1950's and 1960's equaling the Republican realignment in many southern, one-party states. It has been the ascendant political party ever since. Because of this and because of my judgment that in Vermont as elsewhere Democrats have a more activist mentality, the hypothesis is for higher town meeting attendance to be found in Democratic towns than Republican towns. Yet the five town meetings held in the five most Republican towns averaged 135 attenders for every 100 predicted by their size and the five town meetings held in the five most Democratic towns averaged 103 for every 100 expected. Over the entire array of meetings this pattern fades away, producing an "r" of only -.15 with the Democratic base variable. It is clear that towns filled with Democrats have no more participatory town meetings than towns filled with Republicans. This weak coefficient also means the partisanship variable as such explains only two percent of the variance in attendance after town size has been controlled.⁶⁷ (See Plot 2 in Figure VI-D.)

⁶⁷A control for size is especially important because the Democratic vote is stronger in the larger towns. The simple correlation coefficient "r" between town meeting attendance and the Democratic Base Vote is -.31 because the "r"

The notion of party competition holds more theoretical promise. It has, for instance, often been associated with voter turnout.⁶⁸ Moreover, even though local politics are traditionally non-partisan (especially in Vermont) a competitive partisan balance at the local level may be a surrogate for other variables. It could reflect fundamental differences in social structure which carry over into politics at the grassroots, stimulating conflict there which in turn triggers political participation. Perhaps political conflict fostered in a community equally divided between Republicans and Democrats as they vote in elections for “higher” offices translates into a habit of vigilance that affects local issues and inflates participation in town politics. Once again, of course, the conflict sword has two edges. One predicts higher attendance at town meeting if open participation and conflict are reinforcing. The other predicts lower attendance if the public nature of town meeting discourages people from attending when conflict is in the air.⁶⁹

between the Democratic Base Vote and town size is .27. When size is controlled the relationship is cut in half. The small town/Republican connection is much weaker now since the Democratic breakthrough and the influx of flatlanders in the 1960's and 1970's. But the new Democrats didn't come soon enough to save me. My mother (a child of the Depression and a Truman Democrat) forced me to carry a Stevenson sign in a little political parade sponsored by the school in 1952. I was eleven and terrified and I made a promise to God: “Get me through this parade and as soon as I am old enough, I will become a Republican.” I kept my promise. But the party abandoned me in 1990. Evidently they didn't like the T.V. and radio spots I did for socialist/independent Bernie Sanders.

⁶⁸ Verba, *et al.*, “Citizen Activity,” 305. Their individual level evidence shows that party “self-identifiers” are “somewhat but not substantially” more politically involved than the general public. This is a fair summary of a host of similar findings over the preceding four decades. See, for instance: Gregory A. Caldeira, and Samuel C. Patterson. “Contextual Influences on Participation in U.S. State Legislative Elections,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 7 (August 1982): 359-381; and Harvey J. Tucker, “Contextual Models in U.S. State Legislative Elections,” *Western Political Quarterly* (March 1986): 67-78. The competition produces turnout thesis is most often theoretically related to the closeness question. By reducing the gap between the candidates in election, the size of the vote needed to change the outcome is reduced and this enhances the chance that any voter can change the outcome of the election which improves the likelihood that marginal voters will participate. But there is also the voter mobilization thesis: “Candidates who foresee a close election typically put greater effort into voter identification and mobilization than candidates who expect a lopsided result. Mobilization begets counter-mobilization, the net effect of which is to raise the vote of both candidates, and turnout overall.” John R. Petrocik and Daron Shaw, “Nonvoting in American Attitudes in Context,” in William Crotty, (ed.) *Political Participation in American Democracy*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991): 67-88.

⁶⁹ When in 1870 the New Hampshire legislature removed state elections (and most local elections) from town meeting day in March, it may have had the effect of making town meeting less partisan. But there is no evidence it

To see how the data cut at these dispositions, the Democratic Base (the average Democrat percent of the three gubernatorial elections nearest each town meeting in the town the meeting was held) was subtracted from 50 and treated as an absolute number. This number was then subtracted from 100 to give the more competitive towns higher scores. Thus if a town split 60-40 in favor of the Democratic candidates its competitiveness would be 90. If a town split 60-40 for the Republicans its score would be the same, 90. Towns voting 70-30 either way would get a score of 70 and so forth. The most competitive towns received scores of close to 100 and the least competitive town, the tiny ski town of Landgrove, received a score of 68 when it voted only 18 percent Democratic in the three elections of 1976, 1978 and 1980. Plot 3 in Figure VI-D has size adjusted attendance scores for a sample of 200 town meetings and the two-party competitive balance in the towns in which they were held. It is obvious party competition has no effect whatsoever on town meeting attendance. In the sample, Norwich is the least competitive (strongly Democratic in the election of 1992, 1994 and 1996) and Burke was the most competitive in the elections of 1980, 1982 and 1984. By using a subset of the larger sample, it is possible to identify meetings in other towns that are becoming (one hopes) more familiar, Newark, Barnard (Sinclair Lewis's town next to Woodstock), Proctor of the conservative wing of the Republican Party in the first half of the century, the ski towns of Fayston and Waitsfield, Morgan, where Bernard DeVoto lived, Craftsbury (the Fiddler's Contest), Ripton (Robert Frost), and others. But only one thing is clear from the scatterplot and it's important. Those town populations with the closest voting splits for governor in general elections had no more or less attendance at town meeting than those towns

made it less *intense*. James Wright, *The Progressive Yankees*, (Hanover, New Hampshire: The University Press of New England, 1987): 23.

producing the most one-sided results. Pearson's "r" for the relationship was an almost non-existent -.01.

The Bernard Sanders Vote

In modern American history few have shunned the two major parties with such aplomb and success as Vermont's lone Congressman, Bernard Sanders. The Jewish flatlander with the New York accent is supported by card-carrying liberals and crusty Kingdom dwellers. He reflects in metaphor the inscription on the headstone of Robert Frost: "I had a lover's quarrel with the world." An expanded role for citizens in matters public, which for Sanders includes just about everything, is a key component of his rhetoric and promise. Critics notwithstanding it is clear that his twenty-year odyssey for power in Vermont was driven by the twin goals of empowerment and participation. The kinds of people who Sanders attracted to him were the kinds of people who insisted on openness in government and access to the institutions of power. Most importantly, Sanders' career in Vermont politics blossomed when he became a localist. Sanders built his electoral apparatus in Vermont at the local level as Mayor of Burlington. And in these early days he did little to hide his socialism. True, Burlington is a "city" without a town meeting and, true, there is evidence that he gave less than enthusiastic support for the neighborhood council movement in Burlington. But the fact remains that the Sanders' progressives were not the kind to ignore local politics even as they kept a cat's eye on anything that so much as twitched on the right side of the political horizon from Burlington to Bangladesh.⁷⁰

⁷⁰During the Sanders' years as mayor of Burlington, my students' short essays written to accompany their data on the town meetings produced many notations on the presence of "Sandanistas" or "Sanders people" at the town meeting they attended. While there is no doubt that anyone who looked (or behaved) leftist might be given credit (or suffer guilt) by association with Sanders, it is hard to imagine the great majority of them not supporting Sanders.

The bottom line is this: given the strength of the progressives in Vermont, their participatory and grassroots ideology and behavior, and given the fact that the Sanders' vote is the best way to locate their strength in the towns, it becomes important to check to see if the Sanders' movement (it was not a revolution as some suggest) identifies the differentials found in town meeting attendance. It didn't.⁷¹ For each town the vote for Sanders in the three statewide general elections closest to the year its meeting appeared in the sample was averaged and then matched with the town's size controlled attendance at town meeting. The result was the now familiar, straight horizontal line through the scatterplot. For the ten-year period that includes the elections of 1984 through the elections of 1994 (which encompasses Sanders' breakthrough election and two of his reelections to Congress) the Pearson's "r" was .01 for the 511 town meetings we studied during those years.

Plot 4 in Figure VI-D displays the relationship for the meetings surrounding Sanders' most important election, which took place in the year 1990 when he became only the third Vermonter in history to defeat an incumbent Congressperson or U.S. Senator. The lowest vote for Sanders in the towns for which we had town meetings in the sample during the period took place in the ski towns of Dover (population 666) and Jamaica (population 681) in the southern snow belt. Both towns are adjacent to the Stratton Mountain⁷² ski area and Dover has Mt. Snow within its borders. Jamaica also borders Londonderry and the Magic Mountain ski area. Sanders received 18 percent of the vote

⁷¹In fact "Sanders towns" had no higher turnout at the polls either. The correlation between the Sanders three election average and the turnout base statistic for the 365 cases in the 1986-1992 pool when Sanders himself was on the ballot was .01.

⁷²Stratton's population is only 122. A perspective on the impact ski areas have on local communities may be had in the following description of the Stratton Mountain facilities: "Base amenities...(by these they presumably mean amenities at the base of the mountain)...include restaurants, bars, discos, saunas, movies, indoor tennis, ski shops, ski touring and skating." This for a town of 122. DeLorme Mapping Company, *Vermont Atlas & Gazetteer* (Freeport, Maine: DeLorme Mapping, 1988).

in Dover and 25 percent in Jamaica. The average percent for Sanders in the towns holding the 272 meetings in the sample was fifty-five. The size adjusted attendance at town meeting ranged from a very low -.48 (about five for every ten predicted) in Dover to 2.30, about 23 for every ten predicted in Charlotte.

The strongest town for Sanders was Stannard, which is located north of Walden and east of Greensboro in the Kingdom. Its percentage for Sanders there was 74. Stannard is a small town too. In 1990 its population was only 142. It is wild country where calloused hands and guns are as prevalent as money is scarce.⁷³ Featured is “Stannard Mountain Road” a rough gravel pathway that takes you east from Greensboro up over into Wheelock (where kids get free tuition to Dartmouth)⁷⁴ and down through into Lyndonville. It was “granted” as a “Gore”⁷⁵ in 1798 and was finally incorporated as a town by the legislature in 1867 in honor of General George Stannard of St. Albans, Vermont, who won the Civil War for the Union by turning the tide of the battle at

⁷³ In 1987 the three students who went to Stannard included the following on the first page of their reports: “If it were not for the orders of my political science teacher, I would not have been caught dead out here in Boonsville, USA.” “Where the hell are we? This was the question on all our minds as we drove deeper and deeper into the frozen hills of the Northeast Kingdom.” “Imagine living in a town with a population of 163 human beings, including the children!” Caroline Block, “Stannard 1987: Like No Other town I’ve Seen,” (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, March 1987); Julie Garside, “Stannard Town Meeting 1987,” (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, March 1987); Lee Rosenthal, “Town Meeting Essay: 1987 Stannard,” (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, March 1987).

⁷⁴ Because its founders created Dartmouth College as well.

⁷⁵ Goshen Gore Number 1 (which was to become Stannard) was created and given to the town of Goshen when it was discovered that Goshen (see above pg.____) which was located across the state and to the south in Addison County, did not have as much land as it was entitled to under its charter. Thus the town of Goshen had two parts, one in Addison County (Goshen “proper”) and one in Caledonia County (Goshen Gore). Since “Goshen Gore” was legally considered part of the town of Goshen, it caused problems. For instance voting results had to be tallied and tax bills assessed for two different places on opposite sides of the state. When the legislature turned Goshen Gore into a town named Stannard it made the people of the Gore happy. Not so the people of the town of Goshen who had just lost half their territory even though the two halves of town had been separated by 150 miles of some of the roughest terrain in North America. See: Esther Munroe Swift, *Vermont Place-Names*, (Brattleboro, Vermont: The Stephen Greene Press, 1977).

Gettysburg. Stannard was also the home of Bernard Sanders for several years during his “hippie phase” in the 1970’s.⁷⁶

The second strongest town for Sanders was Strafford, which gave him 70 percent of the vote. Third for Sanders was Craftsbury where in the late 1960’s and 1970’s up to 25,000 people a year showed up on the Common for a leftist country version of “Woodstock.” The Craftsbury Fiddler’s Contest (as it was called) featured fiddlers and banjos instead of electric guitars. It was to Woodstock what Gordon Lightfoot is to Mick Jagger. Lincoln, the mountain town at the foot of the gap through the mountain named after it (closed in winter), and Monkton down below in the last rough before the great Champlain flatlands begin (and more in Burlington’s orbit) were also strong for Sanders (67 and 66 percent). But the attendance at the town meetings held in these towns varied wildly. Strafford’s size adjusted rate was 14 for every 10 predicted, while Stannard’s was 7. Craftsbury’s was 13 for every 10 predicted while Elmore and Monkton had about six. The 272 meetings in Plot 4 of Figure VI-D fall in the now familiar “very little happening” shotgun pattern. Sanders’ strength in the electorates of Vermont’s communities explains only two percent of the variance in attendance at town meeting. Moreover the slope, drifted ever so slightly downward, away from a relationship between stronger real democracy and the progressive movement.

Political Culture Variables In Combination

The point was made earlier that attendance at town meeting seemed to float free of the “standard expectations” that define the link between the socioeconomic environment of a

⁷⁶The two best sources on Sanders are: Greg Guma, *The People’s Republic*, (Shelburne, Vermont: The New England Press, 1989) and Steven Rosenfeld, *Making History in Vermont*, (Wakefield, New Hampshire: Hollowbrook Publishing 1992). Unfortunately neither considers Sanders in any kind of biographical context. This is a shame because the Sanders’ phenomenon began long before his election as the mayor of Burlington.

community and its involvement in the democratic process. Certain socioeconomic variables were able in combination to explain only seven percent of the variance left after town size had been taken into account. Political culture variables behaved in like fashion. From the most rock-ribbed Republican towns to the most solidly Democratic towns, from towns voting heavily conservative to strongly progressive ones, from towns with high turnout at their polls in general elections to towns with low turnouts the data produced no individual association that could on its own explain more than two percent of the variance of attendance at town meeting after size had been considered. It was simply nearly impossible to know how high or low attendance might be based on a wide array of variables identifying various components of a town's politics.

There is always the question of the behavior of variables in combination. It is often the case that the effect of one variable is hidden by another. Once a key variable has been controlled it is sometimes the case that a second or third variable crystallizes, more influential than at first believed. As with the community life variables I experimented with combinations of political culture variables to determine if more light could be shed on the question of the linkage between representational and real democracy in the context of community.

Table VI-D contains the results of a stepwise multiple regression involving three political culture variables, the Liberal Factor, the Electoral Turnout Base and a Sanders/Democratic Factor Score.⁷⁷ The most important variable of the three was the Sanders/Democratic Factor Score. But it explains only a bit more than one additional percent of the variance in turnout at town meeting after size is controlled. The relationship is negative. The two other variables in combination increase the

⁷⁷The Democratic Base variable and the Sanders Score correlated at .78. Therefore I factor analyzed a series of elections involving Sanders and other statewide candidates and created a single measure that was most influenced by Sanders, followed closely by the Democratic Vote.

percent of the variance explained another percent. No matter how you cut it (and I tried a number of ways), size explains 58 percent of the variance in attendance and size plus politics explains only 60 percent.

[TABLE VI-D ABOUT HERE]

When the structural and community life indicators are plugged into the model, one message emerges and only one; political variables have little to do with levels of attendance at town meeting. The Sanders/Democratic factor comes in fourth behind town size, the Australian ballot, and population distribution and adds an increase of but a single percentage point of variance explained to the equation. Later in the sequence of variables the liberalism factor score chipped in another half percent. The impact of the Sanders/Democratic Factor on attendance (which is defined by the Beta coefficient (see Table VI-D) was negative but minimal. Put in the very simplest terms: while every increase of one standard unit of size (which means, remember, the town was smaller) is associated with an increase of well over a half a standard unit of attendance (.615), an increase of one standard unit of the Sanders/Democratic Factor is associated with only a .07 change in attendance . . . and that change is negative.

WITNESS

Town Meeting Hill Song by Lee Pennock Huntington⁷⁸

One of the pleasant things about Town Meeting Day is the noon recess when everyone gathers in the church hall for the meal served by the Ladies Alliance . . . In addition to this gastronomic plenty, there is the opportunity to visit with the fellow townspeople who share your table, with some of whom you have not exchanged more than a word or two since last year's meeting. And whatever the differences of opinion concerning the articles on the Warning, the noonday dinner is a time of congeniality.

⁷⁸Lee Pennock Huntington, *Hill Song: A Country Journal*, (Woodstock, Vermont: The Countryman Press, 1985): 9-10.

table 6 D

At our table this year, the talk turned to energy, the solar house being built above the Morrow place, the controversy over a proposed hydroelectric dam on the Black River, the way wood smoke came straight up from everybody's chimneys throughout the valley in the still frosty morning, and the success of the company making cast iron stoves in the next town over. Someone mentioned the fluctuating price of fuel oil and another recalled the gas shortage of a few years ago. Philo Ward, who presides over the local filling, was not convinced that petroleum is an inexhaustible resource. "You can be driving up to the pump one of these days again, sooner than maybe you'd think, and I'd just be giving you two-three gallons if you're lucky, to last you a week or more."

The possible return of gas rationing interested everyone at the table, in particular young Theodore, son of one of the old farming families. Theodore wears his hair in a pony tail and supports a dense beard. He lives with his girl in a cabin at the edge of his father's property, and works hard keeping the old place going, sugaring, planting, harvesting, logging. Theodore has a 1967 Dodge he hadn't finished repairing before snow fell, so he's done a lot of walking this winter. He has been thinking about the price of gasoline for some time, and studying the alternatives.

"Fellow out in California has it beat," says Theodore. "He's making methane gas out of chicken manure, and he's running all his farm machinery on it." Helping himself to a second, different slice of pie, he adds thoughtfully, "I might be getting myself some chickens."

The discussion that followed brought out some well-honed curiosity and speculation on the particulars of methane production. Philo had the final word on chicken manure as fuel for private transportation: "If you want my opinion, it sure would cut down on tailgating."

It was a satisfactory discussion, ending on just the right note. It didn't matter that everyone present understood that methane gas is actually odorless. Philo had simply rounded things off with the kind of traditional remark that keeps large matters in sharp local focus.

In most town meetings there will be discussion of questions of importance, some of them hotly controversial—the school budget, a new grader for the town road crew, fluoridation, property taxes, zoning, the nuclear freeze resolution, funds for the day care center. But no matter how grave or heated the deliberations, nearly always someone will rise and with a canny, waggish sentence or two restore perspective and good humour.

It may not have been just this that Calvin Coolidge had in mind when in a rare moment of eloquence he said, "There is something in every town meeting, in every election, that approaches very near to the sublime." Vermonters know what Coolidge meant, and by and large they would agree. *But they would also know that such sublimity would never be total, would always be limited by the humanity of the participants, and by a wry recognition of the persistence, in all our affairs, of the element of the ridiculous.* (emphasis my own)

One of the retired federal officials who has bought a house in the development uphill was heard to pronounce the Town Meeting obsolete. It's archaic and inefficient, he says.

Maybe.

But if he lives here long enough, he may come around to seeing why it is cherished by the people of this village and region as the best form of local government yet devised. Not quite sublime, but the best so far.

THE PASSAGE OF TIME

One consideration remains. Many of the variables treated here are tied to the passage of time over the 28 years this study has been in progress. The clearest example of this is the population growth of the towns involved. While towns have been growing, attendance at town meeting has been dropping. In the early years of the study 1970-1975, the average meeting had 26.7 percent of their registered voters at town meeting at the highest count we recorded. During this time the towns in which these 185 meetings were held averaged 600 registered voters. In the last five years of the study,⁷⁹ the 273 towns in the data base averaged only 16 percent attendance, a drop of almost 11 points, 40 percent of the amount recorded only 20 years earlier. But at the same time, the average number of registered voters in the towns holding these meetings increased by 83 percent, from 600 in the years between 1970 and 1975 to 1101 in the years between 1994 and 1998. The question is obvious. How much of the decline in attendance at town meeting is associated with this increase in town size?

To get a sense of the problem we can consider meetings in towns of similar sizes studied in the first five and last five years of the study. Approximately 20 years separate these two sets. Prior to 1975, Bakersfield, for instance, averaged 32 percent attendance in four meetings with 384 registered voters. Panton, with 380 registered voters, averaged 17 percent in three meetings in

⁷⁹1976 and 1993 were the only years not included.

1994, 1997, and 1998. With equal population this pair of towns had equal size adjusted attendance entitlements. Thirty percent of the registered voters should have attended in each town. Bakersfield exceeded its allotment by six percentage points in the early period while Panton fell short by nine percentage points in the later period.

It is also instructive to see what happens to individual towns over time. After 20 years had passed, for instance, Bakerfield's population had grown by 81 percent to 694. Accordingly, its size entitlement dropped from 26 to 19. But Bakersfield's average attendance in its meetings of 1994, 1995, and 1996 was only 15 percent, four shy of its entitlement. Some of this may have been caused by its adoption of the Australian ballot in the interim. Panton was nine percentage points short of its size generated entitlement and in the later years only five percentage points below its entitlement over three meetings in the earlier period. It did not use the Australian ballot at either time.

In the early 1970's Calvin Coolidge's little hometown of Plymouth averaged 229 registered voters, an entitlement of 31 percent and only 26 percent attendance. Two decades later in the last half of the 1990's, its registered voter list had climbed to 390, its entitlement had dropped to 26 and its turnout to 22. Using the Australian ballot throughout, Plymouth was five points below par in the early period and four points below par in the later period. Thus it is clear there are varieties of change at work here that seem to defy generalization. But this can be said. Attendance is consistently down over the period and some, but not all, of this decline can be attributed to population increases.

Figure VI-E demonstrates the effect of the passage of time on attendance by showing for each year the gap between the average attendance for that year and the average attendance for the

period between 1970 and 1998. It also includes year by year averages for the gap between what attendance should have been and what it actually was given the size of the town alone, and the gap between what it was and what it should have been given the size of the town combined with the other variables that have some impact on attendance. Thus the slope in the data predicts that in 1977 the average town meeting not considering its size ought to have about four percentage points more attendance than the average town in the entire data base of 1250 meetings studied since 1976. In 1998 the average meeting was predicted to have about 4.5 percentage points of attendance below the average town for the period.

When town size is controlled, however, the effect of time levels out when (first) the size of the town is introduced and (second) when town size plus the other variables that impact on attendance are controlled. The slashed line predicts the average meeting held in 1998 (because of the increased size of the town in which it is held) will be only about three percentage points below the average attendance score for the sample. The dotted line, which takes into account not only the size of the town in which it is held but the nine other factors that impact on attendance included in the predictive model (see Table VI-D), shows that the slope of the data predicts an attendance for the average meeting in 1998 which is less than one percentage point below average. This line may simply be considered a reflection of the impact of time (and the other variables associated with it not yet determined) has had on real democracy over the last quarter century.

[FIGURE VI-E ABOUT HERE]

When time is entered into the regression equation that seeks to account for variations in attendance at town meeting, it bumps population distribution to become the third most important variable behind size and the Australian ballot. Importantly, with time included in the model, the

figure 6 E

position of education is enhanced. The Beta coefficients, which measure the actual impact of a variation of any particular variable, are instructive as well. In the final equation, which includes the passage of time, the education index has the fourth strongest Beta. In simple terms what this means, comparing education to population distribution, for instance, is that an increase in education in a community has more potential to improve turnout than population distribution has in lowering it. Education enters the equation behind population distribution because the percent of variance explained by education (which is a rough indicator of the standard error or our confidence that the variable will do what it is supposed to do) is lower. In short education has a stronger impact but is a tad less trustworthy than population distribution.

When all is said and done, however, size remains dominant. It alone 60 percent of the total variance in town meeting attendance and 87 percent of the total variance explained in town meeting attendance by all the variables connected.⁸⁰ Of all the variables introduced in this chapter, only six are able to account for even one half of one percent of the variance in town meeting attendance after the size of the electorate has been introduced.⁸¹ The Australian ballot is the best of these. It comes in second adding another three percent of variance explained to the size variable. The year the meeting is held is third with an additional two percent. In both cases the Betas are strong. These variables make a difference. After that the degree to which a town's population is educated and scattered has an impact. The rest of the variables yield intriguing but inconclusive results. Over the

⁸⁰The amount of variance explained by size at the end of Chapter V is slightly different. When Census data are introduced into the regression equation, the 190 cases obtained prior to 1976 (when Census data were suspect) are excluded. This causes minor alterations in the results. In the case of the effect of size on attendance, the coefficient increased from .58 to .60 when the early years were omitted.

⁸¹I used stepwise regression with those variables that survived tests of significance within each category to obtain the final equation. A number of alternate arrangements of variables were also tried with variables that I felt might squeeze through under proper controls. None did.

quarter century life of the study the conclusion is that town meeting attendance was best early on in the study in very small towns if the Australian ballot was not in use. It helped a bit if the population was better educated and spatially scattered.

VISITING THE TOWNS

Aggregate the data to town averages and these patterns are reinforced. We already know from Chapter V that the towns conformed to the size driven pattern of attendance fashioned by their meetings. Now we can see they did more. They dramatically enhanced it. When the participation records of the towns are matched against the average size of their registered voter pool and structural and community life factors are controlled, the math shows that the towns' attachment to size entitled attendance is considerably stronger than that of their individual meetings. In the 1435 meeting data set size explained 60 percent of the variance in attendance. In the 56 town data set size explained 74 percent of the variance.

Two things help explain this. The first is attendance at town meeting varies considerably from meeting to meeting within individual towns. The second is that the structural and community life variables considered in the last two chapters are unlikely to cause these variations because they themselves vary so little from year to year. An analysis based on town averages over time collapses year-to-year variations. It frees the size variable to operate unconstrained by whatever it is that causes what are often substantial flinches in attendance. The town-based analysis is in this sense a more powerful exercise because it allows a view of the impact of structural and community life variables after year-to-year variations are controlled. In

short if size is as all-fired important as we think it is, it *ought* to explain more of the variance in attendance when it is not constrained by idiosyncrasies about which it can do nothing.

The impact and direction of the structural and community life variables explored in the last two chapters on the attendance averages of the towns remain about the same as they were on the meetings held in the towns. They ought to. The meetings are simply building blocs for the towns. And the town-based equations (with their smaller N's) will not condone the precision we are used to in the meeting-based analysis. But the towns let us see (albeit in a more hazy afternoon light) what these influences are after size has been allowed to operate to its fullest. The town-based equations do something else. They return us to what are (I hope) becoming more and more familiar places—places like Strafford and Elmore and Newark and Athens; little towns in the hills of Vermont.

There, below the mean on attendance effort (in Plot 1 of Figure VI-F) and joined by the nature of their community lives on the higher end of the “upscale” factor score are the three Burlington “orbit” towns of Jericho, Shelburne, and Underhill. All three used the Australian ballot in all their meetings. Returning too is Norwich, the beautiful college town across the river from Dartmouth with its third ranking attendance and first ranking (by plenty) upscale score. We attended 15 town meetings there between 1970 and 1998 and they used the Australian ballot every single time. Down at the lower end of the upscale factor are the northwestern towns of Eden, Highgate and Alburg. Two of these, Alburg and Highgate, border Canada. They, like Jericho and Underhill further south, are neighbors. Alburg has used the Australian ballot since 1970 and holds its meetings at night. Highgate has used the ballot since 1975 and holds its meetings during the day. Its attendance effort was much stronger than Alburg's. Newbury and

Elmore are there in the center of both distributions along with Hinesburg. Athens and Newark occupy their allotted spaces.

[FIGURE VI-F ABOUT HERE]

These towns and the other 44 in the sample demonstrate the difficulty of establishing the causes of real democracy once community size has been controlled by the attendance effort ratio. The relationship between the upscale factor and attendance effort is upward-sloping as was predicted but the relationship is very weak as the shotgun distribution of the towns around the line of best fit indicates.⁸² The scatterplot does make clear that the Australian ballot is an important factor. Only four of the 19 towns that stayed totally clear of the Australian ballot fell below the mean of attendance effort. Only seven of the 20 towns that used it exclusively landed above it. Keep in mind that this distribution controls only town size. As it did with the meeting-based data upscale disappears altogether, replaced by the more specific education index, when other variables are considered (see below).

Plot 2 of Figure VI-F demonstrates in the strange nature of Vermont politics and its inability to connect with democratic impulses in the towns. Featured is the Sanders/Democratic Factor Score, its failure to correlate with liberalism and its still weaker linkage to town meeting attendance. To one with forty years paying attention to Vermont politics looking at the quadrants of the scatterplot is pleasing to the eye. The upper left hand corner is where liberalism and weak support for Bernie Sanders' lunch pail socialism are joined. There one finds the hill towns of Barnard and Pomfret both back pastures to the green meadows of Woodstock,

⁸² The Beta is .225, not unimportant. But upscale explains only 5 percent of the variance in attendance effort. The standard error was .21 and the smaller number of cases (only 56 rather than 1435 when meetings were the case) put the statistical significance at .10.

figure 6 F

Vermont's quintessential upscale, liberal Republican/institutional Democratic town. It seems natural that Norwich and Warren are there too. The Kingdom towns of Greensboro and Newark, although spiced by the tougher, native, gasoline cultured underclass fit as well. One is tempted to call these places "politically correct" liberal towns. They share an ambiance that features environmentalism, planning and intellectualism aligned to protect a gentrified rural landscape. Shelburne and (especially Williston) bend too much toward "*growth* by plan" (they are, after all, next to Vermont's largest city in its only SMSA) for a tight fit with this paradigm. Otherwise they make sense. They along with Moretown, which borders Warren, are the only three of the 11 in this quadrant to fall below average on attendance effort.

Across the way in the upper right hand quadrant are towns that seem quite similar but possess a feistier populist/libertarian hue. Clearly Strafford is the best example. It is to Norwich what Barnard and Pomfret are to Woodstock – adjacent but more out back. The difference is that there is a closer tie between the classes in Stafford and the other towns of this quadrant. It is almost as though they take their guilt more seriously. I moved into Starksboro in 1972. It is a much poorer place than Strafford and much less gentrified. But both places put their votes where their ideology is. Huntington is our neighbor to the east, stretched out along the Huntington River in the morning shade of Camel's Hump, Vermont's second highest and most uniquely profiled mountain peak. Our politics are the same when we decide about statewide candidates, but Huntington has a more participatory town meeting. We also border Monkton and Lincoln, the two other towns that make up our state legislative district. Lincoln, like Huntington, is hard against the mountains, Monkton, to the west of us toward Lake Champlain is more a valley town with large rolling dairy farms. Monkton is like Starksboro on its attendance effort score – below

average. Lincoln is like Huntington – above average. In short this strong Sanders *and* strong liberalism area exhibits no consistency on town meeting attendance.

When towns are both conservative and anti-Sanders in their statewide voting patterns, their record at town meeting is also ambivalent. The two most conservative and anti-Sanders towns to make the sample, Groton and Addison, are about as different bio-regionally as one can get in Vermont. In Addison they farm the clay-based valley of the beautiful lake and hunt wild turkeys in the spring. Groton is a rugged town in the hills of the eastern range of the Green Mountains. The people there make do and hunt bear on Blue Mountain. These towns are twins on ideology and Bernie Sanders. One is above average on town meeting attendance. The other is below average. The other towns that share their politics (down on both the liberalism and Sanders/Democratic factors) split five to seven in the direction of low attendance effort.

The conservative pro Democrat/Sanders towns displayed the same ratio exactly. Seven of the 12 were low on attendance effort. Three quarters of these towns are in the northwest corner of Vermont where a strong French-Canadian and Catholic footing kept the Democrats in business for the first half of the century before they broke out and became a legitimate statewide party in 1952. Their votes on Vermont's ERA had much to do with their posture on the lower end of the liberalism scale. But Athens is there as well along with, surprisingly, Proctor, the town that bears the name and reared the family of the dynasty that defined Vermont's odd brand of Republican conservatism for nearly a century. Athens was above average on attendance effort. Proctor was below average.

It is tempting to make claims from these town data. Note, for instance, that the towns that seem *inconsistent* in their politics – liberal, anti Democrat/Sanders and conservative, pro

Democrat/Sanders are apt to be *less* ambivalent in their town meeting habits. Consistent towns on the other hand are more mixed in their town meeting behavior. Could it be that this inconsistency or lack of it marks the kind of political culture that generates inclinations to participate in direct democracy? Or could it be that the kind of electorates support the issues the Democratic/Sanders factor represents but don't express it for statewide candidates participate more in town meeting because they don't need state or national solutions economically? Is there perhaps a class-estrangement at work? There are two reasons why such speculations are dangerous. The first is that there are too many idiosyncratic explanations available for individual towns. This is not the place to air them out but they are not unreasonable alternatives for one who knows the towns well. The second follows from the first. There are not enough cases for the fine-tuning necessary to carry the analysis past these caveats. The only thing to do is have faith in the meeting-based equations and back off from tempting nuances.

For in truth these scatterplots profoundly reinforce the notion that in town meeting democracy is enough estranged from the socioeconomic and political cultures of the towns as to make a connection between the two (if indeed there is one—which I doubt) well nigh invisible. This is so whether one is looking through a high-powered statistical scope (regression equations) or using open sights (landscaped arrangements of the towns themselves in scatterplots).⁸³ In combination with the other variables that have concerned us in the last two chapters, the equation confirmed that the Australian ballot and scattered populations are what matter most after size. They increase the variance explained in attendance from 74 percent to 83 percent. The education

⁸³ Or as an old deer hunting friend of mine once whispered to me from the edge of a ten-year-old, clear cut, grown back to face-slapping brush: “He may be in there somewhere, Bootser, but someone else is going to have to go in there after him because I ain't and if I ain't, we ain't.”

index and dependent populations chip in another three percentage points. The reduced “N” then shuts off the analysis by making the tiny contributions other variables that entered the equation in the larger meeting based data set statistically unreliable. (See Table VI-E.)

[TABLE VI-E ABOUT HERE]

When this chapter got underway, the meeting-based sample indicated that the size of the town in which the meeting was held explained 60 percent of the variance in town meeting attendance. Structural context variables (in Chapter V) and community life variables (in this chapter) jacked the percentage explained up to 70 percent. Analysis of the towns themselves demonstrates that taking meeting to meeting variation out of the mix increases the variance by size alone from 60 explained to 74 percent. Plug in structural and community life variables and the total variance explained in the average attendance of the meetings held in individual towns increases to 86 percent. This is a powerful statistic. Given those things that increase or decrease attendance, we now know, for instance, that all four towns whose meetings in 1992 were used to open this analysis in Chapter IV (Athens, Newark, Hinesburg and Shelburne) have had on average better attendance over time than one might expect them to have. These and the other 52 towns are arrayed in Plot 3 of Figure VI-F according to their predicted attendance, given all these variables and their actual attendance. Other towns to which we have directed attention come up short. The places with which I am most familiar, Newbury and Starksboro are examples. Most important, however, is the tight pattern the towns form around the line of best fit.

As with the effect of size alone on attendance it is important to translate these degrees of success or failure (distances above and below the line of prediction) into ratios and thus the notion of effort. It remains the case in the multi-variable analysis (as it did in the size alone

table 6 E

analysis) that when a town is predicted to have low attendance and doubles its predicted allotment it is easy to discount this increase. This is because its *percentage point* increase is below that of those towns where higher threshold expectations make it easier to produce large percentage point deviations, which represent smaller relative gains in attendance. It is time to look at the towns' attendance *effort* again. But this time more than just size is controlled. How does each town fare when all the variables that can trigger variations in attendance are accounted for?⁸⁴

Plot 4 of Figure VI-F arranges the towns by their attendance efforts when size only was controlled (as was done at the end of Chapter V) compared to their attendance efforts that result when size plus all the other variables considered in Chapters V and this chapter are combined. Obviously the two scores are related, tied together by the power of the size variable. Yet substantial changes are apparent. Stowe, which had the best attendance effort with size only controlled, dropped to third with other variables considered. Its attendance record in light of its tiny size alone pushed St. George to the very bottom (56th place) of the attendance ranking. It achieved only 68 percent of its size-based entitlement. But it achieved 88 percent of its entitlement considering the other four factors in the equation and ranked 43th, above, for instance my hometown of Newbury which dropped from 32nd to 46th. In the Burlington area Shelburne and Richmond improved their positions considerably, while Underhill, Jericho and Charlotte fell. Norwich dropped from third spot to below average. When we say Norwich “dropped” all we are

⁸⁴ Bear in mind once again that year-to-year variations are consumed by the averages. This adds mightily to the power of the exercise. Importantly too, the effect of the passage of time between 1970 and 1998, which had a negative impact on meeting attendance is controlled by the averages. While the average year the meeting is held does vary somewhat, its range is so emasculated that it hardly twitches the final equation. The town with the earliest “average year” of its meetings was Groton (1979). Athens had the latest average (1990). The mean was 1985. Thus the yearly range is collapsed from 1970 to 1998, 29 years, to 1979 to 1990 (12 years).

saying, of course, is that, given what we know about Norwich and what we know about how these things affect town meeting attendance, its attendance is not as *surprisingly* high any more. In fact it's quite normal. Earlier, when only Norwich's size was considered its attendance was surprisingly high.

This brief look at the towns themselves pretty much confirms what the meetings suggested. When we left Chapter IV we knew the size of the town in which the meeting was held explained about 60 percent of the variance in town meeting attendance leaving us in the dark about the other 40 percent. When structural variables (Chapter V) and community life variables here in Chapter VI were considered on a meeting-to-meeting basis we added ten more percent explained. Thirty percent of the variance still remained a mystery. When attention was switched from the meetings to the towns the additional ten percent of variance explained by structural and community life factors was confirmed. More importantly, by shutting off the year-to-year variance which is issue generated, we were able to determine that, with size, structure, community life and issues controlled only 15 percent of the variance in attendance at town meeting is left unexplained.⁸⁵

Given this, two observations: the first involves the pain of expectations denied. Given the pedigree of the community life paradigms developed over the past half century, knowing what is *not* important has become as significant for real democracy as knowing what is. Second

⁸⁵It is likely this final variance will never be known. For instance, my students who attended the Newark town meeting of 1999 discovered in their conversations with townspeople that the members of a large extended family in town who were consistent attenders at town meeting were absent due to a family emergency. Newark's attendance for the year was 31 voters shy of expectations. It would not be unreasonable to assume that one-third of these could have been members of this family. These are the kinds of wild cards that only the most precise measures could detect. Measures which in a data base of 1435 meetings are obviously impossible. See: Will Roswick, "Town Meeting, The Truest Form of Democracy (Newark, Vermont 1999)," (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, March 1999).

is the importance of scale. Size repels every attack on its preeminence in the equation. Communities will have high attendance at their town meetings if they are small and this attendance will drop off systematically as they get larger. Because the increase in attendance is related to a decrease in town size in a curvilinear fashion, the rational voter thesis may be strengthened. The more individual votes matter the higher the attendance. In the aggregate the people sense there is a point of diminishing returns in group participation and they behave accordingly. This sense of political power (or lack of it) transcends the socioeconomic and political environments of the communities themselves.