

CHAPTER IX

THE QUESTION OF EQUALITY: WOMEN'S PRESENCE

Into their 40's they shared their last born babies, sons, embarrassed and giggling all the same forgetting afterward the worry of yet another child born to raise in hard times. They would sit nursing them in the back of the Town Hall at all the public gatherings they could get to, diapers modestly draped across their bosoms as they rocked and commented on local politics and social affairs with a fine mixture of sharp perception and grim humor – and always laughter.

—Esther Titcomb McLean¹

Esther McLean was talking about her mother and other women and men of the Depression who lived in the small town of Deering, New Hampshire, across the river and a few

¹ Esther Titcomb McLean, "Give My Regards to Deering," *Yankee* (February, 1975): 86-93. The fact that women nurse their babies at town meeting never ceases to interest those "from away." Reporters from big city newspapers always seem to report it when they see it. Women knitting is also a favorite observation. I suspect it adds the requisite old time flavor that fits the ambiance of authenticity reporters wish to portray. But it also suggests that while women may *attend* town meeting they bring their "womanly duties" with them and are therefore less likely to participate in the business of the meeting. In 1987 Susan Levine, a staff writer from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, went to the town meeting in Guilford. Her report was a balanced and accurate accounting that included the following on the end of a heated debate over local roads and snow plowing: "In the end, the people spoke – 128 of them agreed with former Highway Commissioner Harvey Cutting that the 1987 road budget should be slashed by \$40,000;" [that is a huge chunk of a local highway budget] "there were 63 opposed. *As several women knitted and one or two nursed babies* (emphasis my own), Cutting rose from his chair and, notebook in hand, presented alternative figures. He explained. 'I think we have got to try to save where we can, because I think we've got to keep taxes down.'" Susan Levine, "Town Meeting: A Cherished, But Troubled, Institution" *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (March 8, 1987): 27-A.

miles south of Windsor, Vermont where my own mother was raised in similarly hard times. Women of course “had the vote” in those days. But it is a long, long way from the vote to equality. It is a long way from the back of the hall to the front of the hall just as it has been a long way from the back of the bus to the front of the bus. In the beginning I suspect women were even apologetic for their behavior. A Vermont essayist, Zephine Humphrey wrote the following about the town meeting in Dorset in the 1930’s:

WITNESS

The Town Meeting was some fun, however, though I imagine, not nearly as much as it used to be. I am afraid that is one institution the zest and flavor of which have been spoiled by Woman Suffrage. In the old days, the floor of the hall used to be prepared with a significant coating of sawdust; now it is left uninvitingly bare; sufficiently sad indication of emasculating change. And the flow of language is, I am sure, not anything as full and racy as it was. Too bad! The men, flocking to what was once their social high tide of the year, must hate us women intruding our decorum into the rude freedom of their intercourse.

However the tradition still holds that Town Meeting is an occasion for the interchange of wit and wisdom, and that tradition is lived up to as well as possible. Trying to shut our petticoats from the tails of their eyes, the men do still rally and vilify one another; and I am chokingly able to say that they still smoke. The town buffoon, whose great day this is, still opposes every motion and cracks resounding jokes. The moderator still has real need of the gavel.

Just to look at, however, they are a source of satisfaction, this assembly of real country people, met on their own merits, according to their own standards, with no contamination of the ‘city people’ influence that, in the summer, tarnishes them.²

Ruth French wore a green outfit³ when at 10:05 a.m. on the morning of March 7, 1978 she was the second person to participate in the Monkton town meeting. The weather was

² Zephine Humphrey, *Winterwise* quoted in Charles Edward, Crane *Let Me Show You Vermont*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942): 160-61.

³ This was how the students identified her. By matching up comments in the minutes of the meeting with these kinds of identifications which are coded by the issue on which the person participated and the sequence in which the

excellent, the roads were clear and the meeting had been opened promptly at 10:00 a.m. by the moderator, William Bird. (It was to be his last year as moderator.) She seconded a motion made by Clark Thomas to hold the town meeting before the school meeting. Thomas was a school director for the town in the Mount Abraham union school district (where my youngest two kids went to high school) located next door in the town of Bristol. Ruth French was a library trustee for Monkton. The town immediately approved the motion by a voice vote. It was 10:06 a.m. French also made the motion to accept Article 2: "To receive and act on reports as submitted."⁴ She was seconded by Edgar Baker. The town approved by a voice vote. It was 10:07 a.m. Just after the lunch recess ("ham, mashed potatoes, coleslaw and homemade pie—good!"⁵) Ruth French participated for the third and last time on Article 18, an appropriations article for a series of eight town expenditures such as cemeteries (\$500), dump expenses (\$2,688) and library (\$825). French made the motion to fund the library. She was seconded by Louella Murton. It was so voted.⁶

Throughout that day in Monkton Ruth French was one of an average⁷ of 98 citizens in attendance at the town meeting. She was also one of an average of 53 women. At 10:32 there

participation took place I am able to identify participators by name at least half the time if the minutes are as good as they were for Monkton.

⁴ Town officers are required to report to the town annually and these reports are printed in the *Town Report*. Some towns take time to consider each report individually. Most (like Monkton) dispense with them all under one question.

⁵ My students. The meal was prepared and served by the Woman's Auxiliary of the Fire Department.

⁶ Town of Monkton, Carmelita C. Burritt, Town Clerk, "Minutes of the Annual Town and School Meeting, Held on March 7, 1978," (Mimeograph 1978). Monkton's minutes were better than most for the late 1970's.

⁷ Per the design of the study the students counted attendance by sex four times. This is an average of the counts.

were 42 men and 55 women present. At 11:28 it was 51 men and 63 women, at 1:46 46 men and 47 women and 2:31 49 and 62.⁸ From the beginning of the meeting until at least 2:31 p.m. women outnumbered men at the Monkton town meeting. Then at 2:40 p.m. the town meeting adjourned. After a short recess the school meeting opened at 3:03 and the women's percentage of the attendance went *down*. Twenty-nine minutes later the school meeting adjourned after the fourth item of new business and applause and thanks were given to Moderator Bird for his years of service. At 3:15 the students had counted attendance. There were only 79 still at the meeting. For the first time men outnumbered women 42 to 37. Most would find it odd that men were more apt to stay for the school meeting than women.⁹

⁸ I need to suggest a hypothesis that will not make feminists happy. I have noticed (especially in the 1960's and 1970's) that now and then women's attendance is down a bit right after lunch. In Newbury it seemed to be that a half dozen women or so cleaned up after lunch and didn't get back upstairs until well after the meeting had started again. What I need to do is go back and introduce a code for "lunch served" and see if it correlates with a decline in women's attendance the first time the students counted attendance after lunch. In the most explicit verification of the thesis one of my students reported in her essay on the town meeting in Granville in 1987: "I almost felt as if I had been out in a time warp that day. Their treatment of the women was typical of days long past. All morning the women were busy preparing a feast for the men folk so very few of them were able to participate in the town meeting. I could see from the attitudes of the townspeople that they viewed the women as subservient." But the team's data didn't confirm her impressions. Twenty-six of the meeting's sixty people in attendance (40 percent of the town's registered voters, 32 men and 28 women) had participated by noon. Thirteen were women. Elizabeth Bell, "The Granville Town Meeting, 1987," (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, March 1987). Granville elected 28 officers in 1987. Half (14) were women. But most of these were "traditional" women, officers, all five library trustees, two out of three school directors, two out of three auditors, and the town clerk and treasurer (one person). Still even here percentages were high for women, and they did have one lister (typically a "male" position) and a second constable (almost always a male position). Of the twenty-three appointed officers listed nine were women. Town of Granville, *Annual Report*, (Year ending December 1985): 3.

⁹ Perhaps. But it is also true that this is about the time children would be returning from school and women might have to return home. I have no systematic evidence of this, however, because there are too few cases that match Monkton's situation; that is a school meeting being held after a town meeting and beginning about three in the afternoon. Even with 1435 cases the data base is not big enough, proof that "thin" mega-case analysis is of critical value to social science. My view (see page ___ of the introduction) is that you can never have enough cases. I am also well aware of the simplicity of this construct (women leaving town meeting to return home to watch the children) and how it is bounded by the methodological biases of political science. There is no way my work can wiggle its way into the critical conundrums of a feminist theory of politics. My task is to simply make clear one

The most contentious of the four articles that could be resolved at town meeting (four others were on Australian ballot) was Article 6: “To see if the voters will authorize the School Board to hire a nurse for one day per week during the school year.” The motion was made by Ellen Thompson, seconded by Sallie Havey, and voted down on a voice vote 11 minutes later. In that time nine different people spoke up. In all there were 15 participations on the issue. Jeannette Deale, a member of the school board, spoke the most, five times. During the day the polls were open and the voters were electing town and school officers and deciding three other school issues by paper or “Australian” ballot. One of them was whether or not to provide a kindergarten for Monkton. They voted “nay” 131 to 103.¹⁰

Between 1970 and 1998, 19 teams of students counted women at the Monkton town meeting. In 1978, 55 percent of those in attendance were women. Only one of the remaining 18 meetings equaled it, the meeting of 1989. The average percent of women at town meeting over the three-decade, 1435-meeting sample was only 47 percent. The average for women's attendance in 1978 was also 48 percent. This was a good year for women since as we shall see women's attendance tended to improve over time and 1978 comes early in the sample. But even in 1978 only ten of the other 79 places studied that year had higher percentages of women in

empirical camera shot of women in public life—their role in communal, face-to-face, decision-making, government structures, what I call real democracy. For an excellent essay on feminist theory and the heuristic framework of political science (that unfortunately underscores the embryonic character of my project) see: Diana Owen, and Linda M. G. Zerilli, “Gender and Citizenship,” *Society* 28 (July-August 1991): 27-34.

¹⁰ There were 114 people at the Monkton town meeting at the highest count of the five the students took. Two hundred forty-four voted by Australian ballot for town moderator during the day. This means that ten people who went into the polling booth and voted for town moderator didn't vote on the kindergarten issue. It also means that 120 more (105 percent) people practiced direct democracy than real democracy and 130 more people (114 percent) practiced representative democracy than real democracy. Volume II will deal with these kinds of gaps in depth.

attendance at their town meetings. Nearby Charlotte, Norwich over on the other side of the state on the Connecticut River and Rochester in the mountains in between topped the list. In each 60 percent of the registered voters in attendance were women. To begin the discussion of the degree to which a traditional American “out group” is or is not enfolded into the town meeting process (and why) it seems reasonable to begin with these kinds of simple observations about women at town meeting.¹¹

WOMEN'S ATTENDANCE: WALKING THE BOUNDS

Between 1970 and 1998 we secured data from 1418 town meetings on the number of women present compared to that of men. Forty-six percent of the attenders in these meetings were women and 54 percent were men.¹² Attendance for women was lowest (17 percent) at a meeting in the tiny (population 394) farming town of Waltham in the Champlain Valley in 1981 and at a meeting in the larger (population 2284) quarrying town (granite) of Williamstown in central Vermont in 1984. The high end was 67 percent in Burlington's bedroom town of St. George (population 677) in 1984 and 65 percent in the Northeast Kingdom town of Lunenburg (population 1138) in 1980. Average meetings on women's attendance were found in Fairfield in

¹¹ The literature on women's participation in public life which has grown in tandem with political science itself, is extensive. It is also dominated by national politics as the locus of choice and electoral politics as the focus of choice. More and more, however, scholars are broadening definitions and widening constructs. [See, for instance, Vicky Randall call for expanded research agendas. Vicky Randall, *Women and Politics: An International Perspective*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).] In taking a first cut at women's participation in town meeting democracy, I hope to set the framework for one such agenda.

¹² In the Israeli Kibbutz Rosner found attendance about equally divided between men and women. Menachem Rosner, *Participatory and Organizational Democracy and the Experience of the Israeli Kibbutz* (Haifa: The University of Haifa, 1981): 13.

1980, Calais in 1984, and Lincoln in 1991. They had populations of 1493, 1324, and 974 respectively. This first, brief description of the situation reveals no abnormalities.

The histogram of women in attendance (Figure IX-A Plot 1) shows the data produce a smooth bell-shaped curve. There is some slight tendency for it to deviate from the norm on the lower end of the scale more than it deviates at the upper end. But the overall pattern is dominated by a tight and uniform distribution around the mean. The standard deviation was six percent and 67 percent of the town meetings had percentages of women in attendance that fell within one standard deviation of the mean 46 percent attendance level.

For each meeting these data represent the average of several counts of women in attendance divided by the average number (men and women) present for the same counts. These averages hide variation. The actual number of women at town meeting varied from a low of five in the little towns of Waltham, Goshen, and Orange, which averaged a population of 280, to a high of 265 in Georgia (1991), 250 in Norwich (1970), and 227 in Stowe in 1997. The average population in these three towns was 3097. The average town posted a low of 41 women in attendance and a high of 64. The maximum attendance level for women in the average meeting was 64 percent higher than their minimum attendance, exactly the same as it was for men. In 245 meetings the variation between the high and low counts for women averaged only eight percent. In 269 meetings it averaged 25 percent. But there were over 100 meetings where it more than doubled. (See Figure IX-A, Plot 2.)

[FIGURE IX-A ABOUT HERE]

fig 9 A

As the years passed between 1970 and 1998 the role of women in political life became more and more legitimate, even expected, in America. Although Vermont was ahead of the curve on the issue,¹³ it too was influenced by the national movement. In fact this influence may have been partially to blame for our refusal to add an ERA to our own Constitution in 1986.¹⁴ Certainly one of the key questions for us is, therefore, does the mean of 46 percent attendance for women over the period hide an increase over time? The answer is yes.

Most of the increase, however, came in the 1970's. In the first five years of the study women's attendance averaged 44.89 percent of the total. By the middle of the 1980's (the five-year cluster of meetings including those studied in 1983 through 1987) the percentage had leveled off at 46.9, an increase of over two percentage points. A decade on down the road as century's end neared the five-year average (1994 through 1998) had increased only half a percent to 47.4. In fact if the 1970's trend had continued women would have achieved parity of

¹³ Vermont is one of the few states to elect a woman governor, was the first state to elect a woman lieutenant governor (in 1952) and to establish a college for women. Perhaps the best indicator is the presence of women in the Vermont legislature which has always been near the top of national percentages. In the mid 1960s, for instance, only five percent of all state legislators in America were women. Edmond Constantine and Kenneth H. Clark, "Women as Politicians: The Social Background, Personality, and Political Careers of Female Party Leaders," *Journal of Social Issues* 28 (1972): 217-236. In Vermont it ranged from 10 to 15 percent. Frank M. Bryan, *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont*, (Hanover, New Hampshire: The University Press of New England, 1974): 48. In their study of women in state legislatures between 1981 and 1993, Darry, Welch and Clark found Vermont ranked fourth nationally on women in the lower house of the state legislature. No state east of the Mississippi was higher than Vermont save New Hampshire. Oddly the authors ignore New Hampshire's stellar performance. In 1981 it ranked second in the nation behind only Oregon. In 1993 it ranked third. Perhaps they don't like New Hampshire. Perhaps it confounds their analysis which downplays the role of size on women's representation. With the largest legislative body among the states, a small population and a state with small total area, New Hampshire's districts are apt to be *geographically* small. This makes an important difference. At any rate, one of the most conservative states in America has one of the best records on electing women to the state legislature. If not applause, this explanation demands recognition. R. Darcy, Susan Welch and Janet Clark, *Women, Election, and Representation* 2nd ed. (Lincoln, Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 1994): 53-54.

attendance with men by the year 1990. If the post 1970's slope in the data remains the same, women will not achieve equal status until the year 2029. (See Figure IX-B.)

[FIGURE IX-B ABOUT HERE]

To get a better view of what women's attendance at town meeting actually looks like and at the same time set the stage for a search for its correlates in the character of community life it helps to look at meetings held in subsequent years in the same town. If knowing what percent of the attenders were women in 1970 in, for instance, Hartland or Addison or Norwich or Salisbury predicts women's attendance in these same towns in 1971, there is a good chance that a search for the *kinds* of towns that produce more equal ratios of women to men in town meeting will be successful. If the answer is no—if towns vary widely from year to year on this measure—then the search for contextual variables that support democratic equality between the sexes is likely to be difficult. Once again it is important to remember that towns like Hartland, Addison, Norwich and Salisbury did not change greatly from 1970 to 1971. If the percent of women at town meeting does, then there must be other variables at work other than ones defined by community settings.

I therefore compared the women's attendance score of those towns that appeared in both the 1970 and 1971 samples then. I did the same for those towns that appeared in both the 1971 and 1972 samples, in both the 1973 and 1974 samples and so forth. In this way I was able to create 22 different tests of the hypothesis that those towns that score well on women's attendance in one year will also score well in the next. The Pearson product moment correlation coefficient

¹⁴ Vermonters became more and more disenchanted with the issue as outside forces on both sides descended on the state and intensified the rhetoric.

fig 9 B

measures the degree to which those towns scoring high on women's attendance in the first year (in the context of the towns in each trial) are the same towns that score high in the second year. If they are, the coefficient will be strongly positive. If those towns with the high scores in one year tend to be the ones with the low scores the next year, the coefficient will be negative. If there is little or no association, the coefficient will be close to zero. It is not the direction of the coefficient that is important for determining associations, however. It is the soundness of its prediction—the degree to which it is accurate. This is summarized by the familiar R^2 statistic that tells the percent of variance in one variable (for instance, women's percent attendance in 1970 meetings) explained by another (women's percent attendance in the meetings of 1971).¹⁵

The fate of women in face-to-face democracy becomes clearer when these relationships are inspected. (See Figure IX-C.) In only one of the 14 trials in which there were 20 or more towns that had back-to-back meetings was the "r" negative. This stands to reason since we know that women's attendance was improving from year to year throughout the period. The exception was the 21 meetings that appeared in the sample in both 1995 and 1996 and produced a correlation of -.15 between the percent attenders who were women in 1995 and the same percent in 1996. In other words those towns doing relatively better in the first year did relatively a bit worse in the following year. The highest "r" in the battery of 14 trials was .63 (the 1970/1971 comparison). The average was .38 and the median was .40. The set of back-to-back meetings closest to the mean (the "r" was .36) was generated by a group of 22 towns in 1988 and 1989.

¹⁵ The standardized error of the estimate is also widely used, of course. I use R^2 because it tells us what we want to know and I like the notion of reduction in variance as an operative concept.

The earliest year-to-year comparison of women and men in town meeting made possible by the data (1970 and 1971) is also the one that produced the strongest association between the years. Forty percent of the variance in women's attendance in 1971 can be explained by their attendance in 1970. But only one town of the 23 in the sample (Bethel) fell in what might be called the zone of equality; that is, attendance was in the 48 to 52 percent range for women both years. In Bethel neither women nor men had much of a numerical advantage. (See Plot 2 of Figure IX-C). Four meetings had more women than men in attendance in 1970. In 1971 three did. One town, the upscale, liberal, college town of Norwich, women made up 65 percent of the attendance in 1970 and 56 percent in 1971. But in both years strong majorities of the meetings had significantly more men than women at town meeting.

[FIGURE IX-C ABOUT HERE]

Plot 1 of Figure IX-C demonstrates several associations between women's attendance at town meeting in 1970 and 1971. The solid line traveling horizontally across the scatterplot is where one would bet each meeting in 1971 would fall if there was absolutely no relationship between the percentages of women at a town's meeting in 1970 and that same town's meeting in 1971. In that case the best prediction would be that a town's feminine percentage in 1971 would be equal to what the average town's percentage was in 1970. Indeed for the town of Sutton you would have been right. In 1970, 51 percent of Sutton's attenders were women but in 1971 it was exactly the 1970 *average*, 44 percent. The dashed horizontal line represents the same prediction with a one percentage point increase reflecting the average increase between the two years. It represents a bit more sophisticated prediction; that the town's 1971 feminine attendance score

fig 9 C

would take into account the general increase in women attenders in 1971 and therefore be the average of the 1971 meetings, about 45 percent. Moretown and Newbury are examples of meetings which hit the 1971 percentage right on the nose. They did so by improving their below average (about 37 and 41 percent respectively) performances of 1970.

The heavy diagonal solid line from the lower left-hand corner of the scatterplot to the upper right-hand corner is the prediction one would make under the assumption that the percentage of a town's attenders who were women in 1970 would be the same in 1971. The town of Addison, a farming town on the shores of Lake Champlain, where people come from miles around to see flocks of wild geese gather in the melancholy of a late October afternoon, was right on target. Its score for women in 1970 was exactly that of 1971. But even though we are using the two-year sample of meetings in the data set that produced the highest R^2 , no other towns fell directly on the line of prediction. Sixty percent of the variance in the 1971 percentages was left unexplained by the 1970 percentages. Still it is clear that the meetings of 1971 hover closer to the line representing the individual meeting percentages of 1970 than they did the average meeting percentages of 1970. The dashed diagonal line above the solid diagonal line represents the 1971 prediction based on individual town percentages in 1970 with a percent added to reflect the average increase in feminine attendance between 1970 and 1971. Two towns fall precisely on this line, that is their 1971 feminine percentage equaled their 1970 percentage with one percent to grow on.

The solid double line across the scatterplot maps the *actual* distribution of the meetings of 1971 as compared to the meetings of 1970. The meetings tend to gravitate to this line still

more. A cluster of towns represented by Stamford, Newbury, Moretown and Marshfield are just above the line on the lower half of this “line of best fit” and Sutton, Brighton, and Pomfret represent a cluster that are just below it on the upper half. Note that Salisbury and Norwich, towns on opposite ends of the continuum of increasing women’s attendance, varied so much from one year to the next that they flattened the line considerably. Norwich’s incapacity to match its huge performance of 1970 in 1971 depressed the upper end and Salisbury’s recovery in 1971 after a miserable showing in 1970 elevated the lower end. Had it not been for these towns the actual distribution would have come much closer to the predicted distribution based on the 1970 percentage.¹⁶

The weakest predictive pair of years was 1995 and 1996 when a 21-town comparison produced an R^2 of only .02. Knowing how women scored on attendance in a town’s meeting in 1995 tells us nothing about how it scored in 1996. (See Plot 2 of Figure IX-C.) Only poor performances (in 1995) by Underhill and Lunenburg (two profoundly different types of communities) followed by above average scores in 1996 prevent the distribution from assuming an almost perfect shotgun pattern. But the scatterplot does reveal two towns that produced perfectly cloned meetings as far as attendance by women is concerned. Remarkably, both land neatly in the center of the zone of equality as well. Sheldon is absolutely fair on the question of the sexes with a 50/50 split for both years and South Hero is nearly so. The progress made in the two and one half decades that separates the two scatterplots is also apparent. In 1995 in

¹⁶ The relationship is expressed in squares as $YC + A + BX$. In the 1970-71 case the constant (A) was 26.4. Added to this is .418 times the 1970 percent feminine attendance to achieve the 1971 prediction.

almost half of the meetings 50 percent or more of the attenders were women. In 1996 eight of the 21 had 50/50 ratios or better and three others were only a cat's whisker away.

PREDICTING WOMEN'S ATTENDANCE: THE SIZE VARIABLE

Size might impact on women's attendance in two ways. First, meetings with larger raw numbers of attenders might have a higher *proportion* of female attenders. If it is true that women do not have the political legitimacy of men and therefore feel estranged by a politics as open and as visible as town meeting, then a large crowd might draw relatively more women to it than a small crowd where anonymity is less possible. Second, women who live in the more complex environment of larger towns might be the kind of women who are more at ease as participants in the political process.

The Size of the Meeting

On town meeting day 1998 I was able to attend three meetings, gavel to gavel.¹⁷ The meeting in my old hometown of Newbury on the Connecticut River ended at noon. I ate with old friends in the basement of the town hall and was still able to get to Washington's meeting (about 40 miles to the east over Orange Heights), which began at two and ended late in the afternoon. In the evening I was back on the other side of the state in the Champlain Valley at Waltham's meeting. Waltham is a tiny place of only 300 voters. The meeting is held in a cozy little room off the town clerk's office. I counted attendance three times. The highest count was 44 at 8:10

p.m., 26 men and only 18 women, 41 percent of the total. There were seven empty seats and two were standing. In Newbury total attendance was nearly triple that of Waltham (124) and feminine attendance was 45 percent. But in Washington's meeting women's attendance was the highest (48 percent) and only 67 people were present when I took the count that turned out to be the highest.

Add 1416 more meetings held between the years of 1970 and 1998 to the picture and it is clear that the number of people at a meeting is not related to women's attendance. (See Plot 1 of Figure IX-D.) Interestingly, it was a meeting in the town of Waltham that scored the very lowest on feminine attendance over the period, 17 percent in 1981. In fact Waltham's average percent in the four meetings we attended in that town was only 34, significantly below the sample mean of 46 percent.¹⁸ But it is obvious that this had nothing to do with the total number of people in attendance. Other meetings like the ones in Williamstown and Jericho in 1984 where there were eight times the number of people present also scored near the bottom on women's attendance. On the upper end of the distribution both large meetings like the one in Charlotte in 1985 and Georgia in 1991 and small meetings like the ones in Belvidere in 1995 and 1986 and Landgrove's 1979 meeting did very well. To be in little meeting places like those of Waltham and Belvidere is to understand the raw openness in public, face-to-face democracy. There is no

¹⁷ The two other meetings I attended in 1998 were held in Starksboro, where we are trying out Saturday meetings, and Lincoln which is held on Monday night.

¹⁸ This leads, of course, to the speculation that there is something about the kind of town in which the meeting was held or the structure of the town meeting itself in particular towns in which the meeting was held that escaped detection in the paired towns analysis. Whether or not this is true will become apparent as the chapter develops.

place to hide. But this understanding tells us nothing about why or why not women are apt to be there.

[FIGURE IX-D ABOUT HERE]

The Size of the Town

When considering the question of what kinds of towns draw the greatest proportions of their voters to town meetings, the size variable was of critical importance. Big was bad. But what about town size and its impact on the ratio of men to women at town meeting? Would the relationship be reversed? Is it possible that large towns, even though they have lower percentages of citizens in attendance overall, have a more equal distribution of that attendance between the sexes? Does size matter either way? Happily (for a change) there are hints in the literature as to why and in what way it might. Unhappily they are countervailing.

There are those studies that suggest the smallest towns would be the places where the old taboos are most likely to be found. Under this model small towns house socioeconomic variables not associated with increased levels of public activity on the part of women. Education and income levels head the list. Others argue that increased population size brings with it increased population diversity which helps establish cosmopolitan norms that condone and even encourage non-traditional patterns of behavior.¹⁹ Small towns (which, by definition, have not grown) have therefore remained homogeneous and conservative. Indeed, survey research is deep

¹⁹ Reviews of this literature usually begin with Louis Wirth's seminal piece "Urbanism as a Way of Life," in Paul K. Hall and Albert J. Reiss (eds.), *Cities and Society*, (New York: The Free Press, 1957).

fig 9 D

with findings that small town inhabitants are less likely than city dwellers to approve public roles for women.

On the other hand there is substantial empirical evidence that suggests little places in fact encourage the participation of women in politics. The state of Vermont, for instance, one of the smallest states, elected the first woman lieutenant governor at the very time it led the nation in the percent of its population living in places of less than 2500. Vermont has consistently been a leader in the percentage of women serving in the state legislature. In my own review of 3690 elections to the Vermont House of Representatives between 1934 and 1964 I found that the larger towns lagged substantially behind the smaller towns in electing women to the statehouse in Montpelier.²⁰

In an important study of local officeholders in Vermont town government between 1920 and 1950, Ann Hallowell discovered a strong negative association between town size and the percent of local offices held by women.²¹ Hallowell's explanation is that rural life creates circumstances where women are more *needed* and that small town pragmatism is a more powerful force than traditionalism. When, for instance, someone is required to drive the tractor in a hay field with rain on the horizon, women are pressed into service. If someone is needed to

²⁰ Bryan, *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont*, 46-50. See also: Sharyne Merritt, "Winners and Losers: Sex Difference in Municipal Elections," *American Journal of Political Science* 21 (November 1977): 731-743. In Montana, Jobses found size was unrelated to gender differences in the selection of administrative positions but that small agricultural communities elected more women than small "recreational" towns. Patrick C. Jobses, "Gender Competition and the Preservation of Community in the Allocation of Administrative Positions in Small Rural Towns in Montana: A Research Note," *Rural Sociology* 62 (Fall 1997): 315-334.

²¹Ann Hallowell, "Vermont Women in Local Government 1921-1983," (Master's thesis submitted to the University of Vermont, May 1989).

fill the office of town auditor in a town so small willing men are scarce, women are apt to be asked.²² It may not be the kind of causation one might hope for but in terms of the creation of liberal norms on the question of women's involvement in small town politics, necessity was the mother of invention.

The data say that increases in town size are *not* associated with higher percentages of women at town meeting. But it also warns that it would be foolhardy to accept the opposite hypothesis even though a tiny linkage is evident there. Plot 2 of Figure IX-D arrays the meetings by the number of registered voters in the towns in which they were held and the percent of those voters who attended those meetings who were women. Meetings in the largest towns (like Middlebury, Williston, Shelburne, and Swanton) vary widely on feminine attendance as do the ones in the smallest towns like Victory, Stannard and Landgrove. The Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient between the size and women's attendance was -.08. Although the large number of meetings in the sample makes the coefficient statistically "significant" at the .002 level, it takes some imagination to see it in the display.

To be sure the pooled sample didn't hide any surprises, I broke the analysis into 15 two-year samples of meetings and applied the same procedure to each. The results are demonstrated in Plot 3 of Figure IX-D. Many of the two-year clusters show stronger coefficients, although smaller "Ns" in each mean only three are statistically significant. The strongest negative

²² My own experience working on farms in Vermont as a boy and young man (and in limited respects even as I write this book) supports this notion. We were never threatened by women even when they did (as was often the case) a better job than us. In fact having women around (especially when we were young) was often considered a rare opportunity to show off a bit. Besides we knew they would return to the house at the first opportunity. This confirmed that they were smarter than us.

coefficient appeared in the sample of 1983-84. It was $-.28$. The strongest positive relationship ($.20$) emerged from the combined meetings of 1972-73. The former explained only eight percent of the variance in women's attendance in 105 meetings. The latter explained four percent in 43 meetings. But Plot 3 does demonstrate that had this book been written in the mid 1980's I would have probably called notice to the fact that there was a growing tendency for larger towns to do worse on women's attendance. An additional decade or so of meetings shows, however, that this trend was arrested in the middle years of the 1980's. Since 1988 none of the clusters has explained more than three percent of the variance in women's attendance and none of the relationships have been statistically significant.

Since the relationship between size and equality is so important, I summarized it by placing the distribution under the microscope of a limited number of observations that approximate the overall picture. The 54-meeting sample of 1991 produced a correlation coefficient and slope in the data (" r " = $-.07$) which is almost exactly the same as that of the entire sample. (See Figure IX-E.) A bit of the tilt is produced by two very small towns, Baltimore and Belvidere, with relatively high percentages of women at their 1991 meetings. The rest of the story is patternless. One of the largest towns in the sample, Georgia, had the very highest women's attendance for the year, 11 percentage points above average at 58 percent. But Highgate, another of the largest towns in the chart had the lowest, 34 percent. Put another way the five largest towns in the sample averaged 49 percent women's attendance and the five smallest towns averaged 50 percent. If variations in community size bear at all on the equality of

attendance between the sexes, it is hidden in a relationship too complex for a simple bivariate correlation.

[FIGURE IX-E ABOUT HERE]

WITNESS

Politics, Pot, and Three Female Contestants

In September of 1986 police raided the home of Pietro and Anna Marie Tonzini in Goshen, Vermont. They confiscated large quantities of marijuana and over a dozen weapons, including what they said was an "anti-tank rocket launcher." Here according to one of Vermont's well-known reporters, Yvonne Daley, is what happened to Anna Marie Tonzini when she stood before the townspeople to run for reelection as town clerk at the March town meeting six months later.

Anna Marie Tonzini finished counting votes, bowed her head and trembled with emotion. She stood up slowly and walked toward Madine Reed. Fighting back tears, she offered her condolences to her closest opponent for the town clerk's seat.

Tonzini, the incumbent clerk who had received a suspended sentence the week before after pleading guilty to a charge of cultivating marijuana, had just won re-election for a three-year term by six votes.

The final vote: Tonzini, 37; Reed, 31; Hope Lee, 23.

Tonzini was overcome with emotion because this was more than a town clerk's race. She had gained national attention by running for re-election after police confiscated a large quantity of marijuana and weapons in a raid on the home of Tonzini and her husband, Pietro.

"Incredible," said Mrs. Tonzini. "I didn't know what to think about the election and whether people would vote for me. I knew it would be close. I thank those who supported me for their vote of confidence.

"I think it's because I've done a good job," she said of her victory.

Said Reed of her defeat: "Close, but not close enough. Three years? That's a long way away, but I'll be here and I guess I'll run again." Reed had also run unsuccessfully against Tonzini last year.

The third candidate, Hope Lee, said, "I thought it would go that way." "She had a pretty good team working for her, people who felt she should have it. If that's what the townspeople want, that's what they'll get."

fig 9 E

Reed and Lee both said they wished they had pooled votes to defeat Tonzini and lamented that Vermont is one of only a few states that does not prohibit felons from running for town office.

Ninety-one of the 132 registered votes in Goshen cast votes in the election, but that is not an unusually high percentage here. Voter turnout is usually high.

In the September raid on the Tonzinis' Goshen home, police confiscated marijuana plants and about a dozen weapons, including what they described as an anti-tank rocket launcher. The launcher turned out to be only a piece of the weapon which Pietro Tonzini said he had bought for \$5 at a flea market.

Mrs. Tonzini, 33, said Tuesday all but one of the guns were locked inside a gun cabinet and were not used to guard the marijuana plot as police had intimated. She also said only 50 to 60 marijuana plants were taken, rather than the 1,600 police claimed they had seized. . .

Mrs. Tonzini was issued a suspended sentence of 90 days in a jail for aiding in the cultivation of marijuana. Pietro Tonzini, 37, received a suspended one-to-three year sentence and a \$1,000 fine for cultivation. . .²³

A final question related directly to the size variable is this: are women responsible for the increased attendance at town meeting over and above what is "expected" for a town given its size? If so those towns that exceed their size-predicted level of attendance would tend to have higher percentages of women present than those that did not. In effect we are returning to the question of the preceding chapter; what is responsible for higher attendance once size has been controlled? The answer is that it has nothing to do with increased ratios of women in the meeting place. The correlation coefficient between the percent of attenders at town meeting who were women and the level of town meeting attendance over what was predicted by the size of the town was only -.02. This tells us something important about women's attendance. When a town

²³ Yvonne Daley, "Goshen Clerk Keeps Job," *Burlington Free Press* (March 5, 1986): 1, 8.

meeting is poorly attended (given the town's size), the ratio of men to women is the same as when the attendance is better than size would predict. In short whatever it is behind the highs and lows of town meeting attendance women share equally in the causation. When attendance is higher than is generally expected given town size the percent of women making up the attendance will be no higher or lower than when the overall attendance is low.

PREDICTING WOMEN'S ATTENDANCE: STRUCTURAL VARIABLES

With the size question resolved for the moment, we can continue the search for the correlates of feminine attendance in other places. The inquiry follows a pathway that should by now be familiar. The markers are: governmental structure, community life, and politics. First peer influence, one of the cleanest theoretical bridges to women's involvement on a wide range of fronts, needs to be considered. Town meeting is a highly interactive affair where visual factors bear considerable influence. Very early on in this study I became convinced that those towns that had larger percentages of their town offices held by women would have more feminine attendance at and verbal participation in town meeting. This is because town officers play an important role at town meeting. Several sit at the front of the hall and participate in a more or less formal way. Others are called on during the meetings to provide information and comment on various matters of interest to the town. To the extent that women became role models by occupying town offices overall participation by women in the town meeting process ought to improve. In other words women might break trail to real democracy by setting an example on the electoral pathways of representative democracy.

In 1975 I coded the officers for the towns holding the 82 meetings in the 1970 and 1971 sample by sex and kind of office held for the years 1968-1973. The percent of a town's major elective officers who were women became the independent variable and was matched up with women's share of the town meeting attendance. A series of potential contaminating measures were placed under control. Whether or not there were many or few women officers in town was not associated with women's share of town meeting attendance in the slightest. The correlation between town size and women officeholders was $-.44$, however. This fits Hallowell's findings (see above page____). But town size shared no important association with women's attendance and could not be accused of shielding a hidden connection between women officers and women's attendance at town meeting.²⁴

I duplicated this study for the 89 meetings studied in 1996 and 1997. Once again the correlation between the percent of town offices held by women and women's attendance at town meeting was almost non-existent, " r " = $.05$. One might think that towns like Bolton, Newark, Lunenburg, Walden and Plainfield where over 55 percent of the elective local offices were held by women would have larger ratios of women to men in attendance at town meeting than towns like Swanton, Pittsford, Ira, Waitsfield, and Hardwick where less than a quarter of the offices were held by women. And they did. But the improvement was miniscule. For every ten-percentage-point increase in town offices held by women the attendance of women at town

²⁴ Frank M. Bryan, "Comparative Town meetings: A Search for Causative Models of Feminine Involvement in Face-to-Face Politics," (Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, San Francisco, California, August 21-24, 1975).

meeting increased by less than one half (.03) a percentage point. If none of the elective town offices were held by women, women's percentage of the attendance would be 46 percent. If all the offices were held by women, it would be 49 percent. Moreover, the variation around this slope was so great it made estimations totally unreliable. For instance, Hardwick and Waitsfield had higher feminine attendance than Newark, Bolton, and Lunenburg.²⁵

Because women's attendance and office holding in these two years were both associated negatively with town size (-.21 and -.26), the door was left open for a positive association between office holding and attendance camouflaged by the size variable. The view behind the door was checked out with statistical controls for town size and there was nothing there. It is safe to say, therefore, that a positive electoral presence for women in town politics does not pave the way for a positive real presence in the democratic process at town meeting. This said there are other considerations that may matter.

Daytime vs. Nighttime

There are good reasons to suspect that the reformers who advocated holding town meeting at night in order to increase attendance may have biased the practice of real democracy against women.²⁶ Assume the traditional family situation. The man works outside the home and

²⁵ Frank M. Bryan, "How Does Town Meeting Treat Women?" (Paper delivered to Research in Progress Seminar Sponsored by the Center for Research on Vermont, February, 1999).

²⁶ An important recent study questions the assumption (at least for the 1980s) that women have less free time to devote to politics than do men. In fact "free time is not critical for the decision to take part." Affiliation in voluntary associations, while not differing in frequency between men and women, do extend to women a special opportunity to enter political life. Kay Lehman Schlozman, Nancy Burns, and Sidney Verba, "Gender and

the woman works in the home. There are school-aged children. Traditionally, the meeting is held during the day on a Tuesday beginning between nine and ten in the morning and ending between two and four in the afternoon. The man goes off to work. It may well cost the family a day's pay if he does not. The kids get on a school bus at 7:30. They will return home between three and four. Women with school-age children have an opportunity to attend town meeting. Change the meeting time to 7:30 p.m. Supper is finished. The woman does her evening's chores in the home while the husband, with free babysitting provided, is free to go to town meeting.²⁷

Pathways to Participation: The Role of Resources," *Journal of Politics* 56 (November 1994): 963-987. Both of these observations make sense to me in the context of traditional town meeting democracy. Women's organization in Vermont towns have always been equal to or have exceeded men's organization in *quantity*. (The "Ladies Aid," "Women's Club," Daughters of the American Revolution—and even to some extent, the Parent-Teachers Association, are examples.) Moreover, there were numerous "women's auxiliaries" in place. The Masons (long Vermont's most important civic group) had the "Eastern Star." These are dying out. But historically these segregated organizations gave women as much opportunity as men to learn civic skills. They became very good at conducting public meetings. Moreover there always seemed to be time for them. In fact I would venture a guess that women had more free time than men—*during the day*. The "specialness" of these groups was this. In small town life women tended to *run* the *society* while men tended to *run* the economy and *control* the *governance*. But without these groups the transition from home to politics would have been nearly unthinkable historically. This is one reason I believe that Vermont's political culture (while clearly sexist throughout most of this century) was more progressive on gender issues than the great majority of American states. This model is hardly unique. It is simply that it seems to obtain more clearly in local elections and small communities. Merritt, "Winners and Losers," 731-743.

²⁷ Anne Phillips' discussion of these issues in the context of feminist theory is both insightful and disquieting for human scale communitarians. She argues ". . . considering the intense pressures on women's time, it is remarkable that feminists have been so wedded to a politics of meetings. We might more readily expect male politicians to warm to a politics of continuous meetings and discussion and debate, all of them held conveniently outside the home and away from the noise of the children. But most women have been so grounded by responsibilities for children and parents and husbands and house that they could well have settled for the less arduous democracy of casting the occasional vote." Anne Phillips, *Democracy and Difference*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993): 111. Given this most pessimistic assessment women's attendance at town meeting seems rather high. However this does not seriously detract from Phillips' thesis for town meetings are held but once a year in Vermont. Women do not participate as much in town office holding which does require more "continuous" meetings. Still their presence there is much greater than it is in equivalent institutions of larger scale like representative democracy. My sense is that the dissonance rests in communitarian theory (small scale) which does not distinguish between face-to-face *meetings* and face-to-face *governance*. Face-to-face meetings are an artifact of large scale liberal democracy. In small polities doing face-to-face governance citizens learn to keep "meetings" to a minimum.

But will a woman in a traditional family feel free to go off to town meeting alone even during the day? In farming families, which used to abound in Vermont, the man can structure his work to make attendance possible. In fact town meeting was modeled on this very premise. But if there are small children at home the woman is a convenient babysitter. These and other factors notwithstanding however, it is hard to see how night meetings would have advantaged women in the days when traditional family arrangements dominated. This said two expectations are considered. The first is that night meetings will depress women's attendance. The second is that this relationship will decline over time as women enter the work force, the availability of "free time" is equalized for men and women and gender norms are modernized.²⁸

An important negative connection does exist between night meetings and lower attendance for women. The 1081 meetings we monitored which were held during the day averaged 47.3 percent female attendance. But attendance at the 337 night meetings averaged only 43.7 percent women. This gap of 3.6 percentage points meets extremely high standards of statistical significance.²⁹ To put it in perspective we noted earlier that over the last 28 years women enhanced their position relative to men about two and one-half percentage points from an average of 44.8 percent of the attendance prior to 1976 to an average of 47.45 percent after 1993.

²⁸ The equalization of "free time" finding noted above (Scholzman, *et al*, "Gender and Pathways to Participation," 50) has been reinforced and amplified. Linda Thompson and Alexis J. Walker, "Gender in Families," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51 (November 1989): 845-871; Cathleen D. Zrick and Janel McCullough, "Trends in Married Couples' Time Use: Evidence from 1977-78 and 1987-88," *Sex Roles* 24 (April 1991): 459-87. Both of these are cited in: Nancy Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, "The Public Consequences of Private Inequality: Family Life and Citizen Participation," *American Political Science Review* 91 (June 1997): 373-389. Burns and her associates conclude: "It must be noted, however, that despite the fact that they contribute more time to household chores than do men, women, on average, do not appear to have less free time than men."

²⁹The "ETA" correlation coefficient is .25 and is significant at the .0001 level.

This is not an insignificant improvement, given the fact that women are now in the tough going (the last few percentage points) as they narrow the distance between where they are and perfect equality. In those towns that did so switching from day to night meetings may have had the ironic effect of costing women all their gains since 1976 plus another percentage point to boot.

How the night meeting reform hurt women's attendance is demonstrated in Figure IX-F, Plot 1, which arrays 200 meetings according to the size of the town in which they are held and plots the slopes for night and day meetings separately. The lines of best fit can be seen as the average women's attendance at any given level of town size. The differential favoring day meetings is apparent and seems to grow slightly as towns get bigger. There is wide variation, of course, but the overall pattern is clear and striking. The rim of positive outliers from the meeting in Belvidere in 1986 to Charlotte in 1995 were all held during the day. The opposite (with the exception of Jericho's 1989 meeting) was true for the negative outliers. It is the traditional day meetings of the little and often isolated hill towns that women's attendance is most apt to be equal to men's, the expectations noted by the bulk of social scientists to the contrary notwithstanding.

[FIGURE IX-F ABOUT HERE]

Yet the distance between the two kinds of meetings seems to be narrowing—if by fits and starts. Plot 2 in Figure IX-F demonstrates this. After a decline in the late 1970's the gap increased again in the early 1980's. In the decade between the mid 1980's and the mid 1990's, however, it seemed as though it was on its way out. In 1994 and 1995 the gap was only 2.2 percentage points, the second smallest in the 14 two-year clusters of meetings. But in the 114

fig 9 F

meetings in the 1996 and 1997 cluster the difference between women and men's attendance increased dramatically again to 4.2 percentage points and in the 60 meetings studied in 1998 it remained high at 3.5 points. While the wide angle view suggests that as time passes the equality gap between day and night meetings may be diminishing, one thing is clear: in town meetings held during the day women are on the very threshold of perfect equality with men as far as attendance is concerned. At night they are still walking up the steps.

It is often said up here in the north country that women are less willing to brave the roads when the weather is bad and that this is especially true at night. Chapter V demonstrated bad weather was relatively unimportant in predicting turnout at town meeting, especially for day meetings. Is it at least responsible for reducing the relative number of women in attendance at night meetings? No. Overall, at the 103 meetings held when the weather was "bad" 45.8 percent of those in attendance were women. On those 413 occasions when the weather was mixed 46.6 percent of the attenders were women. When it was good, it was 46.4 percent. Women's attendance is hardly affected by the weather at all. Nor does the overall picture hide a day vs. night influence. Bad weather night meetings draw the same ratios of men to women as good weather night meetings. Women attend town meetings held at night less than they do town meetings held during the day, weather conditions notwithstanding. (See Table 1 of Figure IX-G.)

[FIGURE IX-G ABOUT HERE]

fig 9 G

When School Issues are Present

There is a substantial literature to suggest that traditionally women have been more “accessible” and are therefore more apt to be involved in local politics when “women’s issues” like education are on the agenda.³⁰ Educational issues are usually the most family-centered items on the warning and women are more apt to serve on the school board than in any other town office with the exception of town clerk. Indeed, in Vermont women were elected to school boards even before they were allowed to vote.³¹

School issues are often benign. My students reported that the following discussion reported in the minutes of the school meeting in Warren in 1996 took only sixty seconds of deliberative time:³²

Article 7: To appropriate the sum of \$16,000 to be added to the reserve fund for the purchase of a school bus.

³⁰ Barry Bozeman, Sandra Thornton, and Michael McKinney, “Continuity and Change in Opinions on Sex Roles,” in Marianne Githens and Jewell I. Prestage (eds.), *A Portrait of Marginality: The Political Behavior of American Women*, (New York: David McKay Company, 1977): 38-65. See also: Janet L. Bokemeier and John L. Tait, “Women as Power Actors: A Comparative Study of Rural Communities,” *Rural Sociology* 45 (Summer 1980): 238-255.

³¹ Hallowell, “Vermont Women in Local Government”; Bryan, “Comparative Town Meetings”; Bryan, “How Does Town Meeting Treat Women?”

³² Benjamin Cooper, Grant Hansel and Sarah Leib, “The 1996 Comparative Town Meeting Study: Town of Warren,” (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, the Real Democracy Data Base, March 1996). The issue was put on the floor at 1:19 p.m. and left the floor at 1:20 p.m. Benjamin Cooper points out in his essay: “The majority of the people at the school meeting were women whereas at town meeting it was men.” But he is hard on the officers of the town and school district for hurrying the completion of the town meeting before lunch. The school meeting was “warned” for 1 p.m. This meant that if the town meeting was not completed by that time it would have to reconvene *after* the school meeting was over. “Having the town meeting before the school meeting is a poor system. Issues that residents are concerned with should be dealt with no matter how long it takes.” Benjamin Cooper, “1996 Warren Town Meeting,” (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, March 1996): 10.

Lori Klein moved that the \$16,000 be added to the reserve fund for the purpose of purchasing a school bus. Motion Seconded. Balance of fund is \$17,000. Plans are to purchase new bus in 1999-2000 estimated cost of \$80,000. Article 7 approved by a voice vote in the affirmative.³³

Sometimes school matters are more contentious. Consider the following from the minutes of the 1996 meeting in Danville. It represents a typical account of what often happens when school budgets are brought before a town meeting:

Gerard DeLisle moved to suspend the rules to take up Article 6 out-of-order. The motion was seconded. A request for a paper ballot was approved. Results: Yes - 141; No - 68. The motion was so voted.³⁴

Article 6. To see what sum of money the School District will vote to raise in taxes for the support of the school for current expenses, capital improvements and debt service.

Tim Ide moved to raise \$1,579,660. As presented in the school budget. Seconded. Chairman DeLisle explained in detail the expenditure and revenue figures and that Danville was a “maximum loss” town regarding state aid.

Associate Principal Miriam Benson showed charts and statistics regarding students’ performance standings.

³³ Town of Warren, *Town Report*, (Year ending December 1995).

³⁴ A request for a “paper ballot” is a signal. It is in effect a request for anonymity.

Alan Parker, negotiator for teacher contracts, explained the 18-month process and that the board voted 4-1 in favor of the 3.5 percent salary increase for three years.

Tim Ide stated that this budget would raise the tax rate from 1.84 to 2.01 if the grand list increases by 1.

Bert Frye moved to amend the motion for a zero increase, to raise the same as last year—\$1,409,089. The motion was seconded. Judge Springer moved that the budget at least be increased by the cost of living or 2.5 percent.

Toby Balivet moved to create a blank and insert a figure that the voters agree on. Amendment to create a blank was defeated by a 76–128 ballot vote.

Bert Frye proposed a substitute amendment for a 2.5 maximum increase over last year's school tax amount. Substitution was made without objection. Amendment was defeated by a voice vote. Motion to call the question was sustained by a 2/3 standing vote. The main motion to raise \$1,579,660 in taxes was approved by a ballot vote.³⁵

The Danville³⁶ town meeting in 1996 lasted 400 minutes. In that time 38 warning items were considered. Article 6 of the school meeting took 154 minutes (38 percent) of this time.³⁷ The

³⁵ Town of Danville, *Town Report*, (Year ending December 1995): 49.

³⁶ Women made up 39.1 percent of the voters attending Danville's 1996 meeting. I know Danville well having spoken at their Honors Day evening banquet and given the graduation address in their excellent little high school. In 1958 I spent my 15th summer fighting off mosquitoes and mapping marl deposits in the swamps of and on Ewell's Pond in Peacham, one town south on the same high ridge as Danville. I worked for the minister's son who lived in Newbury. We had lied about my age and it was my first year on the state's payroll. I got a real check along

hypothesis is that meetings which have issues like these on the Warning³⁸ will have a higher percentage of women in attendance than those towns which hold their town and school meetings on different days completely.

Data are available for 1092 meetings which voted on school matters the same day they voted on town matters and 346 meetings that voted on school matters on another day completely. From this data a hierarchy of four meeting types was constructed. First are meetings where school items are mixed in with other business on the town meeting warning. Then come situations where the school meeting is held during an adjournment of the town meeting. This category is followed by school meetings which are separated from the town meeting but are held the same day either before the town meeting begins or after it ends. Finally there are towns which hold their school meetings another day. If the theory holds those meetings in the first category should have the strongest feminine attendance and those meetings in the last should

with a “stub” and room and board money. There was no rest. Ten weeks of hard work all day then a little reading and good sleep at a boarding house called Maple Tree Farms. But I learned about the land and the kind of people who debated both sides of the school tax issue in 1996 in Danville.

³⁷ One of my students said the following (in part) about Article 6 in his essay: “This is where the meeting got ugly (or political). During this time there were several heated arguments back and forth between the people and the school board as well as between the people. The townspeople were impressed with Miriam Benson’s presentation displaying charts of academic performance that were considerably higher than the national and local averages.” Robert Kaplan, “The 1996 Comparative Town Meeting Study: Town of Danville,” (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, the Real Democracy Data Base, March 1996): 3.

³⁸ One of the issues that has been of particular importance in recent years has been the opening of school facilities for use by the townspeople. It is a perfect example for students of the problem of “turf” in public administration and politics. Many local school establishments are testy or even hostile to the notion that regular citizens ought to be able to use school facilities even though these are the people who pay the taxes to support the schools. Here is a typical warning item: “To authorize the Board of School Directors to make available school facilities and equipment for specified public purposes if they appear to be in the best interest of the residents of the District, due consideration being given to efficient, economical, and appropriate use of the facilities and equipment.” Town of Charlotte, *Town Report* (Year ending December 1995): 113.

have the weakest. Unless one is willing to make something of a differentiation of .72 of one percent of female participation between meetings where school issues are imbedded and meetings where the school meeting is either before or after the town meeting, the conclusion must be that school issues do not draw more women to town meeting. Counter intuitive or not, there it is. (See Table 2 of Figure IX-G.)

The Australian Ballot

By now (hopefully) the reader knows the Australian ballot provides a way for people to vote in private and to make decisions “on the edge” of town meeting. It can involve going into the town hall, entering a polling booth and voting on local issues, and then leaving without participating in the discussion. Or it could involve going to town meeting Monday night and voting by ballot on issues the next day. Most Australian ballots are for the election of town officers only but many involve other special ballot items such as a zoning ordinance and some include all matters before the town including budgets. One might hypothesize that women would prefer this more anonymous way of democracy since the psychic costs of open participation have traditionally been higher for them than for men. Or perhaps it is felt that if one member of the family ought to “stay for the discussion,” it is the man. Clearly if traditional family responsibilities are significant determinants of the women’s ability to participate in communal

variants of political participation, an ability to “vote and go home” would likely decrease the percentage of town meeting attenders who were women.³⁹ In both cases one would expect lower attendance at town meeting for women where the Australian ballot option is available. In short if it is true that the openness of real democracy discourages those who believe they are not accepted as equals in the political process, then these people might be more apt to prefer the more private option of voting by ballot and avoiding the discussion.

To test this notion I compared women's attendance at meetings where the Australian ballot was available at least for the election of town officers with meetings where it was not used at all. Since there is a relationship between night meetings and the use of the Australian ballot and since there is a relationship between night meetings and lower attendance for women, when the meeting was held was controlled in order to achieve a fair test of the independent effect of the Australian ballot. Table 3 of Figure IX-G displays the data.

Overall the expected relationship does appear. But it is only a shadow in the fog and disappears altogether when the day/night variable is controlled. At the 642 meetings in which the Australian ballot option is unavailable 47.0 percent of the citizens in attendance were women. At the 778 meetings where it was available 46.1 percent were women. This relationship is statistically significant at the .01 level. The strength of a relationship is a relative thing. An improvement of about one percentage point of feminine attendance may seem trivial. If it were real and combined with the difference holding meetings during the day makes, however, women

³⁹ See: Phillips, *Democracy and Difference*, 109-113.

would attain in town meeting the goal they have been seeking in other political systems for centuries—50/50 parity with men—if, ironically, their town used the old fashioned format.

But it does not appear that the relationship is real. Certainly the lower percentage for women overall is influenced by the fact that 90 percent of all night meetings use the Australian ballot and night meetings have lower percentages for women whether they use the ballot or not. The best test we have is the 1081 meetings held during the day. In those meetings use of the Australian ballot is actually associated with eight tenths of a point more attendance for women. This is contradicted by the fact that the 35 night meetings in the sample that did not use the ballot averaged 2.5 percentage points *more* feminine attendance than the 302 meetings that did. Some of this increase (nearly one half of one percent or 20 percent of the increase) could be due to the fact that the average town in the cluster of 35 fell in the sample in 1989 and the average town in the cluster of 302 appeared three years earlier in 1985 when women's attendance was lower across the board. It could be the Australian ballot is a contributing factor to lower turnout by women at night. Yet the small number of meetings in the sample which were held at night with no Australian ballot trump the conclusion that the Australian ballot has an independent effect on women's attendance. (See Table 3 in Figure IX-G.)

PREDICTING WOMEN'S ATTENDANCE: THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY

The incapacity of the women's attendance level at a community's town meeting in one year to predict that same town's percentage of female attenders in the very next year forewarns

trouble in the attempt to stitch these percentages into the fabric of society.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, to abandon the search for such linkages ignores the incessant findings of more than a generation of scholars. Besides the real benefit is in the quest itself. In social science progress is as often defined in terms of expectation denied as in expectation fulfilled.

Socioeconomic Status

Almost everything we have learned about how women break into the political process tells us socioeconomic status is intimately involved. In fact the connection between SES factors and the tendency of women to participate in politics is as strong in the literature as the connection between SES and participation in general.⁴¹ If the SES paradigm is applicable to real democracy, it is almost unimaginable that one could walk into a town meeting in some of Vermont's quintessential upscale communities and not see more women than, for instance, one would see in the tough, dirt road towns of the outback.⁴²

⁴⁰ I am not ready to make this judgment for the long-term contextual influence of political culture and reinforcement theory which accompanies it. There is strong evidence, for instance, that women's representation in state legislatures is strongly influenced by a state's long-term political folkways. Using Elazar's "moralistic" culture scores in combination with a state's "traditional of female representation" (going back to the 1930s) David B. Hill was able to explain 40 percent of the variance in women's representation in state legislatures in 1973 after structural variables, which explained 8 percent were considered. David B. Hill, "Political Cultures and Female Political Representation," *Journal of Politics* (February 1981): 159-168.

⁴¹ Val Burris, "Who Opposed the ERA? An Analysis of the Social Bases of Antifeminism," *Social Sciences Quarterly* 64(June, 1983): 305-17; Sandra K. Gill, "Attitudes Toward the Equal Rights Amendment," *Sociological Perspectives* 28(October 1985): 441-62; Karen Oppenheim Mason, John L. Czajka, and Sara Arber, "Change in U.S. Women's Sex-Role Attitudes, 1964-1974," *American Sociological Review* 41(August 1976): 573-96; Wilbur J. Scott, "The Equal Rights Amendment as Status Politics," *Social Forces* 64(December 1985): 499-506; Arland Thornton, Duane F. Alwin, and Donald Camburn, "Causes and Consequences of Sex-Role Attitudes and Attitude Change," *American Sociological Review* 48(April 1983): 211-227.

⁴² There is no statistical reason to disassociate women's educational levels from those of men in Vermont's towns. The number of men and women with college degrees in a town is, of course, not equal. But the two measures vary in tandem. If 20 percent of the residents over 25 years old in town "A" have a college degree and 30 percent (that is 25 percent more) in town "B" do, then there is no statistical reason to suppose that town "B" does not have 25

Educational level is the key component of the status variable. Studies show education builds confidence, improves efficacy, and increases commitment to the public weal. In a unique study of the contextual influences on pro-feminist attitudes at the individual level, for instance, Banazak and Plutzer, while not sure about some of the connector variables, are not hesitant about the impact of education. “. . . it is clear at both the individual and aggregate level that women’s access to higher education is the most important structural variable related to pro-feminism support by men and women.⁴³ It establishes the psychic capital especially needed to enter the political marketplace. The education variable is, of course, connected at the hip to income. Recall Jane Mansbridge’s poignant description of Florence Johnson in “Selby,” the fictitious name she gave the Vermont town from which she drew the best analysis of a single town meeting democracy ever published:

Many, especially the women, view their lack of influence as an appropriate result of their lack of education. One woman, who has never gone to town meeting, says people like her don’t usually go.

“A lot of people are not educated enough to understand it, like which I am. I mean, I’m too shy to get mixed into a lot of stuff like this, and I haven’t got the education to decide on this stuff like my husband has, and I think that is a lot of it.”⁴⁴

percent more women with college degrees than does town “A”. This fact and the fact that I am interested in community context of town meeting democracy in Volume I of this study is the reason I am using *community* education levels as my base statistic here. Anyway, that’s my story and I’m sticking to it.

⁴³ Lee Ann Banazak and Eric Plutzer, “Contextual Determinants of Feminist Attitudes: National and Subnational Influences in Western Europe,” *American Political Science Review* 87 (March 1993): 147-157.

⁴⁴ Jane J. Mansbridge, “Town Meeting Democracy,” *Working Papers for a New Society*, (Summer 1973): 7.

Integral to the arguments for the SES connection between women and participation is the finding that, while higher SES levels are connected to higher participation for both men and women, it is especially so for women. Men don't "need" better education and/or higher incomes to legitimize public activity the way women do. Women in politics lack the status variables (like formal education) that are traditionally associated with participation in political life.⁴⁵ It is in a sense their "birthright." Thus given two towns of different overall class status rankings, the ratio of women to men at town meeting in upscale towns will be more equal because women in those towns are more apt to share the higher status. In a poorer town the ratio will be more apt to favor men because (even though the ratio of downscale men and women may be the same) women are more apt to be psychically penalized by this status than men.

On the other hand, and more to the point in a book focusing on communities rather than individuals is the fact that upscale communities create an ambiance that should encourage women's participation of whatever social rank. Clearly there is a strong connection in Vermont, for instance, between the ideology of women's participation and education level. In fact it produces the strongest statistical linkage between two variables I have ever been able to produce in over thirty years of research on Vermont elections. The R^2 between the percent of college

⁴⁵ Merritt, "Winners and Losers," 732. Susan Welch, "Women as Political Animals? A Test of Some Explanations for Male-Female Political Participation Differences," *American Journal of Political Science* 21 (November 1977): 711-731. Welch put it this way: "Women participate in the aggregate less than men not because of some belief that they hold about the role of women in politics, but largely because they are less likely to be found in those categories of people who participate in politics: the employed and highly educated in particular." Welch, 726, 728. Education was also found to be an important criterion for recruitment to political office for women in state legislatures and may be critical if a woman has not achieved a party leadership position. Paula Dubeck, "Women and Access to Political Office: A Comparison of Female and Male State Legislators," *Sociological Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1976): 42-52.

graduates in town and the yes vote on Vermont's ERA for its own constitution taken in 1986 was .42, under controls for the Democratic base vote in the towns. Towns with larger cohorts of the college educated certainly had electorates that were much more apt to vote for women's rights than towns that did not.

Here I focus briefly on education alone and then expand the analysis to class itself. Additionally, just to make sure there is no slippage in the Census data, I will initially limit the analysis to those meetings clustered around the 1980 and 1990 Census counts considered as separate samples. Next the doors of more than twelve hundred town meetings from the full sample will be opened. These meetings were held in communities as different as the nooks and crannies of the hills that house them. In the upscale towns of the educated we expect to see more women inside. In working class towns, less.

Four hundred forty-four meetings in the sample were held in one of the seven years surrounding the 1980 Census. In the average town in which these meetings were held 19.5 percent of the population over twenty-five years old had college degrees. The ten towns that led the college graduate list and also had at least three meetings in the sample should by now be familiar. At the top of the list is Norwich with 54 percent college graduates in 1980. At the bottom of the list of ten is Winhall, with 30 percent. In between is the combination of Chittenden County professional towns (Charlotte, Underhill, Williston) and ski towns (Warren, Waitsfield, and Mendon) we have seen before. Calais (near Goddard College) and Elmore (near Stowe) are also there.

The 40 meetings these ten towns had in the sample averaged 35 percent college graduates in the population over 25 years old. Norwich had the best score for women attenders. In three meetings it averaged 54 percent turnout to go with its 54 percent college graduates. Winhall, which had the lowest score of the top ten on education (30 percent) had the lowest score on women's attendance (39 percent). But that is as far as the relationship goes. For the entire sample of 444 meetings the average attendance for women was 46.1 percent. For the 40 meetings held in the ten best educated towns that had at least three meetings in the sample it was exactly the same, 46.1 percent. The ten towns with the lowest education levels accounted for 32 meetings. The average feminine attendance in these was 49.1 percent, significantly higher than the best educated cohort, even though they averaged only seven college graduates for every 100 citizens over 25. The simple correlation coefficient between college graduates and the percent of attenders who were women for the 444 meetings is .09. It failed (barely) to reach statistical significance at the .05 level. A community's education level was thus able to explain less than one percent of the variation in women's attendance at town meeting.⁴⁶

The town with one of the very lowest educational levels (7.5 percent college graduates) is Lunenburg. Here is a town high on the upper Connecticut knee deep in the culture of the north woods. Here is a town honeycombed with little brooks and laced with bog and marsh and edged by broad farmer's fields along the river. Here is a town where the beaver and the fisher cats and the moose and the people all live together—if not in harmony at least together. Here is a town

⁴⁶ The variable I created weighting levels of educational attainment from grade school diploma to postgraduate degree correlated at .07 with women's attendance.

casting a hefty majority of its votes for Ronald Reagan. Here is the town that when it held its town meeting in 1980 had the highest percentage of women in attendance of the 444 we studied between 1977 and 1983, 65.4 percent.

The 1990's cluster, 365 meetings held between 1987 and 1992,⁴⁷ averaged 25.0 percent college graduates, up from 19.5 percent in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The average percent of the attenders who were women was 46.9. In the 1980's cluster it was 49.1 percent. The ten towns with the lowest percent of college graduates (they averaged only 9.2 percent) which had at least three meetings in the cluster constituted a cohort of 35 meetings. These meetings averaged only 44.6 percent feminine attendance. The very bottom towns on the college education statistic did exhibit significantly lower women's attendance. On the other hand the top ten towns (with 38 meetings in the cohort) did not have above average attendance either, although it was close (46.0 percent). Again, the correlation coefficient between education and women's attendance for all 365 meetings emitted all the light of a lonely firefly over a darkened ten acre meadow. It was only .10.

The equations using all the meetings beginning in 1977, when using Census data⁴⁸ became more trustworthy for the small towns, increases the number of cases to 1250. In this more extensive array of meetings the education index, a more sensitive measure of educational level than college graduates alone, correlated with feminine attendance at .10. This is almost

⁴⁷ I was studying in Mississippi for the 1992-1993 academic year and was not in Vermont to conduct the town meeting study in March of 1993. This is why the number of meetings in the cohort is smaller.

⁴⁸ To provide comparisons across towns it is as reasonable to apply the 1980 Census data to 1977 as it is to 1983.

exactly the same as the coefficients generated by the more careful process of testing clusters of meetings hovering around the Census counts of 1980 and 1990, which correlated at .10 and .09 respectively. Expanding the analysis to other individual components of the SES concept added little. Neither median family income nor percent professional in the workforce was able to clear a very low bar of statistical significance. Expectedly, the combined SES index I created from these three variables also failed. But the upscale factor score built on a wider spectrum of variables (it was influenced positively by socioeconomic diversity and negatively by native Vermonters, for instance) did produce a significant but very weak correlation of .12. Socioeconomic diversity also managed to stand alone with a coefficient of .11.

These data do not speak well for the SES hypothesis as far as communities go. Education, diversity, and upscale are no more than faint mutterings on a distant horizon. The clear, crisp message is that women's attendance is apt to be as strong in communities where formal education and other related class variables are low as communities where they are high. Given that the empirical base for SES is almost exclusively grounded in individual level data, excuses are possible, perhaps even plausible. Yet the overwhelming weight of the "thick" evidence supports the notion that town meeting does not use the SES filter for women the way most political systems participation do. Reports on town meeting in the popular literature and the press over the years does not single it out. It has not been apparent in over 4,000 essays my students have submitted to me. I have attended over sixty meetings myself and have not seen it. One notices more upscale women at Shelburne's town meeting and fewer in Kirby's. That is because there are more of them in Shelburne and fewer in Kirby. But there are not *relatively*

more at town meeting in Shelburne. When you look around inside a Vermont town meeting hall you are not struck by the lack of women nor do you sense a special class identity to those in attendance. They seem to be like the men. The swirl of majority class interaction (whether it be upscale or working class) in a town does little to preclude women from attending town meeting.

This naked eye assessment is perfectly consistent with a statistically significant correlation coefficient explaining but one percent of the variance between the percent of attenders who are women and the socioeconomic status of the members of the community in the aggregate. (See Plot 1 of Figure IX-H.) The slope of this relationship does tend upward, however, even if its standard errors are huge. And it is true that within this substantial variation meetings at the top end of the upscale factor average about forty-nine percent participation while meetings at the lower end average about forty-four percent. The four very worst meetings for women were held in towns far down on the upscale factor, Waltham, Williamstown, Swanton, and Richford. The best meeting was held far up the scale in Charlotte. The regression line is not trivial since it lands women at the 50 percent mark on the highest end. But the variation around the line is simply too great for the relationship to do more than offer a possibility, however pleasant that may be.⁴⁹

[FIGURE IX-H ABOUT HERE]

⁴⁹ In a study of women elected to city councils in 264 American cities of over 25,000 population Welch and Karnig found SES factors were, although statistically significant, “. . . tepidly related to the equitability of female representation on the council, and much less related to the presence of women in the mayor’s seat.” Susan Welch and Albert K. Karnig, “Correlates of Female Office Holding in City Politics,” *Journal of Politics* 41 (May 1979): 478-491.

figure 9 H

Other Community Correlates

I first looked at the relationship between community dynamics and women's attendance. This variable is in some sense a surrogate for cosmopolitanism which is itself part of the SES paradigm. Yet my inclination was to believe that growing towns (which for the most part means towns filling up with newcomers to Vermont) would exceed the norm for political involvement by women *if* it were true that a traditional rural society like Vermont's harbored traditional sexist values. Helpful too is the fact that SES and community dynamics variables stand apart from one another. The 20-year population increase explains, for instance, only seven percent of the variation in upscale. The 10-year population increase explains less than one. Yet no community dynamics measures explained even one half of one percent of the variation in women's attendance. Increases in population, native Vermonters in the population, the percent living in the same house for five years prior to the census count, and the percent moving into town in the last five years all refused to even budge the women's share of town meeting attendance.⁵⁰

Community boundness certainly contains elements of the cosmopolitanism/upscale thesis as well. Communities ranking high on rural isolation, where people are less apt to work out of town might be less influenced by forces of modernism which, it is said, are supportive of an expanded vision for women in public life. But rural isolation by itself turned up nothing. Nor did workplace measures (out-of-town or in-town) and how long it takes to get to work. The

⁵⁰ Timpone, however, found that women who have moved in the last two years were *less* apt to register to vote than men. Richard J. Timpone, "Structure, Behavior, and Voter Turnout in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 92 (March 1998): 152. This would seem reasonable since "home duties" in a domestic relocation have traditionally fallen more to women than men.

factor score that summarizes this concept, isolation, failed to make a peep. The “r” was .03. If interaction with large town life promotes women’s involvement in politics, one would expect stronger ratios of women to men at town meeting in places like Underhill, Williston, and St. George all within the Chittenden County SMSA. Weaker ratios would be expected in Kingdom towns like Canaan and Bloomfield, and town like Granville, deep in the central range of the Green Mountains. But it is not so.

Two hardship variables seemed especially relevant. Population density as I measured it (population per road mile) identifies those towns where people are spread out. In Vermont this means living on a back road, almost always made of gravel. In towns where the number of people for every mile of road is low getting to and coming from town meeting will be more difficult for more people. I hypothesized that this would be especially true for women, not because they have more trouble handling back roads but because the difficulty of mixing distance with children and/or a job is more pronounced for women than men. As long as women are not considered the *primary* breadwinner this will be the case. But towns where miles of back roads separate the citizens had no fewer women at town meeting than towns where citizens are more clustered.⁵¹

⁵¹ There is strong evidence from state legislative races that the population density of the city districts helps women conduct campaigns. When voters are scattered over the hill and dale of rural districts women participate in campaigns less. Unfortunately there is confusion in some of the literature between population size and population density. Since all legislative districts at the state level have been close to the same in population size since *Reynolds v. Sims* this variable has been neutralized. Darcy, Welch, and Clark conclude not surprisingly that “size is not an important factor” in women’s attaining legislative seats. But the population density is not addressed. Darcy, Welch, and Clark, *Women, Elections, and Representations*, 60. Moreover shorter distances to the state capital from city districts also attract women candidates. Carol Nechemias, “Geographic Mobility and Women’s Access to State Legislatures,” *Western Political Quarterly* 38 (March 1985): 119-131.

It is also reasonably assumed that towns with higher percentages of dependent population would have lower women's attendance at town meeting. Over the 28 years of this study I looked individually at meetings in towns where there were relatively more children and towns where there were relatively more senior citizens. Both of these groups are more apt to need the care of an adult from time to time. Overwhelmingly, women are the adults who provide such care. This could interfere with their capacity to attend town meeting. Evidently it did not. Neither percentage worked. I then combined these individual statistics into a single variable I labeled "dependent population." Nothing happened. Women, as we have always known in rural America, make do.

But perhaps they could use a little help. In the 1980's Vermont towns began providing daycare at town meeting. By 1995 it became apparent that enough towns had done so to warrant a measurement. It was a simple matter for the students to make this determination and for the meetings of 1995 through 1998 we included it in the data. The results show that childcare does make a difference. Of the 211 meetings studied in that four-year period, 44 were held during the day with childcare provided. They averaged 49.5 percent female attendance. The 99 day meetings that did not offer it averaged 48.5. At night the difference was even greater. The eight meetings with daycare averaged 46 percent female attendance and the 60 meetings that did not averaged 44 percent. Plot 2 of Figure IX-H arranges the meetings on the upscale factor and flags the childcare variable. Importantly, the higher the more upscale a community, the less childcare seems to matter. This makes sense. But the tip in the data is also influenced by Underhill's very low percentage of women attenders in 1996. Although the number of cases for the night

meetings with daycare is low, there is little doubt that a simple improvement like providing a way to take care of the children during day meetings at least is enabling for women. A percentage here and a percentage there add up to real equality. Although we will need more data to be sure, the 44 meetings held during the day with childcare provided suggest that if all town meetings followed suit, Vermont could announce that their town meetings had virtually eliminated all attendance bias against women. How many legislative institutions in the world can make that claim?

PREDICTING WOMEN'S ATTENDANCE: THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Clues about variations in feminine attendance at town meeting might be found in a town's political culture—its indicators of electoral commitment, partisan balance or ideological posture. The expectations are straightforward. First, women's issues in Vermont, as elsewhere, are more apt to be championed by the Democrats than by the Republicans. For three terms in the 1980's the woman in Vermont's governor's office was a Democrat.⁵² In the three decades during which this study was conducted, there has been a (albeit sometimes fuzzy) gender gap between the parties in national elections. Perhaps towns where Democratic candidates again and again receive a higher percentage of the vote will be more apt to have politically active women that will expand women's attendance at town meeting. Second, the liberalism index based on a series of key elections in Vermont might be associated with increased percentages of women at

⁵² Kunin's memoirs of her political life in Vermont are found in: Madeleine Kunin, *Living a Political Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

town meeting, not only because activism occupies a more elevated position in the liberal lexicon but because women's rights does as well. Communities that are more apt to vote for liberal candidates and issues might provide a more nurturing and supportive environment for women to participate in public life. Third, the vote for socialist Congressman Bernie Sanders whose campaigns have been associated with the women's movement could identify towns where women are more involved in local politics. Fourth, a check was made to determine if towns with stronger voting turnout at the polls in general elections also had larger percentages of *women* at town meeting. Women's presence at the polls is equal to men's but their presence at town meeting is not. If participatory energy at the polling booth signals a commitment to politics in general, women's increases at the polls would tend to advantage women at town meeting more than men. The party balance in a town was tested to see if competitive recruitment structures for the election of non-local officers might result in the mobilization of women for non-elective public sector activity as it has elsewhere. Finally, the clearest indicator of local support for women's issues in Vermont was the "yes" vote for Vermont's ERA. Surely it is reasonable to at least surmise towns that more strongly supported an equal rights amendment to the Vermont constitution would likewise have more equal ratios of women to men at town meeting.

For the most part these assumptions failed to prove out. The turnout in general elections, party competition, and liberalism all folded when preliminary tests of their association with women's attendance at town meeting were applied. Partisanship tells us more about the sorry state of the party system in Vermont, especially its rootlessness, than it tells us about women's participation in direct democracy. Two of the towns that had the very lowest three-election

averages for Democratic candidates in the early period of the study also had the very highest three-election averages for Democrats in the later years. In Norwich, which is so bound to Dartmouth College dominated Hanover, New Hampshire, that they share a school district, the Democrats averaged less than 23 percent of the vote in the gubernatorial elections of 1976, 1978 and 1980. In the elections of 1992, 1994, and 1996 they averaged over 75 percent. The same was true for Barnard, a rural chic suburb of Vermont's quintessential upscale paradise, Woodstock. Partisanship in Vermont moved closer and closer to a random event over the period. It explained less than one half than one percent in the variance in women's attendance.⁵³

The Bernie Sanders' vote didn't do much better. The "r" was .09, which means it explained less than one percent of the variance in women's attendance at town meeting. Given the grassroots organizational work of Sanders and his linkage to women's issues I expected more.⁵⁴ Plot 1 in Figure IX-I, which demonstrates the pulseless relationship between variations in Sanders' support and women's attendance at town meeting in Vermont, is interesting for its bi-modular distribution—like a blast from a double barreled shot gun. Towns tended to be either for or against Sanders. That seemed to fit. But in neither case did the Sanders' vote locate where women are more apt to go to town meeting.

[FIGURE IX-I ABOUT HERE]

⁵³ There is evidence that women do better in being elected to city councils which use the non-partisan ballot. Welch and Karnig, "Correlates of Female Office Holding," 488.

⁵⁴ Close observers of the Sanders' movement, however, suggest I needn't have been. Greg Guma says of Sanders, for instance, "his concern about sexual oppression in general, however, was limited." He also argues that women were mainly "outsiders" in the loose coalition that elected Sanders mayor of Burlington. Guma also stresses the

fig 9 I

conflicts between Sanders and Governor Kunin when both ran for governor. Greg Guma, *The People's Republic*, (Shelburne, Vermont: The New England Press, 1989): 25-26, 52, 136, 176.

Even more surprising, assuming some integrity between issues and behavior, was the ERA vote. Towns demonstrating strong support for a constitutional amendment guaranteeing women's rights ought to have more women practicing one of the dearest of these rights than towns rejecting such an amendment. Yet the 191 meetings we studied in 1985, 1986, and 1987 (the ERA referendum was held in 1986) indicated no such behavior. There is Norwich (in Figure IX-I, Plot 2) the leading town for women on the ERA vote (about eighty percent "yes") with two of its three meetings below the statewide average for women at town meeting. Up north on the Canadian border the town of Troy was at the very bottom of the ERA voting (about eighty percent) but matched Norwich on women's town meeting attendance. Bolton, the little town on the Winooski where a lack of ramps on and off the interstate provides a shield of sorts from Burlington's magnetic forces (and put its major revenue source—a ski area—in hock for decades) had the lowest percentage of women at town meeting over the period. Its percent for the ERA was 48 (almost the statewide average). Hartland, which also produced an average ERA vote, had the second highest town meeting score. Charlotte which was by no means among the ERA leaders had the highest.

Overall, the 20 meetings in towns that were most negative on the ERA averaged 46.1 percent women's attendance while the ERA vote in the towns themselves averaged 29.5 percent "yes" and 81.5 percent "no." The 20 meetings on the other end of the ERA vote (they averaged 68.7 percent for the ERA) had an average of 47.4 percent female attendance at town meeting. This increase is reflected by the regression line in Plot 2 of Figure IX-I which predicts that a 20 percent "yes" vote on the ERA would "produce" a 46 to 54 ratio of women to men at town

meeting while an ERA vote of 80 percent “yes” would produce a 48.5 to 51.5 ratio. Bear in mind that the miniscule “r” of .074” predicts a substantial standard error. (It is 5.95.) What we have with the ERA is a relationship with women’s attendance that is so weak the view from the very lowest point on the slope is almost the same as the view from the very highest point. And what we see all along the way is made uncertain by great cloudbanks of variation.⁵⁵

PREDICTING WOMEN’S ATTENDANCE: THE VARIABLES IN COMBINATION

The analytical steps made throughout this chapter were retraced and summarized by way of a multiple regression equation. Experiments were conducted with various combinations of variables. The conclusion: the ratio of women to men at town meeting is nearly impossible to predict. The most potent arrangement of factors featured the day/night variable. But it explained only 6.9 percent of the variance. Upscale communities added another 1.3 percent followed by small towns with one percent. The entire equation fell short of explaining even 10 percent of the variance. Yet it is of note that Upscale finished the exercise in second place and that it was strengthened a bit when town size was controlled. At the margin (a very narrow margin) the best environment for women’s attendance seems to be an upscale small town that holds its meeting during the day. (See Table IX-A.)

[TABLE IX-A ABOUT HERE]

⁵⁵ The two factor scores used to reduce the political data to a pair of single components, one called “Sanders” and the other called “Liberal,” were also sent into the analysis without success.

table 9 A

The most important factor remains the time of day the meeting was held. In the 210 meetings studied between 1995 and 1998 (when daycare data were available) it was the *only* variable that survived the regression equation. It alone accounted for nearly as much variation (nine percent) as the eight variables entered in the full sample equation for the meetings of 1970-1998. Once entered there was no wiggle room left in the data through which any other variable could squirm and establish a statistically significant presence. In the 210 post-1994 meetings those that were held at night had a 44.5 to 55.5 attendance ratio in favor of men. Those held during the day closed the gap to 49.8 to 50.2. It is worth repeating. The best thing Vermont could do to equalize attendance for women in the short term is the least theoretically complicated and the most practical. Meet during the day and provide childcare.