

CHAPTER XII

If You Build It, Let Them Play

When citizens know the issues to be dealt with [at town meeting] are trivial or uncontroversial, they choose to stay home—and why not? But controversial issues bring them out.

—Robert Dahl¹

Citizens are not likely to “fly to the assemblies” [Emerson] when the decisions they make in those assemblies are trivial.

—Jane Mansbridge²

The role of issues is remarkably muted in the scholarship on democratic performance in America. The reasons why this is so are complex and in themselves revealing about both political science and the health of the body politic. In my conversations with political scientists over the years I have often asked the question: “What do you think would cause variations in turnout at town meeting? Or, “What stimulates people to speak at town meeting?” Or, “Why do you suppose discussion lasts longer at some meetings than others?” Seldom is the answer the one a Vermonter would give: “They had a big fight over road salt.” Or “School taxes went up fifteen percent this year and the wages around here went up only three percent.” Or, “The town is getting ready to reappraise property.” Every year I deal with a couple of dozen reporters who call me (often from out-of-state) looking for a “good” town meeting to attend or for filler in an article they are writing. They too seem surprised when I suggest that issues matter. Practicing democrats in Vermont take it as a given.

¹ Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998): 111.

² Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980): 130.

If this be so why haven't I included it in the analysis until now? First of all it is difficult to develop a variable that would code meetings on issue salience. I flirted with the idea of using conflict in the form of votes taken. The more there were and the closer the outcome the more conflict there must have been and this conflict was most likely precipitated by an important issue. But in preparing the data base for Volume II (when I will treat town meetings as legislative bodies) it became apparent that there was too much slippage in the kinds of votes and the way they are conducted to make this a fair indicator, although I still suspect there is a relationship between the two. Secondly it has been the purpose of this book to describe the parameters of real democracy and explore their connection to community. In this context the kinds of political issues generated by communities and dealt with by their town meetings seemed to come last in the causal order of things. Moreover issues are the perfect segue to a discussion of town meetings as conduits of community conflict, which is the subject of Volume II. Thus it is that now is the time to take them under consideration.

Since it seemed inadvisable if not impossible to code the issues first and look for variation in them second I concluded that the best approach was to study conflict as *it impacts attendance* from the outside in—to turn the scientific process around and proceeded inductively. Let the measurable attributes (town size, meeting structure, community life variables and so on) *identify* those meetings where real democracy significantly exceeded expectations, then hone in on this reduced number of meetings and describe what was happening. Were there key issues at stake in these particular meetings? Beyond my own data on votes and margin of wins and loses, time spent discussing particular issues and the amount of discussion on contentious warning items I use state and local newspapers (Vermont has an amazing network of local papers), my

own familiarity with the towns and the issues that drive them, the students' essays, and personal interviews where needed.

I first selected (arbitrarily) the top 50 meetings of the 1435 on the Achieved Best Democracy Index (ABDI). These were the meetings that most exceed expectations based on the variables that predict good democracy. Then I went to the 55 towns for which I had at least ten meetings and (if it were not one of the original 50) selected the best meeting for each of the 55 towns. This by definition helped neutralize the community context and meeting type variables that in the aggregate built the statistical filters that identified over-achieving meetings. Finally I identified towns for which I had a cluster of at least five meetings in a ten-year period and (if it had not already been selected) looked at the best meeting in the ten-year time frame. This provided additional meetings from additional towns. The question is simple enough. What was going on at those meetings whose democratic performances were far better than one would predict, given the dozens of community and meeting type variables that have framed the bulk of the analysis so far?

[NOTE: I am currently cleaning up this final chapter, one of the shorter ones (about 40 pages) in the book. It has three sections. The first (TOWNS, MEETINGS AND CONFLICT) demonstrates that controversial issues account for most of the variation in the participatory character of real democracy not explained by the book's preceding models. But there are exceptions. The second (CONFLICT AND REAL DEMOCRACY: A TYPEOLOGY) compares these exceptions (places where real democracy is practiced at a level significantly above what can reasonably be expected of them – without the stimulant of contentious issues) with the dominant condition (issues are important) to see if the two situations are associated with commonalities in meeting types and/or community settings. The third (IS THERE A BOTTOM LINE?) treats these distinctions in terms of communitarian expectations and liberal realities.]