

Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works. By Frank M. Bryan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 312p. \$49.00 cloth, \$19.00 paper.

— G. Thomas Taylor, *University of Maine*

This book joins a small number of empirical studies about direct democracy and, specifically, the town meeting. Frank M. Bryan is author, coauthor, or editor of 11 books, including *Politics in the Rural States* (1981) and *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale* (1989). Here, he unveils an incredible set of discoveries that fills a major gap in the literature on democracy and the town meeting. Other prominent scholars who have tackled some of these salient issues are Joseph Zimmerman (*The New England Town Meeting*, 1999) and Jane J. Mansbridge (*Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 1980), both of whose works are referenced extensively in *Real Democracy*.

Bryan has performed yeoman's work in this landmark comparative study of town meetings that has evolved over three decades from 1969 to 1998. With help from his students as a part of their course responsibilities, he designed a framework for data collection and analysis of 1,435 Vermont town meetings held in 210 different towns (p. 266). Typically, his research teams would observe and document approximately 50 town meetings each year. One example of a significant finding from this massive longitudinal study was that "on average only 20 percent of the town's registered voters attended their yearly town meeting . . . and only 7 percent of them spoke out" (p. 280). Collecting data from hundreds of these towns is a remarkable feat because they often meet simultaneously in March, causing a logistical problem. Before Zimmerman's book, there were no aggregate data on attendance rates of the New England towns.

To analyze this huge set of data, Bryan employed standard statistical techniques of multiple regression, correlation coefficient, and the Gini index. In addition, he crafted several original indices, for example, the raw best democracy index (RBDI) and the controlled best democracy index (CBDI). He and his students identified 238,603 acts of participation by 63,140 citizen-legislators that form the basis for this study.

The author argues that what happened at a town meeting in Athens, Vermont, in 1992 was not unusual or random, or even very unique, but real democracy. In the United States, town meetings have predated representative government. He further claims: "It is accessible to every citizen, coded in law, and conducted regularly in over 1,000 towns. In my state of Vermont citizens in more than 230 towns meet at least once each year to pass laws governing the town" (p. 3). Moreover, using the word "democracy" to mean a representative system is, as Robert Dahl concluded, "an intellectual handicap" (Dahl, "The City in the Future of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 61 [December 1967]: 953-69.) Real democracy for Bryan happens only when eligible citizens of a general purpose government function as the legislative body. They must meet in a deliberative, face-to-face assembly and agree to follow the laws and other decisions they have made. In their visible laboratory, real democracies evolve in better or worse forms and promote good and bad policies. Real democracy functions best when those who dwell in a community are citizens and all are able to participate (p. 4).

Bryan states that the purpose of his book is "quite modest: to take the guess work out of fundamental things we ought to know about real democracy" (p. 18). His remarkable comparative study of Vermont town meetings analyzes data about real democracy never before assembled. Some of his key questions are the following (p. 18): What percentage of registered voters attend and speak? What issues are discussed and what is the length of meetings? Do a few persons dominate? Are there significant differences between women's and men's participation? How much conflict occurs? Do officers dominate discussion?

The book is a complex blend of the author's own colorful and witty partial autobiography with his persistent effort to conduct both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of Vermont town meetings. Its organizational structure includes a preface and introduction, which explain his purpose, passion, and methodology. He also integrates a meaningful comparison between Athenian democracy (500 B.C.) and that in Athens, Vermont, where the former also includes the "demes" (139 small village governments). What follow are 11 fascinating chapters, including an essay on the town meeting (a well-documented historical account that traces the image and reality of the American experience with real democracy through all forms of literature). Another chapter introduces the readers to several town profiles and the importance of size; two chapters each are devoted to attendance, public talk at the meeting, and equality and women's participation; other chapters include issues and participation, best and worst cases of town meeting practices, and a conclusion on their purpose and future. Readers also may consult a thorough and useful lab report at www.UVM/~fbryan.

Numerous insightful findings appear throughout this seminal work: "[O]ne thing is certain: community size must

lead the attempt to build a working model of real democracy" (p. 72). Size matters: "When we take into account its curvilinear properties, the size variable is extremely powerful, explaining 58 percent of the variance in attendance at town meeting. As far as citizen presence is concerned, real democracy works best in small towns. Of this there is no doubt" (p. 81). In addition, "Beyond meeting size, issues are the most important determinant of discussion at town meeting" (p. 233).

Searching for shortcomings boils down to different preferences and the author's discretion. For example, there is an inordinate amount of significant and juicy commentary in many of the chapters' copious footnotes that could perhaps be better integrated into the main body text, thereby making the book more reader friendly. Another option would have been to locate some of the more technical tables, plots, and figures in a methods-oriented appendix (for the more advanced readers).

The prospective audience for this significant book will likely be diverse, including political scientists (and their students in advanced undergraduate and graduate courses especially in democratic theory and state and local government), as well as appointed and elected local government officials. It also would naturally appeal to community and neighborhood advocates and general readers who are rightly concerned about the future of American democracy.

The irony is that *Real Democracy* is very strong on comparisons within Vermont but has only a few passing references to the other New England states. Maine, for example, has twice as many towns and still retains the pure town meeting in most of its smallest towns. However, an appointed executive, the town manager, has been grafted onto the traditional board of selectman-town meeting form in many of its communities. There are other thorny issues: Is the meeting affected by the growth of staff and professional management? Is the town meeting a luxury enjoyed by communities under 2,500 in population? How many meeting abandonments (or other reforms, such as the representative town meeting) have occurred in the New England states? Frank Bryan has opened the door of his archive (which he will certainly continue to mine for even more "jewels") and will thereby challenge other scholars to venture beyond representative democracy and join him in the search for and understanding of the real democracy that most modern-day political scientists have bypassed.