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Keeping tabs on town meeting

Professor says Vermont is democracy's standard-bearer

Editor's note: This is part of a monthly series exploring change in Vermont through its symbols.

By KEVIN O'CONNOR
Staff Writer

Want to study Shakespeare? Travel to London. Art? Try Paris. Political science? Frank Bryan points students to Athens.

Athens, Vt., population 340.

Bryan used to grouse when big-city pontificators exaggerated the romance or ruin of town meetings based not on facts but feelings. So the University of Vermont professor sent students to Grange halls and gymnasiums year after year with instructions to count every seat filled, every issue considered, every hand raised (both before and after lunch).

More than three decades and 1,500 town meetings later, Bryan has collected and crunched his numbers — all 238,603 “discrete acts of participation” by 61,474 people — into a new book, “Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works.”

“So what if individual town meetings do little more than buy trucks, vote for local school budgets, rule on salt for the highways, and determine when taxes come due?” he writes in the introduction. “Physics can be learned and taught as well

from the perspective of a spider web as from that of the Golden Gate Bridge.”

So what's the state of town meeting in the state of town meeting? The answer, Bryan believes, says much about the future of democracy not only in Vermont, but also in the nation.

Political science lab

Vermonters have focused nationally this winter on a favorite son in the presidential primaries, but Bryan says those fascinated by politics need look no farther than their own backyard.

“It is time for us to return to the towns, the villages, where pasture springs in the high hills of home feed the streams that fill the reservoirs of our national citizenship,” he writes in the preface to his book. “Tiny places that govern themselves are both laboratories for the science of democracy and watersheds that sustain our liberal and continental politics.”

Bryan believes town meetings, now limited to New England and the “Prairie Home Companion” parts of Minnesota are best seen in more than 230 of Vermont's 246 cities and towns.

He admits he's biased. The 62-year-old Newbury native collected his first town meeting data as a high school freshman sent on the mission

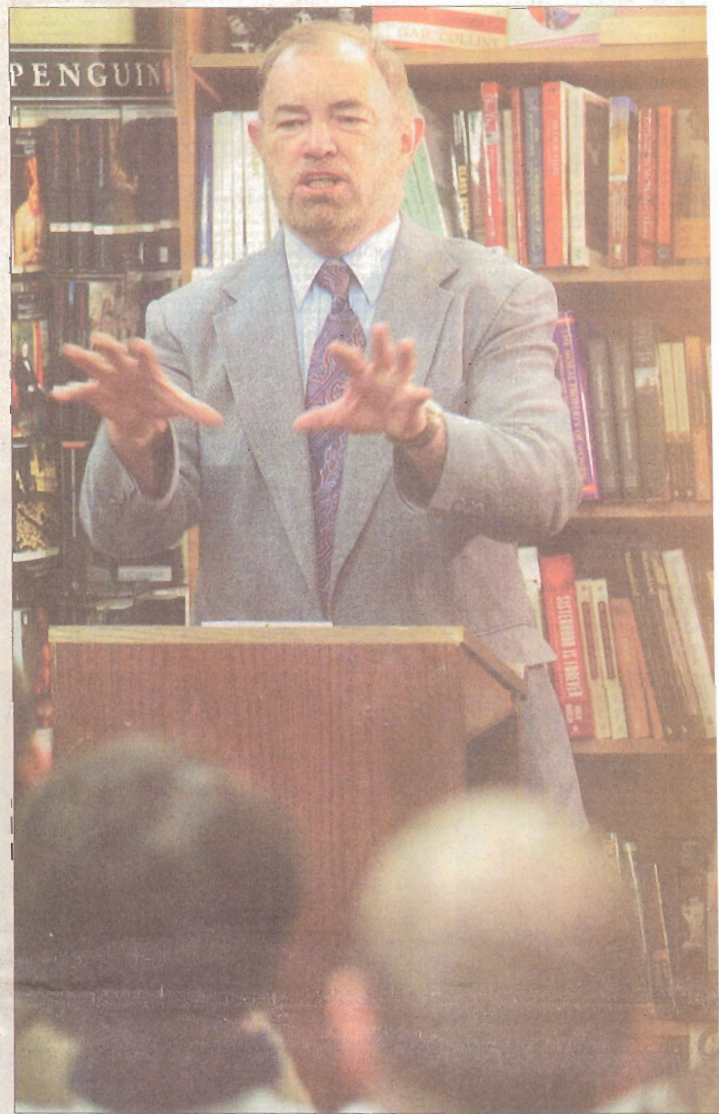


Photo by Stefan Ward

Town meeting historian Frank Bryan speaks at a book signing event at Bear Pond Books in Montpelier recently. Bryan talked about his latest book, “Real Democracy.”

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Professor

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by his civics teacher. ("My graduating class contained seven students," he writes in a footnote. "I finished in the top 10.") Studying and then teaching at St. Michael's College in Colchester, he started dispatching his own students in 1969, and kept doing so when he moved to the university.

His assignment: Count how many men and women are present a half-hour into the meeting, shortly before and after lunch, and at the next-to-last agenda item. Clock the time spent on each issue. Record who, when and how often people speak, as well as the results of voice, standing and ballot votes. He filled in the blanks from there.

Driving forces

Lesson one: Fewer than a quarter of eligible voters — 20.5 percent — showed up for the almost 1,500 town meetings studied between 1970 and 1998.

Bryan calls this "the single most important statistic I have discovered" (because "that's the question most often asked me, and we had no idea"). But he qualifies it with graph upon graph of explanation. The professor can prove, for example, that voters in smaller towns take part more than neighbors in larger towns.

"If you and I are in a meeting of two, we each have 50 percent of the power. If a third person comes in, we now have 33 percent. If a fourth person comes in,

we've each got 25 percent. You notice what happens? Small-town people feel more expected to participate since they're part of a smaller group. We can't reduce town size, but you can use representative town meetings like Bartleboro (with 145 representatives for 11,986 residents), or neighborhood associations that have some real power to make decisions."

Bryan discovered communities with higher education and economic levels didn't necessarily have higher meeting turnout, but those voting with Australian ballots saw attendance drop significantly.

"The assumption is if you go to a ballot everybody can vote, but guess what — everyone doesn't vote."

He also found a combination of bad weather and bad roads could cut attendance by almost 7 percent during the day and more than 12 percent at night. (But blue skies have their clouds, too: "After a long winter, the last place many Vermonters want to be on a bright, sun-filled March day is inside," he adds.)

Best and worst?

Bryan even has worked out a formula to determine Vermont's best and worst "real democracies."

The Northeast Kingdom town of Newark, population 467, scored highest in attendance, participation, women's involvement and

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Frank Bryan, UVM professor

meeting length of the 55 communities Bryan surveyed at least 10 times in the past three decades. He found a "nice mix" of natives and newcomers. But ask why, on average, 43 percent of Newark voters attend the three-hour, 42-minute meeting (or why 53 percent of attendees speak up) and he admits, "I'm not sure."

In comparison, the southwestern town of Proctor scored lowest, on average, with only 11 percent of voters at the one-hour, 38-minute meeting, and only 22 percent of participants speaking.

Bryan has attended a Proctor meeting himself and appreciated the cocoa and cookies one resident served him afterward. But he said he believes the town's Vermont

Marble Co., once the largest in the world, caused local laborers to speak through unions and leaders to side with the Proctor family, which produced four governors.

"The family and union siphoned off civic capital away from the town," he surmises. Bryan sees divergence even in close communities. Huntington and Starksboro are neighboring bedroom towns between Burlington and Middlebury. They have similar socioeconomic profiles, but Bryan says Huntington has a more robust meeting than Starksboro, where he lives.

"Huntington has more arguments on more issues than we do," Bryan says enviously. "There's more conflict."

Sparks fly

And so although Bryan has several suggestions for boosting turnout — cut Australian ballots and night meetings, combine town and school agendas, provide child care (women averaged only 46 percent of attendees and 36 percent of speakers in the study) — one tops his list:

Ask to triple local tax bills. "Conflict draws people to town meeting."

Bryan found even towns with the biggest, best-scheduled meetings have suffered attendance declines as the decades pass. He says a growing number of residents don't participate because they don't find reason to.

"I think our national government is imploding. It's a mess because we don't train people to be smart, discerning and tolerant citizens. You can't train them in the madness of presidential elections. Better to empower them in town-meeting-like things. There you have to disagree with people you care about on things that matter. That, over time, builds real tolerance."

"Vermont has a very strong civil society, and I think that's because of our town meeting tradition. I try to tell Vermonters we really have something incredibly precious and historically significant. I do think we are now the stewards of the world's most democratic society. A lot of people want to fix things from the top down. I think you've got to fix it from the bottom up. I'm convinced ordinary people make good decisions about their communities if given a chance."

'Like the springtime'

Bryan voices similar hope for town meeting: "It's alive and well and, given conditions of modern democracy, I think it's surprisingly healthy. People say I'm a romantic about it, but I'm not. I grew up in a small town, and I have watched town meeting democracy in all its good and evil. Real democracy isn't necessarily beautiful. A lot of time it gets ugly."

That said, his book cover pictures Norman Rockwell's "Freedom of Speech," a 1943 Saturday Evening Post magazine

illustration of Arlington resident Carl Hess standing reverently among a circle of neighbors.

Bryan had to edit his book to 312 pages (The University of Chicago Press, \$49 hardcover and, because he waived royalties, \$19 paperback), but offers an uncut "The Unexpurgated Real Democracy" on his Web site, www.uvm.edu/~fbryan. He'll send up to 40 students to more town meetings over the next two weeks and update his data "for as long as I am able."

"My colleagues around the country still think Vermont is a quaint farming state. They don't understand we're beset by the modernization of life. My passion as a scholar is to find out the truth, to set the record straight. I want to be able to tell someone who looks back 200 years from now, exactly to the minute, how much time we spent on road issues compared to other issues. That's volume two, if I live long enough."

For now, volume one supplements its facts with personal observations. The professor ends one chapter looking out his office window one late November afternoon, seeing past the coming winter cold and darkness to another town meeting.

"It matters not what others say," he writes. "Real democracy resides deep in America's dearest dreams. It is like the springtime. It is a longing."

Contact Kevin O'Connor at kevin.oconnor@rutlandherald.com.