

Public Opinion Quarterly

Fall 2005
Volume 69 / Number 3

Frank M. Bryan. *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2004. 320 pp. \$49.00 (cloth); \$19.00 (paper).

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What does "real democracy" look like? According to Frank Bryan, author of *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*, real democracy involves eligible citizens coming together in face-to-face deliberation to vote on binding legislation that governs everyone within a specific geographic boundary. Bryan argues that town-meeting democracy, still practiced in New England states, offers perhaps the nearest illustration of what real democracy might have looked like 2,500 years ago in Greece. Pointing out that we, as political scholars, know more about the practice of real democracy in ancient Athens than today in the United States, Bryan attempts to set the record straight by chronicling over 28 years of field work, attending more than 1,500 town meetings in his home state of Vermont.

During this period, Bryan and hundreds of undergraduate student volunteers traveled the length and width of Vermont to attend town meetings, which traditionally take place annually on the first Tuesday in March (thus necessitating the use of multiple researchers to compile the data set). The final count used in the analysis totaled 1,435 meetings, which took place from 1970 to 1998 in 210 Vermont towns. The towns were randomly selected each year, although 55 towns were followed for 10 or more years for comparative purposes.

For the length of the study, Bryan and his team of assistants cataloged details of town meetings that related not only to attendance, but also to participation. Thus, in addition to taking head counts, researchers recorded the number of people who spoke and how many times they spoke, as well as the proportion of male to female citizens who attended and participated. In narrating the results, Bryan alternates between numerical analysis of data and first-hand "witness" accounts or essays that provide "thick description" of the

individual meetings. The book also includes a generous supply of footnotes, which often contain amusing personal observations of town meetings or Vermont life, alongside an impressive review of scholarly work. In addition to the data presented in the book, Bryan refers his readers to additional sets of analyses, tables, and essays on his personal Web site at the University of Vermont: <http://www.uvm.edu/~fbryan>.

To explain town meeting attendance and participation, Bryan painstakingly examines several hypotheses. For instance, what is the association between socioeconomic status (SES) and town meeting attendance? Contrary to political science research that shows a strong and positive association between SES and political participation, Bryan found no link between income, education, or occupation and town meeting attendance. In a few cases, his data showed that towns populated with working-class citizens, who had far less formal education, often had much higher attendance than more upscale towns, which had highly educated residents (think suburbs of Burlington). Other hypotheses examined differences between large towns and small towns, towns that hold their meetings during the day and those that hold them at night, and towns that have adopted Australian ballots (written ballots that allow people to vote on questions before the town without going to town meetings) versus towns that have not or that use them in some combination with voting at town meetings. Bryan's quest to explain town meeting attendance and participation also leads him to consider the political culture of the towns, community structure, population mobility, population density, the topics of the town meetings—including the potential for conflict—and even the weather conditions (weather on the first Tuesday in March can be notoriously unpredictable).

What does Bryan's research tell us about the health of real democracy in Vermont? During the 28-year study period, an average of 20.5 percent of a town's registered voters attended their town's annual town meeting. To those who would wield these numbers as evidence of the declining significance of town meetings, Bryan would point out the "costs" associated with attending the town meetings. For example, town meetings that occur during the day typically last about four hours, including a break for lunch; for nonsalaried workers, attending town meetings can mean taking a day off work without pay. There are childcare issues, which can limit female attendance during the day, as well as at meetings that are held during the evening. If parents do not bring their children, many must hire babysitters at additional costs. Night meetings also require that people still go to the polls the next day to vote. Finally, town meetings occur at least once a year. As Bryan notes, if the costs associated with going to the polls every four years to elect an American president were as great as attending the town meeting, we might see far fewer than 50 percent of registered voters going to the polls.

Overall, towns exhibiting the best examples of real democracy tended to be small; town size explained almost 60 percent of the variance in town meeting attendance. In addition to occurring in small towns, the best examples of real democracy, according to Bryan, were associated with town meetings that

lasted longer, had more active participation among attendees, and involved a greater proportion of women.

Largely absent from the account are the personal experiences or opinions of citizens who attend town meetings, which might have addressed whether attendance or participation influenced people's sense of political efficacy, among other things. Still, the witness accounts offer useful insight into individual experiences at the meetings. In addition, by returning to some towns year after year, Bryan is able to examine patterns in town meeting behavior, as well as how particularly contentious issues played out in subsequent years.

In *Real Democracy* Bryan gives us a comprehensive view into town-meeting life in Vermont. His work takes the reader on a picturesque journey through the Green Mountains of Vermont, visiting sparsely populated towns that hug the border of Canada, to the larger suburbs of Burlington, to the towns that border the southern edge of the state. Through witness accounts, we meet the everyday people who attend town meetings, as well as the less common—but perhaps more stereotypical—colorful characters who attempt to disrupt town meetings for personal reasons. We also get firsthand reports of how Robert's Rules of Order and more subtle group sanctions work to minimize inappropriate or unsavory behavior.

Real Democracy, along with Jane Mansbridge's *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (1980) and Joseph Zimmerman's *The New England Town Meeting* (1999), collectively give valuable attention to what some might consider a fascinating relic of early American democracy but which others recognize as fertile ground for examining how citizens come together to negotiate policy related to their everyday lives. Bryan makes no claim that town meetings are the best examples of representative democracy, but he does make a compelling argument that town meetings deserve recognition as "schoolhouses of citizenship" or training grounds for future civic engagement. Although the matters under consideration might seem trivial by national standards—for example, road conditions, the purchase of a new snowplow, or school board elections—they represent high stakes for citizens, who often attend town meetings at considerable personal expense.

References

- Mansbridge, Jane J. 1980. *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Zimmerman, Joseph. 1999. *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action*. Westport, CT: Praeger.