

VERMONT

*The
Proceedings of the
Vermont Historical Society*

HISTORY



WINTER/SPRING 2005

VOL. 73

Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works

By Frank M. Bryan (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. xx, 312, \$49.00; paper, \$19.00).

Town meeting is the essential Vermont experience. It is what distinguishes us from every other government on earth, in that we hold annual meetings of voters to adopt budgets and settle questions of local interest in open meeting, face-to-face, reasoning together, the decision binding as a matter of law. This is direct democracy—the governance of the people by the people, as opposed to government by elected or appointed representatives. It is something that happens every year in nearly every Vermont town, as it has since the town began, according to law and tradition.

Of course, there are town meetings in other New England states and in some towns in Minnesota, but as Frank Bryan asserts, “Vermont is the

best place in New England with enough small town meeting governments to make possible a long-term comparative study of town meeting" (p. xii).

With something so unique and so vital, you might think that generations of scholars would have flocked to Vermont to study town meeting over the years, but you would be wrong. Meet Frank Bryan, the one and only political scientist to collect and interpret empirical data on town meeting. Bryan, who was raised in Newbury, Vermont, and has long held the position of professor of political science at the University of Vermont, has been studying town meeting for his entire professional career, more than thirty years. It is his life's work.

His book is, at last, published, and it's everything he promised and more. It is mandatory reading for every Vermonter who wants to understand town meeting.

At St. Michael's College, where Bryan began his career, and then at UVM, Bryan recruited hundreds of students to attend over 1,700 town meetings, and then spent years compiling and making sense of the data they collected. The students carried clipboards and stop watches, and recorded all the numbers they could collect, such as how many people were in attendance at different times of the day, how many spoke, how many women participated. Bryan made charts and graphs, and read the numbers.

The students graduated and got on with their lives, but ask around and you'll be surprised how many people you know took Frank Bryan's course at UVM and will admit, if you pry, how it changed their lives. They are the leaders of our communities now. They didn't just collect data for the professor; they were inspired by the experience.

Frank Bryan is a scientist. That means he is compelled to study data in order to understand his subject. Bryan explains his motive for writing the book in the preface, where he complains that, before he started his study, "Nearly everyone who said or wrote anything about small-town life or town meeting got it wrong. They inflated the hell out of either the positives or the negatives" (p. x). That happens without hard data. People fall back on what they think, rather than on what they know, and of all subjects fit for nostalgic treatment, town meeting can cause people to mist over quickly, their minds clouded by sentiment.

Most readers of *Real Democracy* won't be political scientists, and for that reason the charts and graphs, and the conclusions drawn from the data, may seem foreign at first. Give it a chance. The author will wait for you, and his conclusions from those numbers are worth understanding. Frank Bryan is a strong writer, because he is a strong thinker. *Real Democracy* shows his real genius, in between the numbers.

It would do no good to declare town meeting an endangered species. In small Vermont towns, it continues to serve its original purpose, both

as an act of governance and as a way of bringing the community together. It is changing, as everything does, but it retains its basic structure and function. Bryan deserves some kind of First Citizen award for adopting it as his field of study and restraining himself from earlier publication, allowing the book to ripen at its own pace.

With nothing but gratitude for the work Frank Bryan has done, I cannot help but think there is another book on town meeting to be written, one that would complement *Real Democracy* by examining the subject of debate and how close issues are decided. It could not be scientific. It might not even be logical, in the classical sense. Debate does not always reflect the outcome of votes. But a community acting together to resolve public dilemmas at town meeting has a personality and a mind different from any of the individuals participating. How we decide important questions is a subject no one has investigated as yet, and something sorely lacking in the literature.

That is not to take anything away from *Real Democracy*, a book that warrants a close reading and will trigger a new appreciation for town meeting. Everything Frank Bryan publishes is engaging; this one more than others has a vitality that springs from the author's complete passion for the subject. It is an important book.

PAUL GILLIES

Paul Gillies is the Berlin Town Moderator.