Forget the New Hampshire primary circus, says political scientist Frank Bryan. The best hope for American democratic revival is the humble, fractious, much-maligned town meeting.

By Christopher Shea

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are doing can help save American democracy. In his new book, "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works" (Chicago), Bryan tries to fill the void. With its Norman Rockwell cover illustration and endorsements by big-name scholarly advocates of participatory democracy (like Harvard's Robert Putnam), the book is simultaneously nostalgic and up-to-the minute. It depopulates over the good sense and independence of New England political bodies that helped fuel the Revolutionary War, while also tapping into a growing body of contemporary work arguing that American democratic habits must be reinvigorated from the bottom up.

Thirty years in the making, "Real Democracy" contains the first substantial data about town meetings across Vermont, the state most closely associated with the tradition, analyzing 338,603 acts of participation by 63,140 citizens in 510 different towns. Who goes? Who speaks? Do issues get resolved? Do face-to-face meetings with one's neighbors breed trust, i-will, and disillusion, as some scholars have suggested — or a kind of civic bliss?

Bryan, a former Golden Gloves boxer and rodeo rider who insists that the academic life leaves too little time for hunting and fishing, is well-known to generations of students for his often-gruffly expressed views. He has long sung the praises of smallness ("Democrats hate big business. Republicans hate big government. I hate big," he likes to say) and derided the upscale "theme-parking" of the Greek Mountain State (an at-

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began to celebrate town meetings as exemplars of "small is beautiful" democracy.

But by the 1970s and '80s, according to Bryan, the meetings were discredited as they became tools of national movements, with activists encouraging towns to vote to impeach Nixon or declare themselves nuclear-free zones. Today's presidential candidates pay lip service to the tradition by holding "town meeting"-style debates and forums across the country. The Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq is even holding "town hall meetings" in large cities to educate Iraqis about democracy.

Yet for all the mythology of the town meeting, there hasn't been much data about them - which is where Bryan comes in. Since 1969, when he taught at tiny St. Michael's College (his alma mater), in Winooski, Vt., Bryan has sent surface-finding out across the Connecticut River Valley and up into the hardwoods of the Northeast Kingdom to observe town meetings, keep time, record their impressions, and above all count, count, count. In all, he has information on 1,435 meetings in 210 towns, from 1970 to 1998.

Typically, towns hold one meeting a year, usually in March. Most are open to all adult registered voters. Some towns conduct all their busi-
Hannah Arendt said the town meeting represented 'public happiness.' H.L. Mencken denounced them as 'idiotic.'

"Plato would not be pleased." To boost direct democracy—and attendance—he suggests several reforms: Convene meetings during the day, if not on a statewide "town meeting day/holiday" then at least on Saturday. Decide all town affairs then and there, with no outside balloting. "(I) just think voting is an incredibly 'thin' form of democracy," he says.) And if a town is too big to get all of its citizens under one roof—like Howard Dean's home-town of Shelburne, pop. 7,000—break it down into smaller self-governing units.

Some scholars have argued that town meet- ings discriminate against the poor, against women, even against the sky. But Bryan says his data show Vermont's meetings are relatively in- clusive. Forty-six percent of meeting attendees are women, and they make up 36 percent of the speakers—a number that increases each year (and beats most state legislatures, not to mention the US Senate). Most startling—at least to political scientists, who generally argue that the richer you are the more likely you are to participate in virtually any political activity—Bryan finds that the aggregate wealth and education level of a given town does not predict attendance.


"There's still a lot of feeling out there that ordi- nary people can run their own lives."
Bryan's book arrives as interest in local civil capital and "deliberative democracy"—as contrasted with the old-fashioned adversarial style—is surging. Stanford University recently hired the political scientist James S. Fishkin, who studies how decisions change when citizens discuss them in small groups, away from the University of Texas and gave him his own research center.

During this year's primaries, Fishkin will collaborate with PBS's Lehrer NewsHour on a series of "deliberative polls," in which voters will be asked their opinion only after participating in group discussions. In their forthcoming book, "Deliberation Day" (Yale, March), Fishkin and Yale law professor Bruce Ackerman call for a new national holiday marked by similar forums, to be held just before the presidential election.

Bryan argues that the legacy of town meetings explains why New England is at or near the top of the nation in many measures of "civic capital"—including social tolerance, voting rates, and charitable contributions. But not everyone in Vermont sees town meetings the way Bryan does. Barbara Coelho, a 63-year-old administrative assistant in Proctor (pop. 1,900), just led an unsuccessful campaign to allow citizens who didn't turn up for the annual meeting to vote on the town budget. (The proposal was defeated this month, 67 to 94.) Town meetings, she argued, can penalize workers with odd schedules or the homebound elderly—and they make it too easy for passionate minority interests to dominate town affairs. "The smaller the meetings, the easier it is to sway 'em," she says. "The phone chains get going with people saying, 'We've got to go and vote this down.'"

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, a political scientist at the University of Nebraska who frequently butts heads with deliberative-democracy advocates, agrees that time-consuming mandatory discussions can skim off "the people who want to be involved but are not activists." She adds, "I would be shocked if the 20 percent who show up at Vermont town meetings were truly representative of the population."

Bryan doesn't have income or educational data for individuals at meetings—only for whole towns. So he can't really say whether the people who attend town meetings represent a cross-section of the towns he studied. Still, he writes, "I would bet any house or car" on it.

Bryan insists that at the meetings he has witnessed, a dairy farmer is just as likely to out-argue a retired investment banker. "I have in my files hundreds of pictures of town meetings," he says. "Just pick one out at random and look at the people sitting there. You see—I'm not sure I should say this, maybe you shouldn't quote me—people with no teeth, you see fat people, you see rednecks, you see people in suits, L.L. Bean types who just moved into town. You tell me they aren't the 'People.'"

He looks back fondly on the days when Vermont towns, not the federal or state government, decided whether to offer algebra or kindergarten and what safety net to offer to their poor. Were he a philosopher king, he says, he would devolve more and more power to the towns (while acknowledging the need for basic national environmental and civil rights laws).

With his flinty Yankee humor and his dreamy reminiscences of Old Vermont, Bryan is clearly vulnerable to the charge of fuzzy nostalgia. But Harvard's Jane Mansbridge defends him on that score: "Bryan comes across as a sort of romantic," she says, "but he didn't fall out of the sky as a romantic. He experienced town meetings. And when you experience town meetings, you come to respect them."