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 symbol.

By KEVIN O’CONNOR
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Bryan used to grouse when big-city politicians 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 23,860,000 “discrete acts of participation” by 6,474 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 not look so far 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 communal politics.”

Bryan believes town meetings, now limited to New England and the “Prairie Home Companion” parts of Minnesota are best seen it 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 (See Professor, Page A6)
(Continued from Page A1) by his civic teaching and grad- ing activities contained seven stu- dents, many of whom still are at the university.

Their assignment: Count how many men and women are pres- ent 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.

It all filled in the blanks from above.

Driving forces

Lesson one: Fewer than a quarrer of eligible voters - 27.5 percent - showed up for the almost 1,500 town meetings stacked between 1950 and 1958.

Bryan calls this "the single most important statistic I have discover- ed" because "that's the question most often asked and we had no idea what it means besides, of course, that people don't vote." He points out that the general public is 'illiterate' in the civic sense.

That remains the prime conclusion for all of his future work.

The professor can prove, for example, that in the two or three smaller towns he examined in larger towns take part more than in those with 10,000 or more people.

"If you find at a meeting of a town with a population of 10,000 or more that people are comfortable about the power of the police. If a third person or more, you can have 45 per- cent. If a town person comes in, we each get 25 percent. You are talking to people who feel more interested in the fact that they are part of a smaller group. We can't reduce town size, but you can use representa- tive things. There you have a response from the town," he concludes.

Bryan sees divergence even in small communities. Huntington and Stackpole are neighboring bedroom towns. Between them lies Midlothian. They have similar socioeconomic pro- files, but Bryan says Huntington has a more robust town meeting than Stackpole, in which he lived.

"Huntington has some nagging issues on more than one do- main, but you've got to hit it from the bottom up. It's more conflict.""}

Sparks fly

And so although Bryan has seen no suggestions for boosting town meetings - creating an office to serve as a civic forum and expand on-line town meetings, providing the mayor and town clerk, association and school agendas, provide child care, develop agendas only 46 percent of attendees and 30 percent of voters speak up - his vision is to ask local groups to help.

"Confused people to town meeting".

"Bryan found even towns with the biggest, best-attended meet- ings have suffered attendance declines as the decades progress. That says a growing number of resi- dents don't participate because they don't feel need to.

"I think our national govern- ment is imploding. It's a mess, and people need to speak through us and leaders to see we are talking about the four governments that produced four governments.

"The family and union split off civic capital away from the town," he surmises.

Bryan sees divergence even in small towns.

Illustration of Arlington resident Carl Hess standing reverently among a circle of neighbors. Bryan had to edit his text to 312 pages (The University of Chicago Press, $49 hardcover, because he wanted royalties, $29 paperbacks, but offers an electronic version for "The Unpopulars"

"Real Democracy on His Web site, www.uvm.edu/~bryan. 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 alive."

"My colleagues around the country still think Vermont is a quaint farming state. They don't understand we are feted by the modernization of life. My passion as a scholar is to find out the truth, to set the record straight. I want to read it. What I think is a considered view of people make good decisions about their communities if given a chance."