

REAL

democracy

The New England Town Meeting and How It Works

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There are several ways of crossing barbed-wire fences according to your inner differences.

Frances Frost

The epigraph is from Frances Frost, "Advice to a Trespasser," in *Hemlock Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), 32. Frances Frost, a Vermonter best known for her children's stories, was no relation to Robert Frost, although she was a prizewinning poet (the Yale Prize, the Golden Rose Award of the New England Poetry Club, and the Shelley Memorial Award). See Margaret Edwards, "Frances Frost, 1905–1959: Sketch of a Vermont Poet," *Vermont History* 56 (Spring 1988): 102–111.

Preface:

The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Democrat

It was the summer of 1972. Jane Mansbridge called, and we agreed to meet halfway. She was hard into the research for *Beyond Adversary Democracy*,¹ which contains the best treatment ever published of town meeting democracy in one place, and she was living in "Selby"—her fictitious name for the Vermont town she was studying. I was living in an abandoned deer camp on Big Hollow Road in Starksboro. Since we shared an interest in town meeting, where could we meet and swap what we knew? In the hundred or so miles of green mountains between Selby and Starksboro, "halfway" meeting places are hard to find. But there is a covered bridge across a river along the highway. I suggested it as much as a test as for any other reason. That would do, she said, without missing a beat.

We had never met before we parked our cars on the roadside by the bridge that June afternoon and headed down to a shady spot in the cow pasture beside the river. But there's something in crossing a barbed wire fence together that breaks the ice. Near the end of our conversation and our exchange of ideas, data, and various methodological conundrums, I made a mistake. I whined. Working grantless, without graduate students, and with a huge teaching load (four classes per semester in a small college, St. Michael's in Colchester, Vermont), how could I ever accomplish what it would take to write the definitive book on town meeting?

1. Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

The glint in her eyes danced between reproach and amusement. "Then it will become your life's work, Frank," she said.

And so it has.

The Anthropology of Making Do

My mother raised me a Democrat. Vermont raised me a democrat. This book springs from a life of fighting the dissonance between the two. From my earliest recollections I witnessed real democracy work itself out in the little town of Newbury, high on the fall line of the Connecticut River. My interest in social science, however, began with a teacher named Scott Mahoney, who despite being a socialist, a Democrat, and gay, managed to do passably well in a Republican farming town of 1,453 people and a high school with sixty students.² In my freshman "civics" course he sent us to town meeting. Most of us had been before, of course, but he insisted we record *data*, not just impressions. The next day in class was the first time I ever heard the term "political science." Later, as a college student, I noticed something. 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.

Up front I'd better tell you this: I am a passionate believer in real democracy—where the people make decisions that matter, on the spot, in face-to-face assemblies that have the force of law. Before town meeting day the town taxes itself to fund a community library. The next day it does not. The people of the town have voted the expenditure down. Although I might not like the result, I'll live with it—and not because town meeting is filled with "the chosen people of God," as Jefferson said. If it were filled with all those chosen people, I'd probably be too bored to pay attention. I'll live with the result because, as former congressman Morris Udall put it, "Democracy is like sex. When it is good, it is very, very good. When it is bad, it is still better than anything else."³

2. My graduating class contained seven students. I finished in the top ten.

3. On the other hand, the harm done to town meeting by inflated romanticized accounts of its workings is incalculable. Over the past thirty-five years I have marked dozens of accounts like this: In 1977 the University of Vermont advertised itself as located in a state where "on the first Tuesday in March each year, residents gather at a town hall or school auditorium or church basement to vote on most of the matters of import affecting the town in the coming twelve months." "Being in Vermont," in *The University of Vermont 1977* (Burlington: University of Vermont, 1977), 2. Wrong. The residents vote on many matters of import, but most are decided somewhere else. In 1986 a major front-page piece in the *Hartford Current* led with the (correct)

A desire to put the record straight set the design of my work. I have been committed to creating a baseline for the empirical study of town meeting so that future scholars will be able to study its evolution and performance in a way forever lost for ancient Athens. To do this I mixed "thick description"⁴ with thin. But the primary task was to increase the number of real democracies about which we have "thin" data. To be *sure* about the claim, for example, that women are less apt to attend town meeting than men requires an investigation of hundreds of meetings. To be as sure about an additional finding that this inequality is greater at night meetings than at day meetings requires an original sample at least twice as large. The more factors considered, the more cases needed.⁵ And so it goes. This book is based on a detailed analysis of nearly fifteen hundred town meetings. Still, again and again I find myself cursing my lack of cases.

The great bulk of my evidentiary base for this book is found in what I call *The "Unexpurgated" Real Democracy*, an uncut version of the original volume.⁶ More a lab report than a book, it can be found on my Web site, www.uvm.edu/~fbryan, and in the Special Collections section of the Bailey/Howe Library at the University of Vermont. There one will find over three hundred additional tables and figures, methodological addenda and appendixes, student essays, extended footnotes, additional findings, and other material that might be thought of as back roads off the main highway of a long journey. As the years go by I will also update the fundamental data on real democracy that directly support this volume for as long as I am able. Numbers fascinate me.

claim that a general store in Newfane, Vermont, was closed, with a sign on the door that read "Closed. Went to Town Meeting." Then followed: "The owner, like most other residents, was at the one-story Grange Hall down the road, voting for three selectmen, a second sheriff and a new budget." William Cockerham, "Small-Town Vermonters Cling to Town Meetings," *Hartford Current*, March 9, 1986, 1. Wrong. A simple majority of the residents could not even fit inside the Grange hall at Newfane. Robert Dahl emphasizes the physical limits of size in ancient Athens. If every citizen of Athens had attended the assembly, the meeting place on the hill of Pnyx could not have held them all. Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 16.

4. This is Gilbert Ryle's term, popularized by Clifford Geertz in "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in Geertz's *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–32.

5. These kinds of questions are what David Easton called "second gauge" hypotheses, and they drive much of the analysis in the central chapters of the book. David Easton, *The Political System*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

6. One of the readers to whom the publishers sent this original volume made the following notation in the margin on page 643. "Help. I feel like I am at a party with people I don't like and I can't get away!" It was this reader (who thankfully was very supportive of the book) who suggested the word "unexpurgated."

A belief that the Republic cannot survive without democracy and (in turn) that democratic possibility is limited to small places set the prescription for my work. For those of us who labor at the science of governance (and is there a better calling beyond the cloth?), I believe it is time to look inward toward the heart of the polity. 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. Tiny places that govern themselves are both laboratories for the science of democracy and watersheds that sustain our liberal and continental politics.

In her presidential address before the American Political Science Association in 1997, Elinor Ostrom directed our attention to the theory of collective action, which she called "*the* central subject of political science." To investigate this theory, she argued, we need empirically grounded investigation of three "core" relationships—reciprocity, reputation, and trust. Where better to study these relationships than in the context of face-to-face decision making by citizens of whole communities? Except for some townships in Minnesota, the New England town is the only place in America where general-purpose governments render binding collective action decisions (laws) in small face-to-face assemblies of common citizens. 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.

Students, Time, and Self: An Odyssey

The only way to know what happens at a town meeting is to be there. In the town of South Hero⁷ in 1999 the town meeting lasted five hours and twelve

7. Katherine Krebs, Kevin Sigmund, and Mike Hapwood were the students who actually did the counting in South Hero in 1999. At 9:40 a.m. they recorded 158 people in attendance, 82 women and 76 men. By 2:30 p.m., when they counted for the fourth time, only 43 men and 48 women remained at the Folsom Educational and Community Center where town meeting was held. In the place for notes beside the attendance counts, the students wrote, "lots of kids." The tradition of starting kids early in Vermont—whether it's driving trucks, handling shotguns, or doing democracy—is still intact in many places. Katherine Krebs, Kevin Sigmund, and Mike Hapwood, "The 1999 Comparative Town Meeting Study: Town of South Hero," Burlington, University of Vermont, Real Democracy Data Base, March 1999. Here in part is what Katherine Krebs (who grew up in South Hero) wrote in her essay. "Town meeting day in South Hero felt like a homecoming for me. I remember vividly having the day off from school but being babysat at town meeting anyway as my parents participated in the meeting. . . . I knew a great number of the people there and had formed impressions about them at a young age. . . . It was interesting watching these people congregate and participate with such vigor in the events of the town. There were people who had had numerous children go through the school system who argued, nevertheless, against the school budget. There were people who argued against everything, and it made one wonder, surely these people enjoy roads to drive on, a sheriff and fire squad protection.

minutes (not counting a short lunch break). In that time fifty-one different people spoke at least once. Twenty-three of these were women. The only way to collect data like these is to take the day off work, go to South Hero's town meeting on the first Tuesday in March, stay at the meeting from the time it begins until the time it ends, and record what happens. Town meetings are usually held only once a year. Most town meetings in Vermont are held on the same day, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in March. No one person could cover more than two or three a year, and grants to fund such coverage were out of the question. But I had two things aplenty: students and time. So I returned to an old formula substituting "professor, student, time" for "committee, grant, staff."⁸

Undergraduates can count. Undergraduates will go to strange places and count accurately if they are prepared and if they understand the *adventure* of it. They also need one more thing—a sense of mission. On the first day of any class I've ever taught over the past thirty-three years, I have told my students that I would treat them as young *political scientists*. I told them, because I believe it to be true, that political science is more intellectually challenging and more important than any other science. I've also worked hard to establish a sense of romance: "Take Bryan's course and you'll end up in one of those hayseed conventions under a foot of snow one hundred miles from nowhere." The "field trip" was from the beginning an integral part of the course. Without it this project could not have happened.

But I realized that for some people, attending Town Meeting is their form of involvement. It is their right. . . . While many of the people who argued and debated seemed infuriatingly ignorant or uninformed, it simply validated the need for open forums and the democratic process." Katherine Krebs, "South Hero Town Meeting Day 1999," Burlington, University of Vermont, March 1999. There you have it; lessons of tolerance and patience and respect for the commonweal learned at an early age. Fifteen years earlier, here in part is what Tracy Fitzgerald had to say about town meeting in South Hero. "What I did realize was that the town meeting of South Hero, Vermont, isn't that much different from my own town meeting in Marblehead, Massachusetts. The issues debated in South Hero are no different from what I have seen on the warrant in Marblehead. Granted, I did not hear one fight about who was going to put how many lobster pots where, and my town does have more than 2,500 people, but I was quite surprised at the modernness of a supposedly quintessential example of a real Vermont lifestyle." Tracy Fitzgerald, "Town Meeting of South Hero," Burlington, University of Vermont, March 1984.

8. When I was in graduate school at the University of Connecticut I took a seminar with the comparativist G. Lowell Field. He had continually involved his students in the work on *Comparative Political Development: The Precedent of the West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967). In a review shortly afterward I wrote, "Field substituted for the 'committee-grant-staff' formula of scholarly research the nearly forgotten 'professor, student, time' approach once used extensively on the Continent." Frank Bryan, "Comparative Political Development: The Precedent of the West," *Academic Reviewer* 3 (January 1969): 37–39. His example inspired the method that made this book possible.

Most important, I made sure the data these students produced involved no judgments on their part.⁹ The numbers required only their attention. Each component of information was remarkably simple. Even a junior high school student could understand and record it accurately. Because so many students visited so many towns each year, I was able to exclude results that contained errors or were incomplete. For instance, if the data sheets indicated that the students got to the meeting late or left early, I did not include those data in the findings. Even excluding three or four cases for this reason, I usually compiled close to fifty complete town meetings each year.

But to describe town meeting without the context of its life, its feel, its nesting in the heart of the Vermont town would be like describing love without describing passion—damned misleading. So in my mixing of “thin” and “thick” I have tried to tell as best I can what life in Vermont’s towns is like. It is one thing to know about a Vermont town that 21 percent of the voters attended town meeting in 1987. It is another to know that the man who made a fool of himself arguing against a \$1,500 subsidy for a day-care center for low-income working women was a logger who two years earlier had watched his brother slide under a bulldozer and carried his crushed body out of the woods alone in a vain attempt to save his life. Put it this way. If a test group of one hundred political scientists were to read this book after having studied Frost’s poems in *North of Boston* for a semester, they would have a far greater knowledge of and appreciation for town meeting than a group of one hundred who did not.

So from time to time in this book I interrupt the analysis with “Witnesses”—firsthand accounts of town meeting by people who were there, including myself. My witnesses range from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s farewell address to the people of Cavendish to excerpts from student essays. Now and then I will walk you step by step through parts of town meetings. We need to share the fascinating mix of liberal processes and communal ambiance that typifies what goes on inside a town hall. And I have not tried to reduce or rationalize the number of towns you will be introduced to. While you may become familiar with some towns, others will come and go. Let them. The senses are astounded more by the complication and variety of real democracy than by its symmetry.

Finally, to fill out the context in which I have studied real democracy I have included personal reminiscences, reflections, and observations about

9. I did, however, call for judgments in the essays the students were required to write. These ranged in length and quality depending on the course I was teaching. I have over four thousand essays on record with the data file for the meeting the student attended.

Vermont, its towns, and its people—flashbacks and mutterings from a boyhood and an adulthood of loving only one place, this feisty, cantankerous, liberal, cold, glorious little republic of Vermont. I have, in short, included autobiography in my methodology. Much of this is found in the footnotes. I expect you to read them, and I justify this unusual approach by claiming, shamelessly, that I have learned something of value by working for years on Vermont farms, living more with farmers and loggers than with academics, and by experiencing from childhood the satisfaction, frustration, irritation, anxiety, and hope that real democracy brings.

WITNESS

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN BIDS FAREWELL

[From] Minutes of the Cavendish Town Meeting—1994

Moderator led the assembly in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.

The moderator asked those present to pause for a moment of silence in memory of the members of our community who died during the past year.

Moderator stated if there is no objection he would like to dispense with the rules for a moment and call a brief recess to allow a distinguished friend and resident to address the group assembled. There was no objection.

The following speech was given by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and interpreted by his son Stephan:

“Citizens of Cavendish, our dear neighbors,

At town meeting seventeen years ago I told you about my exile and explained the necessary steps which I took to ensure a calm working environment, without the burden of constant visitors.

You were very understanding; you forgave my unusual way of life, and even took it upon yourselves to protect my privacy. For this, I have been grateful throughout all these years and today, as my stay here comes to an end, I thank you. Your kindness and cooperation helped to create the best possible conditions for my work.

The eighteen years which I have spent here have been the most productive of my life. I have written absolutely everything I wanted to. I offer today those of my books that have been translated into English to the town library.

Our children grew up and went to school here, alongside your children. For them, Vermont is home. Indeed, our whole family has come to feel at home among you. Exile is always difficult, and yet I could not [have] imagined a better place to live, and wait, and wait for my return home than Cavendish, Vermont.

And so this spring in May, my wife and I are going back to Russia, which is going through one of the most difficult periods in its entire history—a period

of rampant poverty, a period where standards of human decency have fallen, a period of lawlessness and economic chaos. That is the painful price we had to pay to rid ourselves of communism, during whose seventy-year reign of terror sixty million people died just from the regime's war on its own nation. I hope that I can be of at least some small help to my tortured nation, although it is impossible to predict how successful my efforts will be. Besides, I am not young.

I have observed here in Cavendish, and in the surrounding towns the sensible and sure process of grassroots democracy where the local population decides most of its problems on its own, not waiting for the decision of higher authorities. Alas, this we still do not have in Russia, and that is our greatest shortcoming.

Our sons will complete their education in America, and the house in Cavendish will remain their home.

Lately, while I have been walking on the nearby roads, taking in the surroundings with a farewell glance, I have found every meeting with many of you to be warm and friendly.

And so today, both to those of you whom I have met over these years, and to those whom I have not met I say: thank you and farewell. I wish all the very best to Cavendish and the area around it. God bless you all.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn¹⁰

10. Town of Cavendish, "Minutes of the Cavendish Town Meeting—1994," *Town Report*, year ending December 1994.

Acknowledgments

Given this book's gestation, it would be silly to attempt to list those who have helped along the way. Better to omit hundreds than to forget ten. Still, I need to thank my colleagues Alan Wertheimer and Bob Taylor at the University of Vermont for reading earlier drafts of the manuscript. William J. Smith's enthusiasm and capability in dealing with matters methodological was a comfort, as was Gene Laber's and Alan Howard's. It was through Benjamin Page's faith and patience that the manuscript found its way into his series on American politics and political economy at the University of Chicago Press. It was there that I came under the guidance of John Tryneski. I was told early on by another of the Press's authors that John was an "author's editor" and I would like him a lot. He is and I do.

Senior manuscript editor Alice Bennett was uncanny in her ability to be technically astute and insightful at the same time.

Most of all I want to thank Jane Mansbridge. She read every page of the original manuscript (all 850 of them), looked at every table and figure (all 338), and then with painstaking acuity (and even good humor) urged me to give up my tome and write a book instead. It was she who wrote in the margin of one of the pages in the middle of the manuscript: "Help! I feel like I'm at a party with people I don't like and can't get away!" But she stayed to the end anyway, and I pray I was able to live up to her high standards.

Beginning in 1969 at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont, and continuing to this very day at the University of Vermont in Burlington, thousands of students have done the leg-work that allowed me to establish the database that made this

book possible. For over three decades, year in and year out, I have promised them that what they did could become a valuable contribution to what we know about democracy. If it does not turn out that way, the fault is not theirs. Thinking back over these thirty-four years, their collective effort continues to astound me, and the remembrances continue to bring me joy. How lucky I have been.

Finally, there is my friend Melissa Lee. In the spring of 1975 I wrote asking this long-legged city girl teaching school in Burlington, Vermont, if she would please hook up with a former student of mine at St. Michael's College (I was teaching in Bozeman, Montana, that winter) and go to the town meeting in my hometown of Newbury to collect data. It was only a hundred miles away. Foolishly, she did. We married in the fall. She's been going to town meetings with me ever since and has been intimately involved with every aspect of this book. She is a good citizen but cares as much for political science as I do for boiled turnip greens. Now and then I look at her as she sits working away at some town meeting in some faraway little town in the hills of Vermont and feel guilty. But then I think, hey, I warned her in 1975! Besides, words don't exist to thank her enough.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

The epigraph is from T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*. Thanks to Daniel Kemmis, the former mayor of Missoula, Montana, for reminding me of Elliot's words in his exquisite book, *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

Introduction

The Methodology of Starting from Scratch

It is the spring of 1992. Twenty-five hundred years earlier in a place called Athens, a Greek named Cleisthenes took a risk for an idea. The idea took hold. Few others promised more happiness or provoked more anguish in the two and one-half millennia of Western civilization that were to follow. It was incandescent, this idea of democracy: coming and going, rising and falling, dodging in and out of the passions of history. It has been defined and redefined, cursed and cheered, understood and misunderstood, lived for and died for. Nations and regimes have been named in its honor. Tens of thousands of scholars have labored in its vineyard, and the fruits of their labor fill library shelves throughout the world. As a global enterprise, the principles of democracy rival even those of the planet's great religions. No other secular notion has so triggered the sanctimony and sincerity, the good and the evil, the despair and the hope.

Democracy.

Athens Is Where You Find It

On March 3, 1992, Stephen Fine, a citizen of Athens, Vermont, was unaware that he was marking the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of the birth of democracy when, at 10:01 a.m., he was first at town meeting to rise and address the assembly. Neither was Marjorie Walker, who, as tradition in Athens dictated, was next to speak. When Athens, Vermont, first began to practice open, face-to-face democracy, women were not allowed to participate. But by 1992 that had changed. Walker made several announcements

and then read the list of items (the town warning) that the assembled polis would address. Nearly 60 percent of the citizens of Athens were present. Their deliberations would end in votes that they and every citizen of the town not present would have to obey under penalty of law.

After introducing a few guests (who addressed the assembly briefly), Mr. Fine gave way to David Bemis, whose job it was to ask the people if they would reaffirm Fine's right to conduct the meeting. If not, they could choose someone else to do the job. Another citizen, James Waryas, immediately nominated Fine, and a third, Philip Reeve, seconded the nomination. A fourth, David Kenny, asked that the nominations be closed and that the clerk cast one ballot for Fine. Carol Bingham seconded this motion, a vote was taken, and Fine was elected. This process took less than two minutes. It was now 10:50 a.m. Fine stepped forward to take his position before the assembly again, and the people of Athens got down to the business of governing themselves.

About this time a pair of the world's leading experts on democracy, Josiah Ober of Princeton and Charles Hedrick of the University of California at Santa Cruz, were preparing an international celebration to mark the birthday of what the people in another Athens, the Athens of ancient Greece, had created twenty-five hundred years earlier. Because of their efforts the government of the United States provided funding, conferences were held in Washington and Greece, a display was mounted at the Smithsonian Institution, and a six-week summer institute was held in California. The summer institute attracted the participation of Bernard Grofman, a political scientist at the University of California at Irvine. The result was a series of short essays on Athenian democracy for a small journal sent to every member of the American Political Science Association.¹

The American Political Science Association consists of about 15,000 professionals whose business it is to know about governance.² They probably represent at any given time over 50,000 years of postgraduate education, committed (usually at a dear price) out of their highest-energy years, simply to *prepare* to ply their trade. They have accumulated in the aggregate over 250,000 years of teaching and research. The essays they published for themselves under Grofman's direction were written by a cadre of scholars of singular competence, led by Sheldon S. Wolin of Princeton.

1. Bernard Grofman, ed., "The 2500th Anniversary of Democracy: Lessons of Athenian Democracy," *Political Science and Politics* 26 (September 1993): 471-494.

2. www.apsa.com. The membership of the American Political Science Association (unfortunately) represents less than half the number of practicing political scientists in the United States.

Here is the problem. While I doubt that any of the citizens of the Athens town meeting knew they were gathering to practice democracy on its twenty-five hundredth birthday, it is equally doubtful that any of these scholars writing about ancient Athens were aware of what was going on in Athens, Vermont. Worse, I suspect I could name—and count on one hand—all of the members of the American Political Association who knew there was an Athens, Vermont, and had some idea of the character of the action taking place there that day. Besides me, none of the twenty members of the political science department at the University of Vermont did. I'll bet Richard Winters and Denis Sullivan at Dartmouth did, and I'm sure Jane Mansbridge at Harvard's Kennedy School did. Joseph Zimmerman of SUNY Albany may have. That's about it.

Why is this so?

Real Democracy: Now and Then

I make two claims: First, what happened in Athens, Vermont, in 1992 was not strange, or random, or even a unique event. Second, it was real democracy. The first claim is easily supported. In America, town meeting predates representative government. It is stitched into the fabric of New England and dominates the patchwork of its public past. It occurs in each New England state at a set time and in a set place. It is accessible to every citizen, coded in law, and conducted regularly in over 1,000 towns. In my state of Vermont citizens in more than 230 towns meet at least once each year to pass laws governing the town. Since the dawn of modern political science³ the people have come together to govern themselves in approximately 11,280 individual, properly "warned," town-based, democratic assemblies in Vermont alone.

The second claim is more tendentious. Certainly all polities that call themselves democracies are "real." But I say that nearly all representative structures that provide the frame of governance for the "democracies" of the world are substitutes for democracy, not approximations of democracy. This is *not* to say these "democracies" are less than they might be or that they are not better at what they do than town meeting is at what it does. It is to say that using the word "democracy" to cover representative systems is, as Robert Dahl observed, an "intellectual handicap."⁴ Real democracy (for good or ill)

3. We all have our favorites, but I place the date at 1949 with V. O. Key's publication of *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).

4. Robert A. Dahl, "The City in the Future of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 61 (December 1967): 953-969. In 1982 Dahl said: "The term democracy is like an ancient

occurs only when all eligible citizens of a general-purpose government are legislators; that is, called to meet in a deliberative, face-to-face assembly and to bind themselves under laws they fashion themselves.

Real democracies come in better and worse forms. They promote both good and bad policies. They make their participants both satisfied and frustrated. "Real" does not mean "good." Real democracy is better to the extent that all who live in a jurisdiction are citizens and all citizens are eligible to participate. It is better when attendance at meetings and participation in them are high and egalitarian. Real democracies are whole when they make all the laws that govern them. Otherwise they are to some degree partial. Nor is real democracy to be confused with direct, plebiscite democracy.⁵ The bottom line is this: in a real democracy, the citizens—in person, in face-to-face meetings of the whole—make the laws that govern the actions of everyone within their geographic boundaries. This definition is strict. It means that only *governments* can be real democracies. Poker clubs and snowmobile associations may govern themselves democratically under this definition, of course. They may indeed be more "democratic" than a town. But they can never be democracies.

To what extent does democracy in Athens match democracy in Athens? Remarkably well, as it turns out. True, substantial (indeed, paradigm threatening) differences are present. But given the passage of time, the variations in geography and cultures, and the lack of any direct genetic linkage between the two, the similarities are compelling.⁶ These similarities extend far

kitchen midden packed with assorted leftovers from 2500 years of nearly continuous usage." Robert A. Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 5. On the distinctions between real democracy and its other forms, see also Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1987), 282–284; Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper, 1950), 246; and Danilo Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 58. Some scholars have paid serious attention to real democracy. Among them are Benjamin R. Barber, *The Death of Communal Liberty: A History of Freedom in a Swiss Mountain Canton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 13–23; Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 1–23 and 270–289; and Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1–22.

5. Although authors of textbooks in American government nearly always make the distinction, now and then they equate the New England town meeting with such things as referendum voting in the Swiss cantons. See Beth Henschen and Edward Sidlow, *America at Odds: An Introduction to American Government* (Belmont, CA: West/Wadsworth, 1999), 9–10.

6. Comparisons of Athens with town meeting begin early in American history. Much of what we know about the first quarter century of postrevolutionary New England (especially its northern frontier) must be credited to the industry of one man, Timothy Dwight. On vacations from his job as president of Yale University he traipsed over a tough land and found the time to write about everything from government to horticulture. His take on town meeting:

beyond the single most obvious likeness that both were lawmaking assemblies of the whole. In town meetings, spectators, the press, and other "outsiders" are often asked to sit in places reserved for them.⁷ When the assembly met in Athens (at the Pnyx), outsiders and spectators sat on the side of the hill behind the speaker's podium. The Athenian democracy made laws not only for Athenians but also for "metics"—residents who paid taxes but could not vote. Vermont towns make laws not only for their own registered voters but also for out-of-town, second-home, and "camp" residents who pay (often very high) local property taxes but cannot participate in town meeting.⁸ Political manipulation appeared in both places as well. In Vermont, items that farmers might oppose were sometimes placed near the end of the agenda in the hope that they would have gone home to milk before the items were called up. In Greece more conservative proposals were often postponed until the navy, which required the rowing power of the more radical *thetes*, was out to sea and thus underrepresented in the assembly.⁹

"The Legislature of each town is, like that of Athens, composed of inhabitants, personally present, a majority of whom decides every question." His next comment, however, attempts to distinguish town meetings from Athens in a way that I will emphasize in later parts of this book. The first New Englanders were committed to rules of procedure. As Dwight put it, town meetings are "controlled by exact rules; and are under the direction of the proper officers. The confusion, incident to popular meetings, and so often disgraceful to those of Athens and Rome, is effectually prevented." Dwight shares the Americans' distaste for things Athenian that so troubled Madison and his colleagues. Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Timothy Dwight, A. Converse, Printer, 1821), 31. Dwight no doubt exaggerates in suggesting that all town meetings were "controlled by exact rules." It is easy to find accounts of the breakdown of what he called "very honorable decorum." See, for instance, David Syrett, "Town-Meeting Politics in Massachusetts, 1776–1786," *William and Mary Quarterly* 21 (July 1964): 352–366. Unfortunately, Syrett's piece extrapolates beyond a listing of transgressions, which by his own language happened now and then and here and there, to an unbelievable final claim that town meeting was "almost always characterized by the willingness of its officials to break or ignore the rules by which they professed to live."

7. The thousands of student accounts I have read over the past thirty-four years indicate that most students were allowed to sit pretty much where they wanted to and many times were given special places of advantage to watch and record data on the meetings.

8. Athens had a property tax as well, the *eisphorai*. It too was progressive in a sense, because only the richest paid it. Athens, Greece, had the equivalent of the Athens, Vermont, "listers"—those people who rated property for purposes of taxation—and it also had a match for the Athens, Vermont, "grand list," the *timema*. But tax collection in the city-state was delegated to the *symmoriai*, groups of the wealthiest property owners. The richest *symmorite* was required to put up all the tax payment for his group in advance and then reimburse himself from the group's membership later. Athens, Vermont, elects a tax collector. See Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, trans. J. A. Cook (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 368, 370.

9. The Dutch classical scholar Herman Hansen credits the absence of the thetes with partial responsibility for the coming of the Oligarchy of the Four Hundred, since "the entire Athenian navy was stationed off Samos" at the time. Hansen, *Athenian Democracy*, 126.

Like the Athenian assembly twenty-five hundred years earlier, the Vermont town meeting jealously protects its participatory prerogatives. The Greeks guarded entry into their assembly with six *lexiarchoi*. Those caught trying to participate illegally could receive a death sentence.¹⁰ Athens, Vermont, has never gone this far, but individual towns have often denied citizens of other jurisdictions the right to speak.¹¹ In 1844 the town of St. Albans, Vermont, refused to allow General Winfield Scott, a special emissary of President Martin Van Buren, to speak to them on the matter of the town's "flaunting" American neutrality laws by supporting anti-British forces in Canada. More recently the governor of Vermont found herself standing outside the Duxbury meeting hall while the citizens within voted on whether to allow her to speak to the town.¹²

The Board of Selectmen sets the agenda for town meeting in Athens, Vermont. In Athens, Greece, it was set by the *prytaneis* (an executive

10. In Demosthenes' time the *lexiarchoi* were replaced by a committee of thirty, three from each of the ten newly established tribes. Hansen, *Athenian Democracy*, 129.

11. I try to attend at least five regular town meetings every year, including the ones in my old hometown of Newbury (1943–1970) and my current hometown (1971–2001) of Starksboro. Sometimes I am forced to listen to the drone of some special-interest representative or politician "from away" who has been granted permission to speak. Sometimes I catch myself entertaining the notion that the Greeks' death penalty was not bereft of redeeming qualities. Of this I am certain: their willingness to indict someone who "proposed an inexpedient law" clearly has merit. See David Stockton, *The Classical Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 81.

12. Madeleine Kunin was a brave governor. In the winter of 1987 she expended a large sum of her political capital establishing a controversial regional planning law in Vermont. While taking a fast tour of several town meetings in March, speaking briefly at each, she stopped at the town of Duxbury. The moderator announced her arrival, and she prepared to step forward to address the meeting. But before she could begin, a motion was raised from the floor to prevent her from doing so. A secret ballot on the question was requested and granted. The governor decided to wait out the balloting in the parking lot, suffering, in her own words, some "anger and humiliation." Had she been raised or experienced in the town meeting tradition (Kunin lived in the city of Burlington, which is governed by a council), she would not have taken it so hard. From the meeting in the tiny town of Belvidere in 1984: "When the election of a town auditor came up, a brave lady accepted a nomination for the post. Another was nominated, and they voted right there in front of everyone! The first lady was beaten, and I felt sorry it was in front of the townspeople, many her friends. To make matters worse, she accepted a second nomination for auditor and was defeated again. Twice in ten minutes. You knew she was hanging her head lower when she left than when she came in" (Sean P. Hart, "Town Meeting in Belvidere," Burlington, University of Vermont, March 1984). Political defeat in the open, among one's friends and enemies (neighbors all), happens not infrequently at town meeting. But in the end the governor acted admirably. Perhaps it was the light drifting snow outside the Duxbury town hall that day. When she returned after a positive vote allowed her to address the assembly, she applauded freedom of speech with "firm conviction" and commended the town for upholding it. See her political remembrances in Madeleine Kunin, *Living a Political Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 393–394.

committee of the Council).¹³ The agenda in Vermont (the warning) must be published ("warned") at least thirty days before the meeting. In Greece it was posted four days before the meeting. In Vermont agenda articles may be open-ended proposals for discussion or more or less concrete ordinances to be voted up or down. In Greece proposals or *probouleuma* could similarly be open-ended or specific. In Vermont the meeting starts in the morning and can run all day. The same was true in Athens, although the meeting was often over by noon. So too in Vermont. In the Greek *ekklesia*, discussion began with the question "Who wishes to speak?" In the Vermont town meeting the phrase is often "What is your pleasure?"

The Vermont Athens of 1992 and the Greek Athens of antiquity shared other similarities. In neither could items not on the agenda be approved into law.¹⁴ Both meetings might open with a prayer.¹⁵ Most voting in both places was conducted by voice or a show of hands, and secret ballots were few. In a town meeting's secret ballot citizens walk forward and drop marked slips of paper into a box. In the assembly of Athens they dropped pebbles into an urn.¹⁶ It appears that from time to time the process of voting was quite complicated in ancient Athens, as it is in Vermont when amendments to amendments are offered and so forth. Even the *rhétors* of the Athenian assembly (defined loosely as citizens who move articles, frame debates, or in other ways participate a lot) have their Yankee counterparts.¹⁷

13. Vermont towns have no structure analogous to the Athenian Council, which comprised fifty members from each of the ten tribes. Each tribe's contingent of representatives served as an executive committee for one-tenth of the ten-month "Council year," and its members were called *prytaneis*.

14. The Vermont town meeting has a "new business" article that is taken up at the end of the meeting. Some of the most interesting discussion often takes place at this time. However, no binding action may be taken.

15. The Athenians included a sacrifice, whereas Vermonters do not, unless we include allowing a representative from the state legislature to explain what is going on in Montpelier. Many Vermont towns have dispensed with an opening prayer in the past thirty years, but most have some opening ceremony like a salute to the (American) flag.

16. Voting "by ballot" was rare, however, in the Athens of Greece during the classical period (Hansen, *Athenian Democracy*, 147), and it may not ever have been as secret as the modern town meeting process. E. S. Staveley finds peeking going on in pictures of voting on vase paintings. E. S. Staveley, *Greek and Roman Voting and Elections* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 83–86.

17. Verbal participation in town meeting is the subject of chapters 6 and 7. On the matter of *rhétors*, the Vermont town meeting has citizens who have informally carved out a place for themselves in the life of the town and act as principal participators in the verbal activity of town meeting. I have never, of course, heard them referred to as *rhétors*, or for that matter, any other generic term, although a wide variety of sprightly (and often scatological) nouns have been developed to describe a small minority of such speakers. For an analysis of the Athenian *rhétors*, see Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 4–10.

The differences between the two meetings have more to do with structure. Athens, Vermont, usually has only one meeting a year. In Greece, Athens had as many as forty. In Vermont town officers are never chosen by lot, although the practice of appointing those not present to office from the floor of many town meetings might be considered extremely bad luck by some of those so selected. In Greece selection by lot was the common practice. Athens, Vermont, has no term limits for town officers. There were such limits in ancient Athens.¹⁸

But the most important differences between the Mediterranean Athens of 500 BC and the Athens, Vermont, of AD 1992 involved size and power. Athens, Greece, was a nation. It had an army and a navy. It fought wars in which thousands died. Athens, Vermont, is a town within a state within a nation. It has no army other than the town constable, unless one counts the members of the road crew and local rescue squad who may own deer rifles. No one knows for sure exactly how many citizens there were in Athens in the fourth and fifth centuries BC when democracy flowered there, but most agree that about 30,000 male citizens were eligible to attend the meeting at the Pnyx in the year 500 BC.¹⁹ In AD 1992 in Athens, Vermont, 183 citizens of both sexes were eligible to attend town meeting at the schoolhouse. Do these vast differences in size and power scuttle the comparison between Greek and Vermont democracy?

Not necessarily. For most of the democracy in Attica (the geographical expanse of the city-state, or polis, of Athens) did not take place, as Lewis Mumford pointed out as early as 1961, in Athens proper.²⁰ Indeed, the

18. More general sources I found useful besides those cited earlier are J. A. O. Larsen, *Representative Government in Greek and Roman History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), and Raphael Sealey, *A History of the Greek City States, ca. 700–388 B.C.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). These were also particularly useful in their treatment of the demes (see below). Even in their chicanery I find echoes of the Greeks in town meetings. Mansbridge summarizes one set of claims for Greek adversarialism: evidence exists that the Greeks operated political machines (for instance, to prepare ballots). Political clubs held preassembly meetings to decide who was to speak about what and how. These schemers “also tried to influence voters before the assembly meeting by persuasion, bribes, and threats.” Sometimes they also “packed the assembly, initiated applause and appropriate interruptions, and filibustered to postpone a vote.” Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 13–15, 335–338.

19. One of the better sources on the architecture (both physical and social) of Greek democracy is R. E. Wycherley, *How the Greeks Built Cities* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

20. Mumford was impressed with the village life of the Greeks and its impact on cities such as Athens. “The democratic practices of the village,” he writes, “without strong class or vocational cleavages, fostered a habit of taking council together.” Thus the “village measure prevailed in the development of Greek cities.” Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), 128–129. Victor Davis Hanson claims that the small family farm (precisely the institution that defined the socioeconomic culture of the Vermont town) provided the

fact that (from the founders to the present day) the comparative reference point of America’s only example of real democracy, the New England town meeting, has been based on the Athenian *city* experience is an intellectual tragedy.²¹ How different our understanding would have been had we known the dimensions of real democracy as it took place in the little Greek communities scattered over the countryside—communities that lack chronicles but that must have been in some degree analogous to Vermont’s towns. For many Athenians these communities, called demes, were, says R. K. Sinclair, “the center of their lives.”²² According to David Whitehead, the scholar of record on the subject, not only did the demes provide the political and demographic infrastructure of Athens the city-state, they also contribute “one of the most obvious explanations [for the] success with which radical participatory democracy functioned in fifth and fourth century Athens.”²³

Pallenis, for example, was one of the 139 local governments (demes) of Attica. It was about halfway between the city of Athens and the deme of Marathon southeast of what is now the city of Kifissia and north of Amarousio.

circumstances and ideology to create and then support Greek constitutional government in the polis. See especially his chapter “Before Democracy,” in *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 181–220.

21. I bear Athens no grudge. If this book does nothing else it should establish that, given the limitations size imposes on real democracy, Athens accomplished something just this side of miraculous.

22. R. K. Sinclair, *Democracy and Participation in Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 51. See also Frank Bryan and John McClaughry, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale* (Chelsea, VT: Chelsea Green Press, 1989), 3.

23. David Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica, 508/7-ca. 250 B.C.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), xvii. Classical scholar R. J. Hooper supports Whitehead. He further explicitly agrees with Pateman, Tocqueville, and others on the relation between small democracies and larger republics. Athens was possible, he argues, because the demes allowed for people to be trained in “an administrative and political apprenticeship at a lower parochial level” (R. J. Hooper, *The Basis of Athenian Democracy*, cited in Whitehead, xviii). David Stockton puts it this way: “Young boys must have early become accustomed to hearing about or watching their local deme meetings, and listening to their elders discussing deme business. The demesmen as a whole would find the idea of attending and voting on proposals at meetings of the ‘national’ ecclesia in Athens less formidable [than] would have been the case without this background of local experience, and would have been less daunted by having to serve as members of the central Council of Five Hundred.” Stockton, *Classical Athenian Democracy*, 65–66. A study of members of the Vermont House of Representatives in Montpelier from 1945 to 1965 demonstrated clear parallels between what the experiences of the demesmen serving on the Council of Five Hundred must have been and what local Vermont legislators serving in the House of Representatives in Montpelier surely were. The House was about the size (246 members) of a typical town meeting and operated in much the same way. These 246 people represented a state of only 320,000 residents of all ages, and each member represented a median of only 783 citizens. The huge majority of House members served as town officers. The sound of the gavel in Montpelier fell on an assembly intimately familiar with doing the public’s business face to face. Frank M. Bryan, *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1974).

It marks the place where lowlands along the southern end of the Gulf of Evvoiea begin to rise into the rougher (what used to be) grazing country just north of Mount Hymetto.²⁴ Athens, Vermont, is much more clearly akin to Pallenais than it is to Athens. First and most important, the two were about the same size. The Vermont Athens had 183 citizens eligible to participate in its democracy in 1992. Pallenais is estimated to have had 191 in 498 BC.²⁵ As core units of larger political entities to which sovereignty was owed, both were only partial democracies.²⁶ Yet Athens, Vermont, and Pallenais (and the systems of towns and demes of which they were but a tiny part) were undoubtedly cradles for the citizenship of the sovereignties that housed them. Athenian citizenship was administered by the deme as the jurisdiction of first resort.²⁷ In Vermont also, towns administer citizenship. Vermont citizens' right to vote in statewide elections is validated when their names appear on the town's "grand list." Athens, Vermont, in 1992 and Pallenais in 492 BC were represented at the next level by population, Athens in the state legislature in Montpelier (where it has shared a representative with several other towns in southern Vermont since 1965), Pallenais in the Council of Five Hundred in Athens.²⁸

24. This entire area is now pretty much folded into the suburban extensions of the city of Athens.

25. In population, therefore, Pallenais was somewhat bigger than Athens, Vermont, since in Pallenais only men could vote. The population of Athens, Vermont, in 1990 was 313, making it one of the smallest towns in my study. The population of Pallenais is estimated at about 750. The basic source on the population of the demes is A. W. Gomme, *The Population of Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1933). The authoritative summary and explanation of Gomme's work and other sources appearing since 1933 is John S. Traill, *The Political Organization of Attica: A Study of the Demes, Trittyes and Phylai, and Their Representation in the Athenian Council* (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1975).

26. For most of their history both places were probably much more "full" democracies than partial ones. Taxes and military service were their principal obligations to the larger units they belonged to. Until the 1950s Athens, Vermont, and all the other Vermont towns cared for their poor, educated their children, maintained their own roads, and performed nearly every other important government function in the lives of their citizens. Thus, for three-quarters of their historical existence the towns, for all practical purposes, were pretty much full democracies. In a doctoral thesis written for the political science department at Syracuse University in 1957, Stanley T. Wilson concluded after studying the government functions of some of Vermont's smallest towns that they met the functional, structural, and democratic criteria of full polities. James Wilson, "An Inquiry into the Existence of the Ten Least-Populated Vermont Towns as Separate Legal and Administrative Entities" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1957).

27. One of the most accessible and complete short takes on classical democracy in Athens is David Held's opening chapter in *Models of Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 13–35. He does not discuss the demes' role in Athenian democracy but includes them in figure 1.1, with an arrow leading from the demes to the assembly, the ecclesia. This arrow intrigues me.

28. Traill's quota of representatives in the Council for Pallenais was set at six. Gomme gave the deme seven. Traill, *Political Organization of Attica*, 67; Gomme, *Population of Athens*, 65.

Some dramatic differences add spice to the comparison. For Athens, Montpelier is not the final repository of sovereignty. The United States of America is. In Pallenais a citizen did not have representation in Greece. Greece was not a sovereign nation, and the Greeks had no system of representation in any entity larger than the city-state. The 191 eligible citizens of Pallenais were *expected* to journey to Athens ten times a year and help in person to pass laws for the entire city-state. The citizens of Athens, Vermont, have no such opportunity. For the comparison to hold, the Vermont legislature would have to serve as a statewide "board of selectmen" (as did the Council of Five Hundred in Athens, Greece) that would submit proposals to mass meetings attended by Vermonters from all over the state.²⁹ But for all these differences, the comparison of Pallenais and Athens, Vermont, remains remarkable.³⁰ The demes anchored democracy in the most democratic Greek city-state (Athens), and the towns anchor democracy in the most democratic American state (Vermont).

In 1951 Alistair Cooke, a British journalist, radio and television commentator, and author of many books on America, including the popular *Letters from America*, commented on the Greek influence in the beautiful little town of Newfane, Vermont.

WITNESS

IN NEWFANE'S SMALL VALLEY (1951)

Walk into the center of this village of Newfane. It is a handsome common with a couple of shops, an inn and a quite magnificent courthouse. The town was settled in 1776, but the county courthouse didn't go up until fifty years later, and we can be thankful for that. For in the interval Americans conceived a passion for everything Greek, believing that they had just successfully established the first genuine democracy since the Greeks and the grandest Republic since Rome. In this small village in Vermont, the county courthouse is an exquisite symbol of what Americans did in wood with Greek forms.

Opposite the courthouse is the inn, which is also the jail. Newfane has kept up its habit of feeding its prisoners from the inn, and since the inn serves

29. Pallenais was also part of a tribe (a *phylai*) and, on the level below this, part of a *trittyes*. The *trittyes* was a cross-sectional link between the deme and the tribes. One cannot equate either *phylai* or *trittyes* with the New England "county," which is an unimportant structure. In the deme structure, citizenship remained locked to the deme of one's first male ancestor. In Vermont, of course, citizenship follows the individual. Nor do Vermont towns have an analogue to the *demarch*, which one scholar likens to a mayor (Stockton, *Classical Athenian Democracy*, 63).

30. For instance, for 150 years Vermonters in their towns created and elected officers such as "fence viewer" and "hog reeve." Although trivial offices today, for well over a century they were the towns' answer to problems of the "common." Athenians in their demes did the same. This office was called an *axiomp* (one who oversees pasture rights). Whitehead, *Demos of Attica*, 122.

the best food around here, it's sometimes hard to get the inmates out of jail. Theodore Roosevelt said he would like to retire here, commit some "mild crime" and eat his way through a cheerful old age.

If you went along the valley you would be walking without knowing it through another town called Brookline, for Brookline is simply the scattered houses of the valley. It has less than a hundred people, mostly farmers, and they are their own rulers. Its first town meeting was held in 1795 and the last one was held last week. The names at the first meeting are still there: Moore and Waters, and Ebenezer Wellman and Cyrus Whitcomb, and Christopher Osgood (there has always been a Christopher on the Osgood farm). Walking along the road you might run into the tractor of a Mr. Hoyt, to all intents a farmer. He is also the road commissioner of the valley. His wife, Minnie Hoyt, is the town clerk, a justice of the peace, and when she isn't doing the farming chores she's busy signing fishing licenses, or marrying a visiting couple, or telling the comfortable city-people who have made a summer home here that by decision made at the last town meeting their taxes will be twice as much next year. What is striking to an Englishman is that the few fairly well-to-do people are all what they call "summer folks," people who made a farm over as a summer retreat from New York or Boston. But the summer folks are strangers and underlings. The valley has heard many delicate sounds through the years. But it has never heard the advice of a squire or the accent of *noblesse oblige*. The farmers are ruled and rulers.

Alistair Cooke³¹

Why Not Town Meeting?

There is emotion in the study of Greek democracy. First comes wonderment at the panoply of laws and institutions created so long ago by a people committed to self-government. Accordingly, the effort expended to understand what happened there is equally wondrous. Over the centuries thousands of anthropologists, archaeologists, architects, historians, linguists, and students of drama and poetry have spent their professional lives unearthing the empirical evidence from which we now craft our own political science. Much remains to be done. Yet our poring over the existing record, our exploration of every nook and cranny of nuance, our attention to every scrap of evidence, every subtlety of argument, are profoundly impressive. We have probed our own interpretations of our own interpretations in an incessant stirring of the intellectual broth. We seem compelled to make sure we have

31. Alistair Cooke, *One Man's America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 158, 160–161, reprinted in T. D. Seymour Bassett, ed., *Outsiders inside Vermont* (Canaan, NH: Phoenix, 1976), 121–122.

gotten right what we say about what we think we know. We care about real democracy. Deeply.

Then comes puzzlement. If this be so, why haven't we looked at real democracy where it exists, here in our own land?³² For the fact is, we know much more about the Greek democracy of twenty-five hundred years ago than we do about real democracy in America today.³³ We have as accurate estimates (based on heroic efforts in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, and literature) of how many eligible citizens attended the assembly in the Athens of old as we have of how many eligible citizens attend a New England town meeting today. Until the publication of Joseph Zimmerman's book in 1999, the human race had *no* aggregate published data on attendance rates of the New England town meetings.³⁴

Imagine the world twenty-five hundred years from now. And imagine that the archaeologists of that time could unearth intact the entire empirical record of town meeting democracy as it exists today—the newspapers, popular literature, scholarly works, private diaries, and even the town clerks' records. Practically nothing of what we would want to know about real democracy in America in the year 2000 would be knowable. It has never, literally, been recorded.³⁵ Imagine now that we could travel back in time to classical Greece, carrying with us the information technologies of the present. Would we let the practice of real democracy in the demes be lost to history? Would we condemn ourselves again to centuries of backbreaking discovery that, in spite of many ingenious undertakings, have produced only a frustrating tidbit of what we want to know?³⁶

32. A rare exception is an example of survey research, which focuses primarily on face-to-face participation. See Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thomson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1993).

33. Robert Brown's account of provincial and town meeting democracy in colonial Massachusetts exceeds in its care and precision any account of town meeting democracy since the Revolution. See Robert E. Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691–1780* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955).

34. In bringing together descriptions of the legal and institutional structures of town meeting in the six New England states, Zimmerman's book is important and very useful. Problems with his attendance data should be considered in light of the difficulty of his task. See Joseph Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), and Frank Bryan, "The New England Town Meeting in Action" (Review), *American Political Science Review*, June 2001, 489–490.

35. The best sources might be scattered videotapes of very recent town meetings, most in bits and pieces but some in full. From these we might be able to extrapolate limited data on participation rates. But attendance levels would be mostly obscure.

36. Take the question of the secret ballot process in earlier town meetings. What we have is evidence like the picture of a ballot being cast in the Woodstock town meeting of 1940 on whether the town should license itself to allow liquor to be sold. The caption reads: "Harriet

Puzzlement provokes inquiry. Yet we need not long speculate over why serious scholarship on town meeting is rare. First, town meetings are found only in New England, and the greater portion of them in northern New England. Second, town meeting has hardly been ascendant in recent decades. In many places it seems near death. Third, town meetings do not affect most U.S. citizens. The participants do not start wars or write the federal budget. Fourth, political scientists are primarily liberals, not communitarians. Their interests turn their research away from real democracy. Fifth, political scientists tend to come from cities, not the countryside. I suspect most of my colleagues around the country would welcome three or four years in rural Vermont with the same enthusiasm I would feel for a similar stay in Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, or Los Angeles. Sixth, even those political scientists who are interested in face-to-face, communal participation (and there are more and more good ones these days) are unlikely to believe this form of participation can be attached to real legislative bodies making policy for real governments.

Indeed, the important work predating and that stimulated by Robert Putnam's celebrated enterprise to establish the civic underpinnings of democratic society rests on the assumption that governments are *manifestations* of the civic process.³⁷ The idea that a government could itself be an important, even primary component of civil society has been pretty much abandoned. Our eyes have understandably fastened instead on participation in groups that practice real democracy rather than governments that do. An exception was Jane Mansbridge, who as early as 1970 decided to include a government (the town of "Selby," Vermont) in her pathbreaking *Beyond Adversary Democracy*.³⁸

Although all of these reasons explain, they do not suffice. Northern New England may be a bit of a trip for many scholars, but an entire subdiscipline of political science travels the globe to investigate governance in out-of-the-way places. Town meeting is in decline in some of the largest towns, but it is going strong in many more. So what if individual town meetings do little more than buy trucks, vote for local school budgets, rule on salt for the

Cummings and Blanche Goodsell check off Elmer Freeman. Mrs. Cummings reportedly said to him, "if you vote "yes" for liquor, you'd better put your ballot in a box in another town." Licensing won, 171-76." In the picture Mr. Freeman (his real name) is handing one of the women a slip of paper. It does not appear to be folded, and the woman he is handing it to appears to be looking at it too closely for it to be truly secret. Peter S. Jennison, *The History of Woodstock, Vermont, 1890-1983* (Woodstock, VT: Countryman Press for the Woodstock Foundation, 1985), 246-247.

37. Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Tradition in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Putnam has been a godsend for communitarians like me, for he has challenged the discipline to reconsider the foundation of the Republic.

38. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*.

highways, and determine when taxes come due? We are scientists. Physics can be learned and taught as well from the perspective of a spiderweb as from that of the Golden Gate Bridge. Surely the discipline has had enough enthusiastic communitarians over the past half century to produce more than the half-dozen studies that have been done. No article on town meeting has ever been published in a major political science journal. Never. Finally, are we sure that real democratic governance is impossible? And even if it is, are we convinced that knowing how real democracy works would tell us so little about other forms of democracy that we are willing to let it go completely unstudied?

A single point explains a great deal. Logistics. For the most part town meetings are held only once a year and most on the same day. Minutes are not required, and although most towns produce some kind of record, the thoroughness varies greatly. Even the very best minutes usually do not record complete attendance data. None produce an accurate record of verbal participation. In short, what happens at a town meeting can be known in only one way. Attend. A single meeting needs at least two, usually three, and sometimes even four persons to record data on such basic items as attendance, verbal participation, and voting results. Thus, to study more than two or three small town meetings a year requires a cadre of researchers. The expense would be enormous.³⁹ Consequently, no database on real democracy exists, and therefore there is no developed science. My intention in this book is to do something about that. I want to get the science of real democracy under way.

Going into the Outback

In the spring of 1969, while teaching at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont, I tested the possibility that the logistics of an extensive town meeting study could be overcome. I developed a data-recording procedure, devoted two lectures to town meeting and instructions in its use, and sent sixty-two students (in two class sections) out to pretest the procedure on twenty-five town meetings. In brief, here is the kind of information they

39. Beginning in the late 1990s several Vermont towns began experimenting with Saturday meetings. Before that some towns instituted Monday night meetings. This means that if you plan correctly, are willing to drive fast, and know the right roads, it is possible to attend five meetings a year—Saturday, Monday night, Tuesday morning (for a town that finishes its meeting by noon), Tuesday afternoon (for a town that begins its meeting after lunch), and Tuesday evening (this would also be a very small town). In this way I personally have attended and recorded data for at least four town meetings a year since 1995.

recorded.⁴⁰ They counted how many people were present by gender. They counted four times: half an hour after the meeting began, half an hour before the lunch break, half an hour after the meeting began again after lunch, and at the time the next to last warning item was considered. The students also indicated on another form how each issue taken up was resolved: by voice vote, standing count, or ballot. Whenever votes were counted, they recorded the totals. They measured the time spent on each warning item by noting the time the discussion began on each article and the time it left the floor and discussion on the next item began.

Recording participation turned out to be easier than I had expected. A form allowed the students to do the following: When the first person speaks, she is identified by some unique marking ("red vest, blond hair") and by gender. Her act of participation is placed on a grid, represented by the number of the warning item on the floor at the time she participated. The next participator, say "big guy in green suspenders" is then recorded on the grid immediately under the line for the "red vest" participator. A number matching the warning item on the floor similarly marks this second participation. If these people participate again, that participation is recorded on their individual lines on the grid (next to their earlier participation), with the number of the article on which they participate the second time. And so on until the end of the meeting.

Since this is done *sequentially*, it shows the order of the participations of all the participators and the order of each one's entering the discussion for the first time, along with the issues on which they spoke and the number of times they participated on each warning item. The measure also produces the total number of people who participated and the total number of participations by all those participating. The *distribution* of the participations among those who spoke, the sequence of participation by gender (important for theories of feminine participation), and the kinds of issues that prompted the most or least discussion are also available.

In the Craftsbury meeting of 1999, for instance, we know that 152 people attended the meeting.⁴¹ Of these, 55 participated a total of 185 times. In the three hours and forty-three minutes of the meeting, not counting the lunch break, the people of Craftsbury resolved seventeen articles on the town warning and seven on the school warning. They also considered six matters of "extra business" and eight items under the "new business" article. Five of

40. For a detailed explanation of the process see the methodological appendix, www.uvm.edu/~fbryan.

41. The participation grid for this meeting is available in www.uvm.edu/~fbryan.

the seventeen town articles required a ballot vote.⁴² The closest was 106 yea, 43 nay on the question of producing a new town lot map.⁴³ None of the town officer elections were contested. During the school meeting only one of the seven warning articles, the budget, required a ballot, and it passed 109 to 19. In the closest vote of the day, for school director, Roy Darling defeated Melissa Phillips 70 to 55. On the highest attendance count, women outnumbered men at the meeting 89 to 63. The average of the four counts was 67 women and 58 men. Of the 55 participators, 25 were women. This is a very small sample of the kinds of things we now know about the Craftsbury town meeting, one of the 49 meetings studied in 1999, three decades after the pretest. None of these data are available anywhere else. Nor could they now be made available.

The following are directions to Craftsbury (seventy miles one way) that I found jotted down in Beth Tonneson's Craftsbury folder. Hers is representative of the kind of trip my students have taken for thirty-three years to make this book possible.

WITNESS

Take Interstate 89 to exit 10—Waterbury Stowe take left off ramp head through Waterbury and into Stowe at 3 way intersection go straight on that road into Morrisville in Morrisville come to 4-way intersection and go straight through it. At the end of that road is route 15—take a right—keep going on r. 15—heading toward Hardwick well before that there will be a sign on the left for North Wolcott rd—take a left onto North Wolcott road—(you'll know it a little ways down on that road is Larische's farm it is split by the road) follow North Wolcott to the end, it will intersect with route 14 take a left onto 14 (be able to look up at the common)—then take your first paved [emphasis mine] right road leads directly to the common—Academy will be on the left across from the common.

Beth Tonneson

42. Most elections for town officers must (by law) be resolved by a ballot vote. If no contest develops, a motion is made that the clerk be instructed to "cast one ballot" for the lone nominee. When this motion has been approved (it almost always is) the election is official. Budgets do not require a ballot by law, but often a ballot is requested from the floor. If seven people at the meeting request a ballot, then one must be held on any issue before the meeting. Often you hear groans from the floor when a ballot is requested. The ease with which citizens may require secret ballots is perhaps the best example of the mix of adversary and communitarian forms of participation at a town meeting.

43. This relatively controversial item was on the floor for thirty-two minutes: 15 people participated, 8 men and 7 women, a total of 26 times. Men had 17 of the participations and women 9. Beth Tonneson, "As Craftsbury Goes . . . So Goes Vermont? An Analysis of Democracy in Craftsbury, Vermont," Burlington, University of Vermont, April 1999.

This kind of comparative information about real democracy has never before been collected. We have not known what percentage of a town's registered voters go to town meeting. What percentage of these speak? What are the issues on which they speak the most? How long do the meetings last? Is participation dominated by a few? Do women share real democracy equally with men? Do women speak more often on some issues than on others? What is the nature of conflict within the meetings? How much conflict is there? Are the votes close? Are face-to-face elections more competitive than elections by ballot? On what kinds of issues does conflict occur? Do high-conflict issues take longer to resolve? Do they stimulate more or less participation? Do women participate on high-conflict issues at the same rate as they do on low-conflict issues? What is the distribution of time spent on the issues? Do officers dominate the discussion?

Beyond its descriptive value, this kind of data makes possible for the study of real democracy the kind of scientific inquiry that has been under way for so long in the study of representative systems—for instance, in the comparative analysis of the American states or samples of cities or even nations. Are variations in real democracy in a community related to that community's socioeconomic diversity, or socioeconomic status, or population dynamics, or sense of community "boundedness," or the size of the town? Simple stuff in the scheme of the discipline as it now stands for representative democracy—uncharted ground in the study of real democracy.

Here is what I mean. In 1969, with the pretest over and relatively successful, I decided to experiment with a simple predictive model just for fun and (perhaps) to convince myself that a long-range project was worth the time. With only twenty-three towns in my sample, I ranked each town by number of registered voters and by a number that combined (equally) the percentage of its registered voters at the town meeting and the percentage of those attending who spoke out in the meeting at least once. I called (rather awkwardly) this sum of attendance and speaking "democraticness." The results shown are in figure 1.1, plot 1.

The trend is clear enough. For every increase of one rank of its population size, a town's town meeting will lose about nine-tenths (0.88) of a rank in "democraticness." This remarkably rough, case-challenged scatterplot (clearly unpublishable) greatly advanced what we knew about real democracy. But its value came primarily from the underdeveloped state of the discipline. My purpose in this book is therefore quite modest. It is to take the guesswork out of fundamental things we ought to know about real democracy.

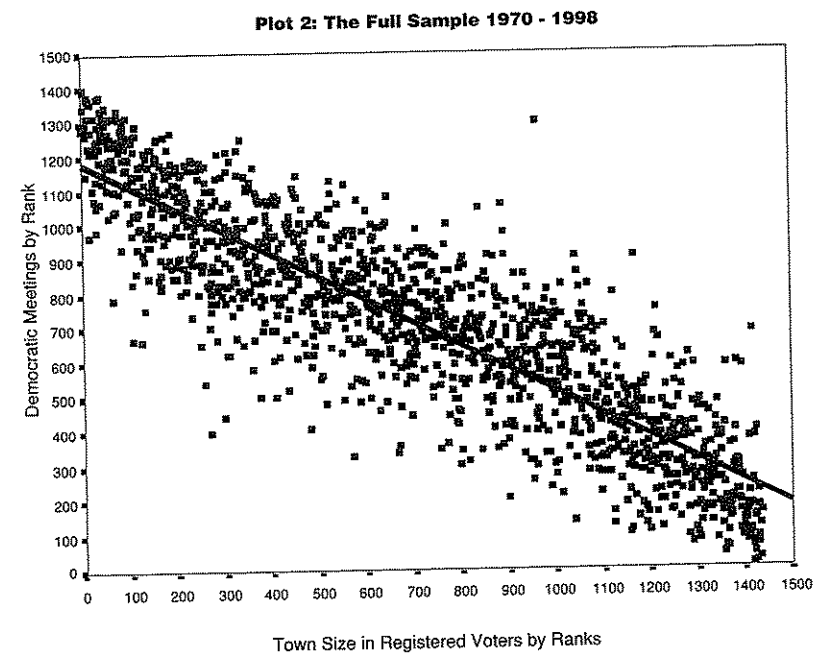
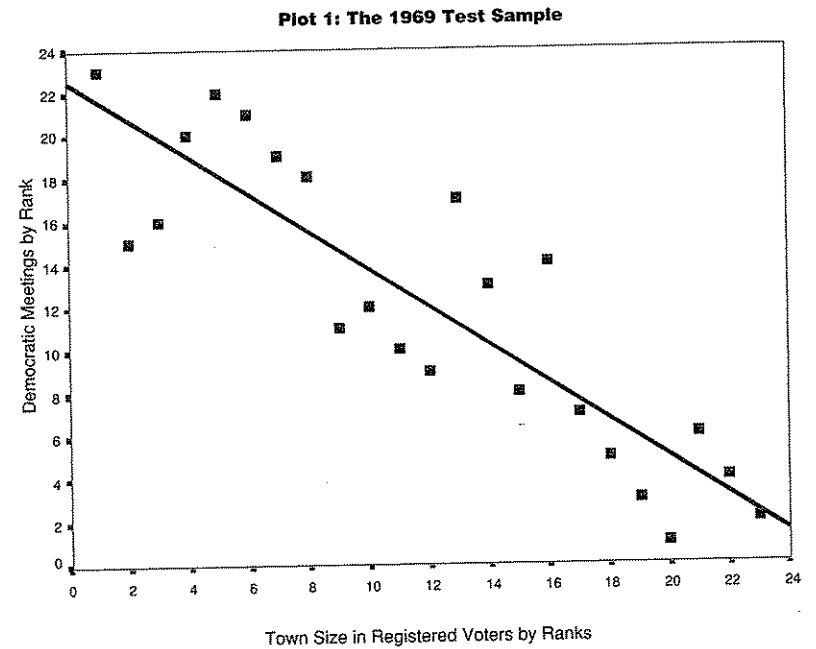


Figure 1.1. Two samples of town meetings.

Telling the Story

Thirty-four years after I began this study in 1969, my students and I had obtained data on 1,669 meetings; 1,435 are used in this book.⁴⁴ Plot 2 of figure 1.1 demonstrates the explanatory potential of such a dramatically expanded database. The towns were selected randomly, with the following exception. Each year before 1980 I chose a number of towns at random and tried to match students with the towns. After 1980, in addition to the random list, I made a conscious effort to return to a select number of towns to be sure I was developing a more or less complete history on a few towns. These towns approximated a stratified sample in that I made certain they had characteristics that represented important features such as size, region, and socioeconomic composition. Throughout this process I was not afraid to vary from the model if logistics required it. The result has produced only one bias—overrepresentation of towns in northern Vermont.

In the description of the towns one condition overwhelms: their size. By nearly every standard a political scientist might employ, they are tiny. One-quarter of the meetings were held in towns that averaged fewer than 1,000 residents. Of the 1,435 meetings, 113 were held in towns that averaged fewer than 200. Only 2 percent of the meetings were held in towns of more than 5,000. Political scientists seldom make professional visits to places like these. Yet little towns allow us to gaze at the important inner space of politics. While many seek the truth by scanning galaxies through powerful telescopes, my eyes have been glued to a microscope—looking down, not up, inward, not outward. America has often seemed transfixed by big. I am captivated by small.

44. The database ends in 1998. The final editing of this book occurred in 2003. I am often asked about the accuracy of the data. Do students ever get it wrong? Sure. The question is how wrong. My judgment is that it is probably more *reliable* than survey research instruments. This is partly because the recording device is so simple and does not rely on assumptions of internal *validity*. On attendance counts my bet is the students are close to perfect. On the number of participators, even more so. On repeat participations I suspect they make a few more mistakes, but it is still very close. In the aggregate these errors are probably less egregious than the errors made by interviewers in someone's household, because it is much easier to record nonobtrusive data. If a student counts 200 people at a town meeting, I'd bet the house and the car the real number is between 195 and 205. If they say 40 of these participated, it is between 39 and 41. If they say "the man in the red hat" spoke 8 times, it is either 7, 8, or 9. Given the wide gaps that we know exist between what individuals say their political behavior is like and what it really is, I have no qualms about asserting that when I report in this book that 18 percent of a town's voters were at a town meeting, it is a more secure figure than a survey research schedule reporting a similar percentage based on a survey of town residents, even when allowances are made for sample size. For caveats to the science of survey research, see John Brehm, *The Phantom Respondents: Opinion Surveys and Political Representation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), and the anthology Thomas E. Mann and Gary R. Orren, eds., *Media Polls in American Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1992).

It is not a popular approach. For the policymakers of a continental republic this is understandable. For scientists investigating democracy I find it odd.

This, then, is a first cut at the study of real democracy. I want to show what real democracy looks like and how it works. To make this description more palatable, I garnish it with the herbs of science—simple hypotheses drawn from the larger scheme of the discipline. To do this requires numbers. Lots of numbers. But quantification must be conditioned by the other senses. And so we turn to Charles Kuralt and Marnie Owen.

WITNESS

CHARLES KURALT'S TOWN MEETING DAY IN STRAFFORD, VERMONT

This one day in Vermont, the town carpenter lays aside his tools, the town doctor sees no patients, the shopkeeper closes his shop, mothers tell their children they'll have to warm up their own dinner. This one day, people in Vermont look not to their own welfare but to that of their town. It doesn't matter that it's been snowing since four o'clock this morning. They'll be in the meeting house. This is town meeting day.

Every March for 175 years, the men and women of Strafford, Vermont, have trudged up this hill on the one day which is their holiday for democracy. They walk past a sign that says: THE OLD WHITE MEETING HOUSE—BUILT IN 1799 AND CONSECRATED AS A PLACE OF PUBLIC WORSHIP FOR ALL DENOMINATIONS WITH NO PREFERENCE FOR ONE ABOVE ANOTHER. Since 1801, it has also been in continuous use as a town hall.

Here, every citizen may have his say on every question. One question is: Will the town stop paying for outside health services? The speaker is a farmer and elected selectman, David K. Brown. And farmer Brown says yes.

DAVID K. BROWN: This individual was trying or thinking about committing suicide. So we called the Orange County Mental Health. This was, I believe, on a Friday night. They said they'd see him Tuesday afternoon [*mild laughter*], and if we had any problems, take him to Hanover and put him in the emergency room. Now I don't know as we should pay five hundred and eighty-two dollars and fifty cents for that kind of advice.

They talked about that for half an hour, asking themselves if this money would be well or poorly spent.

This is not representative democracy. This is pure democracy, in which every citizen's voice is heard.

JAMES CONDUCT: We will vote on this before we go to Article four. All those in favor signify by saying "Aye."

PEOPLE: Aye.

CONDUCT: All opposed.

PEOPLE: Nay.

CONDUCT: I'm going to ask for a standing vote. All those in favor stand, please.

It's an old Yankee expression which originated in the town meeting and has entered the language of free men: Stand up and be counted.

And when the judgment is made, and announced by James Condict, maker of rail fences and moderator of this meeting, the town will abide by the judgment.

CONDICT: There are a hundred votes cast—sixty-one in favor and thirty-nine against. And it then becomes deleted from the town budget.

This is the way the founders of this country imagined it would be—that citizens would meet in their own communities to decide directly most of the questions affecting their lives and fortunes. Vermont's small towns have kept it this way.

Will or will not Strafford, Vermont, turn off its streetlights to save money?

CONDICT: All those in favor—

MAN [shouting]:—Paper ballot!—

CONDICT:—signify by saying—

MAN [shouting]:—Paper ballot!

WOMAN: What?

MAN: That's my right, any member's right at a meeting—to call for a paper ballot.

CONDICT: Is that seconded?

WOMAN: I'll second it.

CONDICT: It's seconded.

MAN: It doesn't have to be seconded.

CONDICT: Prepare to cast your ballots on this amendment.

If any citizen demands a secret ballot, a secret ballot it must be. Everybody who votes in Vermont has taken an old oath—to always vote his conscience, without fear or favor of any person. This is something old, something essential. You tear off a little piece of paper and on it you write "yes" or "no." Strafford votes to keep the streetlights shining.

There is pie, baked by the ladies of the PTA. There are baked beans and brown bread, served at town meeting by Celia Lane as long as anybody can remember. Then a little more wood is added to the stove and a dozen more questions are debated and voted on in the long afternoon. What is really on the menu today is government of the people. . . . When finally they did adjourn and walk out into the snow, it was with the feeling of having preserved something important, something more important than their streetlights—their liberty.

Charles Kuralt⁴⁵

That was Kuralt on Strafford. In March of the year 2000, one of my students, Marnie E. Owen, whose mother is a former town clerk of Strafford

45. Charles Kuralt, *On the Road with Charles Kuralt* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1985), 288–291.

and whose father is a carpenter in town, did her paper on Strafford. Here (in part) is what she said about town meeting:

WITNESS

My observations of town meeting day this past March are much less romantic than Kuralt's. Strafford doesn't have a town carpenter; it has several, most of whom likely went to work on town meeting day. I didn't see many of them at the Town House. There is no town doctor either. Most Strafford residents go to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, New Hampshire, when they need medical attention. As for snow, by March 7, 2000, most of the Strafford's snow had melted. Temperatures climbed to a least fifty degrees that day.

The media often portrays Vermont as a pure, primitive, simple place that modern technology has not yet pervaded and where (as Jefferson said) live "the chosen people of God." Accounts like Kuralt's reinforce these broad stereotypes. . . . This is precisely the sort of thinking that leads the many citizens in places like Strafford to participate in town government. Strafford's high turnout at town meeting likely stems in part from the misconception of the inherent virtue of rural people and newcomers' desires to make themselves part of something they see as highly moral.

When I went to town meeting in Strafford this year, I sat behind and frequently conversed with a relative newcomer, Donna Bliss. Donna and her husband Stephen retired to Strafford from Boston about five years ago. They've built a gorgeous mansion atop a hill that overlooks much of South Strafford. Donna is a graduate of Vassar and had a career as a journalist. Stephen was a high-powered corporate CEO. Stephen and Donna are not unlike many Strafford newcomers in that they were very excited to attend their first town meeting. Unfortunately, Stephen had the misfortune of being called back to Boston at the last minute and couldn't attend. Donna hadn't been in the Town House before and was looking forward to seeing the interior of a building that she'd recognized from magazines when she first moved to Strafford. Donna found the Town House to be a charming place with its old wood stove and natural light. She was amazed that the Town House remains without plumbing, running water or electricity, and though a bit annoyed by having to walk next door to a neighboring house to use the bathroom, she tried not to show it.

Marnie Owen⁴⁶

46. Marnie E. Owen, "Strafford, Vermont: A Historical and Political Analysis," Burlington, University of Vermont, April 2000. Unlike nearly all other proper names used in this book, the Bliss's names are fictional. Over thirty years earlier when I began this study in 1969, Thomas Gallucci reported from the town of Calais: "The meeting place was an old church in need of repair. . . . The 'restroom' consisted of a small room in which was a long board with holes in it. (I waited until I got back to school!)" (Thomas Gallucci, "A Day in Calais," Colchester, Vermont, St. Michael's College, March 1969).

This is what comes of their wretched town meetings—these are the proceedings of a tumultuous and riotous rabble, who ought, if they had the least produce, to follow their mercantile employment and not trouble themselves with politics and government, which they do not understand.

Lord Germain (appointed by the king to be secretary of state to the colonies) when hearing of the Boston Tea Party

“Senator Quayle, you said it’s not going to be the folks at town meeting who are going to resolve this thing, but isn’t that what has happened? Isn’t that the reason we’re here tonight? Isn’t that the reason the president’s speaking on it tonight because people at town meetings . . . have raised the issue?”

“Our military experts say that we’re in an inferior situation: the Soviet military experts believe that we are in an inferior situation. And they’re not going to ask some grassroots caucus taking place in Vermont whether they’re inferior or superior.”

Senator Dan Quayle responding to a question (*The MacNeil-Lehrer Report*, Public Broadcasting System, March 31, 1982).

Town Meeting

An American Conversation

The heart of the American republic, it seems to me, beats to the rhythm of two philosophies: liberalism governs the center, democracy sustains the base. In the beginning, however, the voices of our history chronicle a passion for the life of the nation and the promise of liberalism. Democracy was distrusted, even feared.

From Fear to Celebration

The framers went to Philadelphia in 1787 dreading real democracy. Many say Americans adopted the Constitution *because* they dreaded real democracy. “Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates,” wrote Madison, “every Athenian Assembly would still have been a mob.”¹ Mary Ritter Beard said of the founding period, “At no time, at no place, in solemn convention assembled, through no chosen agents, had the American people officially proclaimed the United States to be a Democracy. . . . [When] the Constitution was framed no respectable person called himself or herself a democrat.”² The nation had discovered (as the British had tried to tell us only a few years earlier) that it takes a certain stability and unified purpose to run a continental enterprise. Troublemakers like Daniel Shay (reminiscent of those who threw

1. Alexander B. Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, *Federalist* no. 55 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 374.

2. Charles A. Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, *America in Midpassage* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), chap. 17. Yet real democracy was happening on the ground all over the new nation and especially in the hills and valleys and along the shores of New England.

tea into Boston harbor) were raising hell in *America*, that is, just across the Connecticut River in western New England.

Yet it wasn't long before fear of democracy began to recede. Relief came with the opening of the frontier, where most of the moblike characters who might disrupt a town meeting or a fresh republic were wont to go. It came too from the acceptance of a new democracy-proof Constitution that would handle what at the time were considered (from the citizens' point of view) the rather incidental matters of the Republic itself. Our first important political upheaval replaced America's emphasis on urban, coastal mercantilism with small-town inland agrarianism. With Jefferson the town meeting democracy that once threatened the Republic ("shook it to its very foundations," he said) became "the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self government."³

After Jefferson, our national perspective on real democracy was defined predominantly by the New England transcendentalist and romantic tradition and by Alexis de Tocqueville.⁴ Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson inscribed town meeting and the real democracy it implied into the annals of the American way. Town meeting became (for Thoreau) "the true Congress . . . the most respectable one ever assembled in the United States." In his famous speech before the people of Concord, Emerson seems almost driven in his praise. Town meeting reveals "the great secret of political science" and solves the "problem" it entails: how to "give each individual his fair weight in the government." In town meetings, he said, "the rich gave council, but the poor also; and, moreover, the just and the unjust . . . every opinion had its utterance, every fact, every acre of land, every bushel of rye, its

3. Ironically, Jefferson had little firsthand experience with real democracy, practiced as he was in the southern county tradition. After New England opposed the Embargo Act, Jefferson remarked, "How powerful did we feel the energy of this system in the case of the embargo. . . . I felt the foundations of the government shaken under my feet by the New England township." And (in language that could have come straight out of Madison's *Federalist* no. 10), "The organization of this little selfish minority enabled it to overrule the union." Letter to Joseph C. Cabell, Monticello, February 2, 1816, found in Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball, eds., *Political Writings/Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 205. Jere Daniell argues that statements like these make Jefferson's recommendation that the town meeting be adopted throughout the United States even more remarkable. Jefferson concluded: "What could the unwieldy countries of the Middle, the South, and the West do? Call a county meeting?" Jere Daniell, "Town Meeting: Symbol for a Nation," Hanover, New Hampshire, unpublished working paper, n.d.

4. Lawrence Buell finds a connection between the writings of the Federalists and those of the New England romanticists. He says that reformers within the Whig Party who were attached to the Federalist tradition did the most to invigorate the town meeting tradition. Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 94-95.

entire weight." About the same time, Tocqueville was writing, "Town Meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and enjoy it." Later in the century John Stuart Mill seconded the motion. Town meeting was "a school of public spirit."⁵ It seemed as though all had read and accepted the words of Yale's President Timothy Dwight, who wrote as early as 1821: "In these little schools men commence their apprenticeship to public life; and learn to do the public's business. Here the young speaker makes his first essays: and here his talents are displayed, marked, and acknowledged. The aged, the discreet, here see with pleasure the promise of usefulness in the young; and fail not to reward with honorable testimonials every valuable effort of the rising generation."⁶ The litany could go on. But all in all it is hard to imagine how the central years of the nineteenth century could have provided town meeting with a more impressive pedigree.

By the century's end, the applause had found its way into the textbooks. James Bryce in his much read *American Commonwealth* says: "The town or the township with its primary assembly is best . . . it is the most educative of citizens who bear a part in it. The town meeting has been not only the source but the school of democracy."⁷ Still more effusive was *Civil Government of the United States* by Harvard's John Fiske, published in 1890, which became a classic. The professor did not mince his words. The town meeting, he says, is "the most complete democracy in the world." While his praise is more broad-based than most, he too focuses on the schoolhouse metaphor:⁸ "In the kind of discussion which it provokes, in the necessity of facing argument with

5. Henry David Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," in *Reform Papers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 99; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Historical Discourse at Concord," in *Miscellanies*, vol. 2 of *Collected Works* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 46-47; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1862), 76. John Stuart Mill, *Consideration on Representative Government* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1963), 73.

6. Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York* (New Haven: T. Dwight, 1821), 32. Dwight also spends considerable time defending in glowing terms the lawmaking capacities of town meeting.

7. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 601.

8. Civic education is by far the most pronounced strain in the praise for town meeting. In 1907 the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts argued: "No small part of the capacity for honest and efficient local government manifested by the people of the commonwealth has been due to the training of citizens in the forum of the town meeting. . . . The practical instruction of the citizen in affairs of government through the instrumentality of public meetings and face-to-face discussions may be regarded quite as important as their amusement, edification, or assumed temporal advancement in ways heretofore expressly authorized by statute and held constitutional." *Wheelock v. Lowell*, 196 Mass. 220, 81 N.E. 977 (1907), cited in Lane W. Lancaster, *Government in Rural America*, 2nd ed. (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1952), 37-38.

argument and of keeping one's temper under control, the town-meeting is the best training school in existence."⁹ Summarizing the century's intellectual exuberance about town meeting, James K. Hosmer, a professor of English and German literature at Washington University in St. Louis, rhapsodized, "Is there anything more valuable among Anglo-Saxon institutions?"¹⁰

Nationalization and the Progressive Alternative

The timing was fortuitous. Town meeting made it into the textbooks just ahead of a band of progressives armed with shotguns and a rope. Historian Jere Daniell of Dartmouth College marks the time and place of the hinge in thinking as 1897, when the *Nation* published an article titled "The Decay of Town Government." Here the author, A. G. Sedgwick, begins by noting that to question the New England town meeting would be like questioning democracy itself. No matter. The truth is, says Sedgwick, the institution has fallen on hard times. New England towns have become corrupt to the core, their meetings dominated by "Village Tweeds," ignoring the will of the people. Elections are rigged. Pockets are lined. Town meeting is no longer a pretty picture (if indeed it ever was). In short, progressives like Sedgwick were not about to give town meeting a pass, hallowed ground or not.¹¹ In the next three decades the attack continued in both the local and the national press.

The Progressive Era dealt town meeting several blows. The first was perhaps the most devastating. Boredom. Looking for critiques of town meeting by the leading scholars of the period is like looking for Vermont dandelions in the snows of January. As Thoreau scholar Bob Pepperman Taylor says, "[Town meeting] wasn't where the action was."¹² The action was with referenda and reform, city machines and the national system. It was in the center, not the parts. At about the time the last state of the adjacent forty-eight joined the Union, the celebrated Progressive Herbert Croly expressed the exuberance and national perspective of the Progressive agenda. "[The] salutary aspect of the present situation is the awakening of American public opinion to the necessity of scrutinizing the *national* [emphasis mine] ideal and

9. John Fiske, *Civil Government in the United States* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1890), 30–32. Fiske's assessment is refreshingly clear-eyed.

10. James K. Hosmer, "Sam Adams, the Man of Town Meeting," in *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, second series, pt. 4, ed. Herbert B. Adams (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1984).

11. A. G. Sedgwick, "The Decay of Town Government," *Nation* (1897), cited in Daniell, "Town Meeting."

12. Bob Pepperman Taylor, interview with the author, Burlington, Vermont, September 1999.

of working over the guiding principles of its associated life. The American democracy is becoming aroused to take a searching look at its own meaning and responsibilities."¹³

In his optimistic *Changing America*, published in 1912, University of Wisconsin professor of sociology Edward Alsworth Ross likewise shows no interest in local democracy. The closest he comes is an early, explicit, and prophetic affirmation of liberalism. The people are no longer "masses," he says. They have "broken up into individuals."¹⁴ Even the quintessential Progressive John Dewey, a Vermonter himself and known for his admonition that democracy begins in the "neighborly community," finds no time to consider the role of town meeting as an institution of governance.¹⁵ Those who did take the time to think about it at all gave it short shrift. Progressive man of letters Charles Russell went to high school in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, and he concluded of town meeting governance there that business ran things: "These men might be so good they were blue in the face; still the fact remained that without mandate from the people they were the government."¹⁶

13. Herbert Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 27. Croly's only attention to town meeting democracy is indirect and instrumental. He credits the towns of Massachusetts and New Hampshire with "stubborn insistence" (even before the end of the Revolution) that any proposed new scheme for post-British state governance be submitted to a statewide popular vote that was generated by a convention formed expressly to propose the new plan. He says: "The importance of this assertion by the people [the "towns" had become "the people" in one short paragraph] of New England of the reality of ultimate popular responsibility can scarcely be overestimated. Thereafter democracy obtained a new meaning and a new dignity." *Ibid.*, 33.

14. Edward Alsworth Ross, *Changing America* (New York: Century, 1912), 6. In its denial of Greek (real) democracy, his defense of direct democracy is reminiscent of the founders: "There is no real likeness between a deliberate referendum vote in sparsely settled Oregon and the offhand, tumultuous decision of six thousand Athenians meeting in their *agora*." *Ibid.*

15. Many believe that Dewey's faith in face-to-face democracy was instilled in Vermont. Bob Pepperman Taylor, who knows as much about Dewey as anyone, resists the linkage between Vermont and Dewey's public philosophy. Dewey's thinking, says Taylor, is more apt to have come from his formal schooling and church experience in Vermont than from his experiences *with* Vermont. Dewey grew up in one of the few cities in Vermont, Burlington—a small city to be sure, but the biggest in the state. It had no town meeting. He left Vermont in his twenties and thereafter lived and worked almost exclusively in two of America's greatest cities, Chicago and New York. See Bob Pepperman Taylor, "John Dewey's Vermont Inheritance," in *The University of Vermont: The First Two Hundred Years*, ed. Robert V. Daniels (Burlington: University of Vermont; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991), 121–137.

16. Charles Edward Russell, *Bare Hands and Stone Walls: Some Reflections of a Sideline Reformer* (New York: Scribner, 1933). St. Johnsbury was home to the second most important business family of the century in Vermont, the Fairbanks of Fairbanks Scales. It would be hard to imagine a better setting for the "company town" thesis. Russell seems fair-minded in his recollections. He pays the people of the town about the highest compliment one can, saying he could think of no community "blessed" with citizens more "kindly, friendly, neighborly and good to know." He also is lavish in his praise of the company: "They gave money for good objects, they

With the war that settled the question of the Union still fresh in memory, the frontier closed, and the Industrial Revolution ascendant (and with it the threat of corruption and corporate greed), it was time to fashion a national democracy, a larger, more centralized expression of American nationhood. In local affairs the quest was for managerial politics engineered by politics-free professionals, a concept anathema to town meeting. The Progressives' democracy was defined in terms of direct voting rather than face-to-face deliberation.¹⁷ In short, on the canvas of the Progressive dream, town meeting was nowhere to be found.¹⁸

The building of the American century—that unique blending of continental expansion and urban industrialism between 1830 and 1950—combined with the Progressive vision to spell more trouble for town meeting. With the American century came the decline of the New England town, a special conjunction of geographic cohesion and small population that had been the prime grassland of real democracy. New England was a major exporter of people to the West, and no state contributed more of its population to the movement than Vermont.¹⁹

financed the Academy [which Russell attended], built and presented to the town the really remarkable Athenaeum, stocked it with a marvelous library, added an excellent collection of paintings. Liberally they subscribed to foreign missions; they had built one of the most beautiful churches in all New England; they were flawless in the performance of every pious duty.”

17. In 1912, while defending the gut-level institutional processes of the Progressive agenda, Delos F. Wilcox pretty much writes town meeting off. It is “a sort of national memory, a regret of days gone by and conditions that have passed.” He continues in a passage prescient of the neighborhood government movement of the 1970s: “Even yet it occasionally happens that some ardent civic reformer, his soul burdened with the political failures of American city government, brings forward some complex and curious plan for reestablishing town-meeting methods in a metropolis. But these schemes are so manifestly visionary and impracticable that they hardly attract a passing notice. The town-meeting belongs essentially to the past.” Delos F. Wilcox, *Government by All the People, or The Initiative, the Referendum, and the Recall as Instruments of Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 5–6.

18. Some Progressives had been willing to link the spirit of town meeting to their favorite reforms. “Town meeting,” one wrote, “gave great encouragement to the spread of the plebescital principle,” because “the people in their town meetings had been made familiar with direct legislation representing their local concerns.” Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *The Referendum in America* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 108, 110. Indeed, it could be that the tradition of “instructing delegates” in Massachusetts did support the notions of referenda, initiatives, and recall. But these traditions could also be seen as simply a natural unfolding of the concept of representation in the colonies. John Phillip Reid, *The Concept of Representation in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 90–93. I am inclined to agree with David Magleby that for referenda and initiatives “the town meeting has little relevance.” David B. Magleby, *Direct Legislation: Voting on Ballot Propositions in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

19. Van Wyck Brooks calls this period New England’s “Indian summer.” Van Wyck Brooks, *New England: Indian Summer, 1865–1915* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940). See also Stewart H. Holbrook, *The Yankee Exodus: An Account of Migration from New England* (New York: Macmillan,

But to the dismay of people like Lewis Mumford, New Englanders failed to implant their democracy in the new lands they did so much to settle and fashion.²⁰ The New England democratic perspective may have had an influence, but the *institution* didn’t take. The land settlement patterns (mostly agricultural) of the Midwest, and especially the middle border and the deep West, were not hospitable to communal, deliberative enterprise.²¹ The township of the new America evolved on its own, influenced by the wider open spaces that New Englanders coveted. Besides, countervailing influences were at work, primarily the county, manor, and parish systems that were fresh in the memories of fellow settlers from New York to Louisiana.²²

Within New England itself, urban industrialism played havoc with town meeting. In the south (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut), where town meeting had first taken hold, urbanization was chewing up the towns

1950). The depletion of small-town New England began in earnest with the Civil War. Vermont sent 10 percent of its *entire population* off to fight. The state had a casualty rate of 15 percent. Dead casualties. “For those who returned,” writes Howard S. Russell, “ties to the old town had been loosened by absence and travel.” See Howard S. Russell, *A Long Deep Furrow* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1976), 417–418. See also John O’Brien, “Vermont Fathers of Wisconsin,” *Vermont History* 16 (July 1948): 74–82, and Lewis D. Stilwell, *Migration from Vermont* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1937).

20. Said Mumford, “The political importance of this new form [the town and its town meeting] must not be under-rated, through the failure to grasp it and to continue it—indeed to incorporate it in both the Federal and the State Constitutions—was one of the tragic oversights of post-revolutionary political development.” Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), 332–333.

21. Clyde Snider observed in 1957, “The geographical townships marked out by the rectangular land surveyors of the national government commonly provided the areas for new civil townships (except in eastern Ohio); and the artificial nature of these areas has been an important factor in preventing the township in these regions from attaining the social unity and political importance of the New England town.” Clyde F. Snider, “Indiana Counties and Townships,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 33 (June 1937): 119–152; Clyde F. Snider, *Local Government in Rural America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1957), 20.

22. The best study of this process is Lois Kimball Mathews Rosenberry, *The Expansion of New England* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962). To get out of New England by land one must go through New York. New York’s county system of local governance developing next to New England’s town system is an example of the subtle chemistry of tradition, geography, and governance. See Nicholas Varga, “The Development and Structure of Local Government in Colonial New York,” in *Town and Country: Essays on the Structure of Local Government in the American Colonies*, ed. Bruce C. Daniels (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 186–215. Townships in Indiana and Illinois bore clear similarities to the New England town, primarily in the central and northern regions where the New England influence was strong. The “Biblical Institute” that came to Evanston, Illinois, for instance, was modeled after the theological seminary in Newbury, Vermont. My first twelve years of education came in the seven-room Town Central School building on the site of the Newbury Seminary. It took only three teachers to get us through eight grades. Mrs. Merrill, Mrs. Whitehill, and Mrs. Butson did everything but the janitorial work—and now and then some of that. One of the best opportunities to study the transplantation of towns in this period is the “Vermontville Colony” in Michigan. See Douglas K. Meyer, “Union Colony, 1836–1870: Pattern and Process of Growth,” *Vermont History* 41 (Summer 1973): 147–157.

and with them the potential for sustained real democracy. Connecticut started the process as early as 1784, incorporating the four cities of Hartford, New Haven, Middletown, and Norwich each *within* its respective town.²³ It was not yet a popular move. According to Harold A. Pinkham Jr., chronicler of early urbanism in New England, it was not until Boston broke out and “set the pace” that a rapid expansion of city charters began. In 1822, after a three-day town debate, Bostonians voted away their town meeting. Providence became a city in 1830, and Portland, Maine did so in 1832. In Connecticut, Waterbury, Bridgeport, and New Britain followed suit, all dismantling their town meetings. By the end of the century, aided by the arrival of the streetcar, suburbanization was added to the mix and further reduced the number of freestanding towns.²⁴

The “north forty” of New England—Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont—which by 1850 was the nation’s best remaining natural range for real democracy, was hit especially hard by the movement down from the hills to the larger mill towns of southern New England or to the West. By the turn of the century a close observer of New England would write:

The children left [the farm] drawn by dreams of gains the city or the sea or the far West offers: and the parents are gone, too, now. The shingles and clapboards loosen and the roof sags and within, damp, mossy decay has fastened itself to the walls, floor and ceiling of every room. Gaps have broken in the stone walls along the roadway, and the brambles are thick, springing on either side. In the front yard is a gnarled, untrimmed apple tree, with a great broken limb sagging to the ground, and about, a ragged growth of bushes. As time goes on, the house falls, piece by piece, and at last only the shattered frame stands, a grim memorial of the dead past.²⁵

23. Thus the city dwellers had dual residency, city and town. This process was adopted in Vermont with the incorporation of “villages” within towns. Growing up on the “intervalles” of the Connecticut River (just below the fall line) in Newbury, I had dual citizenship. I was a citizen both of Newbury village and the town of Newbury. Newbury has two incorporated villages—Newbury village and Wells River village. It was in another village (Orleans) in a two-village town (Barton) up in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom that I began my teaching career in the local high school.

24. For a treatment of the urbanization process through 1873 see Harold A. Pinkham Jr., “Plantation to City Charter: The Rise of Urban New England, 1630–1873,” in *American Cities and Towns*, ed. Joseph F. Rishel (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1992), 14–25.

25. Clifton Johnson, “The New England Country” (1893), quoted in Perry D. Westbrook, *The New England Town in Fact and Fiction* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), 161. When I was ten years old I spent a good part of the fall and winter on a hill farm on Wallace Hill in Newbury, Vermont. Rural electrification had not yet arrived. I remember Mr. McEachern’s face in the yellow light of a kerosene lantern as he milked. A fuzzy pride of barn cats (mostly kittens) surrounded a huge bowl of steaming fresh milk, the purring so

This picture is precisely on target.²⁶

Although the demise of the hill farms left many valley villages intact,²⁷ the decline of rural, farm culture in so many places all at once in the very heartland of “town meeting country” had a debilitating effect on the public persona of town meeting. It fertilized the emerging antirural sentiment that accompanied Progressivism and the urban-industrial revolution and became a third element in the swing from good to bad of the national perspective on town meeting between 1895 and 1935. The more or less benign country bumpkin image evident throughout the nineteenth century turned sour in the twentieth. Critics began to doubt that country people were of the proper *quality* to sustain democracy, especially face-to-face deliberative democracy.²⁸

In fairness, things did look bleak. Listen to Rudyard Kipling describe the outback of Vermont as he worked on *The Jungle Book* and *Captains Courageous* from his home in Brattleboro: “The land was denuding itself of its accustomed inhabitants, and their places had not yet been taken by the wreckage of Eastern Europe or the wealthy city-folk who later bought ‘pleasure

loud it competed with the sound of four alternating teats filling the pail between my best friend Joe’s knees. I milked my first cow there and shot my first gun. Now and then I got to drive the old jeep they used for a tractor. The family moved away when I was thirteen. Joe got killed on his motorcycle somewhere in California, I heard later. The last I saw of any of the McEachern family was the night Joe’s brother John beat the hell out of me at a dance at the town hall over a girl named Frances. (We danced, played basketball, watched plays, and marched in to graduate from high school on the same floor from which our parents practiced democracy.) The McEachern house lasted longer than the barn; I watched it rot and lean and tumble over the years. Like dozens of other hill farms I knew as a boy, it died hard. I often take the shortcut over Wallace Hill on my way back to Burlington from visits home to Newbury (eighty-five miles). But the only trace of the old McEachern place is in a faraway corner of my heart.

26. See John R. Stilgoe, “The Wildering of New England, 1850–1950,” in *Settlement in New England: The Last 100 Years*, ed. Timothy J. Richard (Storrs: University of Connecticut, 1980), 1–6. The best overall source is Harold Fisher Wilson, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History, 1790–1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

27. See Joseph S. Wood, *The New England Village* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Many villages were commercial centers within a town, often near the depot. When incorporated they provided essential urban services like a fire department and streetlights. These villages were (and are) governed by their own village meetings. In Newbury village where I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, the village plowed the three sidewalks (one of which ended at our house) and maintained lights on the three little streets that had them. It also provided water from a reservoir up on Moore Hill, which drained the “Adam’s lot” where I spent my high school weekends and vacations in 1959 logging with Ira Chamberlain, Alex Greer, and an old white horse named Captain. Three dairy farms were within a few hundred yards of our house in the village. The village population was 723.

28. As late as 1973 the textbooks were reporting that “the popular urban expression of rural people is that they are ignorant, slow in thought and action, and very gullible.” J. B. Chitambar, *Introductory Rural Sociology* (New York: Halstead Press, 1973), 130. Paul Carter, *The Twenties in America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), 73.

farms.' What might have become characters, powers and attributes perverted themselves in that desolation as cankered trees grow out branches akimbo, and strange faiths and cruelties born of solitude to the edge of insanity, flourished like lichen on sick bark."²⁹ This kind of Kipling-like observation on the sorry condition of county folk can be found throughout the popular literature and serious scholarship of the period.³⁰

Life was apparently so bad in Vermont in the 1930s that the federal government suggested saving the state by purchasing over 55 percent of it, abandoning most of the roads in the condemned areas, closing the schools, and moving all the farmers and townspeople—every living soul—down into the valley towns. Future governor and then future U.S. senator George Aiken (on Vietnam: "Why don't we declare victory and leave?") was lieutenant governor and chairperson of the committee to consider the proposal. His take on the situation: "They placed before members of the legislature the astonishing story that, not only were these people in certain areas of the state very unhappy because of their condition, but that the State itself was very unhappy because such people existed in such areas. Vermont was very, very sick. . . . What of the fact that the people of these areas concerned did not care to be moved from their homes? Well, possibly these people weren't of high enough mental capacity to understand that they were really unhappy."³¹

The blurring of exuberant Progressive reform and serious threats to liberalism emerged in a book authored by "Two Hundred Vermonters" in

29. Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1937). At the turn of the century Kipling was forced to take up residence in a cottage in Brattleboro belonging to his new bride's family. He had run out of money on his honeymoon, a trip around the world. See Derek Levin, "Rudyard Kipling's Vermont Years," *Window of Vermont* 3 (October 1986): 54–60.

30. Daniell remarked, "One can almost hear Emerson turning over in his grave." Daniell, "Town Meeting." Perhaps the best counterpoint to what is known as the degenerative or "dark age thesis" of rural life in northern New England in this period is Hal S. Barron's treatment of Chelsea, Vermont, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in 19th Century New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

31. George D. Aiken, *Speaking from Vermont* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1938), 8–10. The response in Vermont was not a conservative reaction against government as such. Aiken himself was an agrarian, Jeffersonian Republican. See Frank M. Bryan, *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1974), 85–93, and Duane Lockard, *New England State Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 8–45. *The Fifth Annual Report of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont* offered what historian Kevin Dann termed a "strange inversion of the frontier myth" as a solution to what eugenicists called the decay of rural Vermont. It argued that people living in "infertile" areas should move to more "progressive communities" so that "degeneration in the quality of the stock of future citizens" would not occur. See Kevin Dann, "From Degeneration to Regeneration: The Eugenics Survey of Vermont, 1925–1936," *Vermont History* 59 (Winter 1991): 5–29.

1931, which is mostly a compilation of plans for a better life through government. Written before Hitler's fall, it has no trouble comparing immigrants with native stock.³² Early on, the movement had focused more purely on eugenics. Targets were rural families and ethnic groups, especially French Canadians and (to a lesser extent) the Irish. For example, Henry F. Perkins, professor of zoology at the University of Vermont and founder and leading light of the eugenics movement in Vermont, describes the French Canadians as congenial, not very bright ("many have a pretty low I.Q."), and liars ("You can't believe a thing they tell you"). Otherwise (especially compared with the Irish) they are a hell of a race.³³

How could town meetings, which presumably draw on our best behavior and our best reasoning, prosper in such an environment? The following comments by H. L. Mencken illustrate the high-water mark of rural decline and the low-water mark of the public's perception of town meeting:

Certainly no competent historian believes that the citizens assembled in a New England town meeting actually formulated *en masse* the transcendental and immortal measures that they adopted, nor even contributed anything of value to the discussion thereof. . . . [T]he New England town meeting was led and dominated by a few men of unusual initiative and determination, some of them genuinely superior, but most of them simply demagogues and fanatics. The citizens in general heard the discussion of several ideas and went through the motions of deciding between them, but there is no evidence that they ever had all the relevant facts before them or made any effort to unearth them, or that appeals to their reason always, or even usually, prevailed over appeals to their mere prejudice and superstition. Their appetite for logic, I venture, seldom got the better of their fear of hell, and the Beatitudes moved them far less powerfully than blood. Some of the most idiotic decisions ever come to mortal man were made by New England town meetings, and under the leadership of monomaniacs who are still looked upon as ineffable blossoms of the contemporary *kulture*.³⁴

32. Two Hundred Vermonters, *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future* (Burlington: Vermont Commission on Country Life, 1931), 21.

33. Dann, "From Degeneration to Regeneration," 16. Interested scholars everywhere are fortunate to have a thorough, careful, and sober analysis of the eugenics movement in Vermont. See Nancy L. Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999).

34. H. L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 72–73.

Revival—Sort of

The American conversation on town meeting began to shift in the 1930s. The change featured resuscitation in the popular and literary press and in a new electronic medium, the radio. There would be no return, however, to the heady days of Jefferson, Emerson, and Tocqueville. The new tone seemed to be one of ambivalence.

A dramatic increase in national attention paid to town meeting began with the Depression and continued into the war years.³⁵ The *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Scribner's*, *Life*, *Time*, and *Collier's* all painted a pleasant picture of town meeting between 1935 and 1945.³⁶ In 1938 Thornton Wilder's popular play *Our Town* idealized small-town life in a place he called Grovers Corners, New Hampshire. As Perry Westbrook reminds us, Wilder went out of his way (with accents and speech rhythms) to nail down its location in northern New England.³⁷ This renewed interest may have derived in part from a national backlash to the Depression.

A more likely stimulant was the influx of influential academics and intellectuals into the country that Frost called simply "north of Boston" (the title of his first book of poems). From E. B. White in Maine to Bernard DeVoto in Vermont, a cadre of writers, editors, scientists, and artists reestablished in the national mind the land that Arnold Toynbee had trivialized as "above the optimum climatic area" of the United States. These intellectuals were just the vanguard of a massive relocation into rural New England that began in earnest in the 1960s and was to peak in the early 1980s. Earlier settlers, like Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson, had come seeking peace and quiet to think and to write. Before the Depression a rampaging capitalism had brought huge vacation hotels to cool the rich in the summer

35. At the war's end the *New York Times Magazine* featured the century's most positive look at town meeting to appear in a journal of significant reputation. See L. H. Thomas, "Democracy Town Meeting Style," *New York Times Magazine*, March 23, 1947, 24. A book titled *Town Meeting Country* appeared in 1945 as part of an American Folkways series edited by Erskine Caldwell. Its importance does not lie in its content, because the author, Clarence M. Webster, is content to champion myths and folklore as reality. But "town meeting" could now be used as a title in a series that featured *Golden Gate Country*, *Blue Ridge Country*, and *Buckeye Country*—titles that commercial impulse had concluded would touch a positive chord among Americans. This would not have happened in 1910. See Clarence M. Webster, *Town Meeting Country* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1945). The other major book on town meeting featuring a town meeting in Maine was John Gould, *New England Town Meeting: Safeguard of Democracy* (Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Daye Press, 1940). Town meeting is romanticized in this book, and too much attention is paid to the "Yankee" character. Nevertheless, in its fundamental description of town meeting and how it works, the book reads and looks (with many telling black-and-white photographs) true to life.

36. Daniell, "Town Meeting."

37. Westbrook, *New England Town in Fact and Fiction*, 215.

mountains.³⁸ But the post-Depression newcomers were neither rich nor transient. They became "summer people." Heavily degraded, they bought abandoned farms and stayed from last frost to first. Their work, full of their accounts of country life, told a benign story.

There are times when there is no way to walk the hills of Peacham, Vermont, and not weep with the beauty of it.³⁹ Like most towns in Vermont, it has a published history that (in terms of words per capita) is one of the most extensive histories of a political entity ever written. In this paragraph chroniclers of modern Peacham, Shepard B. Clough and Laura Quimby, describe the arrival of the summer people in the 1930s:

People of "back farms" also sold out and moved to better places. Sometimes the buyers were people from "away." Crane Brinton, a Harvard University historian, acquired the farm of Mark Abbott on Penny Street; Herbert W. Schneider, a member of the Philosophy Department at Columbia, bought two adjoining places on Cow Hill. . . . In the "in-migration" which took place, as in all migrations, pioneers blazed the trail and others, frequently their friends, followed. For example, Professor Schneider [of the Columbia group], who bought two places as early as 1929, had attracted fifteen of his friends to the area by 1939. Similarly, the first of the Harvard group had brought in a like number in the first ten years after the Depression began.⁴⁰

38. Across the Connecticut River valley from my backyard in Newbury, fifty miles of peaks of New Hampshire's White Mountains marched uninterrupted north and south. But Mooselocke, which in its bulk is the largest single mountain east of the Mississippi, dominated. It was there that my brother David (a walker of mountaintops in his youth) and I had climbed on a summer's day in 1961 when I was twenty. Among the boulders in the rare air of the mountaintop we sat and schemed about ways to save our town from the ravages of centralism. President Kennedy was my hero when I started up Mooselocke that day. Like my mother, I was a Democrat. But by the time I came down David had convinced me my loyalties were misplaced. His ten-hour seminar (up and down the mountain) took. I ditched Kennedy and the Democratic Party and accepted communitarianism. The political journey from that day to now has been lonely.

39. I spent the summer of 1957 at age sixteen boarding at the Maple Corners Farm in Peacham while I worked for the State of Vermont mapping marl deposits under Eules Pond. I worked for Roger Wilder, the minister's son in Newbury, who managed to get me the job even though I was underage for state employees. This was my first real "paycheck" money. We came down every morning to a nice little dining room where usually sat a few tourists from here or there, and we were served breakfast with real juice, and bacon and eggs, and cereal. Days that summer were filled with blackflies, muck, bloodsuckers (huge ones, I still remember), and sweat. Still, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

40. Shepard B. Clough and Lorna Quimby, "Peacham, Vermont: Fifty Years of Economic and Social Change, 1929-1979," *Vermont History* 51 (Winter 1983): 5-28. This article was an update of Ernest L. Bogart's first-class local history, *Peacham: The Story of a Vermont Hill Town* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1948).

From the town of Arlington, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, an eclectic and best-selling author with a national reputation, worked hard to promote the image of rural America in the 1930s. More important, she worked directly to resettle the outback of Vermont with people like herself, a Ph.D. (again) from Columbia. Robert Frost, Sarah Cleghorn, Stephany Humphrey, and Norman Rockwell all lived close to Fisher's house in Arlington.⁴¹ To Bethel, Vermont, in 1940 came Johns Hopkins's Marshall Dimock, a political scientist and a highly placed member of the Roosevelt administration, who became one of America's leading scholars in public administration. He and his wife, author Gladys Ogden Dimock, wrote dozens of books from their farm high in the hills of central Vermont.⁴²

Hundreds of such examples could be listed. Yet no pair did more to nationalize the new image of the real "town meeting country" of northern New England than Bernard DeVoto and (to a lesser extent) Wallace Stegner. An accomplished writer and essayist, Stegner lived on Caspian Lake in Greensboro, Vermont. DeVoto, a historian (*Across the Wide Missouri*), critic (*Mark Twain's America*), and columnist (*Harper's Magazine* for twenty years), lived on Lake Seymour in Morgan. Both lakes are deep, cold blue waters in Vermont's fabled "Northeast Kingdom." Both lie near rolling fields cast among the hard line ridges of a glacier's bygone passing. Both have villages and a little country store.

It was from Morgan that DeVoto wrote his famous description of the Green Mountain State: "There is no more Yankee than Polynesian in me. But whenever I go to Vermont I feel like I am traveling toward my own place."⁴³ It

41. Ida H. Washington, professor emeritus from the University of Massachusetts living in Weybridge, Vermont, a town that has provided several town meetings to the case base of this book, provides an excellent description of Fisher's contributions to the "summer people" movement. Ida H. Washington, "Dorothy Canfield Fisher's 'Tourists Accommodated' and Her Other Promotions of Vermont," *Vermont History* 65 (Summer-Fall 1997): 153-164. Fisher is clear-eyed about town meeting. It can be tedious, quarrelsome, and petty. But the empirical record tells her that "a bunch of quite ordinary men and women, if they are not permanently separated into rival competing classes or groups, are really able, in spite of human rancor, to get together on how to run things—for everybody's benefit, not for any one or any few." Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Vermont Tradition: The Biography of an Outlook on Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), 409-410.

42. See Marshall Dimock's autobiography *The Center of My World* (Taftsville, VT: Countryman Press, 1980) and Gladys Dimock's *Home Ground* (Woodstock, VT: Countryman Press, 1985).

43. Bernard DeVoto, "The Easy Chair: Wayfarers Daybook," *Harper's Magazine* 203 (December 1951): 46. See also Bernard DeVoto, "New England, There She Stands," *Harper's Magazine* 164 (March 1932): 36.

was from Greensboro that Stegner wrote his joyful yet melancholy description of the social psychology of Vermont's weather:

Though rains are frequent and often torrential in that country, which lies under the St. Lawrence storm track, the good days are like the good days in the western mountains. The light is intense, the deep sky is crossed by navies of fair-weather, strato-cumulus clouds, the horizons are cut with a diamond, the air has never been breathed. And those days come so infrequently between days of clouds and rain and violent thunderstorms, and are spaced through such a brief and fragile time, that a man believes he deserves them and has a right, because of what else he has to put up with, to enjoy them thoroughly.⁴⁴

These men were not Vermonters. But whatever it was that touched their hearts, they found something in the hills of Vermont they understood, and they let it be known.⁴⁵ Americans everywhere seemed to want to listen.

During this period another kind of intellectual began to pay attention to the American outback. These residents were conservationists and practitioners of rural life to a degree that the summer people were not. From Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold gave us his classic *Sand County Almanac*. From Maine, Henry Beston wrote *Northern Farm*, a year's chronicle of human and natural events in a small town. Louise Dickinson Rich wrote *We Took to the Woods*. From Vermont (and then Maine), Helen and Scott Nearing came as close as anyone to fusing the lives of social commentator and naturalist advocate, writing back-to-back books on maple sugaring and economic theory. These and other

44. Wallace Stegner, *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974).

45. In DeVoto's case it might have been the Quebec and Southeast Transportation Company, the name coined by members of the Harvard community for DeVoto's network for smuggling liquor across the Canadian border between Rock Island, Quebec, and Morgan, Vermont. DeVoto supplied not only visitors to his place in Vermont but also his colleagues at their homes in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It turns out he was an accomplished smuggler. Charles Morrissey relates the following account of one such shipment delivered in 1931: "Young Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who would later be a student of DeVoto's and still later an ally and admirer and working colleague, was fourteen years old in the fall of 1931, and he first met DeVoto because the *Harper's* editor would often appear on the Schlesinger doorstep carrying packages for the senior Schlesinger, the eminent Harvard historian. For a long time young Schlesinger assumed that DeVoto was the family bootlegger." Charles Morrissey, "Wanted: An Oral History of Vermont during the Prohibition Era," *Vermont History* 43 (Fall 1975): 322. DeVoto was carrying on a long-standing Vermont tradition of free trade with Canada stretching back to the War of 1812.

voices from rural America cast a warmer, friendlier light on the possibilities of living “the good life” in town meeting country.⁴⁶

Jere Daniell, however, offers a far bolder explanation for the rebirth of national interest in town meeting, one with a more populist resonance.⁴⁷ “What really put town meeting into the national limelight,” he writes, “was the extraordinary success of the radio program, ‘Town Meeting of the Air’ The first program began with the words ‘Town Meetin’ Tonight! Town Meetin’ Tonight! Which Way America—Fascism, Communism, Socialism, or Democracy?’”⁴⁸ *Town Meeting of the Air* sponsored the formation of discussion groups around the country to discuss the program’s weekly topics.⁴⁹ This was the golden age of radio, and the National Broadcasting Company made good use of it. Within three years of its first broadcast, the program expanded from one radio station and 500,000 listeners to seventy-eight stations and 2,500,000 listeners.⁵⁰ By the early 1950s its prestige was immense, with Peabody Awards in 1950 and 1954. Daniell is unequivocal in his assessment of the program’s influence: “‘Town Meeting of the Air’ did for the legitimacy of twentieth century town meeting in America what de Tocqueville had for the nineteenth.”⁵¹

Two fortuitous parallel factors emerged from the revolutionary 1960s to revitalize the more positive tone of the American conversation on town meeting. First, the energy crisis and other national ecoshocks led to a remarkable

46. Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949); Henry Beston, *Northern Farm* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1948); Louise Dickinson Rich, *We Took to the Woods* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1942); Helen Nearing, *Maple Sugar Book* (New York: J. Day, 1950); Scott Nearing, *Economics for the Power Age: A Statement of First Principles* (New York: J. Day, 1952).

47. Daniell, “Town Meeting.”

48. Recently *Town Meeting of the Air* has been put to sound academic uses. The most recent example is Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), esp. 206–222. *Town Meeting of the Air* was far more populist in tone than its companion program, the *University of Chicago Round Table*. Although these two were the most popular, respected, and influential of the growing number of such programs, *Town Meeting of the Air* “had a much livelier and less pretentious tone than the staid atmosphere of *Round Table*.” Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 206.

49. An important text in rural sociology identified *Town Meeting of the Air* as a popular radio program in rural America that exemplified the impact of communications technology on small-town life. J. H. Kolb and Edmund de S. Brunner, *A Study of Rural Sociology: Its Organization and Changes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), 488.

50. Lawrence C. Zucker (executive director), the Town Hall (www.the-townhall-nyc.org/townmeetings.htm).

51. Daniell, “Town Meeting.” Vermont scholar and writer Charles Edward Crane said of *Town Meeting of the Air* in 1942, “It is hard [for a Vermonter] to believe if most if not all the other states are getting on without town meeting. Of course there is The Town Meeting of the Air, but a mere open forum of broadcasting has slight similarity to town meeting as we know it in Vermont.” Charles Edward Crane, *Vermont in Winter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 292.

distrust of macrosystems and a growing willingness to pay attention to the small and decentralized—in energy sources and in governance. The politics of this awareness (it could not be called a movement) reinforced and reinvigorated the second factor—the ideology of the Left that had emerged from the antiwar, feminist, and civil rights revolutions of the 1960s.⁵² Crossover academics began to pay more attention to small places and human-scale behavior, at least in metaphor. Charles Reich’s *Greening of America* urged his readers to look for “flowers pushing up through the concrete pavement.”⁵³

This theme was sustained and developed by E. F. Schumacher⁵⁴ and his followers, who formed a small⁵⁵ but ideologically eclectic band of true believers around the rallying cry “small is beautiful.” Scholars, activists, authors, and poets like Wendell Berry, Murray Bookchin, Leopold Kohr, John McClaughry, and Kirkpatrick Sale held that governments work better when they are small rather than big.⁵⁶ Later Rutgers University political scientist Benjamin Barber’s *Strong Democracy* reinforced the drive for a more human-scale politics.⁵⁷ At the same time came a fresh look at community from the urban perspective.⁵⁸ The city could become in some limited but useful ways

52. An excellent anthology that appeared in 1971 provides an inclusive array of thinking about direct participatory democracy from the Left during the period. See C. George Benello and Dimitrios Roussopoulos, *The Case for Participatory Democracy: Some Prospects for a Radical Society* (New York: Grossman, 1971).

53. Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970), 395. The new rural romanticism became so silly that in some places city people began trying to lug the country into downtown America. Even in usually level-headed Vermont, city planners in Burlington hauled huge boulders down out of the hills and scattered them along the city’s new pedestrian mall. Here we’ve been working for two hundred years to get the damn things off our fields and out of sight, and the first time we go into town to soak in some urban atmosphere, there they are.

54. E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

55. What else could it be? A good summary of the “small is beautiful” movement is found in Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History, 1620–Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 441–442.

56. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977); Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982); Murray Bookchin, *The Limits of the City* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Murray Bookchin, *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987); Leopold Kohr, “Critical Size,” in *Time Running Out? Best of Resurgence*, ed. Michael North (Dorchester, UK: Prism Press, 1976); Leopold Kohr, *The Breakdown of Nations* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978); Frank Bryan and John McClaughry, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale* (Chelsea, VT: Chelsea Green Press, 1989); Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Union* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985); Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1980).

57. Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

58. See Daniel Bell and Virginia Held, “The Community Revolution,” *Public Interest* 16 (Summer 1969): 142–177; Harry C. Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple

a federation of little neighborhoods, each with avenues of direct participation for citizens. Not surprisingly, "town meeting" appeared more and more in the lexicon of the metropolis.⁵⁹

Political scientists were beginning to take a scholarly interest, if not in town meeting directly, at least in more direct forms of face-to-face politics—in instruments of street-level bureaucracy, open hearings, and neighborhood decision making. "Maximum feasible participation" became a rallying cry for academics and reformers alike.⁶⁰ While political scientists of the inner city enhanced the intellectual credentials of town meeting from the inside out, elsewhere in America town meeting profited from the growing attraction of small, direct, local, and human-scale values—in a word, small-town and rural values.⁶¹

Serious scientific research on town meeting democracy got under way in the 1970s. Two doctoral dissertations appeared in 1974.⁶² By the end of the decade a group of political scientists at Dartmouth College had skillfully integrated town meeting into the options for a citizenry grown restless with the national government. While they were not enthusiastic about town meeting's chances to reinvigorate the Republic, it was the first time a major textbook designed for undergraduates featured town meeting.⁶³ Most important,

University Press, 1980); Bill Berkowitz, *Community Dreams* (San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact, 1984); Mark O. Hatfield, "Bringing Political Power Back Home: The Case for Neighborhood Government," *Ripon Quarterly* 1 (1974): 9–15; Milton Kotler, *Neighborhood Government* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Douglas Yates, *Neighborhood Democracy* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973).

59. See "Town Meeting Gets Miami Tryout," *American City* 77 (August 1962): 93; Frank M. Bryan, "Does the Town Meeting Offer an Option for Urban America?" *National Civic Review* 67 December 1978, 523–527; Frank Bryan, "Town Meeting in Mass Society—What Role Remains?" paper delivered at the annual meeting of the New England Political Science Association, Durham, NH, April 6–7, 1979; and Aaron Levis, "Town Meeting Comes to Philadelphia," *American City* 69 (May 1954): 129.

60. Montana completely restructured its constitutional provisions for local government in its new constitution of 1972. One of the four forms of local government Montanans granted themselves the power to adopt was the town meeting. It didn't take. Frank Bryan, "Town Meeting: Pure Democracy in Action?" in *What This Community Needs* (Helena, MT: State Commission on Local Government, 1976), 31–37.

61. Even some progressives were beginning to rethink their position on town meeting. See J. Allen Smith, *The Spirit of American Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 352.

62. Vivian Scott Hixson, "The New Town Meeting Democracy: A Study of Matched Towns" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1974), and Neil G. Kotler, "Politics and Citizenship in New England Towns: A Study of Participation and Political Education" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1974).

63. Denis G. Sullivan, Robert T. Nakamura, and Richard F. Winters, *How America Is Ruled* (New York: John Wiley, 1980), 26–38. Their thoughtful treatment of town meeting presents a strong challenge to those (like me) who hold that the merits of town meeting are sufficient to bequeath it a fundamental role in American democracy.

Jane Mansbridge left the comforts of Cambridge and headed into the hills of Vermont for intense on-the-ground research in "Selby." Her *Beyond Adversary Democracy* contained the first published account of town meeting to employ archival research, survey techniques, and in-depth interviewing. The book, I later learned, came very close to winning political science's most prestigious award, the Woodrow Wilson prize.⁶⁴

While all this was happening, vociferous criticism of town meeting continued. It came primarily from community power theorists who undercut even the possibility of town meeting governance by questioning the legitimacy of democratic systems of *any form* in small communities. A goodly number of progressives also continued to suspect (correctly) that much of the new hoopla about rural life was no more than romantic nonsense.⁶⁵

Serious scholarship generated by several community power studies published before 1970 called the efficacy of local government into question on a variety of fronts and set the tone for an entire generation of social scientists interested in the possibility for and the character of democracy in localities. On the model of the Lynds' early classic, *Middletown: A Study of Modern American Culture*,⁶⁶ Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman published their equally important *Small Town in Mass Society* in 1958.⁶⁷ In both "Middletown" and "Springdale" the authors question seriously whether the small town is capable of duplicating (even in a cursory way) the democratic models forwarded in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Neither of these studies involved New England towns with town meetings, but Robert C. Wood's well-received *Suburbia: Its People and Their Politics* did.⁶⁸ He was strongly critical of town meeting democracy in Lincoln,

64. Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980). In academia and the journals of opinion, Mansbridge's book is almost universally viewed as critical of town meeting. It was. But it was also balanced. I am perplexed by the degree to which political scientists seized on the negative and chose to ignore the positive in her chapters on "Selby."

65. Although Hofstadter doesn't fit the bill for a "die-hard progressive," see Richard Hofstadter, "The Agrarian Myth and Commercial Realities," in his *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 3–22.

66. Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown: A Study of Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929), and Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937). About the same time as the appearance of *Middletown*, Thorstein Veblen laid waste what he called "the country town"; it was, he said, "an enclave of business elite where competition for sales precludes any hope of open, honest, democratic resolution of conflict." Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), chap. 7.

67. Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

68. Robert C. Wood, *Suburbia: Its People and Their Politics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958). For a response see Joseph Zimmerman, "On the Other Hand," *National Civic Review* 55 (January 1966): 14–20, 28.

Massachusetts. These and other community power studies of small towns were not challenged by efforts of similar quality.⁶⁹ Even Aaron Wildavsky's critique of the Lynds' *Middletown* did little to suggest more than a liberal, pluralist alternative for small towns.⁷⁰ Beyond these strong empirical contributions, the negative implications of real democracy in small settings received theoretical support from scholars like Grant McConnell.⁷¹ In effect an entire generation of political scientists was teaching that both big *and* small were bad for real democracy. In big settings, real democracy was impossible by definition.⁷² The best one could hope for was pluralism.⁷³ In small settings, a clique would inevitably rule.⁷⁴ The best one could hope for was a benign village elite.⁷⁵ Either way, town meeting was out of the picture. Hannah Arendt's suggestion that town meetings were "public happiness" was perhaps the most notable town meeting gush of the 1960s.⁷⁶

American government and politics textbooks beginning in the 1950s and 1960s and extending into the 1980s reflected this negativism.⁷⁷ Phrases

69. Granville Hicks, who was more sympathetic, still provided little to encourage anyone working to continue the town meeting in the modern world. Granville Hicks, *Small Town* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 194. For one of the best counterpoints to the dominant negative strain in the small-town literature see French archaeologist Hervé Varenne's treatment of "Appleton," a small town in Illinois. Hervé Varenne, *Americans Together: Structured Diversity in a Midwestern Town* (New York: Teachers' College Press, 1978).

70. Aaron B. Wildavsky, *Leadership in a Small Town* (Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press, 1964).

71. Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

72. No one put it better than E. E. Schattschneider: "In other words an all American town meeting would be the largest, longest, and most boring and frustrating meeting imaginable. What would such a meeting produce? Total paralysis. What could it do? Nothing." E. E. Schattschneider, *Two Hundred Million Americans in Search of a Government* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 63.

73. Nelson W. Polsby, *Community Power and Political Party* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

74. In fact, the preponderance of these case studies claimed to show that *representative* democracy in small towns did not work. Little communities governed by town councils or village boards, the authors said, failed to parry the natural thrusts of oligarchy. That town meeting democracies would fail as well was (one can only suppose) assumed.

75. An engaging essay by a second-generation progressive that comes down hard on town meeting is Robert Cenedella, "A Lesson in Civics," *American Heritage* 12 (December 1960): 42-43, 100-102.

76. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), 165.

77. Authors of local government textbooks, who were more familiar with the terrain, treated town meeting more objectively. Their views of town meeting in the future, however, were still not optimistic. Clyde Snider's judgment is typical: "The New England town meeting has had an illustrious history, and it seems still to function effectively in many small communities, particularly those in strictly rural areas. In general, however, popular interest in town meeting seems to be on the wane." Snider, *Local Government in Rural America*, 198. In 1952 Lane W. Lancaster was supportive of town meeting, but in the past tense, accepting the standard hypothesis

like "attendance is often very poor" and "sparsely attended" typified the word choices of political scientists when they contributed a sentence or two to town meeting democracy.⁷⁸ They were not totally wrong. But equally correct and far more positive things could have been said as well. Limited by the availability of hard data, many textbooks resorted to pictures to augment their commentary. One shows an old man sleeping in the foreground of a town meeting in Vermont as the author emphasizes the point with his caption: "Direct Democracy: A Town Meeting in Vermont. You Will Note that Some of the Participants Appear to Be Sleeping."⁷⁹ Another textbook features a photograph of what appears to be a very lightly attended town meeting in Victory, Vermont. The student is not told that Victory is the smallest of Vermont's 246 incorporated towns and cities with, at the time, a *total* of twenty-nine registered voters. One can count nine people in a photograph that shows about one-third of the hall. If the other two-thirds of the hall held an equal number, that would amount to over 62 percent attendance.⁸⁰

Outside the academic world, the ambivalence in the public mind on the question of town meeting emerged in two *Newsweek* articles. The first, appearing in 1962, slams the "Farce Down East." "Town meetings are poorly attended, manipulated by minorities, unrepresentative of the community, and cumbersome to the point of rendering town government unresponsive... Modern complexities in local government... have forced many a Maine community... to switch important decisions to either elected officials or appointed town managers. This evolution is inevitable."⁸¹

Only four years later the same magazine had changed its tune. "Farce Down East" was replaced with "New England: Basic Democracy," and the story told of town meeting working well in New London, New Hampshire:

Thus did one of the oldest forms of democracy extant, the New England town meeting, resolve a major local issue—in a way that defied all the

that modernism and town meeting cannot cohabitate. Lane W. Lancaster, *Government in Rural America* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1952), 41.

78. Frank M. Bryan, "Direct Democracy in the New England Town Meeting: Establishing Empirical Parameters," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, August 28-31, 1986.

79. Harry T. Burnham, *Government and Politics in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 36. How many pictures of the Congress of the United States of America could be taken, one wonders, that would show the same thing?

80. Robert Weissberg, *Understanding American Government* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 46.

81. "Farce Down East," *Newsweek* 59 (January 29, 1962): 74. Also see John Guy La Plante, "What Killed the Town Meeting?" *Nation* 180 (February 1958): 96-97.

defeatist discussion about modern man's alienation from his complex government. The town-meeting season wound up last week with hundreds of such gatherings having been held and decisions made in town halls, gymnasiums and school auditoriums from Maine to Massachusetts. And together they added up to solid testimony that this venerable and distinctly American institution, dating from 150 years before the Revolution, was still a spry and vital form of government.⁸²

A decade after the *Newsweek* piece, *Time Magazine* spent town meeting day in Huntington, Vermont (just down the hollow from where I sit at this moment), and left impressed. "The budget was approved at 2:27. The meeting adjourned two minutes later, after one citizen's parting complaint that the dog-pound keeper was letting too many loose dogs run around town.⁸³ By and large Huntingtonians seemed to genuinely like and trust each other. Tocqueville would have been pleased."⁸⁴ About ten years later the *Washington Post* published an article on its editorial page titled "Town Meetings Don't Work," with the subtitle "In New England These Days, Small Isn't So Beautiful."⁸⁵ Less than six months earlier, New England's most important newspaper, the *Boston Globe*, had featured an article titled "Maybe It's Sloppy, but It's Good Government."⁸⁶

In my review of the popular literature on town meeting since the 1940s (of which I have presented only a few examples), one thing stands out: Those who criticize town meeting or question its usefulness almost always seem repentant at the end. It's a strange thing, this craving to place in the record a final apology in the guise of a kind word or two or a nod to better times long past. No doubt some of this is disingenuous or patronizing. But most of it seems sincere. Here is an example from a retired reporter living in Pomfret.

82. "New England: Basic Democracy," *Newsweek* 67 (April 4, 1966): 32, 34.

83. I had a dog named Flip back in the old days. I often took him to work, and he'd wait patiently outside the classroom for me. He got shot running deer in Huntington. I never held it against the guy who shot him. I'd shoot a dog chasing deer in the deep snow too. I was a damn fool for letting him get loose.

84. "New England: Rites of March," *Time*, March 14, 1977, 18-19. Quite a compliment. Huntington has had more than its share of conflict over the past thirty years—over the school, taxes, plans for an upscale golf course-housing development, and moving the post office away from the village center. Earlier in 1970 *Time* devoted its "American Scene" report to the town meeting of Mount Vernon, Maine, the town from which Erskine Caldwell wrote *Tobacco Road*. It too was very positive. Gregory Wierznski, "American Scene: Participatory Democracy," *Time*, April 13, 1970, 24.

85. Robert Preer, "Town Meetings Don't Work," *Washington Post*, July 13, 1986), B5.

86. Raymond Clark, "Maybe It's Sloppy, but It's Good Government," *Boston Globe*, February 22, 1986, 14.

The town meeting had debated the matter of salt on the roads. Nearly all the people with blue-collar jobs (most of whom were "locals"), along with the road crew, were for it. Newcomers, the better-off, and the environmentalists were against it.

WITNESS

The mind tells us that Town Meeting is a government whose time, in this space age, has passed. Towns just aren't efficient enough to be worth saving. But let's not fool ourselves about what we're giving up. Nothing—and that goes for the new form of town/country government I've proposed—nothing can replace a town's and Town Meeting's rich sense of history, community, and close human association. These are the things that give life to social arrangements. These are the heart.

And this citizen's heart? Well, it is still up there in Pomfret, where the late afternoon sun is pouring through those old glass windows, turning our company to gold. Salt has just lost, but a moment later someone makes a motion to thank the road crew "for its fine work in keeping the roads open this winter."

Now, if seventeen years as a Washington reporter have taught me anything, they've taught me that the press never applauds anyone, not even the president. We'll stand for the president, but we'll clap for no one simply out of obligation. Point of professional chastity, I guess.

But when someone moved to thank the Pomfret road crew, and the motion was seconded and approved, friends and foes of salt applauded with a roar. As for me, I dropped my pen and notebook and banged my hands together as lustily as my neighbors.

You see, they are my neighbors.

John Pierson⁸⁷

I know Pomfret well.⁸⁸ I do not know John Pierson well, but I suspect that his words are more than romantic nonsense. I think they are wise. If so, then they stand as an indictment of what is to follow. For the dominant

87. John Pierson, "The Decline and Fall of Town Meeting," *Blair and Ketcham's Country Journal*, March 1982, 98-101. For an excellent balanced account of the problems facing town meeting published about the same time, see David Shribman, "The Town Meeting: New England Staple Faces Tide of Change," *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 1986, 24.

88. In the 1960s I spent time haying one of the little hill farms in Pomfret then owned by May Cole. One of my good friends, Bucky Cole (a first-class ox teamster and maker of fine yokes), was her grandson and the subject of a piece I published in a book of contemporary Vermont essays (Frank Bryan, "We Are All Farmers," in *Vermont Odysseys: Contemporary Tales from the Green Mountain State*, ed. C. L. Gilbert [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 72-83). His father, Tom Cole, was the foreman of the road crew in Pomfret the day John Pierson rose to applaud.

national perspective on town meeting since the late 1970s is neither support nor attack. It is manipulation. In the national mind town meeting became a tool, used first by interest groups and then by politicians. By the year 2000, more ordinary citizens in America knew about town meeting than ever before. Yet fewer than ever before knew what it *is*.

Town Meeting: A Tool for Representative Nationalism

On Monday night, March 4, 1974, the little Connecticut River valley town of Thetford, Vermont, did something no duly constituted, legally incorporated, general-purpose municipal government of the United States had ever done before. In mid-February Jacqueline Lucy, a newcomer to Thetford and chair of the local Democratic committee, had gone to work gathering the necessary signatures to require the selectmen to put an especially controversial article on the warning for the March town meeting.⁸⁹

Discussion had begun at 10:57 p.m. Voting on the article started about 11:30 and stopped (and the ballot box was closed) at 11:55 p.m. At ten minutes after midnight the vote was announced. The local and national press had been waiting since 7:30 p.m. On opening the town meeting and seeing how many press people had showed up, the town moderator, Matthew Wiencke, had issued an order. The press would "be kept to the bleachers and the back of the hall."⁹⁰ There were 420 citizens and thirty reporters in attendance at 7:30. By voting time, 31 percent of the citizens had left for home. The vote was 160 yea and 130 nay.⁹¹

Impeach him, said the town. Impeach Nixon.⁹²

From that moment, the town meeting took on an entirely new meaning for Americans.⁹³

89. Town of Thetford, *Town Report*, year ending December 31, 1973, 6-7.

90. Town of Thetford, "Minutes of the 1974 Annual Town and School District Meeting," *Town Report*, year ending December 1974, 64-66.

91. Do not think it odd that 31 percent of the citizens did not consider impeachment important enough to hang around for until midnight. Many were over fifty, out on a weekday when they had to be in the barn at 5:00 a.m. or warming up the dozer or starting the day shift at Mary Hitchcock Hospital at 7:00 a.m. These kinds of people are apt to conclude about 11 p.m. that either way, in or out, Nixon isn't worth it.

92. Lucy, who became a friend later in the 1970s, moved to Washington and took a job with conservative political scientist and future United States ambassador to the United Nations, Jeanne Kirkpatrick. If I ever see her again, I'm going to ask her how that went.

93. See also John Kifner, "Vermont Town Favors Impeachment of Nixon," *New York Times*, March 6, 1974, 23. Kifner reports the following exchange: After Jacqueline Lucy, the leader of the impeachment forces, said that "Democracy starts" in the town meeting, Robert White, a high school vocational education teacher, reminded Lucy that New England traditions were not

Between 1975 and 1985 interest groups descended on town meetings to solicit approval for their special agendas. Right-to-life organizations introduced ordinances to ban abortions in this town or that. The Vermont Public Interest Research Group introduced ordinances to prohibit trucks from carrying nuclear waste through town. Opposers of the leg-hold trap and nuclear power plants, champions and critics of guns, and limiters of legislative terms all organized to get ordinances or resolutions on the town warnings. Then they worked to get their supporters to town meeting, making sure the press got the results whenever they were positive. Although the Left was better at this game than the Right, players came from across the political spectrum.

What had often been cast as nests of Neanderthal Yankees holed up in their town meetings, fighting progress, skimping on public spending for good causes—and worst of all doing all this to protect a scheming little cadre of businessmen and their cronies—now became fountains of wisdom and legitimacy. A band of scruffy college students hanging from the fences of a nuclear power plant could be dismissed, but a town meeting of farmers and loggers and teachers and owners of mom-and-pop stores voting to disallow a nuclear plant in their village was something else indeed. This was Tocqueville and Jefferson and apple pie and common sense all rolled into one.

Murray Bookchin understood the new American appreciation for town meeting and the power it held. He wrote in 1987: "Vermont's town meetings like those of its New England neighbors are often more effective nationally than they truly realize, precisely because they are hallowed by moral traditions that give America its national identity. It is the enormous weight of this moral voice, this invocation of an ethically charged past that haunts the present with its ambiance and freedom that gives them enormous political power for social change."⁹⁴

In 1983 the nation's leading popular print news outlet, *USA Today*, devoted a cover story to town meeting in Vermont titled "Hands-on Democracy in Vermont." It was a quintessential portrayal of the new national "take" on town meeting. The front-page picture featured an old Vermonter in work clothes talking with an attractive younger woman across a woodstove in a country store in Ripton. The caption: "Town meeting day is as traditional as Howard Murray's chat at a country store with owner Sue Collitt." The article's

always to be emulated. For instance, "women believed to be possessed had the Devil burned out of them at the stake." To which Edward C. Kirkland, a "stooped, white-haired, retired professor of American economic history stood up and said in an indignant voice: 'If there is anything I dislike it's a joke that isn't true. No woman had the Devil burned out of her in New England—not ever.' He sat down amid applause and cheers. 'They hanged them,' the professor later confided."

94. Bookchin, *Rise of Urbanization*, 270.

message: town meeting is still lively, crusty, down-home democracy where quaint rural wisdom prevails. *USA Today* reporter Judith Horstman quoted Faire Edwards, a seventy-one-year-old woman from Waterbury: "Why you might as well say God is dead, or that all the maples have been struck by lightning as to say the town meeting is dead."⁹⁵

National attention paid to town meetings reached its pinnacle in 1982 when over 160 Vermont towns passed resolutions demanding a freeze on the expansion of nuclear armaments. With great portions of the national media still stunned and smarting over the election of Ronald Reagan, the specter of the Vermont towns rising against Reagan's bombs much as they had risen against Jefferson's embargo or Richard Nixon's presidency was simply too sweet to resist. Favorable coverage abounded. But make no mistake. These were legitimate votes cast by citizens who came to town meeting (for the most part) to vote on local budgets, repair roads, and in general maintain the civil order.⁹⁶

A few (including me) had opposed the use of town meetings as forums for special interest politics. The nuclear freeze vote took the wind out of our sails. It was hard to argue that the freeze organizers and what concerned them—nuclear holocaust—constituted just another special interest. The issue was of such importance that it seemed to me the very thing towns *ought* to speak up about every now and then. Yet my argument, expressed as a guest editorial in *Newsweek*, held in part: "What kind of logic suggests that communities that must be told how to bury their garbage or educate their kids are capable of advising presidents on foreign policy? Some of us hold they can be trusted to do all three. So we distrust those who would deny us the liberty to bury our garbage yet urge us to advise on matters of foreign policy."⁹⁷

95. Judith Horstman, "Hands-on Democracy in Vermont," *USA Today*, March 1, 1983, 1.

96. One of my students was not impressed with NBC's coverage of the "freeze vote." "The main problem with NBC's coverage was that it stereotyped Vermonters and the Town Meeting itself. NBC included brief coverage of the nuclear proliferation vote, and of course showed an intelligent immigrant from Connecticut talking about it. Although a couple of Vermonters spoke about the issue, it seems to me that the editors at NBC did not feel that the rest of the nation would believe that a real Vermonter knew anything about nuclear proliferation." John Goodrow, "NBC Visits Lincoln Vermont," Burlington, University of Vermont, March 1982. Another student reported a humorous event early on in the meeting. "A young man of about thirty-five stood up and loudly asked that the *Tomorrow Show* should not be allowed to film the meeting. The request was 'cordially' denied by the moderator." Steve Fuchs, "Impressions of the Lincoln Town Meeting," Burlington, University of Vermont, March 1982.

97. Frank Bryan, "Trouble in the Vermont Hills," *Newsweek* 103 (March 5, 1984): 15. I made a similar point in the *New York Times*: "Town Meetings—a Relic," *New York Times*, April 3, 1982, 25. (Unfortunately one is not allowed to choose the title of an op ed. piece.) See also Jeffrey Goode's article on the town of Weston's debate on military aid to El Salvador. His view: "Local and

My fears were misplaced. Perhaps I underestimated the good sense of Vermonters, the sensitivity of the outside media people,⁹⁸ or the miserable March weather in Vermont. Perhaps the misuse of town meetings simply dissipated with the decline of activism that came with Reagan, the end of the cold war, the changing generation, and the hot economics of the 1990s. Whatever the reason, the incidence of using town meetings as democratically enshrouded public opinion polls began to slow in the mid-1980s. As the century closed, we saw the phenomenon only now and then.

But town meeting was not to escape unscathed. National news people began to leave us alone, but the politicians didn't. They knew that the town meeting reached deep into the American soul and stirred sacred longings. Thus came the final indignity: the use of "town meetings" as strategic devices in political campaigns. Here Bill Clinton was a master. A president of the United States standing before a crowd of ordinary people fielding questions in a seemingly ad hoc format is powerful imagery. Citizen-delivered questions are easier to handle than those offered up by seasoned reporters.

In their textbook on American government, one group of political scientists credited Clinton with inventing the staged town meeting as a campaign device, though some would argue that Ross Perot deserved the finder's fee. The authors include a picture of President Clinton under a huge sign that reads "Town Meeting" as he answers a question from a distant participant on a video screen before an audience in Providence, Rhode Island. The caption reads: "The town meeting of yesterday gave way to the electronic town meeting of today. Here Bill Clinton answers a question asked by a citizen in another location but whose image and voice were transmitted through video conferencing telecommunications equipment. As telecommunications that include video and voice become better and cheaper, politicians will be able to use Clinton's electronic town-meeting concept more and more."⁹⁹

The most poignant example of the new town meeting consciousness appeared in the changing references in the introductory American government

outside activists and network executives must recognize the fragility of this most stubbornly Yankee of traditions and resist the urge to dilute it, to create still more illusion." Jeffrey Goode, "Vermont Spoilers," *New York Times*, March 26, 1983, 23.

98. They can be sensitive. In fact, on more than one occasion I've seen a heartwarming humility on their part when they walk through the doors of a town hall and are suddenly among, really among, common people doing real democracy. They somehow want to be careful.

99. George C. Edwards III, Martin P. Wattenberg, and Robert L. Lineberry, *Government in America: People, Politics and Policy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1995), 328. The same photograph with the same caption also appears in Steffen W. Schmidt, Mack C. Shelly, and Barbara A. Bardes, *American Politics and Government Today, 1999–2000* (Belmont, CA: West/Wadsworth, 1999), 351.

textbooks that political scientists assign to their students. Before the mid-1960s references to town meeting were limited, brief, and structure-bound. References began to increase in the 1960s and to focus more on politics and participation (or lack of it). In the 1970s and 1980s notations became more positive. By the second half of the 1990s, although the textbooks still said little about town meeting (usually a sentence or two or a short paragraph), they remained positive or neutral.¹⁰⁰

Throughout the postwar period and until about the 1990s, these references were nearly always found in the "What is democracy?" section of the first chapter of the textbook. Beginning about 1990 they began to be found as often in the electoral politics chapter and more and more in the media chapter.¹⁰¹ As the century closed, some texts did not mention town meeting *except* as a campaign device or public relations tool.¹⁰² The popular volume *We the People*, by Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir, for instance, cites town meeting in three chapters. The *media* chapter explains town meeting as a media-driven campaign technique, the *campaigns and elections* chapter describes it the same way, and the *presidency* chapter shows how a "town meeting" organized by a president to help sell a policy can have positive effects.¹⁰³ Reference to town meeting as *democracy* is nowhere to be found.

It has come to this. The twentieth century's final, most powerful contribution to the American conversation on town meeting was titled "Ye Olde Town Meeting Gimmick." An essay by that name was published in *Time*

100. In textbooks published after 1995 I found the best treatments of town meeting (in the sense of integrating the town meeting into an account of face-to-face as opposed to referendum or representative democracy) to be James Eisenstein, Mark Kessler, Bruce A. Williams, and Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer, *The Play of Power* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 58–60; Edward S. Greenberg and Benjamin I. Page, *The Struggle for Democracy*, 4th ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999), 8–9; and Kenneth Janda, Jeffrey M. Berry, and Jerry Goldman, *The Challenge of Democracy*, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999). The worst was Morris E. Fiorina and Paul E. Peterson, *The New American Democracy* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 13–14. The text features a picture of nine or ten people scattered about in what looks like a beat-up old church; an old man wearing a hunting cap stands (he looks almost alone) by a woodstove with a stovepipe leading off into the foreground. The caption reads: "In towns like this one in rural New England, town meetings may be scheduled at unpredictable and rather unusual times, in order to obtain citizens' votes on pressing budget issues." The authors are totally wrong.

101. See, for example, Walter E. Volkmer, *American Government*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988): 7, 87; Susan Welch, John Gruhl, John Comer, Susan M. Rigdon, and Jan Vermeer, *Understanding American Government*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: West/Wadsworth, 1999), 16, 88; and James Q. Wilson and John Dilulio Jr., *American Government: The Essentials* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 6, 8, 12, 273.

102. Milton C. Cummings Jr. and David Wise, *Democracy under Pressure* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 224.

103. Benjamin Ginsberg, Theodore J. Lowi, and Margaret Weir, *We the People: An Introduction to American Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1999), 301–303, 380, 494.

magazine in 1998 with the intention of further crippling the Clinton presidency.¹⁰⁴ Its target was Clinton's use of "town meetings," and in particular the one that backfired (with heckling and rudeness from the backbenchers) in Columbus, Ohio, when Clinton went forth to gain support for his foreign policy on Iraq. The event, carried by CNN, received broad coverage by the major television networks.

Columnist Andrew Ferguson's attack on fake town meetings was sound enough, but the article produced collateral damage. According to Ferguson, actual town meetings are "anachronisms today, surviving only in a few eccentric backwaters of Ye Olde New England." (There is some truth there—about 25 percent.) Real town meeting has "fallen from favor" because it was "disorderly and unpredictable." (The causal attribution is totally false—although sometimes I wish it were not.) In real town meetings "the balance tends to tip toward the fellow with the loudest voice [almost never the case]—the crank with the thickest sheaf of mimeograph papers under his arm." (This claim is about 10 percent true. But when it happens the perpetrators are not "cranks," they are bureaucrats.)

The piece is so well done that it is hard not to smile on reading it. It is also unlikely that Ferguson's easy, hackneyed, and dismissive inaccuracies have much influence on the American conversation about town meeting. But that is not the point. Now, when the term "town meeting" has for the first time in history achieved common day-to-day usage and taken a prominent position in the popular lexicon of politics, its meaning in the American conversation is counterfeit.

Oh, well. I look out my office window on this late November afternoon, and I see the ice blue of Lake Champlain tossing whitecaps into the teeth of a brisk Canadian north wind. New York's Adirondack range is ten miles west across the water, and it looks to be a mile, so clear the mountain air. My office is at the top of the tallest building (four stories) on the highest hill near the lake. The flat November sun casts long shadows *northeast* this time of day, this time of year, sneaking under things from odd angles up and down the great valley through which Burgoyne sailed south to defeat at a place called Saratoga. It was from these waters that he wrote in his diary, "Vermont abounds with the most rebellious race on the continent and hangs like a gathering storm on my left."

It will become cold soon. Very cold. The leaves are gone from the trees, and the tourists have gone with them. The northland is quiet. It is time to hunker down for winter. There is no fighting it. But one month from now,

104. Andrew Ferguson, "Ye Olde Town Meeting Gimmick," *Time*, March 2, 1998, 88.

thirty short days, in the dark of a December afternoon the planet Earth will pause for a moment, and then ever so slowly this end of it will begin to tip back toward the sun. The journey away from the cold and back to the light and to the life that follows will begin. About three weeks after this moment passes, governments in over two hundred communities in Vermont will begin to plan the agendas for their springtime democracy, their town meetings. They have been doing this for more than two hundred years. It matters not what others say. Real democracy resides deep in America's dearest dreams. It is like the springtime. It is a longing.¹⁰⁵



105. I have always wondered about the relish with which most scholars and many opinion elites in America feast on the evidence (when it appears) of town meeting's weaknesses—that it is not all it is cracked up to be. Jennifer Tolbert Roberts identified a tradition among students of Greek democracy “devoted to demonstrating the weaknesses of Athenian democracy with a passion that bordered on obsession.” *Athens on Trial: The Anti-democratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 311. Perhaps we are afraid that if real democracy offered so much more than the alternatives, we would be forced to deal with it. What then?

We do not learn to read or write, ride or swim, by merely being told how to do it, but by doing it, so it is only by practicing popular government on a limited scale that the people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger scale.

Carole Pateman

Conclusion

A Lovers' Quarrel

The words on Robert Frost's gravestone in Bennington, Vermont, read simply: "I had a lover's quarrel with the world." So too, it seems to me, has political science (and indeed, America as well) been haunted by a lovers' quarrel with democracy, the real democracy I have tried to describe in this book. My parting hope is that I have somehow touched the heart with distant memory, a memory beginning in ancient Athens twenty-five hundred years ago, a memory still cherished and preserved for the world in little towns that practice town meeting. I hope I have freshened that memory, sharpened it, and made clearer its romance, the passion of possibility that marked its early moments.

Let the quarrel begin anew.

The love is worth it.

This book was designed to describe real democracy in clear-eyed detail. At a minimum I sought to set right our age-old perceptions about real democracy. This alone, I reasoned, might prove useful for those who seek to preserve the representative democracy we have and prescribe new forms of democracy for the future. Beyond this modest goal, I fantasized that trustworthy reporting of real democracy's empirical parameters might in turn tease us into new quarrels about what I believe is our most compelling enterprise—to save the American republic by showing its leaders how to repair its underpinning, a citizenry acquainted with democracy. Such a fantasy requires brief (dangerously brief) answers to three questions. Each answer in turn might trigger

a quarrel—a fantasy-fulfilling quarrel. How does town meeting democracy stack up against representative democracy? How does town meeting contribute to civic capability? Are town meetings realistic options for the future?

Quarrel 1: A Paragon of Participatory Democracy?

"Town meetings, it appears, are not exactly paragons of participatory democracy," wrote Robert Dahl (with droll understatement) after reviewing some of my findings published in 1995.¹ He has a point. When I review turnout levels at town meeting in my classes, for instance, dead (almost disbelieving) silence fills the room. The silence often becomes embarrassment (for me and town meeting) when I speak to larger audiences. During my limited appearances at professional meetings, in my colleagues' eyes I see knives being sharpened.

And why not? On average only 20 percent of a town's registered voters attended their yearly town meeting between 1970 and 1998, and only 7 percent of them spoke out. This, mind you, in the very places one would expect real democracy to work the best—small towns with over two hundred years of democratic tradition behind them. If town meetings can do no better than this under optimal conditions, one can only imagine with trepidation what their performance might be elsewhere. Besides, even this record of low town meeting attendance is in decline. Paragon indeed.

A response to Dahl might take several forms. First is concession. If by "paragon" he means the exaggerations that defenders of town meeting democracy are wont to make (and I think this is precisely what he means), then town meeting is indeed a failure. But it is a failure in a way that is essentially meaningless. I have been continually amused at the way critics of town meeting, with perfectly straight faces, take aim and fire away at the nonsense perpetrated by the romantics.² In short, without a more realistic definition of "paragon," to take on Dahl would be silly.

Or we might sidestep and suggest that the quality of the experience for those who attend town meeting compensates for the quantity of people who do not attend at all. Does this qualitative gain for the few "make up" for the quantitative loss for the many? Who knows? Worse, to my knowledge

1. Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 110–111. Frank Bryan, "Direct Democracy and Civic Competence," *Good Society* 5 (Fall 1995): 36–44.

2. Dahl is aware of this syndrome as it applies to classical Greek democracy: "It would scarcely be necessary [to point out that Greek democracy was not all it was cracked up to be] if it were not for the influence of the view of some classical historians that in his unswerving devotion to the public good the Athenian citizen set a standard for all time." Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1989), 20.

no empirical work demonstrates that town-meeting-like participation is far better for the individual than voting in private, although my experience urges me to assert vigorously that it is. But you do not confront Robert Dahl with assertions.

Third, we can find excuses. Commuter-based lifestyles and other demographic and institutional dislocations have raised havoc with Vermont's town-based society,³ much as they have throughout the rest of America. Vermont has experienced in full measure the negative forces for civic engagement so eloquently cataloged by Robert D. Putnam.⁴ Also, attendance at town meeting would be significantly higher without the dramatic increases in town populations that the townspeople had no control over. Such excuses are important. They do not suffice.

The best way to deal with Dahl's observation is to reset our expectations,⁵ and the best way to do that is to emphasize the costs of town meeting participation in the context of benchmark data on representative democracy's quintessential act of participation—voting. For the costs of town meeting are more severe—dramatically more severe—than the costs of voting,⁶ and political scientists tout costs as one of the most important explanations for low participation. The cost hypothesis has roots in ancient Greece. Some classical scholars claim that without slave labor to free up time for citizenship, the Greeks could not have conducted real democracy in Athens. The modern

3. My favorite example of the erosion of town government is the decision by the business manager of Vermont's Department of Fish and Wildlife to discourage town clerks from selling fishing and hunting licenses. "Generations of young Vermonters who trooped into town clerk's offices to buy their first fishing and hunting licenses may be losing that tradition as the state takes a more profit-oriented approach to licensing." Monica Allen, "Town Clerks Discouraged from Selling Licenses," *Burlington Free Press*, January 31, 1988, 5. My first formal encounter with town government was when I was twelve years old and purchased my first hunting license from "Lil" Knight, Newbury's town clerk. I still mark the moment, that very moment, of walking home from the town clerk's office with my first hunting license as a wonderful and defining transition in my life. I was now a licensed hunter. Government, my government, was intimately involved with this passage from youth to adulthood, from private to public life. If I've got her right, Nancy Rosenblum might even call this my own personal "Hegelian moment." Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 25–29.

4. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

5. Indeed, this was the advice given by the authors of *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*, which contains more findings per page on the potential for face-to-face politics than any other book since Mansbridge's *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980). See Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thomson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1993), 292.

6. John H. Aldrich, "Rational Choice and Turnout," *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (February 1993): 246–278. Aldrich says the low cost (and low benefit) of voting precludes its being considered a collective action problem.

"voter fatigue" explanation has been carefully demonstrated by Richard Boyd and others.⁷ It helped persuade the president of the American Political Science Association to (in an eerie "Vietnam village" type of metaphor) call for saving voter turnout by limiting the number of elections and the number of officers elected at each.⁸

It takes close to three and a half hours to attend an average town meeting, not including a lunch break. If it is not held at night (and three-quarters of them are not), this means that attendance costs a day's pay or a vacation day (which is the same thing) for citizens with jobs.⁹ When held at night, town meeting consumes the whole evening. For those with young children, it may mean the expense (and hassle) of getting a babysitter. Also, nearly all night meetings require citizens to go to the polls the next day to vote for local town officers. Town meeting "uses up" a day or an evening. It is almost impossible to fit it in with other activities.¹⁰

Compare the 20 percent turnout at town meeting with the turnout for the presidential election in America. After all the hoopla is over, all the money is spent, the last campaign ad is aired, the last interest group's mobilization team has gone home, the last political party's "get out the vote" apparatus closes down, and the last national news network airs its last prognostication, America has difficulty drawing even 50 percent of its eligible citizens to the polls once every four years to elect its president—a person who can do more harm or good in a single day than Genghis Khan or Mother Teresa in a hundred lifetimes.

During this same election Americans also elect members of the House of Representatives, one-third of the senators, governors of several states, state legislators, and countless other local officers. Would voter turnout in presidential years even reach town meeting's 20 percent level if presidential

7. Richard W. Boyd, "Decline in U.S. Voter Turnout: Structural Explanations," *American Politics Quarterly* 9 (April 1981): 133–159; Richard W. Boyd, "The Effects of Primaries and Statewide Races on Voter Turnout," *Journal of Politics* 51 (August 1989): 730–739. Robert W. Jackman and Ross A. Miller, "Voter Turnout in the Industrial Democracies during the 1980's," *Comparative Political Studies* 27 (January 1995): 467–492.

8. Arend Lijphart, "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma," *American Political Science Review* 91 (March 1997): 1–14.

9. As early as 1962 Robert S. Babcock, a former professor of political science at the University of Vermont, wrote that "turnout (at town meeting) has fallen off considerably in recent years, for the very real economic reason that many wage earners cannot afford to take the day off for the business of the community." Robert S. Babcock, *State and Local Government and Politics* (New York: Random House, 1962), 96.

10. As Anne Phillips reminds us, there is a high cost associated with political meetings: "From Oscar Wilde through to Michael Walzer, people have recurrently worried that activism involves too many meetings." Anne Phillips, *Democracy and Difference* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 111.

elections occurred alone, were held every year, used up a full day in a citizen's life, and cost three-quarters of the voters the equivalent of one-fifth their weekly salary?

Finally, town meeting attendance looks better still when compared with local elections. At this level town meeting attendance figures begin to stand on their own even though the costs of voting in local elections (even more than in national elections) pale beside the costs of attending a town meeting. Voter turnout in local elections held alone seldom reaches 25 percent and often dips into the single digits.¹¹ Remember too that throughout this period variables positively associated with voter turnout like education levels and access to the polls have been improving while positive variables associated with town meeting attendance like small town sizes and town decision-making authority have been in decline.

Moreover, the "costs" side of the equation involves much more than time and money. Town meetings are mostly work. The romantics cast them in the rosy glow of "neighbor meeting neighbor," and there is plenty of that. But town meeting is not, as some suggest, primarily a social event. The chairs are hard, the hours can drag on.¹² Humor is nearly always present, but only in bits and pieces. Plus, one has to pay attention—keep up with the warning articles, understand what the vote means. People don't always speak clearly, the person sitting next to you is fidgety, a baby is crying in the back, the bathroom is sometimes (how shall I say it?) "problematical" or, as in Strafford, Vermont (see page 23), across the street in someone's house.

Because the towns are so small, huge per capita public responsibility costs inflate the costs of town meeting. The average town elects over a dozen officers and appoints at least a dozen more. Planning boards (and meetings), zoning boards (and meetings), and library boards (and meetings) are examples. The chances are high that any given citizen of a Vermont town could (with perfect justification) say something like "I've done enough for the town this year. I guess they can handle town meeting well enough without me." My old hometown of Newbury has twenty-four officers listed in the town report for 2000, and my current hometown of Starksboro has thirty-two.

Then come the psychic costs. Last town meeting you ended up sitting next to someone who smelled like celery. If you have to listen to another

11. See, for instance, Jacques Steinberg, "Boards and Minds Are Little Changed by School Elections," *New York Times*, June 14, 1996, B2, cited in Lijphart, "Unequal Participation," 8. Turnout in these elections was only 5 percent.

12. My students' essays are full of comments like, "As we left the meeting I was tired and sore. It was a very long day." Scott Denham, "Bakersfield Town Meeting," Colchester, VT, St. Michael's College, 1974.

impassioned plea for property tax relief you'll go nuts. It is always painful to see Jim, and he may be there. The Smiths will want to sit near you, and they are the most boring couple you know. Or you may get steamed when (as you know they will) those new people over on West Hill in their trophy house ask to have the West Hill Road paved. Last year you agonized (found your hands shaking) trying to get up your nerve to speak but failed. Two years earlier it took you ten minutes to calm down after you did get up your nerve to speak but your voice cracked and everyone heard it.

Attendance aside, other kinds of town meeting involvement compare remarkably well with institutions of representative government. At the average town meeting 44 percent of those in attendance speak out. I have yet to find evidence that state legislative assemblies, for instance, seem more like a parliament (a place for speaking) than does a Vermont town meeting. Nor do I have evidence that percentages of citizens speaking out at public hearings equal or surpass those at a town meeting. Finally, I'd wager my colleagues around the country would agree that verbal participation in meetings of equal size they have attended throughout their careers does not equal the levels achieved in town meeting as discussed in chapters 6 and 7.¹³

As for women's participation, the Vermont town meeting has not achieved parity. But where in the representative institutions of American democracy is it better? Where is it even close? Between 1970 and 1998 women constituted an average of 46 percent of those in attendance at town meeting. City councils cannot match this figure. State legislatures fall far behind. The American Congress isn't remotely close. Women at town meeting do not speak out as much as men do. But try as I might, I have not found comparative data suggesting they participate less at town meeting than they do in other venues.

My impressionistic conclusion that town meeting has failed to integrate the deeply disadvantaged into the process must be compared with voting behavior studies that have found the very same thing for the electoral process. Among this cohort of society, the contextual nature of town meeting democracy may make participation even more problematic than we know it is for the simple act of voting. That said, of this I am perfectly sure: step into the average town meeting in Vermont and you will see before you an approximation of the ranges of status groups in the community that is remarkably accurate.

13. In this case it is important to remember that we did not count "seconding a motion" as an act of participation, although it clearly is. Seconds were not counted because it was difficult to count them accurately. But they add to the overall participatory level of the meetings.

Finally, two contextual considerations: First, a key finding of this study is that issues matter, especially in the most important component of real democracy—presence at the assembly. More than any other variable (beyond size), issues are the most important explanation for turnout at town meeting. Yet in the second half of the twentieth century Vermont towns have steadily been losing the authority to deal with controversial issues. Unlike many states, Vermont has no home rule provision in its constitution to protect its localities' decision-making authority. In 1974 G. Ross Stephens found that between 1957 and 1971 (about the time this study began) no state's local governments had lost power as swiftly as Vermont's.¹⁴ A few years later Jane Mansbridge referenced several policy areas exempted from town prerogatives, writing: "The diminishing power of the town has inevitably had an effect on town meeting attendance. . . . The surprise is that the effect of declining town powers on attendance has not been greater."¹⁵

In the twenty years since Mansbridge published *Beyond Adversary Democracy* this process has continued, as important elements of local discretion have been taken (or given) away. These have been replaced with ever increasing layers of administrative complexity as the state tries to ensure (correctly) that those policies it seeks to control are properly delivered. Meanwhile a burgeoning apparatus of regional nonprofit organizations has sprung up to help the towns deliver services. It is becoming more and more unlikely that important matters that once were the object of a town's commonweal can be framed in ways that allow deliberation and decisions by town meetings.

The second contextual consideration is the heavy democratic infrastructure that exists in Vermont's towns and competes with town meeting for civic capital. As my mother grew old in Newbury, her "local" property taxes went to four incorporated "governments": the village of Newbury (for streetlights, plowing the sidewalks, and providing water—not inconsequential services), the town of Newbury's school district (kindergarten through the sixth grade), the Oxbow Union High School District that Newbury shared with the towns of Bradford and Corinth (two-thirds of her taxes went there), and the town of Newbury itself, which provided all other local government services. Each one of these four entities had a yearly "town meeting." Thus, besides the real town meeting, my mother would have had to attend three other more issue-specific town meetings each year in order to fulfill her role as a citizen-legislator practicing real democracy in the town of Newbury.

14. G. Ross Stephens, "State Centralization and the Erosion of Local Autonomy," *Journal of Politics* 36 (February 1974): 44–76.

15. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 130.

Newbury's citizens who live in Wells River village also pay taxes to their village (Wells River), their town (Newbury), and a couple of school districts. But the school districts are different from those used by citizens of Newbury village. Thus the Newbury town meeting is competing with several other little governments, each a real democracy where citizens set tax rates and make law in face-to-face assemblies. Fewer than 1,500 voters support all this democracy. Although these other meetings are held on different days of the year, they siphon off a considerable share of public concerns held by the town's citizens.

Paragons, it seems to me, are related to possibility. I am not about to suggest that town meetings are "pure" democracy if what we mean by pure is complete participation. Majorities, large majorities, of the citizens of Vermont's towns do not participate regularly in town meetings. But I do claim that, given the burdens under which they operate, town meetings come about as close to paragon status as reasonable people would agree is possible within the limits of human nature. More. All things considered, I claim that the record town meetings have established in Vermont in the past thirty years demonstrates that ordinary citizens are far more willing to expend the energy to practice real democracy in their towns than the ordinary American is to expend the energy to vote in representative democracy at any level in the United States of America.¹⁶

Quarrel 2: A Gentler Kind of Tutelage?

No description of how town meeting contributes to civic education surpasses that written by Michael J. Sandel:

Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, wanted to . . . teach each citizen "that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property." But civic education need not take so harsh a form. In practice, successful republican soulcraft involves a gentler kind of

16. This claim and the following claim by Robert Dahl probably cannot coexist: "The smaller the unit, the greater the opportunity for citizens to participate in the decisions of their government, yet the less of the environment they can control. Thus for most citizens, participation in very large units becomes minimal and in very small units it becomes trivial." Robert Dahl, "The City in the Future of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 61 (December 1967): 97. To political scientists who are working hard to figure out a way to keep the Republic functioning democratically, I suppose leash laws may seem trivial. To the nice man who likes to jog on Big Hollow Road in Starksboro and was accosted on several occasions by Mr. Jones, my black Lab/Chesapeake Bay retriever, leash laws are far from trivial—as witnessed by the language he used in describing Mr. Jones's behavior.

tutelage. For example, the political economy of citizenship that informed nineteenth-century American life sought to cultivate not only commonality but also the independence and judgment to deliberate well about the common good. It worked not by coercion but by a complex mixture of persuasion and habituation—what Alexis de Tocqueville called "the slow and quiet action of society upon itself."¹⁷

Town meeting differs from other options considered by social capital theorists in that it is in effect on-the-job training. Nancy Rosenblum casts these other options in two categories. The first group, "congruence" associations, emphasize "rights and due process." These associations fit Michael Walzer's dicta that "only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society" and "only a democratic civil society can sustain a democratic state."¹⁸ I claim that town meetings possess the fundamental characteristics of "congruence" associations.

Rosenblum's second category comprises "mediating" associations. Groups in this category "orient us *away*" (emphasis in the original), says Rosenblum, "from civic and politically inspired" goals and emphasize instead generic values that "inculcate civility, sociability, responsibility and cooperation" along a wide "range of moral dispositions." Mediating associations are not designed to teach specific civic skills related to such liberal notions as due process. Town meeting provides both "congruent" and "mediating" influences.¹⁹

Town meeting is different from both types of associations because it is not an association at all. It is a branch, the legislative branch, of a general-purpose government. Thus its agenda is eclectic and places a greater premium on both civic skills and generic values associated with common enterprise—values like cooperation, sociability, responsibility, and (most of all) civility. On the other hand, civic associations, either congruent or mediating, by definition possess a certain unity of purpose generally held by people with

17. Michael J. Sandel, "America's Search for a Public Philosophy," *Atlantic Monthly* 277 (March 1996): 57, reprinted from Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

18. Michael Walzer, "The Idea of a Civil Society," *Dissent* 38 (Spring 1991): 302; cited in Nancy Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

19. Participation at town meeting can take many forms. I have seen hundreds of them. But the following, reported by one of my students, has haunted me for over a quarter of a century: "Lastly, there was an old man (let's call him Gramps) who could barely walk. He just sat on the aisle calmly and patiently throughout the meeting, staring at nothing, tapping his cane. He had made his annual appearance as he had for the last fifty years." Peter Lefebber, "Brighton, 1974," Colchester, St. Michael's College, March, 1974.

similar backgrounds and therefore mute the difficulties related to becoming both real citizens and good citizens.

Town meeting's capacity for tutelage is linked as much to its performance as a liberal institution supported by republican values as to its performance as a republican institution utilizing liberal means. The fundamental purpose of town meeting is to make decisions for the commonweal based on principles of due process and equal protection—but on a human scale. Consequently it establishes and nurtures by necessity the republican principles required to sustain an incessant, year-in, year-out series of face-to-face collective action decisions. What better way to train democratic citizens without intending to? In this lack of intention, town meeting avoids a critical liberal critique of republicanism—the forced adherence to ideals that abhor force.

The teaching of civic skills, specifically *Robert's Rules of Order*, is a fundamental element of (liberal) "congruence" provided by town meeting. How well do people at town meeting know *Robert's Rules*? Not well. Do they get confused with their application? All the time. But the degree to which town meeting orders talk, applies procedure, sticks to its guns on issues of due process, and bends over backward to ensure that minority rights are observed is perhaps the biggest surprise that newcomers to town meeting experience. Many of them are put off by the tedium of it. They come to town meeting expecting communalism, and they get liberalism. They say it with their eyes: "Do we have to go through all this?" The answer is yes. People growing up in the town meeting tradition know how to conduct public meetings.

What about town meeting as a tutor for "mediating values"? The playwright Jonathan Miller once said that in order for a relationship to be humane it must be complicated and dutiful. Complication and duty are products of intimacy, and intimacy is a product of small size, and small size gives birth to the critical human virtue of forbearance. If town meeting teaches anything, it is how to suffer damn fools and to appreciate the fact that from time to time you too may look like a damn fool in the eyes of people as good as yourself. Here I recommend the insight of Russell L. Hanson in his critique of the claim that deliberation has a depressing effect on tolerance. Forbearance, says Hanson, is a more important concept than tolerance. While we cannot exorcise intolerance from the human soul, we can create institutions that ensure forbearance in the face of intolerance.²⁰

20. Russell L. Hanson, "Deliberation, Tolerance and Democracy," in *Reconsidering the Democratic Public*, ed. George E. Marcus and Russell L. Hanson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

Such an institution is town meeting, a place where people of their own volition (Hanson's term) tend not to act on their "intolerant orientations." Attend a town meeting with any consistency, and you cannot help but learn forbearance in the face of others' intolerance toward you and, conversely, your own intolerance toward others. As the ruler of Germany, someone once said, Adolf Hitler was a horror. At a New England town meeting he would have at once been recognized as a flaming jackass and subtly ostracized into impotence. This is the kind of learned "gentler tutelage" that town meeting offers.

Such learning takes time, and exceptions exist. "Black Hat and the Four Evils" of Victory certainly do not fit the model, nor do Jane Mansbridge's farmer Clayton Bedell and the lawyer who threatened to sue him.²¹ These exceptions are to be expected. Still, Black Hat was "tolerated." His right to act like a damn fool in the context of public deliberation was preserved intact. Most important, the people of Victory learned from it. Many were ashamed for the town. Liberal critics of republicanism rightly fear for the rights of people like Black Hat and the Four Evils, but the town meeting experience tells us that this fear may better be directed at institutions of systems scale, where distance from personal contact may make intolerance less visible, easier, and thus profoundly more dangerous.

What evidence do we have that this kind of town meeting tutelage works?²² The data show no significant association at the town level between turnout at town meeting and turnout at biennial state and national elections. But a strong association does exist in the aggregate between town meeting culture at the local level and an advanced civic culture at the state level. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert D. Putnam scores Vermont first among the fifty states on his tolerance index (gender/racial and civil liberties) and third on his

21. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 59–65. Mansbridge's description of the farmer put down by a lawyer at town meeting was so real that it still makes me cringe when I think about it. This certainly did not seem like "gentle" tutelage. Yet in the fullness of time these occurrences are in my view an unavoidable (perhaps even a necessary) part of a fundamentally gentle process. Visible intolerance may be harder on the senses, but I judge it is far less egregious in quality and quantity than invisible intolerance. Meanwhile, clear and intentional acts of human kindness are continually displayed at town meeting at a measure dramatically exceeding acts of intolerance.

22. In an important return to Tocqueville's empirical roots in the American township, Robert T. Gannett Jr. claims it was the township's political and institutional life (not simply Americans' habit of associational participation) that spawned the "participatory vector" that was then "disseminated" (along with the "bracing vitality" of the township itself) to "civil society as a whole." Robert T. Gannett Jr., "Bowling Ninepins in Tocqueville's Township," *American Political Science Review* 97 (February 2003): 1. This is the dynamic I have seen at work throughout my lifetime in Vermont.

social capital index, below only North and South Dakota.²³ Tom W. Rice and Alexander F. Sumberg rank Vermont first on their measure of civic culture.²⁴

Moreover, by the Rice-Sumberg measure Vermont is by far the strongest American state on civil society. This score is 1.52 (these are *Z*-scores that begin at -1.53), while the next closest state (Massachusetts) scores only 1.05. This forty-seven-point gap is far and away the largest between any two states on the scale. Finally, three of the six New England states (the only place in America where town meeting is practiced) finish in the top five states, and five of the six New England states finish in the top ten states on civil society. These findings establish no clinical causality between the tutelage of town meeting and civil society. Nor can I.²⁵ But the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming.²⁶

While no state has stronger real democracy than Vermont, few if any have stronger representative democracy. Vermonters are voters. Historically they have participated more fully in their representative democracy at the state level than the great majority of Americans in other states.²⁷ Most important, Vermont's electoral participation in presidential politics has traditionally been far better than that of most American states. Vermont's elections in off years follow suit. Vermont is one of only two states to insist on electing its governor and other statewide officers every two years. Our state ballot is a long one, including a lieutenant governor, secretary of state, auditor of accounts,

23. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 298.

24. Tom W. Rice and Alexander F. Sumberg, "Civic Culture and Government Performance in the American States," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 27 (Winter 1977): 114.

25. To specify the direction of the relation between civil society and town meeting is difficult. Moreover, several American states with no hint of a town meeting tradition score higher than the New England states on social capital. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 298. Still, Vermont's system of what Hannah Arendt called "elementary republics" is in my view a near perfect replica of democratic institutions that "radiate" (Vaclav Havel's term) on their surroundings "by the force of their example, by the embarrassment felt by those who failed to act, by the indirect moral pressure exerted on the regime." This has been as true for the town's historical influence on Vermont's centralized government in Montpelier as it is beginning to be for Vermont's growing radiant impulses on the American nation—from pathbreaking environmental legislation in the late 1960s to the nuclear freeze referenda in the early 1980s to civil unions for gays and lesbians as the century closed. See Jeffrey C. Isaac, "Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics," *American Political Science Review* 88 (March 1994): 156-168.

26. In her comparison of a Michigan city council town and a Vermont town meeting town (matched on size and socioeconomic variables) Vivian Scott Hixson found that citizens of the Vermont town possessed dramatic advantages over citizens of the Michigan town in the kinds of civic capacities and skills that typically find their way into social capital indexes. Vivian Scott Hixson, "The New Town Meeting Democracy: A Study of Matched Towns" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1974).

27. In recent years Vermont's position in the national rankings on these measures has slipped.

attorney general, and treasurer. No state save New Hampshire elects more state legislators per capita than Vermont.

Beyond its record in electoral arenas, Vermont's history has continually reflected liberal principles. From the very beginning, when the towns met in convention and established a new North American republic based on the first American constitution to outlaw slavery and offer the rights of freemen to those who were not property holders, to its outcry against secrecy (Vermont was the strongest anti-Mason state in America), to its nearly fanatical involvement in the Civil War (Lincoln fought the war more to save the Union than to free the slaves; Vermont did the opposite), to its leading role in the fight against McCarthyism, Vermont has demonstrated the politics of a liberal government comprising republican parts.²⁸

The Vermont legislature that so overwhelmingly rejected McCarthyism in the 1950s was elected one member from each town, no matter its size, and was in every sense a statewide assembly of town officers and town meeting goers.²⁹ The state that elected the first female lieutenant governor (and the second female speaker of a house of representatives), that established the first school of higher education for women, that produced the first woman to argue a case before the Supreme Court, that elected the first African American to its state legislature, that graduated the first African American from college, that passed the first absentee voting law, that first adopted one of the most progressive state campaign finance reform laws in the nation, and that first bestowed the rights and privileges of marriage on gay and lesbian couples is more firmly rooted in town meeting politics than any state in the Union.

Vermont is a state that abhors negative campaigning, whose drivers are so polite that some say they cause traffic accidents, where the communal ethic worked out in its localities under the auspices of liberal codes of political process has produced a representative democracy that, while never perfect and sometimes blemished, seems to have become an object of national envy. Writing on the defection of Senator Jim Jeffords from the Republican Party in the spring of 2001, Jon Margolis said it about as well as it can be said. Jeffords's action, says Margolis, should be seen not as a measure of how much the typical Vermonter cherishes *autonomy* (emphasis mine) but rather "as evidence of the persistence of an old tradition and of how much Jeffords and Vermont

28. For an extended essay on the historical origins of town meeting in Vermont and its role in the development of Vermont's political culture, see www.uvm.edu/~fbryan.

29. In 1953 someone introduced a bill in the Vermont House of Representatives that would establish a board to review books used in the public schools to make sure they were free of subversive, pro-communist content. The bill was killed 202 to 11. It was a Vermont senator, Ralph Flanders, who led the fight against McCarthyism in Congress.

still depend on it, [an] attitude that cherishes restraint, civility, tolerance, and compromise." In New England, says Margolis, one finds an "implicit acknowledgment that one *might be wrong*" (emphasis mine).³⁰ No other place better teaches the virtue of humility—or its corollary, forbearance—than a New England town meeting. Of this I am sure.³¹

Quarrel 3: A Future for Town Meeting?

I am not altogether certain town meeting will survive the coming half-century even in Vermont, to say nothing of having a renewed future elsewhere in America. Still, my reasoning leads me beyond hope to possibility and even (on a good day) expectation. All are grounded in several axioms. (1) Real democracy must be limited to extremely small units. Stretching it over larger wholes is fatal. (2) To work well, town meetings must serve general-purpose governments that have complete authority (from taxation to assessing results) over some areas of governance. (3) Town meeting—like control over all or even most of the services Americans expect from government is neither practical nor desirable. (4) Real democracies must be free to make mistakes. (5) Consequently, hard thinking about the division of powers is mandatory. (6) Deconcentrated government must not mean less government. It must mean better government more equally distributed. (7) The conservative/liberal dichotomy and the partisan split on the decentralism issue are dead. They are what Robert Putnam calls "false debates."³²

In *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale* (if one scrapes away our lapses into utopian rhapsody) John McClaughry and I suggested how such axioms might frame a plan for sustained town meeting democracy in postmodern societies.³³ To believe this is possible, you must accept two propositions. First, Vermont is (despite its bucolic image) more a "postmodern" society than the great majority of American states. Second, the postmodern world will become as decentralist in character as the urban-industrial world was centralist. The first proposition is defended

30. Jon Margolis, "As Vermont Goes, So Goes... Vermont," *U.S. News and World Report*, June 4, 2001, 21.

31. Of course, I could be wrong.

32. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 413. When Democratic senator Joseph Lieberman and Republican president George W. Bush agree that national educational standards should be placed on local schools and that schools not meeting these standards should be closed down, it is time to redraw the battle lines or (better) forget about them.

33. Frank Bryan and John McClaughry, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale* (Chelsea, VT: Chelsea Green Press, 1989).

in *The Vermont Papers* and in the extended essay on Vermont available on the Web site.³⁴

The intellectual infrastructure for the second dynamic, while clearly not prevailing, is nevertheless ascendant.³⁵ I see the argument as follows: Under an information age umbrella of centralized structural cooperation (the European Union being a model to watch), new decentralist opportunities (the Committee for the Regions within the European Union is an example) are being framed. With nationalist loyalties on the wane,³⁶ new smaller unions (often bioregional) are emerging. The work of nation-states will shift toward their roles as part of larger, transnational structures, and their attention will be siphoned away from the micromanagement of their own societies. In this vacuum lies the future of democracy.

This is the model suggested by Dahl and Tufte in 1973. Giant transnational organizations will necessitate "very small units" to "provide a place where ordinary people can acquire... the reality of moral responsibility and political effectiveness."³⁷ Daniel Bell has added to this thesis by suggesting that domestic politics will gravitate toward the states and localities on domestic issues and outward toward transnational organizations on economic, diplomatic, and military issues. Evidence of this is already apparent in the United States Congress, says Alan Ehrenhalt. Congress's contemporary malaise can be explained as the beginnings of a search for ways to understand its role in operating within a new transnational framework that features both localism and globalism.³⁸

About the time Dahl and Tufte published *Size and Democracy*, Robert J. Pranger published a prescient essay in *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* titled "The Decline of the American National Government." "The redemptive nature of broad national politics," he warned, "has been replaced by localism writ large." Because of this America is failing at its most fundamental

34. www.uvm.edu/~fbryan.

35. For starters I suggest the symposium Alexandra Kogl, ed., "The Politics of Place in a Globalizing Era," *Good Society* 10, 2 (2001): 4-35.

36. As an extreme example I cite America's hostility to the metric system. Every time I have to go to the toolbox to substitute a 13-mm wrench for a 5/8-inch wrench I curse nationalism and capitalism. My instincts tell me the human race is unwilling—in the long run—to put up with inefficiencies like this. Let a global state secure human rights, prevent nuclear holocaust, and make up its mind on wrenches. My bet is that localities will flourish under such a system, especially if information continues to be democratized as it has been in the United States over the past several decades.

37. Robert A. Dahl and Edward Tufte, *Size and Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 140.

38. Alan Ehrenhalt, "Demanding the Right Size Government," *New York Times*, October 4, 1999, 27.

task—being a nation that provides “a base for the broad general will” and a “system of national unity” that couples “liberty and safety.”³⁹

John McClaughry and I used this platform in 1989 to call for strengthening the federal government to do those things a nation must do. We said the loss of civic attachment to the center was caused by Americans’ “lost faith in the things they have always expected from the nation: security and a sense of wholeness with the fundamentals of public life. They miss the sense of national well-being.” Public work abounds for everyone, we claimed, and if the federal government insists on performing a wide range of tasks better done locally, “it will fail at its most important task, the maintenance of the context for a democratic civil order. And in heart and mind Americans will continue to drift away from the center.”⁴⁰

The future of town meeting resides in this charge: Let the Republic be a nation and lead us securely into a world of increasing political cooperation. In the meantime let the nation’s people begin the process of learning to take care of themselves and each other once again—but now in their communities assembled under a new national framework that ensures in broad context the fundamentals of the post-Roosevelt agreement.⁴¹ This is no call for a radical decentralism; rather, it asks for a careful reassessment of possibilities unbridled by the demons of doubt and fear. Let the following be heard more often: “This government is too big.” And let us hear less often that “this government is too small.” Hillary Clinton was right. In so many ways it does indeed take a village.

Real democracy requires, first, governments small enough to give a significant number of citizens a significant chance to make a significant difference on a significant number of issues. Second, real democracy requires larger governments that trust their citizens enough to let them make mistakes on matters of importance. Not all important matters. Not most important matters, but some important matters.⁴² Decentralism and empowerment; put

39. Robert J. Pranger, “The Decline of the American National Government,” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 3 (Fall 1973): 11–28. The events following September 11, 2001, and the formation of a new Department of Homeland Security are clearly within the purview cast by Pranger.

40. Bryan and McClaughry, *Vermont Papers*.

41. As Tocqueville put it, “What I want is a central government energetic in its own sphere of action.” Quoted in Gannett, “Bowling Ninepins in Tocqueville’s Township.”

42. Tocqueville noted this critical element of democratic possibility when he said of the New England town, “Its sphere is limited, indeed; but *within this sphere, its action is unrestrained* [emphasis my own]. This independence alone gives it real importance, which its extent and population would not insure.” For a model for such a distribution of powers with specific examples see Bryan and McClaughry, *Vermont Papers*, chapter 11 (“Education on a Human Scale”) and chapter 12 (“The Compassionate Community”).

these two requirements together and citizens will participate in governance to a degree that will dramatically transcend expectations. Real democracy not only will live, it will flourish. Take either away and it will die.

My claim is simply that history is moving slowly toward a time when the first requirement (smaller communities) will be satisfied, when we will come to understand that the term “global village” was a silly oxymoron born of our exuberance over third-generation (but still embryonic) computer technology. This leaves the second requirement—creative localism and empowerment. This one is up to us. Will we consider it? Will we plan for it? Or will we continue to so distrust our neighbors that we are unwilling to cast our lot with them in hopeful common enterprise?⁴³ Will we condemn ourselves to unyielding conservatism (cowering under the paradigms of past generations), or will we develop the intellectual infrastructure to help our leaders refit America with a new commonwealth—democratic in its parts, the heartland, and liberal at the center, its nationhood—a commonwealth in which real democracy therefore is an important component?

WITNESS

The culture shock I felt when we moved from outside Boston to West Windsor, Vermont (at age 10) was non-existent when I returned to town for the 1982 town meeting. I was thrilled to receive the special attention of my teacher who had taught me in grades 5 and 6. It had been quite easy to learn the names of all eleven of my classmates!

On the first Tuesday of March our principal would lead us down to the Story Memorial Hall, where we would sit up in the balcony and distract our parents, who were engaged in something we didn’t understand.

Now, when I sit up in the balcony and look down on the people in my town I realize the faces really haven’t changed much since I sat there seven years ago. A few new outsiders stand to speak, voice their opinions, and sit down. Someone in the back whispers to his friend, “Who’s that?” and is informed, “He lives up on the Brook Road near the Ely place.” Mr. Denyon, a life-long resident of the town, asks thirty questions ranging from the new grader to the mini-computer for the grade school. Selectman Ed Cyr answers each question patiently. The town speeds through the big money items and spends half an hour trying to decide whether to buy a smoke or heat detector for the school. It decides it definitely needs something to protect “our kids.”

Perhaps the most important question raised was nuclear disarmament. Rev. Gottenburg, a retired Lutheran minister, began passing out literature

43. In his inspiring final chapter of *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam calls for “decentralism of government resources and authority” downward. As I awaited the publication of his book I anticipated (with pleasure) that he would use the term government “resources.” But I prayed he would use the term government “authority.”

during the town meeting. He spent his entire lunch hour asking for support of the question. The nuclear question was the last to be discussed, and after ten minutes it was passed unanimously.

The Rev. felt so moved by this that he stood up and began singing "God Bless America." The entire floor stood up and sang along. At first I thought that the act was silly and senseless, something I could not and would not take part in.

Reflecting on that past moment, I can honestly say that I am disappointed in myself for not joining in and professing my love for my country. Our society has become apathetic in dealing with government duties. We rarely vote, and when we do we don't know the candidate or what he stands for.

Vicki Johnson⁴⁴

A Final Word

Liberalism has achieved its greatest enterprise. It has created the world's best continental (and therefore necessarily) representative democracy. Madison's classic admonition that we should organize ourselves against one another has worked out well enough. Liberalism was correct for the Republic.

It still is. But in our own times liberalism seems to run amok. The imperialism of liberalism inward, downward into the national heart is infesting the very soul liberalism depends on—a citizenry that knows self-government. Interest groups can give us participation. Elections can give us the vote. Involvement in governance is what is needed. The heart of democracy is found in our localities: our towns, counties, parishes, and boroughs.

It is liberalism by which the nation lives. It is communitarianism by which it dreams. And as life without dreams is unsustainable, so too is liberalism. Because living a dream is impossible, let the nation be liberal. But let the nation set free the times and places where living and dreaming are joined, where communitarian impulses and liberal requirements are mixed, where real democracy is learned and practiced and developed. We have always known that the nation's parts could not survive without the nation's whole. The time has come to understand that the reverse is equally so.

I have watched real democracy in all its goods and ills for nearly half a century, and this I know to be true: if given a chance, the people can govern themselves. I've seen them do it.

Moreover, I believe they must do so again—and soon. For there is a second requirement for controlling the passions of self-interest beyond

44. Vicki Johnson, "1982 West Windsor Town Meeting," Burlington, University of Vermont, March 1982.

Madison's cure of setting ourselves one against the other. In its absence the center will continue to fester, and our most cherished enterprise, our national, representative democracy—our glorious Republic—will continue to slip into atrophy and decline.

This requirement is to come together again. We are required to ensure that we see, that we feel, up close and face to face, what happens to each other when we do each other harm. We are required to allow ourselves no escape from our common humanity. We are required to mark together the renderings of our collective actions—the joy and satisfaction that come when we find the common good, the pain in each other's eyes when we ignore, as we will often do, what Lincoln called "the better angles of our natures."

To recreate the conditions for such a governance, limited in its breadth but sovereign in its depth, will be no easy task. But there are Madisons and Jeffersons among us. It is our calling as political scientists, is it not, to find them and inform their judgment? This is the calling Jane Mansbridge referred to in her classic *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. We should proceed, she said, past the democracy of balanced self-interest toward a balance of self-interest and common interest: not without liberalism, not in spite of liberalism.

The fulcrum of this balance,⁴⁵ I believe, is scale. The objects of this balance are town and nation, the instrumentalities are citizen and representative, and the processes are communal and liberal. More than anything else, therefore, I hope my work is an invitation for political scientists, as political scientists, to explore this paradigm and lead America back to the pasture springs in the high hills of home. Let the watersheds that sustain our nationhood be refreshed by our efforts. It will be a challenge, but we are up to it.

This task, I now realize, is to what Mansbridge referred in 1972 when she said to me with a patient smile (after enduring a particularly emotional outburst on the beauty of town meeting), "Actually, Frank, I suspect it's a little more complicated than that." And so I end where I began: on the banks of a little Vermont stream by a covered bridge in the hardwood hills of northern New England.

45. Mansbridge describes a "classic balance" between adversary and unitary democracy in Athens and opts for a similar balance in town-meeting-like structures. This balance makes town meeting possible. But the balance I am referring to here is between large representative systems where liberalism is the prevailing thesis and small communitarian systems where unitary values prevail.