

## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

## THE METHODOLOGY OF STARTING FROM SCRATCH

*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<sup>1</sup>

It is the spring of 1992. Twenty-five hundred years earlier in a place called Athens a man named Cleisthenes risked his life for an idea. He prevailed and it took hold. No other promised more happiness or provoked more anguish in the two and one-half millenniums of western

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<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*. I am in the habit of telling my students that social science is a post-modern route to adventure, to becoming an explorer of uncharted lands, a Lewis and Clark. When I press the “enter” button on my computer to apply some statistical analogue to a new data base I think, “there is always the chance that out will tumble the ‘northwest passage’ of, for instance, the secret of low voter participation—or some such thing.” There is no way one can anymore be the first through the Gates of the Mountains but you can be the first to see—to know—something of equal significance. To wit. I happened on the T. S. Eliot quote quite by accident years ago and included it in my “quote of the day” with which I end each lecture in my large section of our American Government course at the University of Vermont. Later it seemed to be the perfect summary for the introduction to this book and I so attached it three years ago in a fit of optimism. In the summer of 1999 I discovered and became transfixed by a book written by the former mayor of Missoula, Montana, Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman, Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1990). Imagine my astonishment when I discovered after reading a book so close to my own thinking it was scary that Kemmis, whom I have never met, nor with whom I have ever corresponded, *ended* his book with the very quote I had selected to *begin* mine. All this takes on more meaning when one understands that the thesis of his book is “going east to find the West,” and that Vermont was America’s *first* frontier and Montana was its *last*. I still do not know if he has read my book, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale* (co-authored with John McClaughry) and published at the same time as his and so clearly in the same spirit. Nor have I made any attempt to contact him. It is enough to know that we are seekers of the same passages with maps fashioned from the same conceptual commitments. Someday in the great wilderness of social science we may yet meet up—perhaps drawn by each other’s campfires in the dusk of some distant headwaters of the mind.

civilization that were to follow. It was incandescent, this notion; 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 this labor fill library shelves throughout the world. As a global enterprise, its principles transcend even the planet's great religions. No other concept has 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, was unaware that he was marking the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of democracy when he was first to rise and address the assembly there at precisely 10:01 a.m. Neither, one supposes, was Marjorie Walker, who, as tradition in Athens dictated, was next to speak. When Athens first began to practice open, face-to-face democracy, women like Marjorie were not allowed to participate. But it was 1992 and that had changed. Walker made several announcements and then read the list of items with which the polis assembled was about to deal. Nearly sixty percent of the citizens of Athens were present. Their deliberations would end in votes they and all those citizens not present must obey under penalty of law.

After the introduction of several guests of notoriety (who addressed the assembly briefly), Mr. Fine gave way to David Bemis, whose job it was to ask the people if they would reaffirm his (Fine's) right to conduct the meeting. If not, they could choose someone else to do

the job. Another citizen, James Waryas, immediately nominated Mr. 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 vote for Mr. Fine. Carol Bingham seconded this motion, a vote was taken, and he was elected. This process took less than two minutes. It was now 10:50 a.m. Mr. Fine stepped forward, retook his position before the assembly 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 in Athens, Josiah Ober of Princeton and Charles Hedrick of the University of California at Santa Cruz, were preparing an international celebration to mark the 2500<sup>th</sup> birthday of what the people in Athens were up to. Through their efforts the government of the United States was convinced to provide funding, conferences were held in Washington and Greece, a display was erected at the Smithsonian, and a six-week summer institute was held in California. The latter caught the attention of Bernard Grofman, a political scientist at UNC at Irving, California, who was then preparing a book on the impact of the 1965 voting rights act in the South. The result was a series of short essays on Athenian democracy for the trade publication of the American Political Science Association.<sup>2</sup>

The American Political Science Association is made up of over 13,000 professionals whose business it is to know about governance.<sup>3</sup> A conservative estimate might be that they represent at any given time over sixty-five thousand years of post-graduate education, committed (usually at a very dear price) out of their highest energy years simply to *prepare* to ply their

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Grofman (ed.), "The 2500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Democracy: Lessons of Athenian Democracy," *Political Science and Politics* (September, 1993): 471- 494.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.apsa.com>

trade. Similarly they have accumulated in the aggregate over two-hundred and sixty thousand years of teaching and research in the science of (as one of them called it in 1958) the “authoritative allocation of values for the whole society.”<sup>4</sup> The essays they published for themselves under Grofman’s direction were penned by a cadre of scholars of singular competence, led by Professor Emeritus, Sheldon S. Wolin of Princeton, whose opening piece was (in the vernacular of my youngest daughter) “awesome.”

Here is the problem. While I doubt that any of the citizens of the Athens meeting that day to practice democracy, real democracy, knew they were doing so on its 2500<sup>th</sup> birthday, it is equally doubtful that any of these scholars were aware of what was going on in Athens. Worse. I suspect I could personally name each and every one of the 13,000 members of the American Political Association that did—on one hand. Several hundred of them<sup>5</sup> may have been aware that something *like* what was happening in Athens was going on in places *like* Athens. But only a handful knew it was going on *in* Athens that day *and* had accurate knowledge of the character of the action taking place. Besides myself none of the other nineteen members of the political science department at the University of Vermont did. I bet Richard Winters and Dennis Sullivan at Dartmouth did and I’m sure Jane Mansbridge at Harvard’s Kennedy School did. Joseph Zimmerman of SUNY Albany may have. That is about it.

Why is this so?

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<sup>4</sup> David Easton, *The Political System*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971): 129-130.

<sup>5</sup> In my (somewhat limited, to be sure) participation in various professional meetings of political scientists and other scholars and activists around the country, for instance, (and in my communications with political scientists otherwise over the past forty years), I have been struck (hard) by the number who were unaware of even the pivotal characteristic of town meetings: they *make laws that are binding on real governmental institutions*.

Athens is a little town in Vermont.<sup>6</sup>

### Real Democracy: Now and Then

I make two claims: one is that what was going on in Athens in 1992 is not a strange or random or even unique event. The second is that it was real democracy. The first is easily met by simple assertion. Town meeting is a governmental institution. In America it predates representative government. It is stitched into the fabric of New England and dominates the mosaic of its public past. It occurs at a set time in a set place. It is perfectly accessible, coded in law and conducted regularly in over 1000 towns. In my state of Vermont there are more than 200 places where the citizens meet to pass laws governing the town *as a town* at least once each year. In fact since the dawn of modern political science<sup>7</sup> the people have come together to govern themselves in approximately 11,280 individual, properly “warned,” town-based, democratic assemblies in Vermont alone.

Secondly, by real<sup>8</sup> democracy I do not mean, obviously, the representative substitute that characterizes the “democracies” of the world. Equally egregious to the notion of real democracy

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<sup>6</sup> Ok. I cheated. But what would you have done if you were trying to bring the reader into the conceptual flow of a book like this and had a town named Athens in the data base? Perhaps I was enchanted by the words of Jennifer Tolbert Roberts early on in her fascinating book on how the world has thought about Athens: “There appears to be something hardy and haunting in the Athenian’s little democracy, something that calls for response and will not be denied.” Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Anti-Democratic Tradition in Western Thought*, (Princeton, New Jersey: The Princeton University Press, 1994): 21. Sources on Athens, Vermont, are: Town of Athens, *Town Report*, (Year ending December 1991); Town of Athens, Marjorie Walker, Town Clerk, “Minutes, Athens Town Meeting, March 3, 1992,” *Town Report*, (Year ending December 1992); Kary Bennett, “The 1992 Comparative Town Meeting Study: Town of Athens,” (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, the Real Democracy Data Base, March 1992).

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> I find few willing to use the word “real” in this context. I suspect this is because of the arrogance the adjective implies by its antonym “artificial.” For insisting on the word “real” I therefore offer an early and gutlessly

is the direct (referenda and initiative driven) variety longed for by populists everywhere who have noticed (it is not hard to do) the deliberative debauchery that has descended on representative institutions trying to govern post-modern societies from the center.<sup>9</sup> While definitional essays that sketch the conceptual pedigrees of the word democracy have appeared by the hundreds in the last half-century, few have paid serious attention to real democracy.<sup>10</sup> Exceptions are scholars like Benjamin Barber, Robert Dahl, Jane Mansbridge and Carole Pateman who have devoted particular effort to the heuristic apparatus that distinguishes real democracy from all other forms.<sup>11</sup> My take on the problem is actually quite simple. Real democracy occurs when all eligible citizens of a general purpose government are legislators; that

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preemptive apology. My wife Melissa (who was born in New York City and raised nearby in suburban New Jersey) likes artificial maple syrup better than pure Vermont syrup. I concede that to some it may taste better. Accordingly when I say I like the “real” stuff better, I do not mean to imply it *is* better. Honest.

<sup>9</sup> The lumping of real democracy with direct democracy has become commonplace. Although authors of textbooks in American government nearly always make the distinction, now and then even they become sloppy with the concepts. In one case the New England town meeting is equated with referenda voting in the Swiss Cantons. Beth Henschen and Edward Sidlow, *America at Odds: An Introduction to American Government*, (Belmont California: West/Wadsworth, 1999): 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Dahl in 1982 described the definitional confusion as follows: “today the term *democracy* is like an ancient 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. As early as 1967 Dahl forewarned: “. . . the essential point is that representative government in the nation-state is in so many respects so radically—and inescapably—different from democracy in the city-state that it is rather an intellectual handicap to apply the same term, democracy, to both systems or to believe that in essence they are really the same.” Robert A. Dahl, “The City in the Future of Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 61 (December 1967): 953-969. On the distinctions between real democracy and its other forms, see also: Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*, (Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 1987): 282-284 and Danilo Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992): 58.

<sup>11</sup> Examples from their distinguished careers are: Benjamin Barber, *The Death of Communal Liberty: A History of Freedom in a Swiss Mountain Canton*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974.) Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, (New Haven: The Yale University Press, 1989): 13-23; Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980): 1-23 and 270-289; Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970): 1-22. Neither Mansbridge nor Pateman set out to make analytical distinctions between real democracy and its other forms. But because of their intense interest in the nature of *participation*, the result is the same. Mansbridge’s chapter on size and participation is a case in point. Read it and you will know what real democracy is when you’re finished.

is, they meet in a deliberative, face-to-face assembly and bind themselves under laws they fashion themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Understand. There are good real democracies and bad real democracies. Goodness begins where all human beings of a certain age who live in a jurisdiction are citizens and all citizens are eligible to participate. It drops off after that.<sup>13</sup> Real democracies can be either partial or whole. When they make all the laws that govern them, they are whole. Otherwise they are some degree of partial. There are also real democracies that work better than other real democracies. Real democracies work better to the extent that attendance at and participation in meetings is high and egalitarian. But the bottom line is this: in a real democracy, the people make laws for themselves in person, in meetings of the whole.<sup>14</sup> This definition is quite strict. It means that only

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<sup>12</sup> The debate over the joining of “person” and “citizen” by political theorists continues unabated. Recently it deals with questions like what are the proper sectors for deliberation, how is “public reason” formed, and ultimately what is the nature of justice. Town meeting is a manifestation of the profound dislocations which take place in these dueling paradigms when person, citizen, and legislator are joined even though town meeting clearly has the ambiance of a setting which would be to the liking of deliberative democrats. My sense is, however, that those like Judith Shklar who insists that a clear line of distinction be studiously maintained between the public and private sectors would be pleased and perhaps surprised by the liberal *forms* of separation between public and private that govern town meeting. See: Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in Nancy Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989): 24. For a discussion of these issues that bear directly on this question (especially as concerns Rawl’s position) see: Evan Charney, “Deliberative Democracy and the Public Sphere,” *The American Political Science Review* 92 (March 1998): 97-110.

<sup>13</sup> I have always been fascinated and bothered by the association of town meeting with morality. I am fascinated because it reflects in this age of the dying family farm and its association with small town life (I think) a begrudging (subliminal) admission that Jefferson was right when he said “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God.” (Jefferson, of course, was wrong.) I am bothered because it sets the bar too high for those of us who see in town meeting-like institutions possibilities to both know more about democracy and, yes, use it (in important, but *limited* ways) to help shore up our national representative democracy. Over time I suspect public “morality” (defined in terms of values such as civic tolerance) is expanded in critical and even, perhaps, unique ways by town meeting. Habits (as Bellah and his associates called them) are formed. [Robert N. Bellah, *et al.* (ed.), *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996).] But can town meeting overturn the sin in the garden? Do citizens shed self-interest when they enter a town hall? Maybe, but I doubt it. A good place to get started in dealing with these fundamental questions is with several of the readings in: Jane J. Mansbridge (ed.), *Beyond Self Interest*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Schumpeter in his search of a definition of the word democracy seems to argue that the problem of definition might be easy if: “the people arrive at political decisions by means of debates carried out in the physical presence of all, as they did, for instance, in the Greek *polis* or the New England town meeting. The latter case, sometimes referred to as

*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 a democracy.

To what extent does democracy in Athens match democracy in Athens?<sup>15</sup> Remarkably well as it turns out.<sup>16</sup> True, substantial (indeed, paradigm threatening) differences are present. But given the passage of time, the variations in geography and cultures, and most importantly the lack of any direct genetic linkage between the two, the similarities are compelling.<sup>17</sup> These

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the case of ‘direct democracy,’ has in fact served as the starting point for many a political theorist.” Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1950): 246. Schumpeter is empirically off base with the assumption that all the people met together in either Greece or New England. Moreover I suspect that even if they had such assemblies would not *by definition* meet the definitional prerequisites for his definition of democracy. Two things are important here. One is that he calls real democracy, direct democracy, which I argue (given the current fascination with direct *voting*) is misleading. The other is that after mentioning what democracy might be in its pure form, he continues: “in all other cases our problem does arise . . . [the problem of definition].” In other words there would be *no need* to agonize over a definition of democracy if all we had to deal with were town meetings. This of course is exactly the definitional tact I am taking here—with two qualifiers. First what this book is about is the thing we have always felt would be *above definition* were such things possible. Second there is real doubt (at least in my mind and contrary to Schumpeter) that the theoretical debate would end if they were. But what I am about is to bracket the theoretical issues and try to settle the empirical ones.

<sup>15</sup>One way to tell a “real” Vermonter from a newcomer is by their pronunciation of “Athens.” Long-time Vermont residents pronounce it Athens. I have only lived here 58 years. Thus I still pronounce it Athens. Would that the name could be directly tied to the Greek experience. But alas no such claim is possible. No one knows from whence it came. Esther Monroe Swift, who knows more about Vermont place names than anyone else, speculates that one of the original grantees of the town (these are the people to whom the lands of Athens were “granted” by colonial Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire) was one Solomon Harvey, a medical doctor who would have been educated in the classics. It may have even been linked to his taking of the Hippocratic Oath, which clearly has its origins in classical culture, says Swift. But she also cautions that no one knows for sure. Esther Monroe Swift, *Vermont Place-Names*, (Brattleboro, Vermont: The Stephen Greene Press, 1977): 475-476.

<sup>16</sup> Although it would be unfair to hold him to it in any strict sense, Robert Dahl once described what was going on in Athens (Greece) as “virtually a permanent town meeting.” Robert A. Dahl, *Pluralist Democracy in the United States*, (Chicago: Rand McNally Company, 1967): 29.

<sup>17</sup> Comparisons of Athens to town meeting begin very early in American history. Much of what we know about the first quarter century of post-revolutionary New England (especially its northern frontier) must be credited to the industry of one man, Timothy Dwight. On vacations from his presidency of Yale University he traipsed over a tough land and found the time to write about what he saw. He commented on everything from government to horticulture. His take on town meeting: “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, *distinguishes* town meetings from Athens in a way I will make much of in later parts of this book. The first New Englanders were fascinated by



differences extend far beyond the single most obvious and compelling similarity—they both were lawmaking assemblies of the whole. In town meetings spectators, the Press, and other “outsiders”<sup>18</sup> are often asked to sit in places reserved for them. 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 had to deal with “metics,” residents who paid taxes but couldn’t vote. Vermont towns have to deal with out-of-town, second-home, and “camp” owners who pay (often very high) local property taxes but cannot participate in the town meetings that set their rates.<sup>19</sup>

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rules of procedure. Even the brawling, blasphemous, Ethan Allen, the scourge of rule and pretension, once postponed a man’s frontier lynching in Bennington by storming into a gathering intent on hanging a horse thief, drawing his sword, and admonishing the crowd to follow the rule of law. He finished by thundering the words of Alexander Pope; “For forms of Government let fools contest. That government which is best administered is best.” No one knows whether it was Allen and the sword or Pope’s wisdom that did the trick. But the man did get his trial. Then they hung him. The grafting of particularly western (and in fact American) procedural processes to the town meeting assembly has been grievously overlooked. The result is the single most important misconception about town meetings: that they are more assemblies of free talk than they are assemblies of structured (almost legislative) discussion. I can tell you this: they have more in common with the House of Representatives in Washington than they do with the political forums presidents have been having in their name ever since Jimmy Carter began the practice in the late 1970’s. Here is what Dwight had to say: “The proceedings of this Legislature [town meeting] are all 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.” What is remarkable is that Dwight shares the Americans’ distaste for things Athenian that so troubled Madison and his colleagues. But he explicitly excuses town meeting. Dwight is no doubt a bit confused about Athens. Most of their meetings were not places of popular disruption. Like town meetings today Athenian assemblies were likely typified by hard work and tedium. He also exaggerates the “controlled by exact rules” finding. It is easily possible to find accounts of the breakdown of the “very honorable decorum” he finds displayed. See, for instance, David Syrett, “Town-Meeting Politics in Massachusetts 1777 – 1786,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 21 (July, 1964): 352–356. (Unfortunately, Syrett’s piece rapidly accelerates beyond a listing of transgressions, which by his own language, happened now and then and here and there. The unbelievable final claim is 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.” This is retrospective journalism at its worst. Dwight is guilty of exaggeration but he is far more correct than incorrect about his assessment of rules of order in early town meetings. Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York, Vol. I*, (New Haven Published by Timothy Dwight. A Converse, Printer, 1821): 31. In his lifestyle and politics Dwight was as far distant from Thoreau as one can be. With his inquisitive mind, attention to detail and willingness to travel and endure hardship he was a soul mate.

<sup>18</sup> This often (but not always) included my students. In the thousands of student accounts I have read over the past thirty years the evidence is that 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.

<sup>19</sup> Athens had a property tax as well, the *eisphorai*. It too was progressive in a sense because only the richest paid it. Athens, Greece, also had the equivalent of Athens, Vermont’s, “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

Politics abounded in both places as well. In Vermont items that might be opposed by farmers were sometimes placed near the end of the agenda in hopes 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 moved by the rowing power of the more radical *thetes*, was out to sea and thus underrepresented in the assembly.<sup>20</sup>

The Vermont town meeting, like the Athenian assembly 2500 years earlier, jealously protects its participatory prerogatives. The Greeks guarded entry into their assembly by six “*lexiarchoi*.” Being caught trying to participate illegally could result in a death sentence.<sup>21</sup> Vermont has never gone this far but individual towns have often denied citizens of other jurisdictions the right to speak.<sup>22</sup> In 1844 the town of St. Albans, Vermont, refused to allow a special emissary of President Van Buren of the United States, General Winfield Scott, to speak to them on the matter of the town’s “flaunting” of American neutrality laws by supporting anti-British forces in Canada. More recently the Governor of Vermont found herself standing in a

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the city-state was sub-delegated to the *symmoriai*, groups of the wealthiest property owners. The richest *symmorites* was required to put up all the tax payment for his group in advance and then reimburse himself from the group’s membership later. See Mogens Herman Hansen, (translated by J. A Cook), *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1991): 368, 370. Athens, Vermont, elects a tax collector.

<sup>20</sup> Well known 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, *The Athenian Democracy*, 126.

<sup>21</sup> In Demosthenes time the *lexiarchoi* were replaced by a committee of thirty, three from each of the ten newly established tribes. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy*, 129.

<sup>22</sup> I go to at least five regular town meetings every year, including the one in my old home town of Newbury (1943-1970) and my current home town (1971-2000) of Starksboro. Sometimes I am forced to listen to the drone of some special interest representative or politician “from away” that has appeared and was granted permission to speak. At these times I have now and then caught myself entertaining the notion that the Greek death penalty was not totally bereft of redeeming qualities. Of one thing I am certain. Their willingness to indict someone who “proposed an inexpedient law” clearly has merit. See: David Stockton, *The Classical Athenian Democracy*, (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1990): 81.

light snowfall outside the Duxbury meeting hall while the citizens within voted on whether or not to allow her to speak to the town.<sup>23</sup>

In Athens, Vermont, the agenda for town meeting is set by the Board of Selectpersons; in Athens, Greece, it was set by the *prytaneis* (an executive committee of the Council).<sup>24</sup> The agenda in Vermont (the Warning) must be published (“warned”) at least 30 days prior to 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 they were called *probouleuma* and, similarly, could be open-ended or specific proposals. In Vermont the meeting starts in the morning and can run all day. The same was true in Athens, although it 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 is most often, “What is your pleasure?”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The Governor, Madeleine Kunin, was braver than most. To her credit she had (as she put it) “expended a large sum” of her “political capital” after the 1986 election pushing a controversial regional planning law in Vermont. While taking a fast tour of several town meetings in March of 1987, speaking briefly at each, she happened to stop at the town of Duxbury. The Moderator announced her arrival and she prepared to step forward to address the meeting. 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 (as she put it) “anger and humiliation.” Had she been raised in or experienced 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. In town meetings people are often voted out of office on the spot in public. Political defeat in the open, among one’s friends and enemies (neighbors all) happens not infrequently. 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.” It was, she said, “the only way to begin.” She was right. See her political remembrances in: Madeleine Kunin, *Living a Political Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994): 393-394.

<sup>24</sup> Vermont towns have no analogous structure to the Council which was comprised of 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*. Sequence to the council was determined by lot.

<sup>25</sup> This varies according to the moderator. Another very popular way to start the discussion on a particular warning item (after the motion has been made and seconded) is, “Do I hear any discussion on Article...” or “Is there any discussion on...” But many times a town moderator will say something like: “Whata’ ya wanna do?”

There are other similarities between the two meetings. In neither can items not on the agenda be approved into law.<sup>26</sup> Both meetings open with a prayer.<sup>27</sup> Most voting was conducted by a show of hands in both places and secret ballots were few. In town meeting citizens walk forward and drop marked slips of paper into a box. In the assembly of Athens they dropped pebbles into an urn. It appears that the process of voting was quite complicated in Athens from time to time as it is in Vermont when amendment to amendments are offered and so forth.<sup>28</sup> Even the *rhétors* of the Athenian assembly (defined loosely citizens who move articles, frame debates, or in other ways participate a lot) have their Yankee counterparts.<sup>29</sup> The differences between the two meetings have more to do with structure. In Athens, Vermont, there is usually only one meeting a year. In Greece, Athens had as many as forty. Town officers are never chosen by lot in Vermont, although the practice of appointing non-attenders to office from the floor of many town meetings might be considered extremely bad luck by some of those so selected. In Greece

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<sup>26</sup> 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. To my knowledge the Greeks allowed no such thing.

<sup>27</sup> The Athenians included a sacrifice while Vermonters do not, unless allowing a representative from the state legislature to explain what is going on in Montpelier counts. 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.

<sup>28</sup> Voting “by ballot” was rare, however, in the Athens of Greece during the classical period. (Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy*, 147) and it may not have ever 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, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972): 83-86.

<sup>29</sup> I will have much more to say on the matter of verbal participation in town meeting in the aggregate in Chapters VII and VIII of this Volume. Volume II will feature discrete acts of participation as data points for the measurement of both independent and dependent variables. On the matter of *rhétors*, it should be noted, however, that the Vermont town meeting, like the Greek assembly has a tradition of developing citizens who have carved out a place for themselves in the life of the town act (in a very informal way) as principal participators in the verbal activity of town meeting. I have never, of course, heard them referred to as *rhetores*, 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 from time to time. See for an analysis of the Athenian *rhetores*: Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens*, (Ithaca, New York: The Cornell University Press): 4-10.

selection by lot was the common practice. There are no term limitations for officers in Athens, Vermont. There were in the Athens of old.<sup>30</sup>

But the most important differences between the Mediterranean Athens of 508 B.C. and the Athens of Vermont in 1992 A.D. involved size and power. Athens, Greece, was a nation. It had an army and navy. Athens, Vermont, is a town within a state within a nation. It has a town truck and members of the road crew (both of them) no doubt own deer rifles. No one knows for sure exactly how many citizens there were in Athens in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries B.C. when democracy flowered there. But most agree that there were about 30,000 male citizens eligible to attend the meeting at the *pnyx* in the year 500 B.C.<sup>31</sup> In 1992 A.D. there were 183 citizens of both sexes that awoke on the morning of March 3<sup>rd</sup> in Athens, Vermont, eligible to attend town meeting at the schoolhouse. Do these vast differences in size and power scuttle the comparison between Greek and Vermont democracy?<sup>32</sup>

No. For most of the democracy going on in Attica (the geographical expanses of the city-state, or *polis*, of Athens) was not happening, as Lewis Mumford pointed out as early as 1961, in

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<sup>30</sup> Other more general sources I found useful other than those earlier cited are J. A. O. Larsen, *Representative Government in Greek and Roman History*, (Berkeley, California: The University of California Press, 1966) and Raphael Sealey, *A History of the Greek City States, ca. 700-388 B.C.*, (Berkeley, California: The University of California Press, 1976). These were also particularly useful in their treatment of the *demes*. (See below.)

<sup>31</sup> One of the better sources on the architecture (both physical and social) of Greek democracy is R. E. Wycherly, *How the Greeks Built Cities*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

<sup>32</sup> Mansbridge's account of what she calls the "classic balance" between adversarial and unitary democracy in Athens sounds strikingly familiar to me. Even in their chicanery I find echoes of the Greeks not only in my experience with town meetings but in the (nearly always undocumented) charges of deviousness on the part of small town democrats in the media and from the academy. Citing three sources Mansbridge summarizes one set of claims for Greek adversarialism: There is evidence that the Greeks operated political machines (for instance to prepare ballots). There were political clubs that held pre-assembly 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.

Athens proper.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the fact that (from the founders to the present day) the predominant empirical reference point of our notion of real democracy has been based on the Athenian *city* experience is an intellectual tragedy of gargantuan proportions.<sup>34</sup> How much different it would have been had we known the dimensions of real democracy as it was taking place in the little Greek communities scattered over the countryside—places that are remarkably analogous to Vermont’s towns.<sup>35</sup> These communities, called *demes*, were for many Athenians, says R. K. Sinclair, “the center of their lives” in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.<sup>36</sup> According to David Whitehead, the

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<sup>33</sup> Mumford, perhaps the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s leading urbanologist, was impressed with the village life of the Greeks and its impact on the cities such as Athens. “In these communities,” he says, “poverty was not an embarrassment: if anything, riches were suspect. Nor was smallness a sign of inferiority. The democratic practices of the village, 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, Inc. 1961): 128-129. Victor Davis Hanson claims that it was the small family farm that provided the circumstance and ideology that came 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: The Free Press, 1995): 181 – 220.

<sup>34</sup> By this I bear Athens no grudge. Quite the contrary it is primarily because it was a *city* that it was able to fashion the most significant intellectual heritage the world has ever known. Moreover if this book does nothing else it should establish that, given the *limitations* size imposes on real democracy, Athens’ accomplishment ends up just this side of miraculous.

<sup>35</sup> How much easier it would be to defend real democracy if our primary view of it, if our first and fundamental *assessment* of it came from a small place where functions were local rather than a huge place like a city *state*. E. E. Schattschneider observed, for instance: “Merely to shake hands with that many people [200,000,000 citizens] would take a century...a single round of five-minute speeches would require five thousand years. If only 1 percent of those present spoke, the assembly would be forced to listen to two million speeches. People could be born, grow old, and die while they waited for the assembly to make one decision.” E. E. Schattschneider, *Two Hundred Million Americans in Search of a Government*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, Inc. 1969): 61. This kind of incessant belaboring of the obvious has always overshadowed any good real democracy might bring the Republic.

<sup>36</sup> R. K. Sinclair, *Democracy and Participation in Athens*, (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1988): 51. Sinclair continues with a poignant observation (in my view) for all political scientists interested in working toward an increasing democratization of the American federal republic. The way to save the center is to rebuild its parts. “The vitality of Athenian life, was in short, directly related to the willingness of Athenian citizens to participation in the life of their *deme* and through it to accept also the wider responsibility of the *polis* at large.” (*Ibid.* p. 52) This, of course is the 19<sup>th</sup> Century message of Tocqueville reinvigorated by Carole Pateman in 1970 and others in the last decades of this century. Just so you’ll know, it is also the heart of my own disposition. At the end of Volume II (in a final chapter accessing the role of town meeting in the future) I will make a somewhat extended claim: in order to save *representative* democracy at the center *real* democracy must be advanced throughout the peripheries. My colleague, John McClaughry, and I put it this way in 1989, “This then is the great American challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; saving the center by shoring up its parts, preserving union by emphasizing disunion, making

scholar of record on the subject, the *demes* not only provided 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.”<sup>37</sup> God was kind to me in providing a real Vermont town named Athens with which to open this study. Unfortunately, she failed to see to it that Vermont had a town named Pallenais.

Pallenius was one of the 139 local governments (*demes*) of Attica.<sup>38</sup> It was located 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. It marks the place where lowlands along the southern end of the Gulf of Evvoiea begin to rise into the rougher (and what used to be) grazing country just

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cosmopolitanism possible by making parochialism necessary, restoring the representative republic by rebuilding real democracy, strengthening the national character through a rebirth of local citizenship.” Frank Bryan and John McLaughry, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale*, (Chelsea, Vermont: The Chelsea Green Press, 1989): 3. In short, one of the best arguments for a renewed democracy in the localities is, ironically, a centrist one—to create a stronger republic.

<sup>37</sup> David Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica, 509/7-ca. 25 B.C.*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986): xviii. Classical scholar R. J. Hooper supports Whitehead. In fact he quite explicitly agrees with Pateman, Tocqueville *et al* on the relationship between small democracies and larger republics. Athens was possible *because* the *demes* provided 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. David Stockton put 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 as 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, *The Classical Athenian Democracy*, 65-66. In fact I found this to be precisely so thirty years ago in a study of members of the Vermont House of Representatives in Montpelier between 1945 and 1965. The House was much like the Council of 500. Each member represented an average of 813 voters and a median of 783. Most served no more than one “two-year” term and met for only three months of the odd numbered year. The link between local town meeting democracy and state service was profoundly clear. Frank M. Bryan, *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont*, (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1974).

<sup>38</sup> I have not been able to track down the origin of the name, Pallenius. I assume the *deme* was named for the mythical maiden, Pallene, who was spared execution by her father (for conspiring to kill her lover’s chief rival by removing an axle pin from his chariot wheel) by the gods who sent rain to douse the flames of the funeral pyre on which her father had convinced her to place herself.

north of Mount Hymetto.<sup>39</sup> Athens is much more clearly akin to Pallenius than it is akin to Athens. First and most importantly they 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 B.C.<sup>40</sup> As core units of larger, political entities to which sovereignty was owed, both were only partial democracies.<sup>41</sup> Yet Athens and Pallenais (and the systems of towns and *demes* of which they were but a tiny part) were cradles for the citizenship of their sovereignties that housed them. Athenian citizenship was determined and defined by the *deme* as the jurisdiction of first resort.<sup>42</sup> In Vermont also towns administered citizenship. Athens in 1992 and Pallenais in

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<sup>39</sup> This entire area is now pretty much folded into the suburban extensions of the city of Athens.

<sup>40</sup> Actually Pallenius was somewhat bigger than Athens, since only men could vote. The population of Athens, Vermont, in 1990 was 313. This made it one of the smallest towns in my study. Of the 210 towns in the data base only 15 had less population. The population of Pallenius would be estimated to be 748. 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 number of citizens in each *deme* is estimated by the number of representatives (*bouletai*) in the Council of Five Hundred, men between the ages of 18-20 (figures are kept on the number of fighting men each *deme* was responsible for contributing to the Athenian armed forces) and the number of *diatetai*, men on the military rosters in their 60<sup>th</sup> year who were selected to perform what would be the contemporary analogue of mediators appointed by a court in a civil case to preclude the necessity of going to full trial. For the authoritative summary and explanation of Gomme's work and other sources appearing since 1933, see: John S. Traill, *The Political Organization of Attica: A Study of the Demes, Trittyes and Phylai, and Their Representation on the Athenian Council*, (Princeton, New Jersey: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1975). An analogue that better reflects actual rather than political size would be a *deme* like nearby Phyle just to the northwest of Pallenius.

<sup>41</sup> For most of their histories it is likely that both places were much more "full" democracies than partial ones. Their principal obligations to the larger units to which they belonged involved taxes and military service. 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 governmental function in the lives of their citizens until the 1950's when the state began to get serious about taking away these powers. Thus for three quarters of their existence the towns, for all practical intents and purposes were pretty much full democracies. In a doctoral thesis written for the Political Science Department at Syracuse University in 1958, Wilson concluded after studying the governmental functions of some of Vermont's smallest towns that they clearly met the functional, structural, and democratic criteria of full polities. Stanley T. Wilson, "The Structural and Functional Capacities of Small Towns in Vermont," (Doctoral Thesis, Syracuse University, 1958). By 1992, however, it would be a stretch to so classify Athens. The loss of this fullness will be discussed later in terms of its impact on democratic participation.

<sup>42</sup> One of the most accessible and complete short takes on classical democracy in Athens is David Held's opening chapter of *Models of Democracy*. David Held, *Models of Democracy* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996): 13-35. He includes the *demes* in his schematic of Athens but does not discuss their role in Athenian democracy. But included in Figure 1.1 is an arrow leading from the *demes* to the assembly, the *Ecclesia*.



492 B.C. were represented at the next level by population; Athens in Montpelier (where it shares a representative with four other towns in southern Vermont), Pallenais in the Council of 500 in Athens.<sup>43</sup>

Dramatic differences add spice to the comparison. For Athens, Montpelier is not the end of it. There is always America to consider. In Pallenais one did not have representation in Greece. There wasn't any. The 191 eligible citizens of Pallenais were *expected* to journey to Athens ten times a year to help pass laws for the entire city-state in person. Athenians in Vermont have no such opportunity. For the comparison to hold, the Vermont legislature would have to serve as a statewide "board of selectpersons" (as the Council of 500 in Athens, Greece, did) that would submit proposals to mass meetings attended by Vermonters from all over the state. But for all of these differences, the comparison of Pallenais and Athens remains remarkable.<sup>44</sup> 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 comparing the two an eerie *déjà vu* drifts across the consciousness like an early morning mist in the high hills of home.

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It is this arrow that intrigues me. What if those who tie Athens' success to the *demes* were right? This would add a critical new component to the development of the civil society literature.

<sup>43</sup> Trail's quote of representatives in the Council was set at six. Gomme gave the *deme* seven. Trail, *The Political Organization of Attica*, 67; Gomme, *The Population of Athens*, 65.

<sup>44</sup> Pallenais was also part of a *trittyes* and a tribe, a *phylai*. The *trittyes* was a cross-sectional link between the *deme* and the tribes. It is difficult to equate either with the New England "county" which is now a very 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 in Vermont towns is there any analog to the "demarch" which one scholar at least likens to a "mayor" (Stockton, *The Classical Athenian Democracy*, 63). But in most other matters of form, process and power, real democracy in the towns of Vermont with their open town meeting was closely comparable to that of the Greek *deme* with its open assembly. For instance, Vermonters in their towns created and elected for 150 years an officer called "fence viewer." Athenians in their *demes* did the same. This office was called an *aixomp* (one who oversees pasture rights). Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica*, 122.

**WITNESS****Alistair Cooke****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 court house. The town was settled in 1776, but the county court house 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 court house is an exquisite symbol of what Americans did in wood with Greek forms.

Opposite the court house 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 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. The wealthy stranger goes cap in hand and pays his rates according to Minnie Hoyt and does what Mr. Hoyt says to keep his part of the highway safe and sound.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> T. D. Seymour Bassett, (ed.), *Outsiders Inside Vermont*, (Canaan, New Hampshire: Phoenix Publishing, 1976): 121-122.

## Why Not Town Meeting?

There is emotion in the study of Greek democracy. First comes wonderment. The effort we humans have expended in our attempt to recreate what happened there is no less than breathtaking.<sup>46</sup> Over the centuries thousands and thousands of anthropologists, archeologists, architects, historians, students of drama and poetry, linguists and historians have spent their professional lives providing the empirical evidence from which we now craft our own science—our *political* science. Much I suppose remains to be done and the process is on going. Yet our ponderings over the existing record, our explorations 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 gotten right what it is we say about what it is 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?<sup>47</sup> For the fact is we know much more about the Greek democracy of 2500 years ago than we do about real democracy in America today.<sup>48</sup> Let me make a point I

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<sup>46</sup> My favorite example occurred with the results of an excavation reported in 1938. In that dig nearly 200 potsherds (which were used for ballots in the assembly) were found. All bore the name "Themistocles." Analysis showed that those ballots were fashioned by the work of only fourteen hands, which is taken to mean they were produced by some kind of political machine. Warren Breed and Sally N. Seaman, "Indirect Democracy and Social Process in Periclean Athens," *Social Science Quarterly* 52 (December 1971): 631-645. Cited in Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 336-337. Mansbridge's volume is an excellent example of a book which should have included footnotes in the text. *Beyond Adversary Democracy* stands beautifully without them. But in the footnotes one can hear the beating of its heart.

<sup>47</sup> The closest thing to it is survey research which accurately focuses primarily on face-to-face participation. The best example of this shaped variables from institutionalized arenas of direct democracy and used them in micro level research to explore the causative properties of the institutions themselves. See: Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thompson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*, (Washington, D.D.: The Brookings Institution, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> 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. Indeed, it is the intention of this book to

find stunning. We have as accurate estimates (based on what might even be called heroic efforts in the fields of archeology, anthropology and literature) of how many eligible citizens attended the assembly in Athens 2500 years ago as we have of how many eligible citizens attend a New England town meeting today. In fact until the publication of Joseph Zimmerman's book in 1999 we had *no* aggregate data published on attendance rates of the New England town meetings. Unfortunately Zimmerman's data, even though fundamentally simple in its range and scope, are still seriously flawed.<sup>49</sup>

Imagine this futurism. The empirical record of town meeting democracy as it exists today (the newspapers, popular literature, scholarly works, private diaries—even town clerks' records) is discovered intact by archeologists 2500 years down the road. Nearly all of what we would want to know about real democracy in America in the year 2000—in fact real democracy *on the planet*—would never be knowable. This is because, literally, it has never been recorded.<sup>50</sup> Imagine again. We are time traveled back 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 us? Would we

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provide an empirical base the likes of which was unavailable to Brown and thereby to spare some future historian the truly impressive effort that Brown brought to bear on the Massachusetts Bay Colony. See: Robert E. Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts 1691-1780*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965).

<sup>49</sup> In bringing together descriptions of the legal/institutional structures of town meeting in the six New England states, Zimmerman's book is excellent. To put this in perspective if we had even this much authoritative information on the *demes* of Attica, scholarship in that field would be advanced beyond our wildest dreams. I will discuss problems with his attendance data briefly in Chapter II. These problems must be considered in light of the difficulty of the task on which he embarked. See: Joseph Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1999).

<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the best sources would be scattered video tapes of very recent town meetings, most in bits and pieces but some actually in full. From there we might be able to extrapolate limited data on participation rates. But attendance levels would be mostly obscure. Certainly even *one* video taping of an assembly meeting in Athens would be devastating in its positive implications. Still, I think the claim holds. Most of what we would want to know would remain absent. For instance, no interview data would be available and bear in mind interview data support a huge and indeed dominant percentage of what we know about representative democracy in the United States.

condemn ourselves once again to centuries of backbreaking discovery which in spite of ingenious undertakings, have produced only a frustrating tidbit of what we really need to know?<sup>51</sup>

Puzzlement provokes inquiry. I will treat the American interest in real democracy, including the interest of political scientists, in the following chapter. In the meantime there is no need to long speculate over the *causes* of the lack of serious scholarship. They are quite obvious. First of all it is practiced only in town meeting and town meetings are found only in New England and for the most part only in northern New England. Secondly town meeting has hardly been ascendant in recent decades. In fact it seems (if the national press is to be believed—and for many big towns it should be believed) to be near death. Third, town meeting hardly stands near the front of the “significance” queue. This is no surprise. They do not, after all, start wars or write the federal budget. Fourth, political scientists are primarily liberals, not communitarians. This bends (as it should) their research interests away from real democracy. Fifth, political scientists are from cities not countryside. Town meeting is of the outback. I suspect most political scientists would anticipate three or four years in northern Vermont with the same enthusiasm I would approach a similar stay in Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, or St. Louis. Sixth, even those political scientists who are interested in face-to-face, communal participation (and there are

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<sup>51</sup> As an example take the question of the secret ballot process. If we do not soon get busy with some oral history work we will, within a generation, have to resort to “looking at paintings on vases.” (See footnote # above.) My recollection, which goes back to 1953, when I attended the Newbury town meeting as part of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies assignment, is that it was very secret. Yet one of the better pieces of evidence I have is the picture of a ballot being cast in the Woodstock town meeting of 1940 on whether or not the town should license itself to allow liquor to be sold. The caption reads: “Harriet 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 (that was his real name, believe it or not) 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 a bit too closely. But who knows? There is no ballot box in sight and I have never seen a ballot clerk take a ballot from

more and more good ones these days) do not believe it can be attached to real legislative bodies making policy for real governments. Such participation they hold should be limited to helping prop up civil society, itself desperately in need of resuscitation if the representative republic is to survive.

Indeed the important work that predated and has been stimulated by Robert Putnam's path breaking enterprise to establish the civic *underpinning* of democratic society rests on the argument that *governments* are antecedents.<sup>52</sup> The idea that a government could be more than a manifestation—that it could be an important, even primary component—of *civil* society itself 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 “Shelby,” Vermont) in her cluster of three governing groups in *Beyond Adversary Democracy*.<sup>53</sup>

While all of these reasons explain, they do not suffice. True, northern New England is a long way off for most people but an entire sub-discipline of political science travels the globe to investigate governance in all manner of out-of-the-way places. Town meetings are in decline in some towns but they are going strong in many more. So what if individual town meetings do

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someone and put it in a ballot box. Peter S. Jennison, *The History of Woodstock, Vermont 1890-1983*, (Woodstock, Vermont: Published for the Woodstock Foundation by The Countryman Press, 1985): 246-247.

<sup>52</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Tradition in Modern Italy*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993). Putnam of course has been a godsend for communitarians like myself for he has forced the discipline to think small. The textbook I am currently using for the introductory course at the University of Vermont brings him to our students as follows: “A brilliant and controversial argument that the success of democratic government depends on the vitality of a participant and tolerant civic culture.” That seems right. Edward S. Greenberg and Benjamin I. Page, *The Struggle for Democracy* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999): 22.

<sup>53</sup> Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*.

little more than buy trucks, pass leash laws, vote for local school budgets, rule on salt on the highways and determine when taxes come due? We are scientists. Physics can be learned and taught as well from the perspective of a spider web as from that of the Golden Gate Bridge. Surely there have been *enough* enthusiastic communitarians in the discipline over the last quarter century to produce more than the half dozen studies that have been done. Bear in mind. There has never been an article on town meeting published in a major political science journal. Never. The same caveat holds for the number of country political scientists. Surely out of all of us there are a few score that can handle the smell of fresh cow manure. Finally, are we perfectly *sure* that good citizenship through 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?

Yet we are excused. There is a legitimate reason why town meeting has received so little attention. One that both explains and suffices. Logistics. For the most part town meetings are held only once a year. In Vermont ninety-five percent are held within twenty-four hours of each other. Minutes are not required and although most towns produce some kind of record the thoroughness varies greatly. Even the very best minutes often do not record complete attendance data. Few record verbal participation. For those that do it is uneven and often random. In short there is only one way to know what happens at a town meeting. 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 small town

meetings a year (which a single scholar and one assistant could do alone) requires a cadre of researchers. The expense would be enormous.<sup>54</sup>

To analogize to the American states gathering data on a cluster of fifty towns in any given year would require at least 125 people, all instructed to record happenings consistently. These people would then fan out over one of America's most crooked, cold and hilly places and travel an average of over one hundred miles (often on rough dirt roads) at a time of the year when the weather (and weather *matters* in Vermont) can be the year's worst.<sup>55</sup> This is the real reason why what we know about town meeting is based on a few good cases studies and lots of haphazard, impressionistic, often very biased (in both directions) observation. Most importantly this is why there is no *data base* on real democracy. 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 underway.

## GOING INTO THE OUTBACK

In the spring of 1969 I tested the possibility that the logistics of a town meeting study could be overcome. I developed a data recording procedure, devoted two classes to town meeting and instructions in its use, and sent 62 students (in two class sections) out to pretest it on 25 town

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<sup>54</sup> Beginning in the late 1990's several Vermont towns began experimenting with Saturday meetings. This means that if one plans correctly and is willing to drive very fast and knows the right roads it would be possible to attend five meetings a year--Saturday, Monday night, Tuesday morning (for a town that finished its meeting by noon), Tuesday afternoon (for a town that began its meeting after lunch--this would always be a small town) and Tuesday evening (this would be a very small town). In this way I personally have been attending and recording data at five town meetings a year since 1995.

<sup>55</sup> Most of the time the weather is not a problem and there are many town halls that are on good blacktop roads. A few are as accessible as a Home Depot Store. But limiting the sample to these would be fatal. The thing about the weather is you never *know* and even in good weather the roads can be icy (real icy) or muddy (deep muddy) or both. Even so most of the time a trip to a town meeting is logistically uneventful--except for (often) finding the place.



meetings. In brief here is the kind of information they recorded.<sup>56</sup> They counted how many people were present by gender. This was done four times; a half an hour after the meeting began, a half an hour before the lunch break, a half an hour after the meeting began again after lunch, and at the time the next to the 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. Time spent on each Warning item was measured by noting the time the discussion began on each article and the time it left the floor and discussion on the next one began. Bear in mind that this kind of data is not systematically available anywhere else.<sup>57</sup>

Seemingly the most difficult task would be to record participation. Actually it turned out to be quite simple. A form was provided to allow the students to do the following. When the first person spoke she was identified by some unique marking (“red vest, tall woman”)<sup>58</sup> and identified by sex. Her act of participation was placed on a grid, represented by the number of the warning item on the floor at the time she participated. The next participator, say “Bubba” (the likeness, unfortunately—this one appeared in 1998—was in reference to the President of the United States) is then recorded on the grid immediately under the line for the “red vest” participator. The new person’s act of participation is also noted on the grid by a number matching the issue on

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<sup>56</sup> For a detailed explanation of the process see the Methodological Appendix.

<sup>57</sup> In recent years the Secretary of State’s Office has been keeping a record of attendance sent in by town clerks. The problem is it is impossible to know if the figure is for the number of *attenders* or the number of *voters*. Over half the towns elect their town officers by a paper ballot that takes place throughout the day. One does not have to attend town meeting to cast such a ballot. To report the vote totals is a quick and easy way to report “attendance” but it almost always seriously inflates real attendance. It is also impossible to know when the attendance was recorded during the meeting and that can make a great difference as well.

the floor at the time. If either of these people participate again that participation is recorded on their individual line on the grid (next to their earlier participation) with the number of the article on which they participated 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 each participator, the order of each participator entering the discussion for the first time along with the issues on which they participated and the number of times they participated on each. Known also of course is 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 (which, for instance, is very important for theories of feminine participation) and the kinds of issues that prompted the most or least discussion are also available. Figure I-A has an example of this kind of process for the town of Craftsbury's 1999 meeting.

The meeting began with preliminary remarks by the incumbent town moderator Ann Wilson. For this she received an "X<sub>1</sub>" on the first line of the participation grid signifying she participated on the first item of extra business—business not covered in a Warning item. Later in the meeting she was given an X<sub>3</sub> for making an announcement that the high school basketball team was playing for a chance to go to the state tournament, the third item of extra business to come up. Still later she announced that the auction for project graduation would take place on March 19<sup>th</sup> and was marked for an X<sub>4</sub>.<sup>59</sup> When Wilson finished her remarks town meeting

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<sup>58</sup> I could write a very funny little book about the identifications I have gotten over the years. As one can imagine the students had fun with these from time to time, a process I subtly encouraged in class. The best, of course, I cannot report to you. But remember many of my students are big city kids in a very, very backwoods environment.

<sup>59</sup> One of the lessons learned in the 1969 pretest was not to record the participations of the moderator during the formal and warned discussion of the meeting. Almost all of these participations are procedural. Since there are so many of them and they are apt to happen quickly ("Do I hear a second?" "All those in favor. . .?" "What is your

opened for business. A man in a pink sweater (the students were able to identify him as Bruce Urie, one of the three town selectmen) introduced Article 1 of the Warning. This is the election of a moderator to preside over the current meeting and any other meeting held during the year. A man in a green shirt also participated on Article 1. It took one minute (10:10–10:11 a.m.) to reelect Ann Wilson moderator. Ms. Ryan was the next new person to participate. She spoke twice on Article 2, “To hear and act upon the auditor’s report.” Later the students got her first name, Carolyn. She was a town officer, one of three auditors, all women. Bruce Urie (pink sweater) also participated on Article 2 as did Eugene Mackres.<sup>60</sup> (See Figure I-A.)

[FIGURE I-A ABOUT HERE]

Ryan and Mackres were followed by a woman in a “blue jacket” who participated on the basketball team announcement. She was followed by a man in a “green jacket with a moustache” who participated six times on Article 3, the election of town officers. Speaking next was a man in a “green hat and glasses” (later identified as Mr. Williams), a woman with “gray hair in a green jacket with a khaki color,” and Mr. and Mrs. Wells. Mr. Dunbar (another selectman) and “blue sweater on right gray hair 60” were the final new participants on Article 3. Note as well that Bruce Urie, and Ms. Ryan also participated on Article 3. In all ten persons, six men and four women spoke a total of 24 times. Article 3 was on the floor 13 minutes and in that

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pleasure?” “The nays have it.”) it complicates the recording of the other participations. Also, if the participations of the moderator were counted it would seriously inflate the participatory profile of the meetings. If a moderator did “leave the podium” and participate on a substantive issue, he was then counted as a regular participant. This almost never happens. In general the charge that moderators use their positions to either manipulate or dominate discussion is greatly exaggerated. For the most part they have, for instance, less impact on the process than have the referees at a local basketball game. Bias does occur but it is best described as the exception that proves the rule.

<sup>60</sup> It is not necessary or important to identify all participants by name but the students are instructed to get the names of the top participants (see the Appendix) and to use names in any event if it is for them an easier way to make an identification.

FIG I a

time the citizens of Craftsbury elected 11 town officers. By the end of the meeting 55 of the 152 people at the meeting had participated a total of 185 times.

In the three hours and forty-three minutes, not counting the lunch break, the people of Craftsbury resolved 17 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 the 17 town articles required a ballot vote. The closest was 106 “yea,” 43 “nay” on the question of producing a new town lot map.<sup>61</sup> None of the town officer elections were contested. One of the seven school warning articles, the budget, required a ballot and it passed 109 to 19. The closest vote of the day was for school director. Roy Darling defeated Melissa Phillips 70 to 55. On the highest count women outnumbered men at the meeting 89 to 63. The average of the four attendance counts was 67 women and 58 men. Of the 55 participators 25 were women. This is a small sample of the kinds of things we know about the Craftsbury town meeting, one of the 49 meetings studied in 1999, three decades after the pre-test.

Over these thirty years since 1969 we duplicated this process in over fifteen hundred different meetings in 210 different towns.<sup>62</sup> This kind of comparative information about real

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<sup>61</sup> This item was on the floor for 32 minutes. Fifteen different people participated, eight men and seven women, a total of 26 times. Men had 17 of the participations and women nine. In her paper on the Craftsbury town meeting Beth Tonneson wrote: “The first debate in the town meeting was article seven, the town parcel map. Many people felt that it was pointless to spend \$15,000 to create a parcel map. They claimed that somehow everyone figured out who owned what land just fine since the state began without a map, so why would it be necessary now. Others argued that that the map was necessary not for the people to know where their land started and ended, but instead for banks and real estate agents to be able to value a person’s property.” Beth Tonneson, “As Craftsbury Goes...So Goes Vermont? An Analysis of Democracy in Craftsbury, Vermont,” (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, April, 1999).

<sup>62</sup> One way to get a sense of the contributions made to this study by my students over the years is to read the directions to Craftsbury I found jotted down on a piece of paper in Ms. Tonneson’s Craftsbury folder. “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 rt. 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

democracy has never before been known. What percent of a town's registered voters go to town meeting? What percent 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 others? What is the nature of conflict within the meetings? How much 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?

In addition, with these and other kinds of data points aggregated to the meeting and then to the town level, it is possible to investigate hypotheses fundamental to political science. By this exercise my intention (as I suggested in the Preface) is more creative description than formal model building. The rigor, precision and the excitement of the descriptive process are enhanced when done under the auspices of formalized hypothesis testing. Since we are breaking new ground, expectations are limited. As quantitative methodology in political science got its legs under it in the 1950's and 1960's many of us were ecstatic with the possibility (for example) of using the fifty states as cases to test simple hypotheses such as competitive elections increase

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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 my own) right road leads directly to the common—Academy will be on the left across from the common." This was a 75-mile trip for Tonneson (each way) and is representative of the kind of journey these students took to make this book possible. They also paid their own expenses and often had to cash in real favors to get someone with a car to drive them and/or help them record the data. The grading system for this particular class, a sophomore-junior level course, was: Hour Test (30 percent); Final Exam (30 percent); Paper (40 percent). The town meeting analysis represented one of the four chapters in the paper. The chapters are: (1) History and geographical setting of the town (2) Socio-economic profile of the town (3) Political profile of the town (4) Democracy in the town.

voter turnout. But that is all behind us now as both the models and the methods have traveled into more complex terrain. But in the study of real democracy these kinds of exercises are still ahead. Now that we have threshold data we can explore such questions as: are variations in real democracy in a community related to that community's socio-economic diversity or socio-economic status or population dynamics or sense of community "boundriness" or the size of the town. Simple stuff in the scheme of the discipline as it now stands in the treatment of representative democracy. Uncharted ground in the study of real democracy.

Here is what I mean. With the pretest over and relatively successful I decided to experiment with a simplistic predictive model just for fun and (perhaps) to convince myself that a long-range project was worth the time. In 1969 with an "N" of 23 (two of the meetings were too poorly done to use) I developed a rough ordinal democratic indicator for the meetings. Better meetings were those that had higher levels of attendance (percent of registered voters attending), higher levels of participation (percent of attenders who participated) and more competition on the issues (percent of warning items resolved by recorded votes plus the closeness of the votes taken). I combined these three (equally weighted) statistics and then assigned a rank to each meeting based on their position on the measure. I then hypothesized that the smaller towns would have more democratic meetings. The results are in Figure I-B.

[FIGURE I-B ABOUT HERE]

The trend is clear enough. For every decrease of one rank in a town's population its town meeting will increase about three-quarters of a rank in "real democracy." The standard error is 4.6 and the  $R^2$  is .55. About half the variance in real democracy can be explained by size. Boast. This remarkably rough, case-challenged, technically simplistic scatterplot (clearly unpublishable)

FIG

I

B



advanced what we knew about real democracy by stupendous amounts. Caveat. Since no base line was available, no *measured* advance was possible. Moreover had there been a starting point it would have been set so low that any increases would have seemed huge. Truth. Clear thinkers with open minds would surely have *guessed* the scatterplot would turn out as it did. Any value it has comes not from its own inherent quality. It comes only from the state of the discipline. My purpose in this book is therefore quite modest. It is to establish a baseline. It is to take the *guesswork* out of the very basic things we ought to know about real democracy.

### TELLING THE STORY

Thirty years later as we rounded the bend into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century my students had provided me with data on 1536 meetings.<sup>63</sup> For each and every one they got into cars and drove to a small Vermont town and spent the day (or night) recording information from a live town meeting as it happened. The towns were selected randomly. Sort of. Each year prior to 1980 I selected 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 insure that I would be developing a more or less complete history on a few towns. These towns approximated

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<sup>63</sup> 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 it 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 a few more mistakes are made but it is still very close. In the aggregate they are less egregious than errors made by interviewers in someone's household. Understand this is because it is much easier to record non-obtrusive 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 making the assertion that when I say 18 percent of a town's voters were at a town meeting, it is a more secure figure than a survey research schedule that reports 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, *Media Polls and American Democracy*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1992).

a stratified sample in that I made sure they had characteristics representative of important concepts such as size, region and socio-economic infrastructure. Throughout this process I was not afraid to vary from the model if logistics required it. The result has produced but one bias, overrepresentation of towns in northern Vermont. Otherwise the sample does not stray from aggregate indicators on the complete universe of towns. One of the reasons for this is that we attended so many meetings, 21 percent of those held in the 235 towns that have had town meetings since 1969. The other is that there was no bias in the reason I strayed from the random selection. My interest has always been to expand the number of meetings and in this not be hamstrung by an attempt to reflect a “Vermont” approximation of real democracy. It turns out (as I expected it would) that I ended up with both.

In the description of the towns one condition overwhelms: their size. They are by nearly every standard a political scientist might employ, tiny. In the largest cohort in the histogram in Figure I-C the meetings (355 of them) were held in towns that averaged less than 1000 population. One hundred and thirteen meetings were held in towns that averaged less than 200. Places like these are seldom visited by political scientists either professionally or personally. Yet they perform a profound service for us. They allow us to gaze at the inner space of politics. While most seek the truth scanning huge galaxies through powerful telescopes, my eyes have been glued to a microscope; looking down, not up, inward, not outward. From shopping malls to governments to sports America has been transfixed by big. I am fascinated by small. It is not a popular approach. For the policymakers of a continental republic this is understandable. For scientists investigating democracy I find it odd.

[FIGURE I-C ABOUT HERE]

FIG I C

As for techniques I begin with the extended use of the scatterplot. Remembering that my purpose is description driven by hypotheses and not formal modeling, what is considered a useful screening device in the operational testing of variables takes on a life of its own. In nearly every instance my primary goal is to *demonstrate* relationships not prove causality. I will mathematically express these connections of course. I believe in the rigor and precision quantification requires. Besides, without it relationships cannot be standardized and transported. What is more important, however, is the *visual* expression of the data. New vistas must be seen before they are measured. Second, I also include histograms when important variables are first introduced. This will make statistical purists cringe. They have reason to. A histogram can be easily and efficiently summarized with statistical notations. Yet I want to look at a variable's face before I am asked to categorize its character.

Beyond this I will use tabular displays where I think appropriate and if necessary equip them with measures of strength and statistical significance. But for the most part the analysis uses straightforward multiple regression models to explain what is going on. Again, hard core quantifiers may become impatient with my attention to the step-by-step process of entering variables and discussing outcomes. What I have to say could be summarized quickly and efficiently with one simple equation. When I build indexes I do so individually and (I am sure for the sensibilities of many political scientists) spend too much time with their explanation. And again my defense is that I do not care. Description precedes the search for causality. I am primarily in the business of showing what real democracy looks like. Without some quantification we are doomed to flutter forever around the flame of imprecision, our science

stalled in a hopeless circle of frustration. Even so quantification is often a transgression of the senses—like measuring the dimensions of a sunrise over Ticklenaked Pond instead of just looking at it. Speaking of which, sunrises like so many things of hope and beauty do not last. Morning whitens the sky and it comes time to go to work. And so it has for us.

### WITNESS

#### Charles Kuralt's Town Meeting Day In Strafford, Vermont<sup>64</sup>

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.

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Kuralt, *On the Road with Charles Kuralt*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1985): 288-291.

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 Conduct, maker of rail fences and moderator of this meeting, the town will abide by the judgment.

CONDUCT: 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?

Conduct: All those in favor—

MAN [*shouting*]: —Paper ballot!—

CONDUCT: —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.

CONDUCT: Is that seconded?

WOMAN: I'll second it.

CONDUCT: It's seconded.

MAN: It doesn't have to be seconded.

CONDUCT: 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.

In March of the year 2000, one of my students, Marnie E. Owen, whose mother is a former town clerk of Strafford and whose father is a carpenter in town, did her paper on Strafford. Here (in part) is what she said about town meeting:

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 was joined by my neighbor, Barbara Raives. Barbara and her husband Bob retired to Strafford from New York City about five years ago. They've built a gorgeous mansion atop a hill that overlooks much of South Strafford and Thetford Center, Vermont. Barbara is a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and had a part-time career as a writer. Bob was a high-powered corporate attorney. Bob and Barbara are not unlike many Strafford newcomers in that they were very excited to attend their first town meeting. Unfortunately, Bob had the misfortune of being called back to New York at the last minute and couldn't attend. Barbara 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. Barbara 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 Barbara was a bit annoyed by having to walk next door to the Hardy place to use the bathroom, she tried not to show it.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Marnie E. Owen, "Strafford, Vermont: A Historical and Political Analysis," (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, April 2000).