# CHAPTER VIII

# DEMOCRACY AS PUBLIC TALK: EXPLORING THE CONTEXTS

*Democracy needs a new way to talk.*

—Harold Lasswell, 1941[1]

In the sequence that leads from presence to talk and then decision, talk is the heart of real democracy. Face-to-face exchange by common people in the service of impending decisions that matter and for which they are accountable makes town meeting unique.[2] In the recording and coding of tens of thousands of individual acts of public participation before assemblies of townspeople over thirty years one constant emerged from meeting to meeting and from town to town. Variation. Some town meetings bubble with talk by a large percentage of those in attendance while others are very much quieter. Becoming familiar with the fundamental dimensions of these variations as we did in the preceding chapter leads to the question, why? Do certain kinds of towns populated with certain kinds of people have a more verbalized politics?

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[1] Harold Lasswell, *Democracy Through Public Opinion*, (New York: George Banta, 1941).

[2] It is at least ironic to note that a term often used for (and unfortunately confused with) fear of speaking in public, *agoraphobia* is derived from the Greek "agora" which means assembly, meeting place or market place. Isaac Marks, a leading scholar on fear, reported in 1970 that his survey of 1200 agoraphobic club members in Britain revealed that public speaking was the most common of all their fears. To some degree, therefore, what we are studying here, face-to-face, Greek-style democracy, is named after one of the world's most important phobias. I. M. Marks and E. R. Hurst, "A Survey of 1200 Agoraphobics in Britain," *Social Psychiatry* 5 (1970): 16-24. Agoraphobia is commonly associated with fear of open places, strangers and other forms of public places aversion. For a fuller discussion, see: Isaac M. Marks, *Fears, Phobias, and Rituals*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): 290-293. It seems odd that the fear of open spaces would be associated with fear of speaking before the public. This conundrum has been noted in the literature but to my knowledge has not been resolved. See Paul M. Emmelo Kemp, *Phobias and Obsessive Compulsive Disorders*, (New York: Plenum Press, 1982): 3-4.

Does the social character of a community foretell an atmosphere supportive of expressing one's opinions, initiating public inquiry, and engaging public debate? Does a town's political posture in the wider culture of American representative politics matter? Is it the structure of the meeting itself? Or is something else at work? In short what is it about the meetings and their hosts, the towns that identifies a culture where people literally dare to *stand* for something?[3]

## STRUCTURAL VARIABLES

The search for answers begins with structure. Here we revisit the four ways in which town meetings vary according to the "architecture" of politics. The first is the size of the meeting place. Holding the number of attenders constant, the smaller the building the more crowded the meeting. Does crowdedness relate to participation? The second is when the meeting is held. Is there something about night meetings that improves participation over day meetings? The third is the voting structure. Meetings that hold elections of officers and other matters by daylong paper balloting have more time for talk. This is because balloting during the meeting itself (especially for town officers) takes away from discussion time. The discussion is stopped while each attender leaves their seat, goes to a ballot box, votes, and then returns. Would this account for declines in overall participation? Finally there is the question of school meetings. If

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[3]There is no literature (aside from my own work—and especialy that of Mansbridge in Shelby) on why people speak or do not speak at town meeting and the literature on *verbal* participation at political meetings is scarce. Most of what we know about group participation in general comes from students of small group behavior (principally sociologists) where, alas, the groups are nearly always too small to approximate the town meeting setting. Additional insights come from the community mobilization literature but there the distinction between attendance and speaking is not specified and theoretically explored. For an early example of this genre see: Anthony R. Pratkanis and Marlene Turner, "Persuasion and Democracy; Strategies for Increasing Deliberative Participation and Enacting Social Change," *Journal of Social Issues* 52 (No. 1, 1966): 187-205.

school issues are folded into the town meeting process, is the amount and egalitarian distribution of talk increased?

## The Size of the Meeting Place

Consider talk among a group of 50 in a crowded town hall where space is scarce and a certain forced intimacy exists. Compare this to talk in a place where an equal number of people have room to spread out, where gaps appear in the human tapestry and where openness prevails over crowdedness. The towns of Berlin and West Haven, for instance, had equal attendance (63 in Berlin and 64 in West Haven in their 1983 meetings), but in Berlin there were 192 seats that went unfilled and in West Haven there were only 11. Berlin's percent of attenders participating at least once was 10 percentage points below what one would expect given attendance size and West Haven's was six percentage points higher than expected. Similarly, West Haven's Gini was 8.8 points above the expected and Berlin's was 5.1 points lower. In West Haven there was only about one seat in five that was *not* filled. In Berlin there was about one seat in five that *was* filled. Clearly the ambiance of human interaction was remarkably dissimilar in the two towns. Does the record of other meetings demonstrate that West Haven's healthier participation was associated with crowding?[4]

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[4] Although the evidence is not uniform and the similarities of the research setting with town meting are not even close, there seems to be some consensus that increases in crowding (social density) leads to withdrawal. For an early summary of this literature see: Andrew Baum and Stuart Valens, *Architecture and Social Behavior: Psychological Studies of Social Density*, (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977). On the other hand students of communication avoidance have sugested there is an important variable that may be intervening between crowdness and participation, conspicuousness. Their studies have shown that an aversion to standing out—being conspicuous—is a consistent and important reason respondents give for their reticence to participate in public forums. Standing in a town hall where there are great gaps among the people in attendance may trigger a since of conspicuousness more than a meeting place where nearly all the seats are filled. Michael J. Beatty, "Situational and Predispositional Correlates of Public Speaking Anxiety," *Communication Education* 37 (January 1988): 28-39; A. H. Buss, *Self Consciousness and Social Anxiety*, (San Francisco, California: W. H. Freeman, 1980).

It doesn't seem to. Compare Berlin and West Haven with what happened in Barton and Salisbury in 1987. In the latter meetings there were 64 in attendance at the highest point. This means, of course, that size alone would predict equal participation for the two meetings. But the meeting that was least crowded had better participation. Barton had five times as many empty chairs per attender (4.85) as Salisbury, which had .92. Barton's Gini index was 16 points higher than Salisbury's even though Salisbury was five times as crowded. In this pair of towns a spacious meeting place contained more participation not less. In short, if we were to look at either pair of towns alone our conclusions about crowdedness and participation would be 180 degrees different than if we were to look at the other pair of towns alone.

What happens when these extremes are extended to the general case? Figure VIII-A contains a histogram of the crowdedness data and a scatterplot for the relationship between crowdedness and the Gini index. The median town meeting had about four empty seats for every ten persons in attendance. On the crowded end of the scale there were 208 meetings that averaged only three empty seats for every 10 attenders. This group included 96 meetings in which there were none. On the other end of the scale there is a long string of meetings that had at least one empty seat per person in attendance. There were 11 meetings in which there were more than three empty seats per attender.[5] These were generally found in places like Hinesburg or Barton (towns which conducted the least crowded meetings of the study) which held their meetings in a union high school where an auditorium or gym provided abundant space.

[FIGURE VIII-A ABOUT HERE]

[5]These cases were not displayed in the histogram.

fig 8 A

The scatterplot reveals that there was no relationship whatsoever between this measure of crowdedness and levels of verbal participation. The six meetings showing the least crowdedness were evenly split, three having less equality of participation than expected (given their size) and three having more.[6] These deviations are not out of line given the distribution of the other 1361 meetings. The two meetings with the highest Gini indexes given their size (Westford in 1990 and Newfane in 1980) were pretty much in the middle of the range of crowdedness. Those with the lowest Gini indexes (in Plymouth, Warren, and Shelburne, for instance) were also randomly positioned on the crowdedness scale. Obviously the standard error is huge in this scatterplot. There was no slope in the regression line and the $R^2$ was a breath away from dead. At this point in the analysis this is not a definitive conclusion, of course. It may be that a relationship between crowdedness and participation has been washed out by other variables not yet considered. There are two other caveats. In a large meeting hall the empty seats per attender statistic does not discern those places where all the people at the meeting were clustered in the front leaving the rest of the room empty and those meeting places where the same number of chairs were available and the same number of people sat scattered about in them.

The other problem spins off the first. Some towns seek to limit scatteredness and insure that those in attendance are clustered in the front of the meeting place by setting up the chairs in anticipation of turnout; that is they provide just enough chairs to handle the expected attendance.[7] Thus in my home town of Newbury there may be an average crowd and no empty

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[6] The scatterplot does not include the 96 meetings with no empty seats at all.

[7] It's work to "put the chairs out." Often they are stashed under the stage at the end of the town hall/theater/basketball court or down in the basement or up in the balcony. Sometimes they are hauled in from the fire house where they are used for bingo. Those who get to town meeting first often have the privilege of "setting up the chairs."

chairs (maximum crowdedness) because chairs were set up on the expectation of an average crowd. But the town *hall* is less crowded than if it were the case that a lot more people came than were expected and additional chairs were set up to accommodate them.[8] One way to get a better handle on these issues is to compare towns on which we had data for successive meetings. Here is the logic. Since we can be reasonably certain that the size of the meeting place remains constant from one year to the next in any given town,[9] any increase in attendance in such a place would mean a more crowded situation obtained.[10]

A return to Newbury will help and a good place to start is the years between 1987 and 1992. In 1987 only 114 people came to town meeting at the town hall on the village common. The Gini index of participation equality for the group of 114 was 22.3, which is 2.36 points below the 24.66 points one would expect, given the number present. The size entitled effort was .90. In other words, Newbury did not match the egalitarian distribution of participation normally

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[8]The most serious issue is the most obvious. If talk and crowdedness *are* associated, it may be because the same forces that caused enough people to attend (and thus make the meeting place crowded) also caused the talk. I will deal with the question of issues at a later point.

[9]Actually meeting places do change or old meeting places are altered from time to time. I checked the list of town meeting places for the subset of the data that included only those instances where we had data for the same town on successive years and found this happening only twice and these towns we dropped from the analysis. Nevertheless I could have missed others, although my strong suspicion is that I did not.

[10] Professional scholars of the effects of density make distinctions between the concepts of social and spatial density. Variations in *social* density occur when places stay the same size and the people present increase. Variations in *spatial* density occur when the crowd remains the same and size of the meeting places change. Variation in social density are more apt to be related to manifestation of group pathologies associated with crowding. This distinction was first proposed by Stokols. D. Stokols, "On the Distinction Between Density and Crowding: Some Implications for Future Research," *Psychological Review* 79 (May 1972): 275-277. The variations in crowding in Newbury over time would fit the social density classification. It is also the case that to the extent that townspeople might perceive that a given year's attendance might be high they might act differently because of their *anticipation* of a crowding situation. That behavior might actually limit attendance at town meeting. Andrew Baum and Carl I. Greenberg, "Waiting for a Crowd: The Behavorial and Perceptual Effects of Anticipated Crowding," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32 (October 1975): 671-679 and Andrew Baum and Stuart Korman, "Differential Response to Anticipating Crowding: Psychological Effects of Social and Spatial Density," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 34 (September 1976): 526-536.

associated with attendance levels of about 114 people. The next year (1988) attendance almost doubled to 225. This 97 percent increase was the largest in over a decade. The town hall was definitely a lot more crowded. If crowdedness is associated with more talk among more people the Gini should improve. Yet because attendance increased to 225, the bar on participation effort dropped to a Gini of only 19.22. But Newbury came closer to it, scoring 17.40, only 1.82 size entitled points short. The size entitled effort index rose accordingly from 90 to 91. A dramatically more crowded situation improved Newbury's performance only by a whisker.

In 1989 attendance declined by 73 to 152. Newbury's town hall was 32 percent less crowded and the size entitled effort rose from .91 to .97. In 1990 attendance (thus crowdedness) swelled to 204 and the residual improved again to 1.00. Newbury was now where it should be, producing a speaker for every one they were expected to have by their size entitlement. But in 1991 attendance dropped back to 165, the Gini dropped from 17.7 to 12.6, and the entitlement ratio registered only .66.[11] The next year attendance continued to decline to 124 yet the size entitlement Gini rebounded to finish above average for the first time at 1.04. In the four-year period between 1994 and 1997 Newbury's attendance was uncannily steady, varying from a low of 152 in 1994 to a high of 158 in 1997. Yet the size entitled ratio rattled around.

In Figure VIII-B, these Gini index-based size entitlement ratios were plotted along with the total attendance in the town hall. They provide a succinct portrait of the dynamics of democratic talk in one town. Newbury had been losing real attendance over the period even as the town population increased. Since the size of the town hall remained the same, crowdedness

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[11]It might be assumed that crowdedness was built in to the equation that created the Gini residuals, since they themselves are related to the actual number of people in attendance. But in fact the number of people in attendance

declined as well. At the same time there was a mild decline in participation equality. Try as one might, it is hard to detect a linkage between participation equality and crowdedness in Newbury. At any rate a close look at 20 other towns for which we had data on 15 or more meetings over the period verified the finding that holding town hall size constant and looking at variations in attendance (as a surrogate indicator of crowdedness) does nothing to suggest that crowdedness is either a stimulant or a depressor of participation.[12]

[FIGURE VIII-B ABOUT HERE]

## Day Meetings vs. Night Meetings

When the gavel fell for the last time in Middletown Springs, Vermont, on March 1980 it was 10:05 at night. The meeting had begun at 7:30. In the meantime 31 people had spoken 123 times and the distribution of this participation over the body of 88 citizens assembled had produced a Gini index of participation equality of 22.7, 4.6 points below the 27.3 score predicted by the regression equation. That same year in the town of Monkton a meeting of similar size (90 attenders) was held during the following day, ending at 4:35 p.m. But Monkton's participation was much more egalitarian. There, 52 spoke 169 times and a size entitled Gini of 26.6 was

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was not related to crowdedness ($R^2 = .003$) *across* the sample of towns which makes the correlation of crowdedness with the residuals legitimate.

[12] The visions of a crowded meeting hall often gives way to the notion of democracy by mob. This, of course, is what the founders feared. It is unfortunate that assessments of real democracy have so often come from examples of inappropriate scale. The psychology of crowds has been grafted indiscriminately to town meetings. "The realities of human behavior under the influence of agglomeration" (as Schumpeter put it in 1950) cause ". . . the sudden disappearance, in a state of excitement, of moral restraint and civilized modes of thinking and feeling, the sudden eruption of primative impulses, infantilisms and criminal propensities." These are ". . . gruesome facts that everybody knew but nobody wished to see and . . . thereby dealt a serious blow to the picture of man's nature which underlies the classical doctrine of democracy . . ." Although he excuses English and Anglo-American crowds from such behavior (odd) and focus instead on the example of "a Latin town," it is the case that critics of town meeting often use the paradigm of the mob to describe a crowded town meeting. Joseph A. Schumpter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1950): 256-257.

fig 8 B

exceeded by 7.4 points. The size entitled effort ratio for Middletown Springs was .83. Monkton's was 1.28.

In 1992 two towns fairly close in size, Ira (population 426) and St. George (population 705) with a similar number of people at town meeting (49 and 45 respectively) also differed in the egalitarian distribution of their participation. And once again the meeting held during the day (St. George's) exceeded its predicted Gini coefficient while the meeting held at night (Ira's) fell short. In this case the day meeting's size entitlement ratio was 1.05 and the night meeting's was .90.

Do these cases reflect a pattern in the data as a whole? Are night meetings less participatory than day meetings? They seem to be. In the 347 town meetings held at night 39 percent of the attenders participated while in the 1091 held during the day 46 percent participated. Day meetings averaged Gini indexes of 25.1 while night meetings averaged Ginis of 22.6. Both of these relationships held up when meeting size was controlled. During meetings held at night the percentage of attenders who spoke averaged six percentage points below what was expected given attendance at the meeting. This produced an average size entitlement of .90, ten points below the expected. Day meetings averaged three percentage points above the expected. The average Gini for day meetings was five points above expectations (given attendance) and at night it was seven points below expectations. (See Table VIII-A.)

Comment: .

There is more going on, however, beyond a mystic something about democracy in the daylight. Much of the difference between participation at night and during the day is caused by the fact that night meetings are shorter and quicker meetings produce less egalitarian

participation. Day meetings last an average of three hours and 48 minutes while night meetings generally end after two hours and 30 minutes.

A breakdown of the meetings by length and when they are held demonstrates that the effect of night versus day on participation is substantially reduced when length is taken into account. In the shortest category of meetings (those lasting an hour and a half or less) the Gini index is actually better at night than during the day. The same is true for the percent of attenders speaking. In the other three categories of length night meetings do poorer than day meetings on egalitarian talk but for the percent speaking, they are quite similar. Overall when time is controlled, night meetings do much better than the overall picture would have us believe. The simple correlation coefficient between when the meeting was held and the percent speaking effort index is reduced from -.21 to -.01 when the day/night factor is controlled. The "r" for the Gini index effort drops from -.23 to -.06. The important thing is that 78 percent of the night meetings in the sample lasted under three hours, while only 29 percent of the day meetings did. That made a big difference.[13]

[TABLE VIII-A ABOUT HERE]

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[13] Becker and his colleagues reported that while almost exactly the same number (7) participated in class irrespective of class size, the average total time used for student participation doubled between classes of under and over 20 students. This means that, although no more students will participate in a big class than a small one, in a smaller class those who do participate do so for longer periods of time. Franklin D. Becker, Robert Sommer, Joan Bee and Bart Oxley, "College Classroom Ecology," *Sociometry* 36 (December 1973): 514-525. For an excellent analysis of group size as it interrelates to time the meeting lasts and the dual impact of these variables on human interaction see: Bruce H. Mayhew and Roger L. Levinger, "Size and the Density of Interaction in Human Aggregates," *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (July 1976): 86-110. The problem, again, is that to use their model is to assume that a town meeting is an interactive group whereby the stimuli for participation happens directly between individual members of the group. In a town meeting this is sometimes but not often the case. People do look around to judge the appropriateness of a participation from time to time. But generally the relationhip is not one on one but one on many in the aggregate.

table 8 a

The random sample of 200 meetings in Figure VIII-C demonstrates the interplay of these variables dramatically. Equality in the distribution of talk in a town meeting slopes upward as time for talk increases whether or not the meeting is held during the day or at night. In both cases it takes a 185-minute meeting (a little shy of three hours) to produce a one-to-one ratio in participation equality effort. There is wide variation around these slopes but this variation happens both at night and during the day. Pittsford's night meeting in 1980 lasted about 175 minutes and fell far below its predicted one-to-one participation equality effort, while Shaftsbury's night meeting of 1990 lasted about the same amount of time as Alburg's, and produced an equality effort ratio well above its expectation. Charlotte (in 1981) and Berkshire (in 1980) held their meetings during the day and fell far below expectations. Londonderry and Panton were high. But it's very clear that the difference in the averages between the two sets of meetings is a result of the fact that night meetings cluster on the bottom end of the length of the meeting axis. Long meetings do not guarantee high participation equality (Fairfield in 1991 and Craftsbury in 1990) but do preclude low equality. Short meetings do not guarantee low equality (Sunderland 1986) but they do preclude high equality.

[FIGURE VIII-C ABOUT HERE]

Moving meetings to the nighttime not only does not increase attendance (we know this from Chapter II) it is significantly associated with a reduction of both the amount of verbal participation and the distribution of that participation among the attenders. But it certainly appears to be the case that the *cause* of this reduction is not the time of day itself. It is the length of the meeting. Before we can be sure about this, however, one other possibility must be

fig 8 c

considered. It, like holding meetings at night, was put forth in the name of reform. It too produced sour fruit.

## Australian Ballot Meetings

As explained in Chapter V many Vermont town meetings elect their officers by paper ballot held throughout the day and do not nominate candidates from the floor or discuss candidates for office in any formal way during the meeting. Other towns do. Consider the 1984 meeting in the town of Cambridge. Warning item eight read as follows: "To elect all Town Officers required by law for the year ensuing:" (There followed a list of 12 offices to be filled.) The minutes of the meeting, which were written by the town clerk, Jane Porter and began "Met *agreeably* (emphasis my own) to Warning dated January 26, 1984" are to the point:

> Article 8 Frank Hutchins was nominated and seconded for Selectman for 3 years, motion was made and seconded to close nominations and to have the Clerk cast one ballot, so voted.
>
> Glendon McNally was nominated and seconded for Lister for 3 years, motion was made and seconded to close nominations and to have the Clerk cast one ballot, so voted.
>
> Stanley Williamson, Sr. was nominated and seconded for Tax Collector, so voted.
>
> Stanley Williamson, Sr. was nominated and seconded for First Constable, so voted.
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> Motion was made and seconded to have the Selectmen appoint the Second Constable, so voted.
>
> Elsie Giddings was nominated and seconded for Library Trustee for five years, so voted.
>
> Glenn Skiff was nominated and seconded for Grand Juror, so voted.
>
> John Raymond was nominated and seconded for Trustee of Public Money, so voted.
>
> Kenneth Nye was nominated and seconded for Agent to Convey Real Estate, so voted.

> Philip Fitzpatrick was nominated and seconded for Agent to Prosecute and Defend Suits, so voted.
>
> Kenneth Nye was nominated and seconded for Cemetery Commissioner for 3 years, so voted.[14]

My data show that Article 8 was brought to the floor at 10:16 A.M. and left the floor at 10:27. It took the town of Cambridge 11 minutes to elect its 12 officers. During those 11 minutes seven different people participated a total of 17 times. Ten of these were by one man alone.[15] Over the course of the meeting 174 discrete acts of participation were conducted by 39 different people. Since only one of the 39 participators participated *only* on Article 8, the absence of the article would have reduced the total number of participators by just one and the *percent* of the attenders that participated by only one half of one percent. Electing officers by Australian ballot would have reduced the total number of participations (by 17). But since a majority of these were by one person the absence of Article 8 would have very little impact on the Gini Index of Participation Equality.

The town of Ryegate's 1997 meeting represents another situation. Their town report contains no "minutes" of the previous year only a "synopsis" that briefly states the result of each article warned. The record of the 1997 election of town officers is found in the 1998 report. It reads pure Yankee:

> Article 4: The town voted to elect one Road Commissioner.

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[14]Town of Cambridge, Jane Porter, Town Clerk, "Minutes of 1984 Cambridge Town Meeting," *Town Report*, (Year ending December 1984).

[15]Remember we do not record seconds of motions as participations because at most meetings it is usually too difficult to identify the seconder and this difficulty would lead to errors in the data base.

Article 6: The town elected two School Directors, Bruce Stearns for a term of three years, and Donna Walters for a term of one year.

Article 7: Elected Linda Rosa, Treasurer
Elected Andrew Smith, Selectman
Elected Dale Wright, Delinquent Tax Collector
Elected Lunnie Clark, First Constable
Elected William Nunn, Second Constable
Elected John Zampieri, Town Agent
Elected Dean Rowden, First Grand Juror
Elected Beverly Allen, Lister
Elected Holly McLure, Auditor
Elected Richard Fraser, Library Trustee
Elected William Nelson, Cemetery Commissioner
Elected Clark Bogie, Road Commissioner[16]

Our own data show that the process of electing these 14 officers began at 1:13 p.m. and ended at 2:52 p.m. This was well over half the length of the meeting. Some of this time was spent actually voting and some was spent counting the ballots.[17] We also know that 19 of the 82 people present (the town had only 818 registered voters at the time) participated on the article to elect town officers. This was over half of the total (33) participators. Moreover 13 of the 19 participated *only* on these articles. This is not to say they would not have participated on other articles had they not participated in electing officers, but it is clearly the case that Ryegate's participation profile would have looked quite different had they not elected their town officers during the meeting.

The 1984 meeting in Cambridge and the 1997 meeting in Ryegate are but two. By considering the other 1436 meetings for which we have similar data we can be more precise

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[16]Town of Ryegate, *Town Report*, (Year ending December 1996): 57-8.

[17]It is during the ballot counting time that towns often let the district representative(s) to the legislature speak. As one moderator once told me with a wink after a meeting, "It saves time, dontchaknow."

about the relationship between participation and using the Australian ballot. Let's take the percent speaking first and then turn to the distribution of talk. We know that 792 of the meetings in the sample used the Australian ballot at least for the election of town officers and 646 did not. We know that in the ballot towns the average percent of attenders who spoke was 40 and in the non-ballot towns it was 49. This is a significant difference. The Gini index size entitlement for the ballot towns is five points higher than in meetings with no Australian ballot and 11 points higher for the percent of attenders speaking. But we also know (from Chapter V) that smaller towns are less apt to use the ballot and have fewer *numbers* in attendance (even though these numbers represent dramatically stronger percentages of registered voters). Combine this with the fact that smaller raw numbers of attenders produce larger percentages of speakers and we have a potential explanation for the gap in participation between ballot and non-ballot towns.

There is more. Larger towns also are more apt to hold their meetings at night. Night meetings are shorter and the length of the meeting is also importantly associated with participation. Night meetings are also far more apt to use the Australian ballot. Thus there are two good reasons to assume that the relationship between using ballots and poorer participation is spurious; ballot towns have more attenders (147 versus 125) and they don't last as long (197 minutes versus 223 minutes.) The task is clear: see if the relationship between ballots and talk holds up when both time and attendance are controlled.

Size of the meeting is removed from consideration when the participation effort ratios produced from the residuals of the original regression equation of size on participation are substituted for the actual percentages of attenders talking and the Gini index. Table VIII-B compares the size entitlement ratio developed from these residuals by categories of time the

meetings lasted and use of the Australian ballot in the same manner the day meeting/night meeting association was tested. Use of the Australian ballot is a far more serious depressor of participation than was the day/night variable. In no category of meeting length for either measure do the size entitlement ratios favor ballot meetings. In the very short meetings the presence of Australian ballot voting reduces speaking at the meeting by 23 points from what it would be if there were no ballot. In other words meetings with the ballot produce 6.4 speakers for every 10 they should, given size, and the non-ballot meetings produce 8.7. Both scores are low because the meetings were short. But the ballot meetings are more so. In the other three levels of meeting length the impact of balloting was much less but always favored the no ballot meetings.

The egalitarian distribution of participation behaves a bit differently. The average Gini entitlement is 1.02. In meetings without the Australian ballot that last under an hour and a half it is .81, with the ballot it is .75. As the meeting goes on, however, the egalitarian distribution between ballot and non-ballot towns begins to wither. In the very longest meetings, those lasting over four and a half hours, it disappears completely. Both sets of meetings have 14 percent more equal talk than the number of people present predicts.

[TABLE VIII-B AND TABLE VIII-C ABOUT HERE]

In short the Australian ballot variable seems to hold up better than the day/night variable when time is controlled. But the overlap between night meetings and use of the Australian ballot (only ten percent of the night meetings did not use it) and night meetings and shorter meetings (only nine of the 347 night meetings fell in the longest length category) limit what can be done with the data. In the entire sample of 1438 meetings we studied, only nine meetings were both

tab 8 b and tab 8 c

held at night and lasted over four and one-half hours. Only one of these nine did *not* use the Australian ballot. This was in the Grand Isle County town of North Hero where in 1994, 315 people met for six hours and three minutes. In that time 68 of them made a total of 227 participations. The Gini index was 17.10, which was well above average for such a large turnout. But one meeting does not a sample make. Even if we drop back a category for the time variable (those meetings that lasted between three and four and one-half hours) we find only six more meetings to add to the category "long meetings held at night without the Australian ballot."

What to do? We can look at the day meetings only and specify the relationship between time, the Australian ballot, and participation. Table VIII-C does this and in so doing demonstrates a clear example of the additive effects of two variables. First we see both measures of participation marching up the time staircase hand in hand. But in those meetings where there is no Australian ballot in use, the two measures are higher on the staircase, every step of the way. Until the last one. There at the top the ballot towns catch up, at least for the equality measure. To summarize, we can make several observations for towns that use the Australian ballot: (1) ballots matter, (2) the longer the meeting, the less they do; (3) both variables have less impact on the equitable spread of talk than they do on the percent of attenders speaking.[18]

Figure VIII-D gives us a better look at these relationships by displaying the data for each of 200 randomly selected meetings held during the day by its participation quantity effort, the ratio between the percent of participation expected, given meeting size and the percent of attenders who actually participated. The combination of shorter day meetings and the Australian

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[18]Partial correlation coefficients between the two participation variables and the three independent variables in question, time (measured in minutes) and dummy variables for day/night ballot/no ballot show time overpowering

ballot seems to increase the effort gap between ballot and non-ballot meetings. All of the seven meetings scoring .6 or *below* on participation effort and lasting less than 150 minutes used the Australian ballot. But meetings like those in Huntington and Westford which had very *high* participation efforts, used the Australian ballot and lasted over 350 minutes. The lines of best fit summarize the relationship best. The length of the meeting improves participation for both kinds of meetings, but the improvement that time brings to participation is steepest for the ballot meetings because the shorter meetings are so low and the longer meetings are marginally higher. All but one of the seven poorest meetings on participation quantity were ballot meetings. They were also short meetings. Two of the four most participatory meetings were ballot meetings. They were long meetings.

When a meeting is short, the presence of the ballot system exacerbates the normal reduction in the percent of attenders participating. When for whatever reason the meeting is longer, the negative impact of the ballot on participation disappears. In Charlotte, for instance, their meeting of 1981 which lasted only 114 minutes was tied for lowest of the 200 in the sample. Their meeting of 1997 was well above average, ranking 16$^{th}$ from the top of the 1435 meetings. It lasted 425 minutes, the second longest of the 200 in the scatterplot. The Australian ballot was used in both cases.

[FIGURE VIII-D ABOUT HERE]

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the other two for both variables. The coefficient for time and the Gini index begins (first order) at .44 and finishes at .39. For the percent speaking variable the first order of coefficients of .47 is reduced only to .44 under controls.

fig 8 D

## Town Meeting/School Meeting

Montgomery is a mountain town. When two of my students, Sarah Monneux and Leslie Sacco, went there to code events at town meeting March 4, 1986, it was slightly overcast and 28 degrees. Not a bad day for a town meeting. It was held in the town hall in Montgomery Center just below Hazen's Notch on the Trout River. This is the place where (more than 200 years earlier) the colonialists decided to breech the Green Mountains as they built one of the first military roads in North America, a gigantic task beginning in Newbury, a hundred miles through uncharted forest to the east on the Connecticut and heading for Montreal another hundred miles northwest of the notch.[19] Up Route 242 a few miles from Montgomery Center is the Jay Peak ski area. This explains the six restaurants (The Belfry, Inn on the Trout River, Jamie's Pub, On the Rocks, The Thirsty Boot and Wendy's Kitchen) in a town of 681 people and 445 registered voters.

Montgomery had been chartered 206 years earlier almost to the day, March 5, 1780, by 60 people. These included 13 ministers, a woman and Ira Allen one of Vermont's early heroes. Allen named it after General Richard Montgomery under whom he had fought and who fell leading the attack on the city of Quebec with Benedict Arnold in the Quebec expedition of 1775.[20] There were 34 residents in 1780. On August 12, 1802, at 1 p.m. they held their first town meeting. Then for a hundred years the town grew, prospered and succeeded to delay northern

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[19] As a boy I hunted partridge on what remained of the beginnings of the Bailey-Hazen Road. It was called the "old county road" in those days and was no more than a path whispering its way through the tall timber. But there was an abundance of thorn apple trees along it and on a crimson blue October afternoon a twelve year old could sneak through the trees in the quiet bliss of pre-adolescence when life was as tender as the mosses of the forest floor and hope was bounded by an unsuspecting patridge eating its last meal. (And Mom saying, "Good for you. Now get out of my kitchen with those damn things and clean them on the back porch!")

[20] Esther Monroe Swift, *Vermont Place-Names*, (Brattleboro, Vermont: The Stephen Greene, 1977): 245-248.

New England's mountain town “dark age” for a half century. As sheep farming disappeared in Vermont Montgomery (like most Vermont mountain towns) had gone to cows. Since butter keeps better than milk it became the town's chief product and since tubs were needed to keep the butter Montgomery made these too and furniture and other wood related products. The town had abundant water power and lumber. It used them. By 1890 Montgomery had become an important mill town (lots of very *small* mills, mind you) in the area.[21]

Then as the century turned the people did too. They turned away. For the next seventy years they either died and were buried where they stood or they gave up and left the sides of the mountains for the better lands of the valleys. Those that wonder why have never been down and in highland Vermont. Montgomery butter was no longer needed. The trains had seen to than. That did in the butter tub business. Mountainside milk was a long way from the depot. The best accessible lumber was gone. Left were the rocks and the cold and the loneliness. The rise and fall of Montgomery (see Figure VIII-E) forms an eerie statistical silhouette of the famous peak that guards the town on the east. By 1970 two-thirds of the town's population was gone; replaced by deer who browsed happily on the new growth that slowly covered a hundred homesteads of a gone away people.

[FIGURE VIII-E ABOUT HERE]

When the gavel fell to open the 1986 Montgomery town meeting, the dark age had bottomed out. Just barely. The town was experiencing only its second decade of growth since 1890. Still, the population was about what it had been in 1850. Only 81 people were in

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[21] The history of Montgomery is: W. R. Branthoover and S. Taylor, *Montgomery, Vermont: The History of a Town*, (Mongomery, Vermont: The Montgomery Historical Society, 1976).

fig 8 E

attendance at the meeting of 1986, 18 percent of the 445 registered voters. A town Montgomery's size was predicted to have 25 percent of its voters in attendance. Thus its size adjusted attendance effort was very low, only 74 percent of the expectation. However 46 people participated verbally. This was 71 percent of the *average* number present (65) throughout the meeting. The experiences of all the 1435 meetings in the data base predicted that a meeting with an average attendance of 65 would have only 58 percent participation. Thus Montgomery's participation *effort* for the meeting was 13 percentage points higher than expected, giving the meeting a strong positive ratio of 1.22. Moreover these participators made a total of 268 participations. The distribution of these participations was enough to produce a Gini index of participation equality that gave the meeting a hefty participation equality effort of 120 percent of expectation. In short even after controlling for the low turnout which produced a small gathering (a predictor of high participation) Montgomery's meeting was much more vocal than most.

Could this be because it was one of the 638 meetings of the 1435 that integrated educational matters into the structure of the town meeting's debate? The meeting opened at 10:00 a.m. The moderator elected in 1985, Joseph Sherman, then adjourned for five minutes to wait for more people. After they arrived and preliminary remarks were finished the first article (to elect a moderator for 1986) was taken up at 10:14. By 10:15 Sherman had been duly reelected and article #2 (to approve the town officers' reports) came to the floor. Two minutes later it was approved by a voice vote. Next came the question of whether the most important local government employee, the road commissioner, should be elected or appointed. It took two minutes for the town to decide to authorize the selectmen to appoint one. At 10:19 the town took up article #4 to elect "remaining town officers." Eleven minutes were all that were needed to

nominate and elect all fifteen. It was not quite 10:30 and the town had accomplished considerable. Thirteen different people had participated 23 different times in 16 minutes.[22]

At this point a member of the school board (whom the students identified as a man with "tinted glasses and a large gold ring") moved that the Town of Montgomery's meeting be formally adjourned and the meeting of the Town School District of Montgomery be formally convened. By 10:34 this had been done and Sherman had been elected moderator of the school meeting. For the next hour and 48 minutes the town debated school matters. A minute was consumed electing the moderator, three minutes approving the school directors' reports and one minute electing a school director for three years. Then came the school budget. It took 58 minutes. The vote (a secret ballot) was 44 yeas to 30 nays. An additional minute was needed to authorize the school directors to borrow money in anticipation of taxes, and 31 minutes to discuss new business. The school meeting ended at 12:21. Then a hungry town meeting listened to their local state representative speak for 20 minutes and finally adjourned for lunch at 12:41. They reopened the town meeting at 1:41 p.m.

In the 108 minutes of school debate 27 people participated a total of 101 times. One third of these were women, two-thirds men. This was almost the same ratio of men to women participators as that of the entire meeting where 15 of the 46 participators were women. Only 11 of the 27 school meeting participators participated *only* on school issues and they contributed

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[22] It doesn't take long to elect a town officer if there is no opposition: Moderator, "To elect a town agent. What is your pleasure?" Man with white hair and half glasses: "Nominate Doug DeVries." Moderator: "Do I hear a second?" Unidentified Citizen: "Second." (Remember we don't attempt to identify those who second a motion.) Moderator: "All those in favor of electing Doug DeVires your town agent for one year signify by saying aye." Citizens: "Aye." Fifteen seconds or so does the trick. Sarah Monneux and Leslie Sacco, "The 1986 Comparative Town Meeting Study: Town of Montgomery," (Burlington Vermont: University of Vermont, the Real Democracy Data Base, March, 1986) and Town of Montgomery, Thersa Lamore, Town Clerk, "Minutes of the Annual Town Meeting March 4, 1986," (Mimeograph, 1986).

only 32 of the 101 participations on school matters. Assume (and they are big assumptions) that the eleven who participated on school matters only would have attended town meeting even if school matters were not on the agenda and would not have participated at all. The total number of participators would have been reduced to 35 for Montgomery and this would have been only 54 percent of the average attendance (65) lowering Montgomery's percent participation effort ratio to *below* average, .93. Without these extra participators the Gini index of participation equality effort would have been substantially reduced as well. If a final assumption that the 16 participators who participated on town *and* school matters would not have compensated their loss of school-related participations with additional town-related participations is valid, the overall participatory flavor of the meeting would have been soured still more.

In any event there is enough evidence to at least *charge* school and town meeting separation with the crime of reducing town meeting participation. Besides, there is abundant supportive theory from political scientists who study local politics. They find few issues that elevate the blood pressure of grassroots citizenship higher than education. From taxes to choice one is hard put to imagine an issue in modern American politics that has mattered more to localities. Vermont has not been immune from the wild fire debates that have raged across America in the last 30 years. In fact the little 74-word blurb on the Montgomery town meeting that found its way into the Burlington *Free Press* stressed the school budget debate: "Voters grudgingly approved a school budget they thought was too high..." [23]

Yet education is hard to discuss in the open forum. Educationalists tend to dominate discussion and intimidate with expertise. Supporters of the schools often up the ante on public

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[23] "Montgomery Passes School Budget," *Burlington Free Press* (March 5, 1986): 4B.

criticism of schools with not so subtle suggestions that those who question, for instance, this or that program have something against children. Opposers often lose their tempers and seem more interested in lower taxes than good education. (Many are.) Thus the hypothesis could move in either direction. I will use the more positive: having school issues on the agenda is good for participatory democracy.

How the towns handle their school business, it will be remembered, varies from town to town. Six hundred and thirty-eight meetings in the sample included school matters as separate warning items in the town meeting or like Montgomery stopped the town meeting, convened the school meeting and when it was over went back and completed the town meeting. In this group of meetings those interested in only school issues or only town issues are pretty much apt to be present for both. Another group of meetings in the sample (583 of them) was held in towns that finish one of the meetings (either school or town) and then go on to the other one. In this group it is much more likely that persons interested in only one of the meetings will not be present for discussion in the other. Finally there are towns that decide school matters on another day altogether. In these meetings it is highly likely that those interested in only school politics will not be at town meeting. We studied 217 meetings in these kinds of towns.

The question here is fairly straightforward. Will town meetings where the discussion is more apt to include school matters have a larger percentage of attenders who participate? Will this participation be more evenly spread over the meeting's attenders? The data show that overall there is a slight drop off in percent speaking that occurs as town and school meetings separate. It is 38 percent when the school meeting is imbedded in the town meeting, 37 percent when it comes before or after the school meeting and 36 percent when it is held another day. But

the Gini index hardly budges. It is 25 when school meetings are imbedded or inserted and 24 when they are held another day.

When attendance is controlled, participation equality effort (based on the Gini index) washes out completely. This leaves only the relationship between discussion of educational matters and percent participation effort index. It appears when the meetings are split into two groups: the 1202 meetings in which education was in some way a part of the day's business and the 217 when all school matters were postponed to another day. The size-controlled percent speaking effort is 1.01 for the former and .98 for the latter. Even this small difference falls prey to the time variable, however. When school meetings were held in some form the same day as the town meeting, discussion time increases an average of 24 minutes. When time is controlled as it is in the bar chart in Plot 1 of Figure VIII-F, the relationship between the degree of integration of school business in town meetings and the percent participation effort shows no evidence that school issues inspire more participation. Among meetings of similar length those having school matters before them are not apt to have more participation.

[FIGURE VIII-F ABOUT HERE]

These findings were confirmed through time series analysis of individual towns that switched from holding their school meetings on the same day and in the same place as their town meetings to holding them on a completely different day. In Underhill the percent participation effort was 1.3 in the six meetings we studied prior to the time it switched. It dropped to .92 in the four meetings analyzed afterwards. But down the road in Williston, the correlation was just the opposite, .68 with school meetings on the same day and 1.18 with school meetings on a different day. In Bakersfield there was no change: 1.16 with school meetings and 1.15 without.

fig 8 F

These kinds of anomalies can often be explained by local events. Williston, for instance, changed its school meeting date at a time when the town was undergoing profound development pressures. Accordingly, their meetings did not decrease in length appreciably and participation went up. But by and large the evidence is clear. Towns that hold their educational meetings on another day have less participatory town meetings because, without educational matters on the agenda, meetings are shorter. This is made remarkably clear in Plot 2 of Figure VIII-F. Meetings with school matters absent tend to be shorter. Never are they among the group of longest meetings. If educational issues are not on the Warning, meetings end quicker, fewer people speak, and the distribution of talk is weakened.[24]

In short, educational issues like those advanced in Montgomery improve the participatory character of real democracy but not because they are educational issues. Education, while clearly a critical local issue, shows no special inclination to enhance democratic discussion and debate. Perhaps it is true that the ability of local educational professionals to deter debate through expertise is at work. I have seen this happen many times. Perhaps this inability of town meeting to translate local conflict into real democratic opportunity shows that scholars who argue *open* face-to-face deliberation suffers as the passion of the debate and the outcomes at stake increase are indeed correct.

## The Weather

I have no theory regarding the weather and its direct effect on talk democracy. Nor does anyone else. If atmospheric pressure affects inclination to engage in open political discussion

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[24] Volume II deals directly with participation as it varies from issue to issue and with the question of what kinds of

the evidence that this is so has yet to be discussed and published. But there are intervening explanations. They have to do with time. A storm outside the building or a storm pending or icy roads on the way to a town meeting might urge matters to a quicker resolution which would shorten the time available for talk.[25] It could be the case that bad weather at night is thus linked to participation in the same way it is to actual attendance. Night storms are more fearsome. On the other hand, we know bad weather lessens attendance a little at night and fewer numbers are good for talk.

I examined these relationships in great detail and the findings were reduced to two weak relationships (see Table VIII-D). First, mixed weather meetings have better participation than either bad or good weather meetings and good weather meetings are not much better than bad weather meetings. Second, night meetings are lower on all counts. Both of these relationships can be explained by size. In both day and night meetings the length of the meeting was shorter during bad weather *and* good weather than it was during mixed weather. In all categories night meetings were, of course, shorter than day meetings. No intervening variable that might have caused a link between weather and decreased participation materialized. It is clear we can continue the analysis without a built-in statistical control for weather conditions.

[TABLE VIII-D AND TABLE VIII-E ABOUT HERE]

In summary here is what we know about the structural correlates of talk democracy. Most important, as we learned in Chapter IV, an adjustment must be made for the number of

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issues are most supportive of talk democracy.

[25]I, myself, have never left a town meeting early but there are times I should have, including one night when I eased out of the Kingdom town of Irasburg in a snowstorm at 10:35 p.m. and stretched a two-hour drive into four and one-half hours. But I have seen people leave because of it. And the student essays referred to it on occasion.

table 8 D and E

people at the meeting. The next most significant variable is the length of the meeting. After that there is a faint hint of evidence that, among the shortest meetings, those held during the day will have less participation in all and less egalitarian participation if they employ the Australian ballot. Beyond this nothing else seems to have an independent effect on participation. There is no evidence to suggest that crowdedness, the weather or the way school meetings are handled matters very much by itself. Night meetings are bad for talk democracy only because they decrease the time available for talk and perhaps because they use the Australian ballot. School meetings matter because they take items off the warning and reduce the time needed for discussion. When all these variables were entered into a stepwise multiple regression model, the results were as expected and are found in Table VIII-E. To this point we can explain about 70 percent of the variance in the percent of the attenders participating in town meeting by the size of the meeting and the length of the meeting. For participation equality the percentage is 57. In both cases not using an Australian ballot makes a statistically significant but substantially trivial appearance in the equation.

## THE CHARACTER OF COMMUNITY LIFE

With these considerations behind us it is time to find out if the nature of the community seeps into the mix of variables which might (if we are sophisticated enough to uncover them) explain why some town meetings are more participatory than others. From what we know about the *town*, could one anticipate the participatory quality of the meeting they were entering before they stepped through the town hall door? Many times I have had reporters ask me questions like "What kind of town should I go to see a real exciting meeting?" My students from Vermont have

often opinioned about this or that town: "That's just the kind of place where nothing (or something) is apt to happen at town meeting." Given meeting size would we expect a more lively discussion in the mountain towns or the valley towns, in the small towns or the large towns, in the farming towns or the bedroom towns, in the rich towns or the poor towns, in the growing towns or the liberal towns or the towns where voting by ballot for national and state candidates for office is stronger? Does a combination of these confuse the causation? Or is it possible that there is no explanation; that the nature of political talk is governed by the kinds of people at the meeting and this is not directly traceable to the kinds of people in the community, or that the nature of political talk does not ebb and flow with the tides of community at all?

## Big Town; Small Town

There is a wide literature weighing in to debate the question of "openness" in small town life. The problem for us is that this literature is frightfully contradictory. In Vermont, for instance we have a book of Vermont humor entitled *Yup, Nope and Other Vermont Dialogues*[26] based on the sparcity of talk among small towners and farmers. Fill a meeting hall with these kinds of people and silence would dominate. The brevity of the language is reflected in the observation that rural people guard their tongues and favor monosyllable speak as in: "Where'd you find that horse everyone's been looking for, sonny?" The answer: "I thought if I were a horse where would I go and I did and he had." Seventeen words. Seventeen syllables. Perfect.[27]

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[26]Keith Jennison, *"Yup … Nope" & Other Vermont Dialogues*, (Woodstock, Vermont: The Countrymen Press, 1976).

[27]Keith Jennison, *Vermont is Where You Find It*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1941). My brother David who turned a Ph.D. in ancient Semetic languages from Johns Hopkins University into a rural ministry in northern Vermont once related to me the most succinct (and accurate) analysis he ever heard about the hard life in Vermont. "Dad drank. Mom ran." Mark Twain once gave one of his very funny lectures in the town of Bennington, Vermont.

On the other hand there are those who argue that it is small town people who are the most "open" and friendly and will "talk your head off" if given a chance and that it is city folks who hold their conversations close to the vest.

To break ground this question I have selected the most popular hypothesis from the serious scholarship on the issue. It goes like this: as communities get smaller, societal roles of individuals tend to overlap. As this occurs public talk about politics may be stifled by the unwillingness to jeopardize other relationships. Thus the barber's views on a zoning ordinance remain obscure lest she antagonize her customers. A member of the bridge club protects his relationships there. A father is hesitant to alienate the mother of his daughter's best friend. An employee is careful not to annoy an employer who is sitting six rows over and three rows back. In short as community size decreases social, economic, and political roles tend more to overlap. When this happens, political talk is bound to suffer. It all boils down to the old saying: "In small towns you have to be careful what you say!"[28]

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He was appalled and perplexed at the tepid reception his witicisms provoked. On his way to his carriage afterwards the reason became clear to him: "Golly that man was funny," he heard a Vermonter say to his wife, "It was all I could do to keep from laughing."

[28] This is part of the Aristotilian argument that real democracy can only work in small places that feature (it is assumed) homogeneity. If contentious issues do emerge small town people will work hard to hide or defer them to avoid the inevitable pain of conflict in the raw. But there is a counter position. Sociologist George Homan's classic work on group behavior set the theoretical underpinnings of a model that suggests the high number of interpersonal interactions possible in a small group set up favorable conditions for group solidarity. Mucur Olsen argues in 1965 that in small groups each member can participate in a more contributory fashion. This higher status in the group leads to group solidarity. Mucur Olsen, *The Logic of Collective Action*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965): 65. (For a summary of Homan's work see: George C. Homan, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, 1974). The question is does this "solidarity" lead to a diminishing of conflict which is then associated with less participation or at least less important participation? The hard evidence that it does is sketchy and there are countervailing findings. My own observations tell me that town meetings in small towns are neither less conflictural nor less participatory. Robin Donovan, a community activist in the New Hampshire town of Chichester in the 1980s, put it this way: ". . . when you lose on an issue, you get over it because the person who voted against it'll be working with you on old home day." Gardner Hayes, "Town Meeting," *New Hampshire Profiler* (March 1987): 32-35. Students of fear of public speaking note, moreover, that our "anxiety" about strangers leads to fear of speaking in public and "we tend not to be afraid to speak around our

Given two town meetings of equal attendance the prediction is that participation in the meeting held in a town of 500 registered voters will be more careful and more limited than the meeting held in a town of 2000 registered voters. It is important to recall the effect of town size on attendance and in turn the effect of attendance on participation. For large towns are hurt on both counts. By turning out a larger number but a smaller *percentage* of voters their attendance rates go down. At the same time the larger number of actual attenders in the meeting place depresses the percentage of attenders that will participate.

At this point, however, we want to know if there is any relationship between the participatory flavor of meetings and the size of the town in which the people who decided to come to the meetings live. What we need to do is consider the size of the town as it relates to the percent of attenders that speak when the *number* of attenders present is controlled. In other words, given meeting size, what is the relationship between town size outside the meeting and participation inside the meeting?

A look at the 70 meetings held in 1992, for instance, shows that in Ripton, a little town which lies high along a gap in the mountains east of Middlebury, 90 of the 297 registered voters were present at town meeting. About 50 miles to the south in Proctor about the same number were in attendance (99) even though Proctor has about four and on half times more registered voters than Ripton. (See Figure VIII-G, Plot 1) Given the size of their respective *meetings* Ripton should have had 43 percent of its attenders speaking out at least once and Proctor should

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closest friends and family, even a large group of them." Rush W. Dozier, Jr., *Fear Itself: The Origin and Nature of the Powerful Emotions that Shape Our lives and Our World,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998): 104. There is other evidence that small town people are more willing to interact with strangers. This should boost participation in the meetings of small towns over larger towns where the presence of newcomers is a constant. Joseph Neuman and

have had 42 percent. But the people of the mountain town actually had 44 percent participation in their town meeting (a percentage point above expectations) while the people of the valley town had only 19 percent of its attenders speaking out, 23 percentage points lower than expected. Proctor's size-controlled entitlement ratio was .45. Ripton's was 1.02. Pomfret is a classic northern New England hill town in Windsor County.[29] It is steeper with more ups and downs than Ripton but it isn't as wild as the high ridge towns on the flanks of the mountains. Pomfret's 1992 meeting had 118 in attendance and produced a size entitled participation ratio of 1.33. Up in the northwest in a flatter, big farm town in the Lake Champlain Valley, Fairfax, with almost triple the population, drew 120 to town meeting and produced a ratio of only .81.

[FIGURE VIII-G ABOUT HERE]

In both cases the people of the bigger towns were much *less* (not more) apt to participate once they got to town meeting. This stands the thesis on its head. But four meetings do not a pattern make. St. George was far bigger than Ira and its 1992 meeting outdistanced Ira's on the size controlled participation effort ratio 1.26 to .83. Even though their attendance at town

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Clark McCauley, "Eye Contact with Strangers in the City, Suburb and Small Town," *Environment and Behavior* (December 1977): 547-558.

[29]Pomfret, unfortunately, has become the politically correct town in which to live if you like the upscale ambiance of Woodstock that borders to the south but don't want to be seen living there. Back in 1962 when Pomfret still had real hill farms, I was working for Charlie Cole of South Newbury helping him hay his mother's place in North Pomfret. I scared the bejesus out of myself by stopping the tractor while going up a steep hillside and stupidly raising the draw bar which was used to lift the hayrake on back off the ground. The hill was too steep and instead of the rake raising up, the front end of the tractor did. I knew I was going to die right there on that hill crushed to death by a Ferguson. I have had friends like Sewell Page die when tractors reared up. But the rake prevented the tractor from going over completely and there I sat glued to the seat. Clutch in. Brake down. Terrified. Charlie came over, leaned across my body and pushed down the draw bar lever. The tractor settled dutifully back on all fours with a sigh, and Charlie walked off muttering something about damn fool college boys. The Appalachian Trail crosses through Pomfret on its way to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Many a cold winter's night I spent in a little A-frame deer camp my uncle built over a ridge to the east of that very spot. One time when I was hiking into camp under a cold midnight sky in February, I stood looking south down the trail where the moon shadows lay motionless across a snow so cold it creaked. I was struck by the fact that there were markers in the forest that could lead me all the way to to the warmth of Georgia.

fig 8 G

meeting was about equal. Ferrisburgh with 115 voters present had 44 percent participation when it was predicted to have 41 percent. Shoreham had 33 percent when its similar attendance predicted 40 percent. The town of Ferrisburgh was twice as big as Shoreham. The line of best fit for the relationship between town size and participation for the 70 town meetings of 1992 is flat as a pancake. It seems increases in town size have nothing to do with the percent participation at town meeting when meeting size alone is controlled.

Adding the length of the meeting to the mix, however, refines the relationship a bit. Remembering that the actual number of people present at each meeting has been statistically equalized, it is apparent from Figure VIII-G (Plot 2) that the percent participating at least once does increase as towns get bigger if the meeting is a long one (over four hours) and decreases if it is shorter. Put another way shorter meetings in large towns have less participation than shorter meetings in small towns. None of the longer meetings were conducted in the very smallest towns. But after towns get big enough to have longer meetings, town size was associated with increase in participation. Town size does seem to influence the important relationship between length of the meeting and democratic talk.

Was this an event that occurred only in 1992 or is there something more permanent going on in the relationship between meeting length, town size and talk democracy? Figure VIII-G matches the length of the meeting in minutes with the percent talking (Plot 2) and the equality of participation (Plot 3) for 100 meetings held in the largest towns (over 1600 registered voters) and 100 meetings held in the smallest towns (under 300 registered voters). When these extremes are compared, it is clear that in any given *meeting* of equal size, more people will speak if the meeting is held in a small town than a large one. This happens even though there are more small

towns with very short meetings, which depress participation, and more large towns with very long meetings which tend to expand participation. This tendency to increase the percentage of participation as meeting length increases is stronger in a big town than a small town. What this suggests is that expanding the length of a meeting in a small town is not as apt to increase the number speaking as increasing the length of a big town meeting. The people who speak in a small town will do so even under time constraints. Large town people will be more apt to speak if the meeting lasts longer.

But the same is not true for participation equality—the distribution *of acts of participation* among those who speak measured by the Gini index. (See Plot 3 of Figure VIII-G.) In fact a meeting of say, 100 people in a town of under 300 registered voters is apt to have ever so slightly less participation equality than a meeting of 100 in a town of over 1600 registered voters. Also, the relationship between the length of the meeting and increasing participation equality is a bit stronger for the smallest towns than the largest towns. Thus it is fair to conclude that while a steep decline in participation as meeting lengths shorten reduces participation *quantity* in large towns much more than it does in small towns, it does not have the same effect for participation equality.

With this caveat in hand and given the tiny (and statistically insignificant) differences in participation equality in favor of big towns and the stronger, statistically significant differences in participation quantity in favor of small towns, it seems reasonable to reject the hypothesis that small towns stifle democratic talk. If anything is happening, it is probably that shorter meetings held in the very smallest towns and longer meetings held in the very largest towns may camouflage a weak tendency for small towners to be more willing than large towners to speak (at

least once) in a short town meeting. While the evidence is too weak to propose that small towns promote participation, it is certainly fair to conclude that they do not *inhibit* it. Open, often conflictual, political talk in the context of impending decisions that make a difference is not closed off because neighbors are more familiar with one another.[30]

**WITNESS**

**Political Talk**

**A Town Meeting in Vermont's Smallest Town[31]**

> Twenty-six of the town's 38 registered voters came through the snow to South Victory's school on Town Meeting Day to transact [Victory's] business.
>
> The flag in the school room [unused for years] has 48 stars; a faded portrait of George Washington stares down from the wall; and, on an old globe hanging from the ceiling, most of Africa still belongs to Britain and France . . .
>
> Shirley Lund wanted to be selectman, since Gerard Beauchesne had decided not to run again.
>
> Another selectman, Richard Kerr, a bearded young man in his 20s, was determined Lund wasn't going to get the job.
>
> Kerr has been on the Board of Selectmen for two years. For the last year, he said, the other two selectmen haven't bothered to tell him when they have a meeting. His name was not signed to the official town meeting warning, he said, because the other two didn't consult him about it.
>
> "We couldn't ever get hold of Richard. He lives way up there on Victory Hill and he's never home when you call," Beauchesne said.
>
> Then Beauchesne had a few words of his own to say. "I'm not running again because I'm tired of working with those two," he said. He declined to elaborate, and left the meeting.
>
> When the vote finally was taken, Lund lost the selectman race to George Stanley, an engineer who is the son of a town lister and the nephew of the town clerk. The vote was

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[30] The negative relationship between town size and the percent of the attenders speaking effort ratio for all 1435 cases is "r" = -.14. When length of the meeting is controlled, it increases to -.19. Statistically significant but very weak.

[31] Candace Page, one of Vermont's most respected journalists in the last three decades of the 20th Century, wrote this for the B*urlington Free Press*. In its entirety it received the New England Associated Press's yearly award for reporting. Candace Page, "Victory's Townsfolk Speak Their Minds," *Burlington Free Press* (March 5, 1975): 1.

15-11. While Beauchesne said Lund lost because he wanted to run the town—there shouldn't be one man run the town," other Victory residents explained Stanley's victory in other ways.

Some said Lund's defeat was due to hard feelings in the town over his management of road repair funds; some said it was partially the result of a long-standing feud between folks in two areas of the town, Gallup Mills and Victory Hill; others mentioned another feud over a road abandoned by the town in 1913.

Lund said the present selectmen have done a "bad job." "They've spent all the road money from the state for this year already and the year isn't over. They don't know what they're doing."

The next subject was taxes.

Taxes in Victory next year will be the same as they were in 1974; $2.50 per $1,000 of assessed valuation. That works out to $1 for schools, 75 cents for town highways and 75 cents for the town general fund.

"That's been the tax rate for years, so let's stick with it," one resident argued. So they did, even though the town treasury's balance of $26,000 indicates Victory hasn't been able to spend all the tax money it collected last year.

Which doesn't mean Victory voters aren't concerned about where their money goes.

One item before the meeting required the voters to decide if the town would contribute $1 for a membership in the Old Cemetery Association.

"Now just what did we get out of that $1 last year?" Moderator Leroy Maltby demanded of the selectmen.

The selectmen explained the purposes of the association and the $1 was duly voted.

Then there was the problem of buying a new truck for the town.

"How much do you think that's going to cost?" Lund asked.

"About $10,000 to $12,000," said Selectman Orien Dunn.

"Then I make a motion we pass right over that one," said Lund.

And they did.

And, finally, there was the matter of the town Planning Commission. Somebody asked what had happened to it.

"I'll tell you what happened to it," said Maltby, jumping up. "I'm the moderator and I'm supposed to sit here and not say boo, but I'm going to, whether it's illegal or not.

"We don't have a town Planning Commission anymore because whenever we came up with something, people didn't like it, but when you asked them for ideas, they shut up like clams."

> Maltby was chairman of the now defunct Victory Planning Commission.
>
> "I'm looking straight at you," he said, pointing at one of Victory's 26 voters. "you fouled up the only information meeting on planning we managed to have."
>
> The audience smiled and one woman said to another about the unfortunate voter Maltby was pointing at, "Came in drunk and broke up the meeting. With planners there from Montpelier and all."
>
> "We can have a Planning Commission, but I don't want any dumps outside my house," an elderly woman said, speaking into the dead silence that had followed.
>
> At Kerr's suggestion, Victory elected a new Planning Commission.
>
> Then, with an air of relief, Maltby declared the meeting adjourned.
>
> As the voters filed out, Gerard Masten, whose family has lived in Victory for five generations, said, "mildest town meeting we've had in years."

Where does this leave us? We know that the two key indicators of how much participation goes on in a town meeting and how well it is equally distributed among the attenders are the size of the meeting and how long it lasts. Variables having to do with political structure are weak. The first and most important of the community life variables, the size of the town, has little effect. Table VIII-F summarizes these relationships. The Australian ballot made it into the equation for participation percent effort and the day/night and town size variables did so for participation equality. But the light they cast on the solution was but a flicker alongside the high beams of meeting size and length. These two indicators explained 70 percent of the variance in the percent of the attenders participating and 55 percent of the variance in participation equality, very robust indeed.

[TABLE VIII-F ABOUT HERE]

Before we move on to an analysis of the influence of a town's socio-economic character on participation, a short walk through the data of one meeting in a real town, Sharon, demonstrates in material terms what we have learned about the correlates of talk democracy so

table 8 F

far and how we learned it. Sharon is a hill town between Pomfret and Strafford, which are upscale back pastures for Woodstock and Norwich, themselves well known, still more upscale, classic New England small towns. Most of the town's original grantees and many of its original settlers came from Sharon, Connecticut.[32] Sharon, Vermont is on Interstate #89 about half way between White River and Randolph on the way to the state capital in Montpelier. Randolph comes very close to being in the very center of the state. Those who get around Vermont a lot know Sharon for Brooksies Diner, which is about 200 yards from exit #2.[33] Deer hunting is excellent in the hills of Sharon and nowhere is the White River more beautiful from a canoe. Hill and dale is the topography that prevails even though the original town in Connecticut was named after the Plain of Sharon in Palestine.[34] Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Religion, was born in Sharon, but emigrated out of Vermont early in life.[35]

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[32] Swift, *Vermont Place-Names*, 552.

[33] When my students went to the town meeting in Sharon in 1987 Brooksies was known simply as "Eats." This is how one of the students described it: "It was fairly cold that day and it snowed for part of the trip…so they told me. The small town was right off route 89, so we had no trouble finding it. I woke up just as we pulled into some little diner called 'Eats.' We had a good hour to kill before the meeting so went in to get some good eats, which they had. As I drank my highly caffeinated coffee, I noticed many townspeople all carrying their red programs stopped in to visit with the lady who ran 'Eats.'" (Peter Hawley, "Town Meeting Sharon 1987," (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, March, 1987.) The "red program" was the town report. It was 68 pages long. They change colors every year in Sharon. In 1988 it was blue, in 1990 green, in 1980 yellow and in 1999 it was yellow again. Another student in the Sharon town meeting of 1987, Jane Works, described "Eats" as follows: "Mora, Pete, Wendy and I were hungry and decided to to eat breakfast. Our options were limited but an 'EAT' sign caught our attention. The meal was good and inexpensive, a treat to any college student. We then went to the small red brick building as it was nearing ten o'clock." (Jane Works, "An Interesting Day in Sharon 1987," (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, March 1987.)

[34] Swift, *Vermont Place-Names*, 553.

[35] A bit ahead of the advice of Vermonter Horace Greeley of Bennington "Go west, young man" and far ahead of that of another Vermonter, Stephen Douglas who had left Vermont for Illinois when he was very young. Douglas once said "Vermont is the best state to be born in as long as you emigrate out at a very early age." Campaigning in Vermont against Lincoln, Douglas tried to lie out of it at a speech in Brandon. He'd forgotten evidently he was dealing with Yankees. Vermont voted four to one for a fladlander named Abe Lincoln. They may in fact have agreed with their native son on the emigration remark. But they despised con artists and loathed slavery.

In many ways Sharon is a microcosm of the settings in which most of the meetings of this study were held. The hills, the interstate highway, the river, the lack of a high school, the mix of the tough and the gentile, its position within commuting distance of a substantial market center thirty minutes down river in the White River (Vermont), Lebanon (New Hampshire) area. Like most small towns in Vermont, Sharon has its own smattering of commercial enterprise. In 1999 there were over a dozen small (very small) businesses including a gift shop, a snowmobile repair service, and a fence store (Custom Courts).[36] There were several little manufacturers like the Green Mountain Container Corporation, a toy maker (Bits of the Past) and a maple sugar products establishment (Maverick Sugarbush). The town also had five contractors, two real estate dealers, a surveyor, a motorcycle repairman and a lawyer.[37]

All in all there were 21 merchants and manufactures in Sharon in 1999. Thirty years earlier there were three. This foretells Sharon's clearest match to the greater Vermont. It is a model "dark age" community reborn in the rural renaissance that struck in the last half of the 20th Century. The town's population crested in 1830 at 1459. Then began the exodus to the larger depot towns in the valleys of Vermont and to the great flatlands of America's middle border. By 1950 the population had fallen by 70 percent to 470. When I began this study in 1969, it had began to rise again. Even so there were only 541 people in town. In the next 20 years, the population more than doubled; and it appears it will reach 1400 by the Census of 2000, the highest since 1830 and an increase of nearly 200 percent since work began on this project. (See Plot 1 of Figure VIII-H.) [FIGURE VIII-H ABOUT HERE]

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[36] Not, one suspects, for dairy cows.

[37] National Survey, Inc., *Vermont Yearbook 1969* and *Vermont Yearbook 1999*, (Chester, Vermont: National Survey, Inc.).

FIG 8 H

Such is the community context in which my students[38] recorded the events of the 1987 town meeting which took place almost exactly 200 years after Sharon's first in 1768.[39] The 1987 meeting was held in what one of them described as a "small, stuffy room with cracked paint on the walls and shafts of sun streaming in through the high windows providing the only source of light."[40] It began at 10:05 a.m. and ended at 12:50 p.m. There were 100 people in attendance at 10:30 when the count that produced the highest attendance was recorded. Near the end of the meeting the attendance was 73.[41] In that time exactly 58 people produced a total of 229 participations. The most discussion was on Article 3: "To receive the reports of the Town Officers." It lasted from 10:56 to 12:00 noon. During this time close to one half (103) of the 229 individual acts of participation took place. Exactly half (29) of the people who spoke at all spoke on this article. Selectman Wilfred Moore presented the report and answered questions. He spoke 27 times.[42]

The big issue was gravel. Here is how the selectmen put it in their report:

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[38] Wendy Cohn, Pete Hawley, Jane Works and Maura Mathews, "The 1987 Comparative Town Meeting Study: Town of Sharon," (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, the Real Democracy Data Base, March 1987).

[39] Sharon, Vermont's first town meeting, however, was held (I am hesitant to report) in Plainfield, New Hampshire on March 9, 1862. Aldrich and Holmes, *The History of Windsor County Vermont*, 751.

[40] Maura J. Mathews, "For the People, By the People, 1987 Sharon Town Meeting," (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, March 1987).

[41] When Chip Baldwin defeated Art Pettingill for selectman at 10:20 the vote was 34 to 69. This shows, again, that the highest count statistic is somewhat conservative since there were at least 103 people present for the vote. It makes sense. An incumbent selectman was defeated. This is not a rare event. But it is special. Often after a contest like this is over, several people leave.

[42] My students described him as a selectman "in red hunting shirt." I identified him as Wilfred Moore by town clerk Jean Brockway's excellent minutes of the meeting. I have never come across minutes that report things like the number of participations. Very few even make any attempt to identify all participators. But a careful reading of good minutes in concert with our own data, which often has names attached to some participator identifications, makes it possible to identify many leading participators by name. Town of Sharon, Jean G. Brockway, Town Clerk, "Minutes of the 1987 Annual March Town Meeting," *Town Report*, (Year ending December 1987): 43-45.

> The one problem that we still have is the lack of gravel for use on our roads. We have in past years been able to obtain a permit from the State to remove the top layer of gravel from the sand bars in the White River. We received the State permits as usual, but this year it doesn't mean anything, the State is no longer in charge. This year the Army Corps of Engineers is in charge of issuing the final permits, and they are not giving any out until further studies are done to see what harm is being done to the fish in the White River, especially the salmon.[43]

One of my students described the discussion on this issue as follows:

> Elections for the next few years went smoothly, some with only one person running and a voice vote, others with a secret ballot. I figured that we would be out of there in no time.
>
> Time slowed drastically as we attacked our next issue.
>
> Where was the town going to get its gravel?
>
> There were many intelligent questions and suggestions on this seemingly minor topic. These Sharon voters took their gravel seriously. I guess the length of the discussion, (with no resolution, I might add) showed me that this "minor" topic was obviously a big deal to these people. [44]

Taking the entire meeting as a whole, however, how good is it that 58 of the 100 people in attendance participated. To answer this we need to know what our statistical model would have predicted for Sharon. The variables that matter are the size of the meeting, the length of the meeting and to a much less important extent whether or not an Australian ballot is used. In combination these indicators predict that Sharon ought to have 41 percent of its attenders

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[43] Town of Sharon, *Town Report,* (Year ending December 1987): 7.

[44] Hawley, "Town Meeting Sharon 1987." Peter was a student who reflected the natural impatience of young, college students who find themselves in a town hall in the hills of Vermont when (since the University of Vermont gives the day off) their friends are doing what they think (often correctly) are more interesting things. But his report also reflects a certain satisfaction with (and even personalization of) the town meeting trip that I have noticed in reading these reports over the past thirty years. He concludes. "The day didn't turn out half bad after all. I got to go home and go back to sleep. Also, the town of Sharon, Vermont, was set for the next few months." *Ibid.*

participating at least once. Since there were 100 attenders, 41 of them should participate as follows:

| | | The Constant | Attendance | Time | Ballot Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sharon's Percent of Attenders Participating | = | 152.3 + ((2x – 61.9) + (.0656 x 165) + (1.72 x 1) | | | |
| | = | 152.3 + (-123.8) + (10.8) + (1.72) | | | |
| | = | 152.3 + (-111.28) | | | |
| | = | 41.02 | | | |

It is simpler (and more fun) than it looks. Since participation goes down as the dominant element in the equation (meeting size) goes up, the regression equation (which doesn't know, after all, it is dealing in percentages and town meetings!) predicts a huge and impossible amount of participation (152.3 percent) when there is *no one* at the meeting, no time is spent in discussion, and everything is done by ballot. Silly, of course. But arithmetic is not silly so the equation then adjusts this 152.3 percent figure as follows:

1. For every unit of attendance it decreases the participation by 61.9 percent. Since attendance was translated into a logarithmic base to stabilize its variation, the attendance appears in the equation as 2, which is the "log" of the figure 100, the number of people at Sharon's town meeting. Thus with an attendance of 100, Sharon's participation would be 152.3 – 123.8 (2x 61.9) or 28.5 persons participating.
2. But we also know that the longer the meeting lasts, the greater the percent of attenders who participate. Accordingly the equation adds 6.56 participators for every 100 minutes the town meeting lasts. Sharon's lasted 165 minutes and is, therefore, credited with 10.8 (165 X

.0656) additional percentage points of participation. Add this to the 28.5 it gets for its attendance level and the prediction of Sharon's participation rises to 39.3 percent.

3. Finally we know that not using the Australian ballot helps. Since we coded this as a 1 and using the ballot 0, Sharon should get 1.72 more participators since the mathematical summary of what happens in all 1435 meetings indicates that the mean increase in percentage growth of participation is 1.72 when the ballot is absent. 1.72 plus 39.3 is 41.02, Sharon's predicted participation.

   In short since there were 100 attenders at Sharon's 1987 town meeting:

| | |
|---|---|
| Because of its attendance Sharon should have | 28.5 persons talking |
| Because of its meeting length, Sharon should have 10.8 more for a total of | 39.3 persons talking |
| Because it does not use the Australian ballot Sharon should have 1.72 percent more for a total of | 41.02 persons talking |

Plot 2 of Figure VIII-H displays the results of a similar calculation for each of the meetings we visited in 1987 by plotting the percent of attenders who should (according to the experience generated in 1435 meetings held between 1970 and 1998) have participated against the actual percent who *did* participate. It indicates that Sharon's 58 percent participating was considerably better than that of most towns in that year. In fact it was about 17 percentage points more than we might have expected. In other words 17 more persons participated in Sharon in 1987 than

"should" have for a meeting of 100 persons, lasting 158 minutes, and not using the Australian ballot.[45]

## The Socioeconomic Context

In 1995 Sidney Verba was elected president of the American Political Science Association. His presidential address concerned the status gap between public participation in elections and public opinion polls. (No. He does not see polls as substitutes for elections.) Referring to a recent research project he conducted with his colleagues Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, he says the following: "among people with advanced education and a professional level job, about 90 percent say they plan meetings and give public presentations. The comparable figure for workers with high school education in lower status jobs is around 5 percent."[46] Is this reason enough to wonder if there is a connection between status and participation at a town meeting? Yes. On the other hand, I'd bet that the great majority of people who speak at town meeting have never "given a public presentation." If asked if they had the day after town meeting, they would say no. Nor would I wager that upscale people at town meeting who have given public presentations participate a lot more than their numbers at the meeting would warrant.

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[45] No one who doesn't get a kick out of pressing a button on a computer after 30 years of work and have one hundred lifetimes of hand calculations instantly produce this kind of information for nearly 1500 human institutions as complex and heretofore unstudied as town meetings in Vermont, can understand this glorious enterprise called social science. For me I became a Lewis or a Clark on the high plains of Montana watching the wide Missouri drift toward the Rockies through the gates of the mountains. There is a chance I may see for the first time something no one who has ever lived has ever seen before.

[46] Sidney Verba, "The Citizen as Respondent: Sample Surveys and American Democracy–Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1995," *American Political Science Review* 90 (March 1996): 1-7.

Williston, Vermont, is an upscale community in the Burlington magnetic center. Overhead jets drop out of the sky to land at Vermont's only airport with "gates." Just down the road (in fact the main artery into the Burlington metropolitan area—if we may call it that) is the state's only university, its medical center, and its only commercial television station. Williston is in Vermont's most urban county and has for over twenty years been a battleground where the forces for growth square off against the forces for protecting what they believe is the way Vermont used to be.[47]

Those who know Vermont best would predict that on all counts Williston would score very high on upscale indicators. It does not disappoint. In 1987 (the year we looked at Sharon's meeting) there were 2934 registered voters in town, putting it among the larger towns in the data base. The median family income in Williston was $47,731 in 1990 while the average town meeting was held in a place where the median family income was only $24,736. The educational index (which ranges from 2.28 in the lowest town to 4.31 in the highest) was 3.96. Forty-one percent of the work force were classified as "managers and professionals" while in the average town it was 24.

Up north on the Canadian border things are apt to be different. In the town of Swanton the number of registered voters is almost exactly the same (there are 2951) but the median family income in 1987 was only $29,613. Williston's is 61 percent higher than that. The educational

[47] Actually the protectionists want to protect the way Vermont used to *look* (and who wouldn't?) not the way Vermont used to *be*. If the truth be known, I doubt more than a few know the way Vermont used to be. Those few of us who want to protect both the small town *way of life* as well as small town vistas are called conservatives. The protectionists are called liberals. Neither are.

index in Swanton is below average (2.95) and a full point lower than Williston's. Only 17 percent of the workers are managers or professionals. In Swanton a good portion of the community is bilingual (French/English), a sizeable portion of the rest are Native Americans (Abnakis), dairy farms still dot the landscape, critters own the woods at night and the fear of strip development (like the mutter of a distant August thunderhead) does not register in the hearts of a people with too many troubles in the here and now to search horizons for more.

Will talk democracy vary with these profound differences in the social environments of the towns in which it takes place? In the case of Swanton and Williston the meetings of 1987 were quite similar. In Williston 18 percent of the 188 attenders spoke at least once while it should have been 27 percent for a meeting that size. Thus Williston was 9 percentage points low. In Swanton there were 166 people in attendance. A meeting that size should have 50 people speaking out (30 percent) but only 42 did, five percentage points below expectation. When meeting length and ballot use are considered in the prediction as well, both meetings improve. Williston's lands right on the predicted percentage and Swanton's misses it (high) by a hair. See Figure VIII-H, Plot 2 for the positioning of these two meetings.

Swanton and Williston also ranked low on the Gini index of participation equality. The average for the 1373 meetings for which it was possible to compute a Gini coefficient was 24.5. In 1987 Swanton's was 18.8, and Williston's was 14.7. When other variables are accounted for, however, the gaps between expectations and achievement are reduced for both meetings. For instance, if Williston's meeting is matched against the average meeting with no extenuating factors considered, it falls short by 9.8 points. If it is matched against what the expectation would be with its attendance factored in, the gap is only 5.4 points. Finally if it is compared to

its expectation considering all the variables we have considered to this point that seem to affect the Gini index (including most importantly attendance and meeting length). Williston improves to only 3.8 points below expectations. Swanton's data behaves in a similar fashion as the figures below indicate.

| | **Williston** | **Swanton** |
|---|---|---|
| *Gini* | 14.7 | 18.8 |
| *Gini compared to All Meeting Average* | -9.8 | -5.7 |
| *Gini compared to Attendance Prediction* | -5.4 | -2.1 |
| *Gini compared to All Variable Prediction* | -3.8 | +1.6 |

Other paired comparisons for towns of different sizes based on their socio-economic structures only serve to confuse the situation and further arouse the suspicion that the character of talk democracy is not systematically related to the socio-economic nature of the town in which the meeting takes place. It would be hard to imagine two more dissimilar towns, for instance, than Hardwick and Underhill. Underhill, like Williston is a bedroom community for Burlington but, since it is further "out" it is even more upscale, politically correct, and expensive. In 1990 the Census measures of education and income for Underhill exceeded Williston's. There were also more "professionals and managers" in the work force and the diversity index was a bit higher than Williston's. I would guess Underhill leads northern Vermont in per capita pairs of footwear ordered from upscale catalogues.

Take Route 15 north out of Underhill and stay on it long enough and you cross into the Kingdom and find the town of Hardwick. It is a scrappy little place hard on the banks of the

upper Lamoille River, itself a feisty upland waterway that for years had the habit of flooding out a good portion of the business section during the spring "runoff."[48] In 1987 it was about the same size as Underhill with a population of 1604. This made it a big town in the region. In Hardwick there is a "downtown," equipped with a couple of traffic lights and the rest of the paraphernalia associated with a New England town where the few farmers who are still left in the surrounding hills go on weekends to buy stuff. You know when you've arrived in town. There is a beginning and an end to Hardwick. In Underhill one isn't so sure. While Underhill was able to swap its farms for good jobs down the road, there was no "down the road" for Hardwick. It is a town that took the death of the hill farm to heart.

The median family income was only $18,730 in Hardwick when my students counted and recorded participation there in 1986. In Underhill (where we studied the meeting in 1987) it was $51,746. The educational index was 2.75 compared to Underhill's 4.19.[49] Only 16 percent of the work force were classified as managers and professionals. In Underhill it was 45 percent. The attendance at town meeting in Underhill was lower than that of Hardwick (135 compared to 160) but the talk was much stronger than even this lower attendance would predict. Based on meeting size alone Underhill was predicted to have 35 percent speaking and a Gini index of 23. Its speaking percentage, however, was actually 47 and the Gini index was 34. On the other hand,

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[48]Until a federal grant came to the rescue and provided funds to replace the homemade log booms the town strung across the river above town with more effective but for less interesting flood control technologies.

[49] Studies show that findings at the individual level, which of course could be swallowed up and become meaningless when the two aggregates (town and meeting) are correlated, show that academically talented students feel less apprehension about speaking in groups than do "at risk" students: James W. Chesebro, *et al*, "Communication Apprehension and Self-Perceived Comunication Competence of At Risk Students," *Communication Education* 41 (October 1992): 345-360; Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, Charles H. Grant III and James C. McCroskey, "Communication Apprehension and Self-Perceived Communication Competence of Academically Gifted Students," *Communication Education* 44 (January 1995): 79-86.

Hardwick's percent speaking fell 12 percentage points below the 31 percent its meeting size predicted and its Gini index of only 18 was 31 points below estimate.

Does this mean upscale communities are associated with more town meeting talk more equally distributed? No. There are too many pairs of meetings that contradict. Thetford, a little town on the Connecticut River just north of Norwich, is within the orbit of the Hanover, New Hampshire (Dartmouth College) region. Highgate is up on the border with Canada near Swanton. In 1992 the median family income was $10,000 lower there than in Thetford, the educational index was lower by a whopping 100 points, only 17 percent of the work force were managers and professionals. In Thetford it was 40 percent. But Highgate's meeting was the winner in the talk democracy match up. Under controls both meetings scored above average on participation percentage and the Gini index. But Highgate's positive gap between its expected performance and actual performance was three times as large as Thetford's for participation quantity (percent participation) and four times as large for participation equality.

I extended these sound bites to include the entire sample of 1205 meetings that I studied during the time adequate Census data was available and added a dozen other variables tied to the socio-economic culture of the towns in which the meetings were held. These variables were categorized in the same way they were in Chapter VI. For more direct measures of socio-economic status of the population I used (besides income and education) the percent of managers and professionals in the work force, and the socioeconomic status diversity index. I had minimal expectations for managers and professionals in the work force since it is so strongly related to income and education but I did harbor a bit of hope for the diversity index. The reason goes all

the way back to Aristotle who said that direct democracy would be impossible outside homogeneous populations.

Community dynamic variables surely measure the profound cultural upheaval caused by dramatic post war population growth and immigration into Vermont. This is the source of the most political contentiousness over the period. If there is one issue that ought to be linked to political talk it is this. The theoretical bridge between community boundriness and public political talk in town meeting is much more rickety. Presumably the citizens of towns with a clearer self identification and a higher percentage of "all day" population ought to be more familiar with one another and this familiarity might well produce an atmosphere for increased talk at town meeting. On the other hand such an ambiance could also increase the likelihood of overlapping roles and dampen participation. It is also interesting to think about those places where native Vermonters abound compared to places where they are scarcer as we judge a meeting's amount and distribution of talk. The findings are in Table VIII-G[50] which shows the effects of these and other variables (alone and under controls) on participation when the two size variables (meeting attendance and length) are controlled in the dependent variable.

[TABLE VIII-G ABOUT HERE]

[50]I used simple and partial correlation coefficients. While these are not much use in model building I find them to be a handy way to summarize the aggregate and independent effects of a lot of variables before they are buried in data reduction routines like cluster and factor analysis or disappear into a regression equation. Besides I got into the habit of using them when I was much younger.

TABLE 8 G

It is a wasteland. The survival of the tiny relationship between population size and reduced talk discussed earlier could be important. It is also interesting that the index of socio-economic diversity does likewise. Several community dynamic variables rise from the desolation with a breath or two left in them. But overall the SES landscape is quite bare, indeed. While the large "N" makes these connections statistically significant, they have less traction than a ball-tired pickup. In a last desperate attempt to wring more explanatory value out of this most important construct I reduced the data with factor analysis. Two important dimensions in the data emerged.[51] One was clearly a clean SES measure loading high on education, income, and managers and professionals in the work force. It was also related to diversity and to a lesser extent the percent moving into town within five years of the time the meeting was held. Its most important negative loading (-.161) was for percent of the population born in Vermont.[52]

Here was a single variable that captured everything I expected after watching and writing about the life and culture of Vermont for forty years.[53] Here was an empirical ranking of the results of a growing class division I had witnessed since my youth. An inspection of the factor scores for the towns in the sample for the variable I easily labeled "upscale" turned up all the

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[51]I used principle axis extraction and a varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. A third factor (along with several lessor ones) emerged that accounted for an additional 12 percent of the variance after rotation but the loadings were unidimensional growth variables and added little substance to the original population growth measures.

[52] In Athens, while attendance was not class-based, verbal participation was. During the 4th Century B.C. nobel birth waned as a predictor of participation but wealth continued to matter. Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989): 112-118. Harvey Yunis says that in general "elite social attributes" continued to be "important if ambiguous" factors of Athenian democracy. This had much to do with meeting size which was huge compared to a Vermont town meeting. Because of size you needed skill and very few could speak. The cost of speaking was high. You could count on opposition and you would be held accountable for what you said. Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Rhetoric in Classical Athens*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996): 11, 12.

[53]No, I'm not 90. My first publication was a letter to the editor of the *Burlington Free Press* in 1960, when I was a sophomore in college defending small schools in a state where the fever for consolidation was rising fast.

usual suspects. The top ten (Norwich led the list) featured ski towns: Winhall, Landgrove, and Warren; suburbs of Burlington, Shelburne (a real one) and Charlotte and Underhill (rural suburbs); and towns for the rural chic, Norwich, Thetford, Dorset, and Pomfret. At the very bottom of the scale were hard sledding, gasoline culture towns of the Kingdom: Troy, Lowell, and Irasburg. But the bottom ten included other towns in northern Vermont on the western side of the mountains. Highgate, Alburg, and Richford all border Canada and Sheldon almost does. In central Vermont (east) was Orange and (west) was Whiting. In the south was Athens.

If class matters to talk democracy surely this measure would tell us. The huge majority of political scientists would bet on the SES linkage with participation.[54] I would have bet the farm on the people with the Subarus and Chevy pickups. I would have been wrong. Figure VIII-I has the scatterplots for the percent of attenders speaking effort and the Gini index of

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[54] No one has been more poignant in describing the effects of class status on face-to-face democracy than Mansbridge. Her conclusions: "The face-to-face assembly lets those who have no trouble speaking in public defend their interests; it does not give the average citizen comparable protection." I fundamentally agree. My caveat is simply that what she calls the "emotional tension" of face-to-face assemblies that leads to "trouble speaking in public" has traditionally not been uniformly associated with SES. (Actually Mansbridge never made a serious claim that it was.) Even here, however, I will grant Mansbridge two points. If she is talking about what William Julius Wilson calls the "underclass" of "truly disadvantaged" citizens then she is clearly right. Face-to-face democracy in an institutional setting that features *rules of procedure* that are more or less faithfully enforced *is* discriminatory against the deeply suffering rural poor. The Vermont town, I should judge, has been no more successful in integrating this cohort into the democratic process than has the inner city. But there is a "class" of citizens in every Vermont town with *very* modest formal education and below modest incomes the members of which are remarkably good at public participation–rules and all. It is here that I believe the town meeting is far superior to the other forms of participation. Working class people in a Vermont town *regularly* participate in ways that most Americans of *all* classes can only dream of. Second, I think Mansbridge (especially in her well known discussion of what happened to "Clayton Bedell" (the uneducated farmer who was ridiculed by a lawyer in Shelby), is onto something. As town meeting decision-making becomes more ancillary and tertiary in nature its complexity has changed and its deciphering often depends on formal education, not, mind you, brains. Trucks are complex items. They are often more complex (if less dangerous) than zoning ordinances. I suspect Clayton Bedell would have stood up pretty well against his lawyer antagonists on the matter of differentials and "rear ends." As procedural complexity increases and substantive complexity decreases, I fear Mansbridge's model may indeed become more and more securely attached to variables like formal education. Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, (New York: Basic Books, 1980): 274; Jane J. Mansbrige, "The Limits of Friendship" in J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman (eds.), *NOMAS XVI: Participation in Politics* (New York: Lieber-Atherton, 1975): 261. For further empirical evidence that variations in the nature of participation vary with SES in a way that supports Mansbridge see: Jack H. Nagel, *Participation*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1987): 58.

participation equality effort with both meeting size (number attending) and meeting length (total minutes) controlled. There seems to be a weak linkage between "upscale" and "more talk" (the percent participation effort) while the upward slope in the data for percent participation is weak it is reasonably strong for participation equality. For every increase in one unit of "upscale" the Gini index effort rises about one tenth of a point. There can be no effort to down play the sloppiness of the relationship which explains only 4.5 percent of the variance in the data. Still, given the barren landscape, we have been traveling thus far, it seems almost oasis-like. The combined effect of all the community life factors does demonstrate that upscale communities have more talk, if only on the margin—and a very shady margin at that.

[FIGURE VIII-I ABOUT HERE]

The second factor I labeled "free standing." It loaded high on the index of rural isolation and the community boundriness index and low on percent of the population working out of town and income and (to a lesser extent) native Vermonters and 20-year population increase. Once again the task of inspecting each town's factor scores produced pleasant results. The factor routine had clearly separated suburban rural communities (one might better call them sub "town" rural communities) from more independent, coherent rural towns. At the bottom of the list were places like Rutland Town (surrounding Rutland City), Berlin (bordering both Montpelier and Barre), Weybridge and Cornwall (next to Middlebury), and St. George and Shelburne (in Burlington's orbit). Canaan, a little town on the Connecticut River in the northernmost, easternmost corner of the Northeast Kingdom was at the top of the list. This is as it ought to be.

FIGURE 8 I

You know when you get to Canaan. You know when you leave. You can *see* it.[55] There is a little common in the middle of town and (here) the smaller, swift rolling Connecticut marks its eastern border. Craftsbury, whose own common is so famous they named part of the town after it, is also in the top ten as is Newbury with its beautiful green in the center of the village.[56] Up in the soft apple and hay land of the Champlain Islands the town of Isle La Motte placed third on "free standing" and the hardwood tough, old logging town of Granville in the middle of the Green Mountains came in seventh.

None of this made any difference to talk democracy. We recorded data in 45 town meetings between 1977 and 1998 that were held in the towns making up the top ten list on the "free standing" variable. These towns approximated the full sample average on both participatory variables, the Gini index and the percent speaking. Switch to the bottom of the list and the data are nearly identical. For the 41 meetings we studied held in these towns the Gini index and the percent speaking almost nailed the full sample average right in the center. As one would expect neither participatory indicator so much as flinched when I regressed them on all 1205 cases for the "free standing" variable. The $R^2$ statistics were literally non-existent. It would be masochism to display the scatterplots.

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[55]I am most familiar with the woods of Canaan and an especially remote little trout stream which shall for obvious reasons remain nameless. But one of the nicest parts of a trip to Canaan is getting out of the woods hungry and having supper at the Northland Restaurant. The loggers who frequent the place are as apt to speak French as English, the food is caloric but it eats good, and in the attached pool room/"lounge"/bar/dance hall men and women of the north country get more and more friendly as the evening wears on. Best of all "Maurice's Motel" is only 50 yards due south across the road.

[56]It is odd that Canaan, where I was born (actually I was only conceived there) and Newbury where I grew up would be on the list. In 1943 when I was two my dad left Canaan for North Africa and mom headed south along the river to Newbury. She was raised in Windsor (down stream another 50 miles) and must have fallen in love with the valley as a girl. It's easy to do.

These factor scores and the other more discrete community character variables[57] were added to the continuing regression equation used in this chapter to explain the correlates of democratic participation in town meeting. Three more percent of the variance in the percent of attenders speaking is explained along with four and one half additional percent of the variance in the equality of talk. While three new variables proved to be statistically significant contributors to the percent of talk and four kicked in for equality of talk, only one of these was important.[58] This was SES diversity. It added about two percentage points to each equation. Although it accosts my intuition and a lot of the rough data, the Australian ballot turned up missing.

Perhaps most importantly the "upscale" factor score, which the literature says should be pregnant with possibilities did not survive the competition with the entire range of variables. The faint relationship detected earlier (especially for participation equality, see Figure VIII-I, Plot 2) turned out to be a function of diversity. It didn't appear at all in the equation for percent speaking and contributed almost nothing to the explanation for participation equality.[59] Yet it should be comforting to supporters of democracy *and* equality to notice that in the end it seems to be the case that the importance of status may be in its *mix* not its *level*.[60] Perhaps we should not have

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[57]With upscale and free standing in the equation I did not include any of their associated variables. Nor did I include any variables which in my original inspection did not produce partial correlation coefficients of at least .10.

[58]Several variables received attention only because of the law of larger numbers. With enough meetings in the sample even razor thin linkages become "significant."

[59]The two variables (SES diversity and upscale) exhibited some multicolinearity ("r" = .64). Under controls, however, the modest link between diversity and Gini ($R^2$ = .41) held up (.23) and the weaker coefficent for Gini and upscale was wiped out. (-.01).

[60]Again, an ecological reminder is in order. From this we cannot be sure that the meetings themselves are not totally filled with one status type or another or that the participation is totally dominated by one group. I spent a considerable amount of time experimenting with the way the data are bounded by their marginals and it is nearly always the case that it would be mathematically possible, for instance, for every speaker in every town meeting to have held a college degree and have the aggregate relationship between education and talk appear perfectly flat. I must tell you, however, that my lifetime of observation is in line with the notion that the mix carries over into the

been so surprised that class does not correlate with public talk in the context of town meeting after all. From his personal experiences at town meeting in his own town in Connecticut one of America's leading democratic theorists of the 20th Century, Robert Dahl, recalls: "As in Vermont, discussions at town meeting are not dominated by the educated and the affluent. Strong beliefs and a determination to have one's say are not by any means monopolized by a single socio-economic group."[61] Nor (as I have explained above) do I see any automatic contradiction between Dahl's observations and the findings of Jane Mansbridge. I suspect that the differences between the two could be easily ironed out by fine-tuning the operational definitions of class by adding very small cohorts at either end of the class continuum.

**WITNESS**

**Winking at Mark**

> Mark came to town from away, articulate, poised, and confident. For several town meetings he behaved appropriately. He kept his mouth shut. But then came the mud season of 1987. In the 1988 town meeting Mark participated in town meeting for the first time. He was new to town he said but hoped that was okay. He and his family had found Vermont "just as beautiful as everyone said it would be." (Hmmmm.) He tried to be a good citizen and always paid his taxes on time. And "I pay a *lot* of taxes," he said. (Ah . . . so he was a *rich* flatlander.)
>
> Last spring, Mark spoke quietly to what he apparently thought was the rapt attention of the meeting, he missed work in Burlington on three different days because the mud "precluded" (oh, oh) him from getting down off his hill. And *as you may know* (few did), he said, I have a job in Burlington that really requires I be there. (His half-

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meeting itself. My reading of approximately four thousand undergraduate "short essays" on town meeting is reinforcing. I can point to hundreds of sentences like "This meeting seemed to be dominated by older people." Or "It seems those who talk most are people who must have lived in town forever!" I almost never get something like: "It is obvious that the better off people talk most." Or "You had to have some education to say much in this town." I will say much more about this in Volume II of this study but for now suffice it to say that, while the real down and out and the very, very wealthy are less apt to attend or say anything if they do attend, within a wide range of class division–from the lowest paid blue-collar worker to the well heeled lawyer or banker–there seems to be a roughly equal division of talk. If there is an advantage to the upper class, it is no more than that of the dealer in a game of Black Jack.

[61] Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998): 111.

> apologetic smile bespoke a man of great import on whom worldly matters bear heavily.) Mark concluded: . . . so I would just like to suggest the Selectmen name a committee to meet to determine what we can do to help the road crew with the mud from now on. (Nice touch, he must have thought. No real criticism. Just an offer of help.)
>
> It was quiet for a long moment before Milly Gotcha rose from the back. She is not a down-and-outer, but she is close to it. Blue-collar working person all the way. She had just come in from the parking lot and a cigarette. She didn't finish high school.
>
> "I vote we thank the road crew for all their hard work," she half shouted.
>
> Thunderous applause. Everyone stood except Mark and his wife.
>
> While I was clapping, I tried to relieve his mortification with a wink across the several rows of chairs that (thank God) separated us. I couldn't catch his eye. He and his wife were staring hard at the floor.[62]

## The Political Context

Attempting to tie the knot between a town's political culture and the democratic distribution of its talk at town meeting ought to whet the appetite of any political scientist. But the lack of theoretical tools makes it a worrisome venture. One could argue, for instance, that towns with a more active citizenry at the polls would reflect a civic culture that would result in more participatory town meetings. The theory that conflict spawns action might be held responsible for a link between more partisanship in town and more discussion of issues at town meeting.[63] Or at least it might be argued that partisanship in a community is indicative of deeper rooted divisions that by some other route affect the amount and distribution of talk.

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[62] Frank Bryan, "Direct Democracy and Civic Competence: The Case of Town Meeting," in Stephen L. Elkin and Karol Edward Soltan, (ed.) *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999): 220.

[63] Early on in the voting behavior literature Angus Campbell and his colleagues argued that intensity of partisan attachments were associated with a psychological disposition to participate in politics. It is at least arguable that this would stimulate town meeting participation in those towns where partisanship was keenly felt if (and it is a big one) a close balance between the parties in the town triggered a sharper sense of partisan loyalty. Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren Miller and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter,* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964).

But what reason do we have to ask if towns that vote more for Democratic candidates than Republican candidates have more participation? Are Democrats more loquacious than Republicans? Does their dominance in town trigger something else we can't see which emerges at town meeting? What about towns that demonstrate more support for an independent/socialist candidate to represent Vermont in Congress? Or towns that enthusiastically supported Vermont's ERA? Are these the kinds of towns that will have more participatory assemblies? Questions like these send us out on some very thin conceptual ice. Yet, since this book represents a first pass at knowing about direct democracy, it would seem frightfully silly not to venture out a ways and see what happens.

Not much does. It is difficult to tie verbal participation in town meeting to individual political indicators of culture in a meaningful way. Voter turnout, the Democratic Party vote, interparty competition, ideological intensity, and Vermont's "yes" vote on its own ERA fell through the ice.[64] This was true for both the percent of attenders speaking and participation equality. The only indicator to survive was the Bernie Sanders vote, an aggregation of his support in elections close to the year town meeting was held. This is satisfying because Sanders and his organization did stir up political interest over the face of Vermont. One can easily imagine towns that consistently gave above average support to Sanders having more talkative town meetings. But even here this strongest of political variables explained only two additional percent of the variance after meeting size was controlled.

To modulate some of the noise in the data, I again used factor analysis. Two dimensions were exposed that made sense. One featured liberalism and (understandably) a yes vote on the

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[64]For the operational definitions of these variables see Chapter VI.

ERA and not (it may seem odd) the Sanders vote. The other was silent on ideology and led with the Sanders vote followed by the Democratic Party base strength percentage. Why is a socialist statistically separated from an ERA vote and an amalgam of votes for left wing and liberal issues and candidates? Because Sanders is a lunch pail socialist with deep (and so far enduring) support among very politically incorrect cadres of working people. Sanders' supporters include loggers as well as environmentalists, pro lifers even though he is pro choice, unions, upscale professional people, and gun owning, pickup driving, hard living mountain people, even though he is from New York city and sounds it.

At the top of the factor I labeled "Sanders" were the quintessential liberal *and* Sanders towns, Norwich in the valley and its upland neighbor, Strafford. But also in the top ten were Starksboro where I live and our neighbor Huntington. In the Kingdom were Irasburg, Lowell, and Craftsbury. Between the mountains near the west flowing Winooski was Duxbury and further north still, Elmore. At the bottom of the Sanders factor were high income (often ski related) rural chic towns like Townshend, Readsboro, Dover and Wilmington on the eastern side of the mountains and Winhall, Landgrove, Stanford, Dorset and Rupert on the west. All of these towns were in the southern four counties.

Liberalism scored highest in Norwich and Strafford and a covey of little towns including Plainfield, Marshfield, Calais, and (a bit further north) Greensboro, the town beside deep, cold, blue Caspian Lake where as the century ends the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court plays poker in August in a little cabin up behind the Highland Lodge. Vermont's famous progressive small college, Goddard, is in Plainfield. Ripton was also there along with Sharon, Warren and Westford. The conservative towns were mostly in the Kingdom and all in the north.

Concord, Lunenburg, Waterford, Victory, Kirby, Coventry, Irasburg (which was second on the Sanders factor) and Sheffield are in the former group and Highgate and Berkshire are in the northwest.

Once more I take stock in these two dimensions. Close observers of Vermont's politics would not be surprised to see a Kingdom town like Irasburg cuddled up to Norwich in the top ten of a 210 town ranking of Sanders towns. At the same time (trust me on this) they would place the two towns miles apart on nearly any other factor one might imagine: snowmobiles, John Deere insignia, hound dogs, calloused hands. Yet the factor scores shed little light on the participatory character of town meeting democracy. Neither is statistically associated with the other, and they both have very mild connections to participation equality and the percent of attenders speaking. The strongest associations were participation equality with Liberal ("r" = .21) and with Sanders ("r" = .17).

When Sanders and liberal were included in the regression routine with the other variables with which we have been working in this chapter only one marginal change occurred. Sanders nudged out the free standing community factor score as the fifth variable entered in the equation explaining variations in the percent of attenders speaking. But Sanders failed to find a way into the equation explaining the Gini index of participation equality. Liberal was nowhere to be found in either equation. Moreover, although Sanders was a statistically significant contributor to the percent speaking at town meeting, it turned up no important explanatory power providing only .3 percent of additional variance explained. The results of the final equation are in Table VIII-H.

[TABLE VIII-H ABOUT HERE]

TABLE 8 H

The failure of the Sanders and liberal factors accents two findings that have become increasingly clear throughout this chapter. The first is that after the number of people assembled and the time they take to talk are taken into account the only other consistent and important predictor of participation is socio-economic diversity. It adds only two percentage points of explanatory power. But time and again it fights off attempts to replace it with other variables. This is important because the expectation has been touted from Aristotle onward that homogeneity is a prerequisite for egalitarian, face-to-face, out in the open, communally-structured politics. That diversity is *especially* good for real democracy is not established by these data. That it is not harmful is.

Beyond this it is apparent that the public talk of real democracy is entangled in the socioeconomic character or in the political culture of the towns in ways which defy detection by ordinary means. We have been treated to a labyrinth of expectations denied. The standard concepts failed. The governing paradigms turn up nothing. It was right to worry about the lack of theoretical lights to guide the search. In the hills of northern New England it is a subtle hand that rocks the cradle of talk democracy.

## VISITING THE TOWNS

The raw, almost exclusionary, ability of meeting size and length to explain participation is brought home when relevant variables are averaged for the 51 towns with at least nine meetings in the sample.[65] With meeting-to-meeting variations taken out of the mix the average

[65] The weakness of Census data prior to 1980 means no town meetings studied prior to 1977 (I attached 1980 Census back through 1977) enter the equations. This means towns with nine or more meetings have a rate of appearance of close to one for every two and one half years, about 40 percent of the meetings held. This has been

number of people at town meetings and the average time they lasted explains almost ninety percent of the variance in the average percent of attenders participating and eighty-five percent of the variance in the average participation equality. This leaves little room to expand what we know about the character of talk democracy within the town as towns.

Yet descriptive insights and causative suggestions based on town behavior rather than meeting behavior are valuable. Some of these patterns are demonstrated in Figure VIII-J. The towns of Belvidere, St. George, Panton and Roxbury (see Plot 1) average very high proportions of their attenders speaking at least once. This is because they average smaller numbers of attenders and longer meetings. But two of them, Panton and St. George tended to have, over time, more participation than these positive influences would have predicted. At the low end of the distribution Stowe, Norwich, Georgia, and Shelburne had very low participation because they had short meetings and many more in attendance. But Stowe overcame these handicaps and the others did not.[66]

[FIGURE VIII-J ABOUT HERE]

A town's participation equality can be similarly predicted from the average length and size of its meetings. There are, however, larger gaps between prediction and actuality for participation equality than there were for participation quantity. Panton looks even better on equality than it did on quantity and Roxbury looks even worse. On the other end of the distribution the lack of a downward acceleration of the curve (which was apparent for the percent

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my compromise between extending the number of towns included and making sure I had enough meetings per town (and they were reasonably distributed over time) to reflect the true character of the town meeting in the town. No hard science here, just a hunch I got it right.

[66] Actually that judgment may be a bit unfair. The relationship is not perfectly linear and tails off at the lower end. Taking this into account Stowe looks even better but the other towns do also.

FIG 8 J

of participation) means that Norwich improves its position from below average to normality, while Stowe remains about the same. (See Figure VIII-J, Plot 2.)

The power of the size variables (attendance and length) squeezes out most of the variation making it dangerous to make too much of these gaps between participatory promise and delivery. Still, even a first glance by a Vermont trained eye notices a difference between the towns below these lines of expectation and those above them. It is faint, like the call of autumn on a clear, blue mid-August afternoon, but it is there. Towns below both lines (but especially the participation equality line) seem better off. There are exceptions like Norwich and Shelburne. But the overall finding established earlier in the meeting-by-meeting comparisons is even more focused when it is possible to look directly at the towns. What variation remains after the size variables have been controlled (and it isn't much) has to do with the socioeconomic character of the community. The leveling of year-to-year variations, which presumably are caused by the changing intensity of the issues before the town means that, while the impact of additional explanatory variables may not be strong, the chance that it is a surrogate for other hidden phenomena is weakened. These variables are socioeconomic diversity (for participation quantity) and the upscale factor (for equality).

Their impact is magnified by the regression analysis and presented in Plots 1 and 2 of Figure VIII-K. The line that summarizes the relationship between diversity and the percent of a meeting's attenders who speak at least once is relatively steep. It would be steeper still if it were not for the three adjacent, Franklin County towns of Sheldon, Highgate, and Fairfield. These are all located in the extreme northwest corner of the state just south of Canada and east of Lake Champlain. There the French-Canadian culture predominates, the economy is defined by dairy

cows, and, despite the presence of Interstate #89 which cuts through the region on its way to Montreal (less than 100 miles north across the border), gentrification is almost non-existent. Consequently socioeconomic diversity is far lower here than in any of the other 48 towns. All three towns exceed predictions for town meeting talk. If their data were not part of the prediction itself, the lines would be steeper and they would be even more striking. Is there something about French-Canadian culture that counters the lack diversity and supports the public talk so essential to real democracy?

[FIGURE VIII-K ABOUT HERE]

There is a strong link between the socioeconomic diversity index and the upscale factor (one explains 42 percent of the variance in the other) and is an even stronger link between participation percentage and quality efforts, they explain 64 percent of each other's variance. Scatterplot 2 of Figure VIII-K reflects this, portraying a relationship between upscale and participation percentage that is similar to the relationship between diversity and participation quantity. The Franklin County towns are still clustered but their participation equality does not distinguish them as participation percentage did. Proctor still anchors the relationship with its huge negative residual. Norwich is still an underachiever. It leads the field on the upscale factor but maintains its position well below the line of expectation. But there are differences as well. Panton emerges from the pack with the best participation equality. Underhill and Huntington, although miles apart on the upscale factor, share a union high school and strong positive residuals on the equality of their public talk. Roxbury and Corinth, rugged hill towns in central Vermont, slide down the upscale factor toward the bottom while they maintain their negative residuals.

FIG 8 K

To wrap the discussion up the participation quantity and equality scores were recalculated for each town with these diversity and upscale residuals included. The participation effort scores that emerge thus account for everything we know about the correlates of public talk in the towns. When plotted in Figure VIII-L, they provide a handy comparative map of participation in all the towns, given the handicaps under which they labor, meeting size, meeting length and diversity (for participation quantity) or upscale (for participation equality). To make sense of these plots remember that participation *effort* is measured as the ratio of what was predicted for each town with what that town actually delivered. Thus a town that scores two points more participation than expected when it was expected to score four points earns an effort score of 1.5. A town with the same residual of two points that was expected to have six earns an effort score of only 1.3.

[FIGURE VIII-L ABOUT HERE]

First off in Figure VIII-L (Plot 1) the uncontrolled effort scores for quantity and equality are displayed. Here a town's average town meeting participation score for all the meetings we studied is considered as a ratio of the average of similar averages produced by all 51 towns. Thus Belvidere has the best score on the percent of its attenders speaking with an average ratio of 1.22 to 1 in the 13 meetings we analyzed there between 1977 and 1998. Panton, a quite different kind of small town, has (by a whisker) the best score on equality with a ratio of 1.21 to 1 in the 12 meetings recorded there. Both towns had average participation scores better than 20 percent above the average of all the towns. Norwich and Georgia, also remarkably dissimilar towns, had the lowest scores on quantity and equality. What is similar about the cluster of towns on either end of the spectrum is their size. Strong participatory towns are very small towns which had much smaller attendance totals (while higher attendance percentages). Weak participatory towns

FIG 8 L

were much larger, had lower percentages of registered voters in attendance but higher actual numbers of attenders.

Meeting size, meeting length and the two relevant socioeconomic status variables are brought under control in Plot 2, which by displaying the resulting effort ratios on a grid the same size as that in Plot 1, emphasizes the significant reduction of variance that occurs. In fact the display is so squeezed that its detail is obscured. Plot 3 operates as a magnifying glass and shows us that major changes have taken place in the rankings. Lincoln rose from 23rd place to first place on participation quantity. Warren improved from tenth to second and Hinesburg from 39th to third. On the low end of the ratio scores on quantity Proctor dropped out of a cluster of towns (it ranked sixth) to stand alone far in the rear. Most remarkable of all Belvidere, which had led all towns on the percent of attenders participating when its score was considered in the raw, crashed to 46th when the size of its meeting, the length of its meeting and its socio-economic diversity index were taken into account. Similar dynamics are evident when participation equality is considered.

Explanations for these shifts and the resulting final town scores on participation are hard to come by. Proctor is the only easy one. This is the company town of the Proctor Marble Company, from whence came Vermont's most successful political family, the Proctors, which produced four governors from great grandfather to final son in a direct genealogical march that never missed a beat. The Proctors, conservative yet public spirited in the manner of, for instance, the Duponts of Delaware, ran a pretty tight ship in the town named after them. I have been to several town meetings in Proctor and there is an atmosphere there, not of tension but of efficiency and sense of purpose. Nor does it seem clandestine or "boss-controlled"; it is simply

that the people who attend somehow seem good at the business of town meeting. Perhaps too good.

The other towns are tougher to read. On the lower end of the scale, Norwich is a surprise. So are Craftsbury and Strafford. The fact that Richmond, Williston, Charlotte, and Shelburne are all in the lower quadrant is not. They are all caught in Burlington's orbital influences within Chittenden County. It is hard to imagine their technical ambiance of efficient professionalism broken by the give and take of public inquiry and debate that is necessary for high participatory scores. But if this be so what are Underhill and Hinesburg doing high on the other end of the scale? They too are in Chittenden County. But they are further "out." Saturn as compared to Mars and Earth. Hinesburg is also simply a feistier place than the rest. Underhill is the longest drive in, very close to the mountains, and influenced by the Lamoille River Valley to its north and the little towns and places along its banks. It's harder to forget Vermont in Underhill.

The point is, of course, that the effort to explain further variance when so much is already accounted for is dependent on a fine tuning that requires *artistry* not science. At any rate we are out of scientific tools. What these plots tell us is that the public talk of real democracy depends on some very simple notions. People must have the space (small meetings) and the time. After this, variations are tied in the tiniest way to the socioeconomic setting of the community. When year-to-year variations are removed from consideration by treating the meetings as aggregate town averages fashioned over time, the equations again leave precious little *opportunity* for additional understandings. Bear in mind with the percent of explanation explained in the nineties, a few more people speaking here and there in a few more meetings now and then, or differences in the way town moderators approach their tasks may create the subtleties that we seek to

understand. In short if we know what causes attendance size and meeting length, we know most of what we need to know to predict talk.