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Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How it Works

by Frank M. Bryan. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004.

320 pp. Cloth, \$49.00; paper, \$19.00.

This is the story of the life and life's work of an accomplished scholar, a master teacher, and most of all, a Vermonter. It tells how one man grew up to citizenship in a very special place and came to love the direct democracy that was his legacy there. Inspired by what he saw and experienced, he set out with his students' help to discover the essence of this democracy and to tell others about it.

The result is the best book I have ever read on local government. It is, in unequal parts: careful consideration of democratic theory; exploration of a great range of germane empirical work; very rigorous, original quantitative research; vignette; personal diary; and handbook on engaging students in real social science. The writing, often in the first person, is direct and consistently engaging. The social science—especially in the construction of indexes to

measure the phenomena under study—is creative and imaginative. And I have rarely seen the results of systematic quantitative research so clearly and accessibly explained.

Over more than a quarter of a century (1970 to 1998), Frank Bryan and his students regularly attended annual meetings in towns of different sizes across Vermont and systematically recorded levels of attendance, procedures, characteristics of participants, and types and levels of participation. From this effort, Bryan obtained useful data on 1,435 town meetings in 210 towns. With these data, he successfully demonstrates that size of place is the critical factor in ensuring the vitality of local democracy, as measured by levels of attendance and the extent and nature of participation in town meetings.

After controls are entered for the structure of meetings, the socioeconomic and partisan character of communities, and the nature of the issues before them, town size persists as the most important variable in explaining the proportion of population in attendance: the smaller the town, the greater the proportion. Night meetings (with limited time available), the use of the Australian ballot (removing the necessity to be present to have an effect), and bad weather diminish attendance and participation. Small number of people at meetings, and longer meetings make for the greatest amount of participation and the widest distribution of participation among those in attendance. “Increased town size hurts real democracy in two ways,” Bryan writes. “First . . . it dramatically reduces the percentage of citizens who attend town meetings. Second, town size increases the number of citizens who attend, which dramatically reduces the percentage of these attendees who participate” (p. 167).

Women generally participated less in the meetings that Bryan and his students observed, although their level of participation rose over time, notwithstanding the greater recent presence of factors (for example, night meetings) that tended to dampen participation. And when few women were at a meeting, active engagement of those who were present was likely. Issue-based conflict, Bryan found, also enhanced meeting participation. But here he acknowledges that more work is needed. His report that small-town conflict was most often about policy, broadly defined, is not convincing. At least in rural New York, personalities and even, sometimes, ideology divide communities as much as or more than policy does.

Frank Bryan knows that “the heart of democracy is found in our localities: our towns, counties, parishes and boroughs” (p. 296). What is it about smallness that enhances democracy? Smallness nurtures connectedness between person and place, allows each person to be significant, and enhances respect—Bryan calls it “humility” and “forbearance”—each person for the other. How different this is from the formalistic requirements of equality that we have devised for bigger places—“one-person-one-vote”—requirements that override community and, in the end, almost certainly diminish democracy.

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