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THE NEW ENGLAND TOWN MEETING AS ICON AND ETHNOGRAPHIC OBJECT:
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

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With gratitude to everyone in “Northmont” who helped,
took interest, or accepted or befriended me.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses a reexamination of the contemporary New England town meeting to argue that mainstream Euro-American discourses about political “participation” have become too stereotyped to be useful, for analytic and normative purposes alike. I work at the intersection of participatory democracy studies and the anthropology of democracy, two fields that have had little interchange to date, but whose enormous affinity I establish. From this intersection, I use a suite of ethnographic, historical and quantitative methods to examine how residents of “Northmont,” a town of 1,200 people in northern Vermont, actually practice town meeting democracy, and how the iconic image of town meeting in U.S. culture alternately informs and obscures the ways that they participate. Building on recent anthropological work that has provincialized normative Euro-American models of democracy, I show that those models are a procrustean bed for democratic practices “at home” too, and I develop various alternative idioms to describe Northmonters’ participation. Rather than build to a new and improved overall concept of participation, however, I instead suggest that a commitment to ethnographic ways of thinking helps us to understand that there cannot be any such thing. Taking inspiration from participant observation and participatory democracy as methodologies for transcending stereotypes, we instead are pointed toward a reflexive, interactional, never-settled approach to understanding participation.

KEY WORDS: political participation, democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, direct democracy, town meetings, town hall meetings, New England, Vermont

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INTRODUCTION

The Northmont Skate Park Hits a Participatory Stereotype

James' question to me was the kind that kids have such a knack for asking, innocently tripping on the gaps in adults' collective worldview:

“Ave, can the Rec Center build a skate park?”

As a graduate student doing research on participatory democracy, my immediate reaction was excitement. James was exceptionally thoughtful and motivated for a fourth-grader, and I imagined that he might take to heart an exhortation on participatory citizenship. I therefore warmed up to give a sermon worthy of a civics primer. There was no reason why a skate park *couldn't* be added to the Rec Center, I explained, it just was a matter of getting enough community support. I carried onward, extolling the nearly limitless possibilities of democracy when the citizens are engaged, and I encouraged James to think of himself and his friends as being able to make a difference. “You should talk to the Rec Board about your idea,” I concluded, feeling more than a little self-satisfied from the act of schooling a youth in his culture's sacred truths. James would grow up, I was certain, to become an engaged member of his community.

Ten minutes later, I found myself wishing I'd swallowed my instructive urge. James hadn't just listened, James had *listened*.

In 2009 I was serving as a counselor at Northmont's¹ kids summer day camp, one of the programmatic offerings of the town Recreation Committee. The end of July was baking us far beyond the usual for a northern Vermont summer, so when the campers took a vote on how to spend their afternoon, no one was surprised that "go to the swimming hole" pulled a landslide. As the other kids and counselors crossed down to the river bend, I was named supervisor for a half-dozen defectors, who preferred to stay behind and ride their bikes. Their main attraction was a pair of earthwork jumps that a member of the town mountain bike club had taken the initiative to install a few years previously. For the better part of an hour, this troop of young daredevils careened their bikes into the air. Now, evidently having become bored, James was advocating for an expansion of the jumps into something grander.

Perhaps James already had absorbed the locally prevalent belief that Northmont--a town of 1,200 people with an exceptionally vital tradition of town meeting style citizen government--was a place where residents had real political traction for their collective existence. "If you want to study real democracy," I was told again and again by residents when they found out about my research, "you've come to the right place."² "Town meeting," one woman said, "is what democracy is supposed to be like, and Northmont is what town meeting is supposed to be like." Once a year, on the first Tuesday in March, any or all of Northmont's voters were able to gather in the town hall to deliberate the municipal budget, elect town officers, and set major policy. What the assembly decided literally became law, with no mediating politicians, lobbyists, or bureaucrats. During the other 364 days of the year, the ethic of citizen government continued,

¹ "Northmont" is a pseudonym. I also have changed a few descriptive details about the town and have digitally edited photographs to disguise blatantly identifying features.

² "Real democracy" also is the description used by the leading scholar of Vermont town meetings, Frank Bryan (2004:see especially x, 3-4, 236, 244; compare to 2001:489).

with community volunteers staffing nearly every municipal function, from the Select Board and Planning Commission on down. (A Select Board is the New England version of a town council.) The town's professional management consisted essentially of an administrative Town Clerk/Treasurer with a part-time assistant.

The Rec Center was one of the many instances of Northmont's flourishing citizen governance. By the time of my fieldwork, it boasted a regionally envied array of amenities: a pair of tennis courts, a large two-story pavilion, a baseball diamond, a soccer field, a set of playground structures, the aforementioned bike jumps, a mountain bike trail cutting through the Center's wooded circumference, a wintertime skating rink (of the turn-the-hose-on- and-let-it-freeze variety), a large collection of snow shoes and skates available for free check-out, a small out-building used to host a teen center, and dozens of recreational programs for kids, adults, and seniors. Not all of these features were world-class; the soccer field had poor drainage, the Rec Committee was struggling to keep up with the cracks on the tennis courts, the playground structures had seen better days, the out-building was cramped... But for a town of 1,200 people with a median household income 30% lower than the national average? Incredible. Scaled up, it would be like if San Francisco had a public-access rope-tow to the moon with free jetpack rentals.

The entire operation was the result of decades of vigorously practiced citizen government. At the time of my fieldwork, an enthusiastic community board was continuing to steward facilities and programs with the in-kind and monetary donations of scores and scores of other volunteers. And, at the annual town meeting in March, the Rec Center's successes became a public product in a further way: the assembly of citizens transformed from recreation consumers to recreation governors, reviewing the Rec Committee's finances, facilities,

programs, and plans. The Rec Center's annual appropriation was deliberated, as were any new requests from the board, and citizens also had the chance to bring up just about any other aspect they cared to of the Rec Center's current or potential existence.

With these signs of democratic vitality all around us on that day at camp, perhaps it is no wonder that I was primed to respond to James the way I did. And perhaps it is no wonder either that he responded the way that *he* did. Immediately following my speech's final crescendo, he dug out a notebook and pen from a pile of camp art supplies and ran back to the jumps. Within a few minutes he had canvassed every other biker, and when he returned to me he had several excited friends in tow. "So," he asked as he presented the notebook, "do I bring this to the town office or what?" My heart sinking, I caught sight of the headline across the top:

"PETITION: WHO HERE THINKS WE SHOULD HAVE A SKATE PARK?"

I had said nothing to James about a petition, but apparently the repertoire of populist expression already was ingrained in these young democrats, not yet ten years old. I scanned down the short register of lopsided elementary school signatures, and James added, "I'm sure I can get more when everyone else gets back from the swimming hole."

How was I now to tell this precociously democratic mini-mob that their exercise in citizen advocacy wasn't good enough--wasn't remotely good enough? James wasn't supposed to actually *do* something, he was just supposed to be excited at the idea that he *could* do something. The many reasons flashed through my mind of why he would be brushed aside as naive: *Other interest groups would oppose a skate park. Every spare cent of municipal tax revenue was needed to replace the crumbling town garage and town office. The Rec Center's usual supporters and donors likely wouldn't find a skate park wholesome. State agencies would fight against further structures being erected inside a floodplain. There would be headaches to work*

through with the town's liability coverage. A skate park wouldn't be economically sustainable, not with the competing amenities at the four-season ski resort one town over. Democracy requires more--so much more--than demonstrating that a large number of people want something. It also requires huge quantities of organizing and dialogue, and even with that, there are larger economic forces (economic, bureaucratic, political) that can smother all your efforts. James and his friends would learn as they got older how things *really* worked--that somehow the promises of participation would never quite bear fruit, even in a place like Northmont with a legend-come-to-life system of town meeting government. In fact, the experience of naively pursuing this skate park petition was exactly the sort of thing that would teach them to compartmentalize their celebratory democratic ideologies from their expectations of actual politics.

When the other campers got back an hour later from the swimming hole, James didn't bother to circulate his petition. And when I got home, my daily fieldnotes turned into a rumination on an unsettling possibility: that the ways we understand and talk about political participation might be destructive to the ways that we actually do or could participate. The question that James' skate park inquiry inspired that day, and which now animates this dissertation, is this: **Have cultural ideas about political participation in the United States and Western Europe become too stereotyped to be useful?**

...

Consider contemporary democratic politics across the globe: nations, states, provinces, municipalities, unions, workplaces, corporate governments, voluntary associations, housing collectives, clubs, network-based associations (including many on the internet)... Across these, participation is a crux concept. It is an ideal, a foundational norm, and a technical challenge; for

an institution to be considered democratic, there must be sufficiently meaningful, culturally relevant participation by the relevant parties (the citizenry, the community, stakeholders, or whatnot). Significant parts of the various debates over the why's and how's of democracy can be reduced to debates over the meaning, possibilities, and limits of participation. And in the early 21st century, these debates are roiling anew: international democratization is a signature global macro trend (Sen 1997, Gaonker et al. 2007); movements abound to reinvigorate flagging democratic potentials in first-wave democracies;³ reactionary populist movements, rooted in feelings of political disenfranchisement, are exploding in the U.S. and Europe. Meanwhile, technological trends--above all Web 2.0 and social media--are weaving participatory expectations into seemingly every aspect of our lives (Polletta 2014).

Participation therefore is omnipresent: prominent, important, incessantly talked about. But consider how we talk about participation. Democratic participation is seemingly commonsensical, basic, and self-evident, comprising things like petitions, voting, public advocacy, protesting, engaging with representatives, "speaking up," showing up... But even modest attention rapidly reveals the concept to be polysemous, full of squirrely turns, and at times even contradictory. Definitions of participation and evaluations of participation's quality can differ subtly or enormously depending on parties' long-term or immediate interests, or on their cultural backgrounds. Talk about participation (among both laypersons and specialists) slips among different registers, including aspirational, critique-driven, and technical (Kelty 2017).

The simultaneous commonsenseness and elusiveness of participation has serious detrimental effects. Political efficacy is one casualty: as with James, current participatory models

³ Fung and Wright (2003:40). See for instance: Barber (1984), Fung (2004), Clark and Bryan (2005), Ackerman and Fishkin (2004), Holland et al. (2007), Collins et al. (2008), Gr. Smith (2009).

often encourage potential participants to pull on wrong levers. Another casualty is political morale: the skate park petitioners' bafflement and frustration, when I hemmed and hawed through the absurd proposition that what they had done was somehow the very soul of democracy *and* a fever dream, was the miniature of their parents' disillusionment with American democracy. Current reactionary populist movements in the U.S. and globally can be attributed in part to the cynicism and political alienation that follow from our paper tiger concept of participation. A final casualty is participatory reform. How can practitioners and theorists design improved participatory institutions if they are working from flawed models of participation? The scholarly literature on participatory democracy is experiencing a renaissance, and it may not be too much to say that the 21st century is seeing a revolution of participatory innovation around the world.⁴ While some work and practice has been devoted to stripping down and reconstructing the fundamental building blocks of participation, much has been based on unexamined notions. As Chapter 5 in particular will illustrate (Chapters 3 and 4 will present the same point implicitly), institutional design can miss the boat when under sway of participatory common sense.

Many prior commentators have addressed the fact that our notion of participation is badly under-specified. As they show, it is too vague, too fluid, too encompassing, too cross-culturally variable.⁵ This dissertation shows that an opposite problem is in play too: participation is *over*-specified. When we think or talk about participation, we rely on a suite of hyper-developed tropes and stereotyped reference points. These have enormous breadth and purchase, to the point that it can be hard to see participatory phenomena in any other terms. This can cause us to miss a lot. For instance:

⁴ Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015:45-73), Gr.Smith (2009), Gastil and Levine (2005), Fung and Wright (2003).

⁵ Anthropological versions of this point include Karlström (1996), Paley (2002, 2008), Gaonker (2007), and Kelty (2017). Political scientists include Verba et al. (1978:46ff), Conge (1988) and van Deth (2014, 2016), S.Fox (2014).

- We can stereotype particular institutions as working according to one set of participatory mechanics, when other mechanics might actually be in play. (See Chapter 4.)
- We can overlook behaviors that perhaps ought to be considered participation, but which don't speak to our traditional participatory concerns (see Chapter 2) or which fall into the blind spots of our usual participatory models (see Chapter 5).
- We can misleadingly believe that an institution is working wonderfully, because it is meeting all the traditional participatory criteria, but meanwhile it is failing the underlying purpose of those criteria. (See Chapter 3.)

This is not an exhaustive catalog of ways that participation is over-specified, just a series of illustrations that are sufficient to make the point.

To make my point, I have turned to a participatory institution that is itself the subject of a hyper-developed set of discourses within American political culture: the New England town meeting. As a political institution and as a cultural object, the town meeting is well elaborated in our imaginations--especially so for locals, but even the rest of the country thoroughly understands town meeting as an icon. Chapter 1 will take a more extensive tour of this iconic content, but for now the sidebar offers a few prominent associations.

SIDEBAR 1: TOWN MEETING'S MEANING IN AMERICAN CULTURE

- In film and television, from *Jaws* to *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, town meetings are shown appearing almost spontaneously whenever a community needs to solve a problem. That town meetings represent a primal democratic urge of self-reliant

SIDEBAR 1, CONTINUED (2 of 4)

individuals is driven home by their appearance in the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Walking Dead*⁶ or the “Wild West” context of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ebert 2011, Coursen 1978). Supplanting chaos and “might makes right,” town meeting provides and represents order, justice, and liberty for all. Meanwhile, in the cozier settings of *Gilmore Girls* and *Newhart*,⁷ town meetings are painted nostalgically as something wholesome and pure, an unmediated, uncorrupted politics that the modern world has sadly lost. None of this is to say that town meetings aren’t also represented negatively. In *Parks and Recreation* town meetings⁸ are depicted as ridiculous, shallow, irrational, mobbish, full of disturbing behavior, and easily swayed by demagoguery or bribery. But even here, the characters are ultimately upbeat, treating the meetings as an indispensable and even perversely lovable tool for governmental accountability and community formation.

- U.S. government and civics textbooks use town meeting as an example (or exemplar!) of direct democracy.⁹ Similarly, when political theorists want to talk about the extreme of direct democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, or political

⁶ *The Walking Dead* (2012): In Season 3, Episode 3, the characters have found a human outpost within the zombie apocalypse. The community appears to be not just surviving, but laying the groundwork to rebuild human civilization. There are strong walls, electricity and refrigeration, festivals, and... town meeting democracy. In the background of one scene (approximately 0:33:50-0:34:00), a sign is posted that the camera keeps studiously in frame, announcing the community’s schedule of town hall meetings.

⁷ *Newhart* (1982): Season 1, Episode 3, at 0:11:35 and 0:17:08; compare 0:19:15.

⁸ *Parks and Recreation* actually features public forums and constituent meetings, *not* town meetings. Outside of New England, though, the slippage is widespread. I cannot count how many times I have described my research to someone and received a response like, “Oh, you must really like *Parks and Rec!*”

⁹ E.g., McClenaghan (2013:13), Schmidt et al. (2017:4), Watts (2012:32).

SIDEBAR 1, CONTINUED (3 of 4)

localism, they invoke town meeting, whether as a punching bag or paragon.¹⁰ And on the political side, movements to revitalize American democracy have turned to town meeting decade after decade as an inspiration or rallying call, and politicians similarly have analogized controversial initiatives to town meetings to make them palatable.¹¹

- When politicians want to perform their commitment to popular sovereignty, or when an organization wants to gather community input, a “town hall meeting” is held.

Compared to a bland “public forum,” a “town meeting” suggests authentic grassroots participation that will be meaningfully incorporated into policy. And there is an overtone of American patriotism too. (See Muir 1994, Croy 1999, Herbeck 1999.)

- When Norman Rockwell painted his *Four Freedoms* series to rally American support for World War II, he used a Vermont town meeting to represent freedom of speech. *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*, a popular and influential radio broadcast from the 1930s through the 1950s, similarly invoked town meeting as *the* tool of a free society for addressing public affairs.¹²
- Histories of the United States often start with chapters devoted to Puritans and Pilgrims self-governing in the wilderness--an historiographical trope that makes the town meeting coterminous with the beginning of the American nation. Town meetings then

¹⁰ E.g., R.Wood (1958), Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002:202-207, 241), Schattschneider (1969:62, 1960:138).

¹¹ See Morone (1990, especially p. 9). Here are some examples from my own catalog: Wilcox (1913:3-10), L.B.Johnson (1971:74), Karp (1973:277-301), Barber (1984:273; 1998:85-88), McKibben (2015:xi).

¹² On Rockwell’s *Freedom of Speech*, see Fischer (2005:553-558) and Heydt (2006). On *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*, see Denny (1937) and Dunning (1998:30-31).

SIDEBAR 1, CONTINUED (4 of 4)

feature in the Revolutionary era, as part of the Massachusetts ferment (especially the Boston Tea Party and the Intolerable Acts).

With touchstones like these, even when I am in Chicago or California, I rarely have to explain to people what my research is about. Everyone has a basic idea of what a town meeting is, how it works, what it's supposed to accomplish. And people don't just have *knowledge* about town meetings, they also usually have *emotional investments*: as soon as they hear what I study, they usually have a town meeting story or association that they want to share.¹³

For all its prominence, though, town meeting has received remarkably little empirical study. This analytic inattention has held true even amid the surging interest during recent decades among both theorists and practitioners in a number of highly relevant topics: participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, direct democracy, and democratic localism. Perhaps it has seemed unnecessary to expend time studying town meeting when “everybody knows” the key details already. Town meeting therefore is ripe for applying the anthropological gambit of insisting upon treating something familiar as strange. I use a suite of ethnographic, quantitative, historical, and methods to ask what town meeting actually looks like as a contemporary political practice, setting aside the stylized portrait and the layers and layers of symbolism and discourse--but also asking how the discourse, having been present for generations, is itself part of the practice. My goal is to show that the “everybody knows” understanding of town meeting capture only a portion of what is interesting, instructive,

¹³ I am reminded of John Jackson, Jr.'s (2001:17) anecdote of traveling in Jamaica and finding that nearly every Black person he met had a Harlem story that they wanted to tell him.

important, and alarming about town meeting. Breaking outside of our stereotypes about participation, we find fresh ways of understanding town meeting's mechanics (Chapters 4 and 5), purposes (Chapters 2 and 4), and impact (Chapter 3). These fresh understandings in turn will open the possibility for better efforts at institutional reform,¹⁴ better efficacy of individual participants (no more pulling on wrong levers!), and--thanks to realigned expectations--less frustration for participants.

I must warn my reader from the outset that the results of my inquiry will not include some elegant new definition of participation that will solve the problems that I discuss. This dissertation is a contribution only to the step of chipping away participation's calcification. In so chipping, I also intend to offer an argument by example that participant observation is a privileged method for studying participation (see also Greenhouse and Greenwood 1998, Shah 2017, Park 1997). In fact, a commitment to ethnographic ways of thinking helps us to understand that there may not *be* a better concept of participation. In the Conclusion, I'll argue that theories of participation can be illuminating but can't be comprehensive. The trick is to recognize when one's vision has actually deteriorated from staring too long into the light of any one framing.

The Anthropology of Democracy

The *Ethnology* of Democracy

A central contribution of anthropologists to the study of democracy has been the demonstration that Euro-American participatory concepts do not apply productively to other

¹⁴ Chapter 5 on voter turnout is where I most explicitly draw out policy recommendations from my findings.

cultures, at least not without serious attention to historically dynamic local inflections.¹⁵ In this respect, anthropologists are doing for democracy what they previously have done for other commonsensical topics like kinship (Needham 1971, Schneider 1984, Strathern 1990) or economic need (Sahlins 1996).

An excellent summation of this approach to the anthropology of democracy is offered by Gaonker (2007:16, 17) in the introduction to a special issue of *Public Culture*:

Democracy as a mode of governance is partially based on people's self-understandings, beliefs, and interpretations, and because these are not invariant across societies, different societies generate interestingly different clusters of practices of democracy. One of the assumptions guiding many of the essays is that our commitment to certain normative models of democracy (derived primarily from the Western experience) and conceptual strategies associated with those models prevent us from recognizing the democratic character and possibilities that inform the practices described and analyzed in those accounts. [...] There are democratic polities where certain practices of the people are considered not democratic when they are, due to a restricted, often liberal, conception of democracy.

In a similar programmatic piece, Paley (2008:5-6; see also 2002:473-479) writes,

What becomes crucial for analysis is not just the observation that one form of democracy is normative, but also that any dominant form emanates from and is reconfigured in particular places and times and through particular nexuses of institutions and power relations. Instead of a single transhistorical norm, there are ongoing processes of making or maintaining assertions of normativity amid a field of contestants. [...] Alternative democracies should not be viewed as an array of bounded systems mapped onto places or groups, each distinguished by its own unique configuration and placed in a relativistic frame. Such a construct would logically lead to categorization and the creation of typologies, a project in which we do not seek to be engaged. The emphasis on discrete, contrasting systems would also tend toward positing alternative democracies as both atemporal (or unchanging in time) and mutually isolated. Moreover it would risk reducing complex phenomena to 'distinctive features'--decontextualized elements that stand for and highlight difference. Instead, the point of analysis should be to trace the history through which alternative democratic forms came to be, as well as the directions in which they are headed.

¹⁵ Karlström (1996), Comaroff and Comaroff (1997), Paley (2002), Nugent (2002), Goody (2006:53-54, 247-256), Gaonker et al. (2007), Ch. Taylor (2007:118), Paley et al. (2008).

Or as Karlström (1996:500) writes in one of the earliest anthropological arguments along these lines,

Whereas much academic analysis pins its hopes of democratization in Africa to the emergence of Western-style institutions of civil society and an attendant Western-style democratic culture, equal attention, at the very least, should be paid to the compatibility of democratic reforms with existing political cultures. If democracy based on periodic elections contested by political parties is unlikely to take root, at least in the near term, in Uganda and perhaps elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa as well, the countries of the subcontinent may seem destined to remain relatively undemocratic. But such a conclusion rests on an untenably universalist conception of democracy. Because the democratic project is everywhere emergent and incomplete, the West, despite its historical priority, can claim no monopoly of its current and future forms or definitions.

Pursuing this program, the anthropology of democracy has been a fantastically effective trust-busting operation. It has reclaimed democracy from the claims of a singular Grecian origin and it has pushed back against monolithic versions of democracy, especially the Euro-American fetishization of regularized elections as the *sine qua non* of democracy.¹⁶ It has wonderfully illustrated how Euro-American democratic institutions and norms 1) may obscure the actual participatory workings of local politics if used as a master analytic framework, and 2) perversely may produce anti-democratic results if applied by planners without sensitivity to local history and culture. And the anthropology of democracy has also taken a page from linguistic anthropology (e.g. Gal, Kowalski, and Moore 2015) to investigate how democratic discourses circulate globally, in order to see how both the discourse and the local culture affect one another.¹⁷

¹⁶ Goody (2006:53-54, 256), Graeber (2004:88; 2013:171-186), Comaroff and Comaroff (1997:125). Political scientists also have been pushing against the limitations of voting-centric analysis of participation (e.g., Zukin et al. 2006). For a historical reviews of the “expansionist” tendency of poli-sci definitions, see St.Fox (2014). And see Dahl (1998:7) for a political scientist’s critique of Grecian origins. An example of the Grecian origins claim is Sen (1997:4).

¹⁷ For instance, Karlström (1996:485) writes, “My emphasis is on the complexity and dynamism of the process of articulation whereby elements of Western and global democratic discourse and practice have been selectively assimilated to an existing political cosmology, while also

The risk of this approach is that we will do to “Euro-American democracy” exactly what we protest for “Buganda democracy” or “Chilean” democracy: shoehorn local Euro-American practices into Euro-American conceptual categories.¹⁸ Certainly those are exactly the conceptual categories that are used in local discourse in the Euro-American case, but that does not mean we should take them at face value. As Ouroussoff (1993:281) trenchantly asks, “Why are anthropologists so gullible?” Why are we so ready to accept philosophical traditions and mainstream discourse as an accurate description of Euro-American cultures? When it comes to other cultures, Euro-American anthropologists produce highly nuanced, empirically grounded descriptions, and they attend sensitively to the slippage between discourse and practice, and especially to the power dynamics that shape the discourse. When it comes to our own (Euro-American) culture, however, we rely on the dominant cultural narratives that would be exactly the object of our ethnographic deconstruction if our homes were our fieldsites (Ouroussoff 1993). As Hansen and Stepputat (2006:300) observe, “Much of anthropology has juxtaposed a thick description of the practices and symbolic forms of the exotic other and a thin, ahistorical, if not bland, symbolic representation of the West--as if, say, the nature of modern sovereignty could be understood through a reading of Hobbes” (300). It is this “thin” version of Euro-American democracy that appears in our explicit and implicit comparisons.

transforming that cosmology in important respects.” See also Paley (2008:5-6): “A valuable analytic approach is to situate powerful and non-powerful actors within the same frame, by examining how they selectively choose and resignify elements of a globally circulating discourse.” This attention to circulation and impact has been an important vaccine against the traps that the anthropology of democracy otherwise would fall into: an exaggerated, Huntington-like sense of cultural difference, and an exaggerated sense of the staticness of difference. See e.g. Karlström (1996:495-496, 497-498). Anthropologists are not the only social scientists resisting these trap; see e.g. Sen (1997:12-16).

¹⁸ In saying this, I don’t mean to suggest that the constraints of Euro-American democratic discourses have the same degree of negative impact upon the United States and Europe as upon less powerful democratizing countries.

At their best, anthropologists of democracy have been careful to acknowledge this issue. Paley (2008:5), for instance, writes that “even those forms [of democracy] with dominant status experience a range of variations and disputes internally.” Writing in the same volume, Nugent (2008:23) offers an especially effective version of this point:

In making these points, I would like to emphasize that no ‘pure’ principles of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the like, were originally centered in Western Europe and subsequently ‘altered’ in a spatial plane removed from ‘the West.’ That is, it is important to disrupt the assumption of core and periphery that is implicit in much writing about alternative modernities and democracies. Instead of a core and a periphery, multiple and contradictory versions of democracy, modernity, rights, and freedoms have emerged from within, as well as beyond, Western Europe. (23)

The fact that democracy is subject to political contestation and vernacularization, he notes, “is as true of European democracy as it is of so-called alternative democracies” (55), and he continues by flagging

the importance of ‘deconstructing Europe,’ of ceasing to view Europe, Western or otherwise, as an internally homogenous unit of analysis. This, in turn, suggests the importance of paying greater attention to the multiple forms of citizenship, public sphere, and democracy that have emerged within the European arena, as well as to the political processes that have resulted in some forms of European democracy and citizenship achieving normative status and others being relegated to a debased, vernacularized form. (55-56)

But even when we pack our work with these kinds of explicit disclaimers--let alone when we don’t--there is a continued risk at an implicit level. If nothing else, this involves the sheer imbalance of the comparison. We can continue with Nugent’s chapter as our example.

Sandwiched between the passages I’ve quoted, which come in the introduction and conclusion, he gives a vivid, lengthy historical account of his Peruvian site. Thus, while the Euro-American case is told, the Peruvian case is shown. And this typically will be an unavoidable issue, given the practical matter of time, space, and focus; an anthropologist’s goal usually is to illuminate a particular place, and there is only so much space in an article or chapter for imbedding nuanced

comparisons to someplace else. There is real risk, therefore, that disclaimers will not be enough to avoid the likelihood that the demonstration, “Euro-American models don’t apply *there*,” will re-imbed the assumption that the models *do* apply “here.”

Of greater concern is that it’s ambiguous in the first place whether the body of Nugent’s chapter fully aligns with his bookend disclaimers. (I should say that Nugent isn’t unique in this regard, nor in the prior one. To my reading, he embodies all the virtues of the anthropology of democracy, including the initial recognition of this version of a “West vs. the rest” dynamic. My interest is figuring out how to address the real challenges of fully operationalizing that insight into our scholarship.) In his definition of Euro-American democracy, he includes emphasis on liberal rights, representative structures, and the state/civil-society divide (56n1). He then paints a contrast:

According to APRA [a populist political party], *participation* was a far broader, far more inclusive term than the aristocratic families [who were pushing the liberal representative model of democracy] allowed. Contrary to the claims of the elite, it did not refer to a narrow political right (the vote) that conferred upon a fortunate few the unilateral power to determine the fate of all others. Rather, *participation* referred to a broad set of complex *duties* that ensured that everyone would be actively involved in making decisions about, and in sharing responsibility for, the well-being of everyone else. In its broadest sense, *participation* referred to the obligation of all citizens to come together collectively to determine the conditions of their own existence. (37; italics in original)

This contrast softens considerably, though, if we take what we learn from ethnographies of Euro-American democracy. From Dahl (1961), for instance, we have a portrait of American polyarchy that disrupts the liberal folk-sense idea that all citizens have qualitatively similar capacities for political action. From Mansbridge (1980), we have a discovery of the unitary elements of American democracy, instead of the more pervasive assumption that Americans practice adversarial democracy. From Heiman (2015) we see that spatial and affective sensibilities

dramatically affect what can be considered “vote-able” in the American suburbs in the first place, in contrast to having our focus be on the of votes within our politics.

To be fair, at most moments Nugent is making a historical rather than contemporary comparison, looking at the development of the democratic Euro-American state during the Industrial Revolution vs. the development of the democratic Peruvian state starting a century later. But this historical comparison exhibits the same issues as the comparison to the contemporary definition. Here is his summation of the distinction of the 1930s Chachapoyas social movement from the Industrial Revolution development of Euro-American states:

APRA’s goal in creating these new forms of social interaction was *not* to establish a boundary between state and civil society that would set limits on the exercise of state power (as occurred in Europe). Nor were the party’s efforts focused on creating a public sphere beyond the gaze of the state, where rational debate about public policy could take place (as in Europe). [...] The boundary between state and civil society so central to the liberal democracy of Europe was the target of APRA’s efforts. The independence of what might be called ‘elite civil society’ and the inability of the state to curb elite excesses were seen as being responsible for the plight of the majority. An uncompromised state and a functional democracy were what APRA sought to create. (54-55; italics in original)

Was a strict state/civil-society boundary *really* what occurred in Europe? And was rational debate about public policy *really* the method being in used in Europe? I am less familiar with European history, so I hope I will be forgiven for substituting a reference from the United States. During the Revolutionary Era and preceding and following it, *mobs* were a hugely important engine of U.S. state-making, in competition with deliberative practices; to accept the primacy of the latter is therefore to be taken in by the aspirational claims of the period’s elite writers and orators who were trying to suppress the former (Frank 2010). If we use this actual history of American constitutional politics instead of the stylized victors’ history, we suddenly have a

whole new set of fascinating and instructive comparative possibilities, looking at the respective roles of U.S. and Peruvian elites in their respective state-making struggles.

I'll return shortly to these kinds of comparative possibilities that are opened up when we resist using Euro-American stereotypes for our explicit and implicit contrasts. First I want to drive home my contention that Nugent's Chachapoyas case may not be so far removed from Euro-American democracy after all, not because the former *does* fit into the liberal representative model, but because the latter does not. If we consider what was happening in the United States in the same decade (the 1930s) as the efforts of the APRA group that features in Nugent's discussion, it becomes very hard to think that the state/civil-society divide was a hard or fixed aspect of Euro-American democracy. What was happening? Roosevelt's New Deal. Building on the earlier Progressive Movement, the New Deal yielded new communal solidarities that required intensive new penetrations of civil society by the state. Social security, for instance, was a battering ram through the status quo's division between state and civil society. Numerous fiscal and regulatory policies likewise were predicated on a new understanding of the necessary publicness of many private economic activities. The political energy for the movement, meanwhile, often was anything but deliberative. All things considered, if we take Nugent's final two sentences from the passage above (the one that starts "APRA's goal in creating...")--maybe even the final three--and replace "APRA" with "New Deal Democrats," the result describes 1930s U.S. politics to a T. Possibly none of these effects in the U.S. was to the same extent as Nugent describes for Peru, but they went far enough for the contrast to have to be redrawn in terms of degree rather than kind.

All of this has been a long way of calling for more linguistic precision. Nugent's ultimate conclusion--that normative Euro-American democratic models are actually idiosyncratic, arising

from a particular historical and political context, rather than being universal (22)--is still valid and still valuable. We just need to eliminate the slippage between Euro-American democracy as a *normative discourse*, and actual localized Euro-American *practices* of democracy. Keeping the distinction will productively allow us to draw comparisons to one, the other, or both, as needed. Comparisons to the discourse will be important insofar as it has enormous currency and will inform readers' assumptions if we *don't* draw a contrast to it. Comparisons to the discourse also will be important for tracing--as Nugent does--how local actors draw upon and resist it in selective ways. (We just need to be clear that it is Euro-Americans' discursive valorization of their own democracy that circulates, not a model of their actual practice.)

In turn, comparison to the actual practices will be important for developing a true ethnology of democracy, as opposed to the straw comparisons that Ouroussoff described. This kind of grand ethnological comparison has fallen out of fashion, but the current century of global hyper-circulation may mean that a return is much needed (Graeber 2014:393-394).

The need to rigorously distinguish when we are talking about Euro-American democratic discourse, vs. when we are talking about practices, gets to the heart of why we should do comparison in the first place. Following Charles Taylor (2007:119), I take the payoff of comparative study of democracy to be not the revelation of general laws of democracy, but the acquisition of new inspirations for democracy's possibilities. Taylor urges,

We should turn back to an older tradition that finds its source in Montesquieu. Comparison here does not aim at general truths but rather is the search for enlightening contrasts, where the particular features of each system stand out for their differences.

If we rely on Euro-American stereotypes, whether explicitly or implicitly, we flatten the contrasts, dramatically reducing the possibilities for inspiration and understanding. And if the

anthropology of democracy focuses primarily on circulation and vernacularization, we will lack a strong framework for analyzing Euro-American democratic communities in their own right.

I've already hinted at some ways that Nugent's Peruvian case could be put into fascinating new dialogue with three-dimensional accounts of Euro-American democracy. I'd like to be more explicit, and to do so I'll turn to two fresh examples. The first is from Taylor himself, who describes a case from Russia following the 1917 revolution:

The collapse of Czarist rule in 1917 was supposed to open the way to a new republican legitimacy, which the provisional government supposed would be defined in the constituent assembly they called for the following year. But if we follow the analysis of Orlando Figes, the mass of the peasant population could not conceive of the Russian people, as a whole, as a sovereign agent. What they did perfectly well understand, and what they sought, was the freedom for the mir to act on its own, to divide the land that the nobles (in their view) had usurped, and to no longer suffer repression at the hands of the central government. Their social imaginary included a local collective agency, the people of the village or mir. They knew that this agency had to deal with a national government that could do them a lot of harm and, occasionally, even some good. But they had no conception of a national people that could take over sovereign power from the despotic government. Their repertory did not include collective actions of this type at the national level; what they could understand was large-scale insurrections, like the Pugachovschina, whose goal was not to take over and replace central power but to force it to be less malignant and invasive. (2007:122)

What a fascinatingly subtle departure from the American idea of positive legislation emerging from "we the people"! But of course "we the people" is only sometimes and partially a valid description of American beliefs about collective action. Students of American history and contemporary culture have given considerable attention to fragmented insurgencies that achieve coherent "willfulness of the people" only in retrospective description (Frank 2010, Paley 2008:10), and pluralist theorists have argued at great length that American collective action emerges as the equilibrium point of multi-vector competitions, rather than any kind of "we-ness." There also are powerful American traditions of localist libertarianism, that could be a

fascinating counterpoint to the Russian mir as Taylor and Figes describe it. There are layers and layers of greater depth we can reach in a side-by-side comparison, that will illuminate both cases.

Final example: Banerjee (2008), writing in the same volume as Nugent, provides a wonderful argument against either a purely discursive or a purely political understanding of Indian voting practices. Instead, she emphasizes the carnivalesque aspects of the elections she observed. By bearing in mind the political pageantry and carnivality of *American* politics,¹⁹ we have the grounds for a comparative consideration of how politics and performance entwine in different democracies across the globe. Banerjee also attends to the ways that her subjects avoid overt politics outside of the formal electoral contexts--a suppression of political talk that is both similar and different to what American sociologists have found (Mansbridge 1980, Eliasoph 1998).

Deep comparisons of these sorts of course will require that we fill in the domestic ethnographic record beyond the rhetorical traditions. A number of political anthropologists already have made good headway on this front,²⁰ and they have served as inspirations for my own effort to “re-see” town meeting democracy in New England. There also are disciplinary walls that the anthropology of democracy would profit from overcoming. As my citations in this section already have illustrated, and as they’ll continue to do throughout the rest of this dissertation, the disciplines of political science, political theory, sociology, history, critical race studies, and gender studies already have produced volumes of excellent work showing that American democracy at all scales is richer or more tangled in practice than the stylized

¹⁹ To give just a few examples, mostly focused on electoral politics: McLeod (1999), Hall et al. (2016), Lempert and Silverstein (2012), Schudson (1998a, 1998b), Herbeck (1999), Fried (1999), Weatherford (1985), Dabashi (2012), Carden (2016). Sometimes the pageantry of American politics takes an eerily literal aspect--see H.Friedman (2012).

²⁰ E.g., Perin (1977), Fitchen (1991), Greenhouse, Yngvesson, and Engel (1994), Holland et al. (2007), Heiman (2015).

descriptions even come close to capturing. This work provides a major head-start as anthropologists begin to bulk up the American side of their ethnological comparisons.

Anthropological Challenges to Euro-American Power in International Affairs

There is another reason, even more important than more effective ethnological comparison, why anthropologists need to become more critical users of Euro-American democratic discourses. It is closely related to the foregoing discussion but is worth highlighting. As Nugent, Paley, and the others I previously cited all suggest, the anthropology of democracy is one of the most important potential correctives to the errors and excesses of international democratization. Euro-American democracy has become an exportable product used in (or forced upon) state-building projects around the globe. In other cases, Euro-American democratic discourses serve as rhetorical cover for interventions with uglier motivations. One example is the weaponization in international relations of the “failed state” idea, which has been a justification for “*non* failed” states to conduct military interventions, regime changes, or seizures (formal or *de facto*) of sovereign resources. Another example is the way that a culture’s “tribalism” or “cultural deference to big men” or whatnot becomes a reason why it must yield pieces of its autonomy to NGOs or to other countries or to the United Nations. In other words, anthropologists are not the only ones making cross-cultural comparisons.

In contesting these problematic comparisons, anthropologists to date largely have taken two tacks. The first tack, which we’ve already discussed, is to show that democracy doesn’t necessarily have to look like it does in Euro-American countries to be effective. The second tack has been to question that Euro-American countries are actually democratic themselves--to point out that Americans have their own irrational tribal obsessions, their own

carnavalesque politics, their own magical ideas about power and status and representation, their own shockingly inegalitarian societal structures.²¹ The new third tack that I am suggesting is complementary with the prior two and is simply a less negative version of the second: sometimes Euro-American democracy in reality does not look much like the discursive version, not because it is failing to live up to the standards of the latter, but because it is achieving its work through other mechanics. Figure 0.1 evokes the contrasts of the three different projects through a series of restatements. Calling out the shortcomings of Euro-American democracy (tack #2) is crucial. There is such a thing, though, as a counterproductive level of cynicism. We simultaneously need to be able to recognize (and celebrate) the ways that local Euro-American actors are *succeeding* at creating democratic and participatory spaces for themselves. Anthropologists are in a prime position to help bring recognition to these successes that are happening beneath--and above and to the side of and within the pockets of--the mainstream discourses of Euro-American democracy.

And ultimately the first two tacks will benefit from simultaneous pursuit of the third. For instance, maybe global democracy builders wouldn't be so hell-bent on institutionalizing Euro-American style voting everywhere they went if they understood that some of the most effective participatory democracy within Euro-American contexts does not depend on the vote either. Maybe the hypocrisies of Euro-American democracy would be harder to tolerate if descriptions of alternatives continue to proliferate. As Bryan (2004:54) writes of town meeting, "Perhaps we are afraid that if real democracy offered so much more than the alternatives, we would be forced to deal with it. What then?"

²¹ E.g., Holland et al. (2007), Greenhouse (2008), Collins, di Leonardo, and Williams (2008). See also the suggestion that Euro-American democracy is running out of steam at the same moment as democracy is globally ascendant: Comaroff and Comaroff (1997:126), Ch. Taylor (2007:118, 126), Fung and Wright (2003:40).

<u>1st tack</u>	<u>2nd tack</u>	<u>3rd tack</u>
“Euro-American democratic discourses obscure what is happening in other cultures.”	“Euro-American democratic discourses obscure what is happening in our own culture: they are aspirational or ideological, not descriptive.”	“Euro-American democratic discourses obscure what is happening in our own culture: they oversimplify or ignore the polysemous strands and silences of Euro-American democracy.”
“Many other culture’s democratic and participatory institutions and practices stack up just fine to Euro-American ones, because the former are more democratic than supposed.”	“Many other culture’s democratic and participatory institutions and practices stack up just fine to Euro-American ones, because the latter are not as democratic as supposed.”	“Many Euro-American institutions can’t yet be compared to anything, because we have too-stylized ideas about how they work.”
"Here is an institution in another culture that is highly democratic even though it does not reflect Euro-American democratic discourses. We must highlight and make room for institutions like these."	"Here is a Euro-American institution that is highly undemocratic even though it gives lip service to Euro-American democratic discourses. We must call out shortcomings, pretensions, and hypocrisies like these."	"Here is a Euro-American institution that is highly democratic even though it does not reflect dominant Euro-American democratic discourses. We must highlight and make room for institutions like these."
“Euro-American democratic stereotypes are a Procrustean bed for democratic norms, practices, and ideologies in other cultures.”	“The Procrustean violence that Euro-American democratic stereotypes do to other cultures is especially disturbing given the hypocrisy.”	“Euro-American democratic stereotypes clip and stretch Euro-American democracy too.”

Figure 0.1: Three tacks for the anthropology of democracy

Town Meeting vis-a-vis the Anthropology of Democracy

With that question as inspiration, let us pivot to the ways that town meeting fits into these goals I’ve outlined for the anthropology of democracy. There are several.

First is simple the opportunity to fill in one more little slice of the ethnological record. Town meeting, as we will see in the next section, is badly understudied. Within anthropology specifically, town meeting has yet to make a real appearance. More than 60 years ago, Conrad

Arensberg (1955) included a few pages on town meetings as part of an article on “American communities” in *American Anthropologist*. It was not based on any fieldwork of his own, nor did it cite any empirical research by anyone else. Instead, it straightforwardly recapitulated the stylized terms of the rhetorical tradition, without consideration for intra-cultural variability or contestation. Beyond this article section and my own short essay in *Anthropology Now* (Leslie 2013), the only other discussion ever published in an anthropology journal is Waugh (1972), in the student journal, *Anthropology UCLA*. It is a charming and well-observed account of a single meeting in the student-author’s Massachusetts hometown. It too, though, is over reliant on the dominant discourse and--not unreasonably for a student paper--tries to wrap up its observations in a too-tidy package of received theory.

Beyond being a fillable entry for the Human Relations Area Files, town meeting possesses several unique productive characteristics for the anthropology of democracy. The town meeting tradition was a major ingredient in the formation (see Chapter 1) of the American democratic discourses that now bedevil our understanding of democracy in other cultures (see Sahlins 1996). Understanding the town meeting tradition therefore helps us untangle our taken-for-granted analytic frameworks. There also is the more tangible impact that, for at least three-quarters of a century, town meeting has played a direct role in international democratization efforts: deployed in rhetoric and used as a model in institution-building. This is not the place to go into a detailed accounting, but the four vignettes in the sidebar will be enough to make the point. Thanks to this international circulation, town meeting therefore is directly a part of the story in numerous other cultures where anthropologists might be studying democracy. In many cases only a small part, but still.

SIDEBAR 2: TOWN MEETING'S CIRCULATION ABROAD: THREE VIGNETTES

- In 1947, the U.S. Army commissioned a 16-minute film called “A Town Solves A Problem” to be used to promote American values and interests internationally. The film--one of the earliest cultural salvoes of the Cold War, and part of the ongoing effort to discredit fascism--uses a fictional town meeting in Vermont to show Americans’ enjoyment of independence and freedom in governing their own affairs.²²
- Two scholar-practitioners of town meeting reported in 2005 that, “As this book was taking shape we were contacted by a woman responsible for working out democratic ways of governance in the mountains of Afghanistan. Could we help her arrange a visit to Vermont by a group of Afghan tribal leaders to watch how town meetings work?” (Clark and Bryan 2005:13-14). Something similar actually was carried out fifty years prior: observers from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East traveled to Massachusetts to observe town meetings (Powers 1960). The suggestion appears with some frequency that town meeting could be an inspiration for Muslim countries (e.g., Rotberg 2004, Broussard 2011).
- In the 2000s, the el-Rufai administration in Nigeria launched an initiative called the “Abuja town hall meeting.” As Participedia.net explains, “In Abuja, Nigeria, a new democratic space was created to facilitate dialogue between political leaders in local government and citizens. Through the use of public meetings and a range of media, decision-making processes became more transparent and the scope for trust and mutual respect improved. Most importantly, the efforts contributed to a shift in the city's

²² The setting of Vermont, with its overwhelmingly non-Black population, also helped downplay to the world any sense that American democracy suffered from serious racial conflict.

SIDEBAR 2, CONTINUED (2 of 2)

democratic culture away from the militaristic mentality, and back toward Nigeria's own tradition of communality and consultation” (Participedia 2017; see also Daniel 2016).

- In November of 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama visited Myanmar and met with 400 young leaders in what was purposefully styled as a town-hall meeting, to discuss the shaky democratization of the military dictatorship. As he stepped to the microphone and saw protesters in the crowd, he realized he had an opportunity to illustrate in real-time how an advanced democracy embraces dissent: “Hello, everybody! Myanmar Luu Ngae Myar Min Galarbar! It’s wonderful to be back in Myanmar. Everybody, please have a seat. Have a seat. Oh, we got some signs. ‘Reform is fake.’ ‘Change...’--okay, well, you guys will have a chance to ask questions later. Yeah, you can put them away. That’s why we’re here--for a town hall. See, that’s the thing, when you have a town hall, you don’t have to protest because you can just ask the questions directly.” As a portable stand-in for American democracy as a whole, town meeting thus gave Myanmar a taste of the democratic future that the State Department hoped for it. (Obama 2014, Goldberg 2014, Landler 2014)

The final way that town meeting carries special value for the anthropology of democracy has to do with its archetypal status vis a vis American popular sovereignty, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, direct democracy, etc. (Chapter 1 will elaborate and substantiate this archetypicality in the course of historicizing it.) That is, with town meeting it is possible to study in an unusually direct way some of the core themes of American democracy--even, I would contend, seemingly extraneous topics like race and immigration, though only to an

extent. But I am getting ahead of myself; these points are more effectively covered in the next section on town meeting's place within participatory democracy studies.

Participatory Democracy and the Paucity of Research on Town Meeting

Participatory Democracy Studies and the Anthropology of Democracy: Time to Converge

This dissertation's second major concern is participatory democracy as a field of scholarship and practice. In 2018, the United States (and also Europe, but I do not claim expertise on the latter) is experiencing surging interest in participatory democracy and related areas like deliberative democracy and democratic localism. The past 300+ years of American history have featured cyclically waxing and waning participatory enthusiasm, so the current moment does not necessarily represent a permanent new plateau.²³ With that said, the moment certainly is a peak. Activists and politicians from across the spectrum, from Sarah Palin and Steve Bannon to radical environmentalists and Marxists and anarchists, have been rallying around formulas like “more democracy,” “return power to the people,” and “democratic localism.”²⁴ Participatory experiments have been popping up all over, from participatory

²³ See Gastil and Keith (2005), Polletta (2016), Cronin (1989:9), Morone (1990), and Lockridge (1981).

²⁴ Palin (2009), Bannon and Priebus qtd in Beckwith (2017), Bellah et al. (1985:204), Clark and Teachout (2012), Mair (2006). This cross-spectrum character is long-standing; see Kauffman (2010:112) and Kaufman (1969:210-211) for some examples. See Clark and Teachout (2012:45) for statistics on Americans' greater positivity toward local vs. state and federal government.

budgeting to the Occupy movement and its many afterlives.²⁵ The United Nations has articulated participation as a bedrock norm of modern governance.²⁶ “Participatory democracy” has become such a buzzword that for-profit companies and other institutions with patently non-participatory governance structures and goals can be found jumping on board, at least in name.²⁷ And on the academic side of all this activity, a “small industry” (Chambers 2003:307) has emerged even of *review* articles.²⁸

For those involved in or interested by this ferment, town meeting ought to be an enormously useful object to think with. Yet, as we’ll see momentarily, this participatory icon has been surprisingly shallowly engaged. I also hope to show that participatory democracy studies and the anthropology of democracy (or anthropology at all, really), despite having had negligible intersection to date, can be brought together with great mutual productivity.²⁹

The theory of participatory democracy--a literature that stretches back to Rousseau (1762), Tocqueville (1835), and Mill (1861)--has been greatly elaborated since it reached its initial modern restatement in the Port Huron Statement (SDS 1962) and the work of Kaufman

²⁵ Leighninger (2012:31), Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015:59-68). See also the web encyclopedia, Participedia.net.

Houseman (1986:221) catalogs some precedent experiments from the 1960s-1970s..

²⁶ DESA (1992:Principle 10), Foti (2012).

²⁷ I once saw executives from a state lottery commission explain at a panel on participatory governance that, faced with the need to redesign their product offerings, they had eschewed “top-down decision-making” in favor of an “innovative process” of “involving citizens in participatory decision-making” (Sweeter and Gonsler 2015). Nothing they said helped me understand how what they had done diverged from the standard repertoire of commercial customer surveys and focus groups.

²⁸ These include Delli Carpini et al. (2004), Lupia and Matsusaka (2004), Ryfe (2005), Williamson and Fung (2005), D.Thompson (2008), Maduz (2010), and Hilmer (2010), Pateman (2012), Polletta (2014), plus many, many more whose focus is on the related subject of deliberative democracy (e.g., Bohman 1998, Ryfe 2005).

²⁹ There is one big exception to the “negligible intersection”: anarchist anthropologists have been heavily engaged with the anarchist side of participatory theory (e.g. Graeber 2004, J.Scott 2012). Applied anthropologists and participatory action researchers also have developed insights that closely mirror those of participatory theorists (e.g. Park 1997), even if the literatures haven’t interpenetrated.

(1960, 1969) and subsequently Barber (1984). The theory now has passed through a full round of critique and restatement (Mansbridge et al. 2006, Kadlec and Friedman 2007). Nonetheless, some theorists and numerous practitioners have observed that the theory remains remarkably abstract and removed from the experience of practitioners,³⁰ and many of the most prominent figures in the literature agree that greatly more empirical study is needed of various specific institutions.³¹ The major project ahead is to put a new mass of empirical findings back into dialog with the theory, thereby requiring us to call the theory back from wrong paths or to ask it to expand or redirect its focuses.

This practice/theory dialogue is where the anthropology of democracy offers such promise as a partner for the field of participatory democracy. Anthropology has a century's worth of methodological and conceptual tools for building emergent theories from local practices, and as a discipline its instincts are to ask what is missing in taken-for-granted concepts like "participation" or "politics" (Jo.Comaroff 2010, Fortun 2012). These anthropological tools and instincts align perfectly with the practitioner-driven call within participatory democracy studies, for investigating the norms and practices emergent "on the ground." The anthropology of democracy also provides a framework for the kinds of cross-cultural comparative work that participatory democrats have become eager to initiate.

Anthropology, meanwhile, has made little uptake of or engagement with the field of participatory democracy studies. A crude initial reflection of this is that almost nothing comes up if ones does all-text queries in the Anthrosource database for the names of major figures from participatory democracy studies (e.g., Mansbridge, Fung, Fishkin, Gastil). A similar search using

³⁰ Kadlec and Friedman (2007), Mansbridge et al. (2006).

³¹ Fung and Wright (2003), Mansbridge (2003), Mansbridge et al. (2006), Fishkin (2009).

the keyword “participatory democracy” returns a *single* article (Morton 2014), and only a couple more results pop if we both expand from keywords to abstracts and repeat the search in JSTOR’s collection of anthropology journals.³² Related keywords appear more frequently, at least by comparison: “democratic participation,” for instance,³³ or “participatory politics,”³⁴ or--with considerable frequency--“political participation.”³⁵

As these hits for “political participation” suggest, it is *not* the case that anthropologists have failed to engage with the topic of participation. To the contrary, anthropologists have attended closely to the topic when analyzing things like citizenship, civil society, and political subjectivity,³⁶ and there has been much consideration of participation as an object within state, NGO, and corporate efforts related to development, conservation, and extraction.³⁷ Anthropologists’ theories of “vernacular democracy” also have been precisely based on explorations of participation.³⁸

Rather, my point is that anthropologists are considering participation using different terms and frameworks than participatory democracy researchers, that we are looking at different facets, that we are relying on different bodies of theory, and that we are not engaged with the participatory democracy studies literature.³⁹

³² These results are Kunreuther (2018) and Foster (2008), and less relevantly Osborne (1996). M.Hale (2013) uses the term “participatory democracy” in their abstract but does not re-invoke the concept in the body of the article. Two more hits are achieved if we look at journals that are non-Anglo-American (Linkenbach 2002) or non-English (Joliet and Blouin-Gourbilière 2012).

³³ Li (2008), Jacobsen and Raakjaer (2012).

³⁴ Comaroff and Comaroff (1997).

³⁵ E.g., Baiocchi and Summers (2017), Walker (2013), De Munter and Salman (2009), Banck (1997).

³⁶ E.g., Savell (2015), Paley (2001), Graan (2016), Loperena (2016), Gagne (2016).

³⁷ E.g., Sivaramakrishnan (2000), Vannier (2010), Cooke and Kothari (2001), Hoogesteger (2012), Gupte (2004), Perreault (2015).

³⁸ Comaroff and Comaroff (1997), Tanabe (2007).

³⁹ One notable exception is Holland et al. (2007:195-198), who utilize Fung’s concept of Empowered Participatory Governance.

This is a deficit in two regards, and a lost opportunity in a third. First, anthropologists are sidelined from important conversations. According to a casual perusal of the Social Sciences Citation Index, scholars of participatory democracy are cited with considerably greater frequency than anthropologists who work on related topics. Given this citational volume, and given that participatory democracy is a discipline that already has made significant inroads with policy makers, anthropologists would profit from integrating ourselves into their existing conversations. Second, methodologically and theoretically, there is enormously productive overlap between anthropology and the field of participatory democracy. For instance, both disciplines are very interested in things like how formal and informal channels of participation inform one another, and how power dynamics and cultural differences shape the contours of participation at macro and micro scales. Much value will come from interdisciplinary conversation on these topics. Meanwhile, the lost opportunity is that anthropologists and participatory democracy researchers can augment one another's work, insofar as parts of their work has *not* overlapped. For instance, anthropologists have explored how participatory projects can reinforce macro structures that ultimately constrict the possibilities for participatory, or how debates over participatory methods within a particular project or meeting sometimes already presume important things about civil society, the bounds of community, the global or societal distribution of resources, or other larger political questions.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, given that anthropologists rarely argue that participatory institutions have *no* value even when seriously limited in these larger ways, they might find much value in the robust, multi-dimensional, cross-culturally sensitive metrics that participatory

⁴⁰ E.g., Perreault (2015), Linkenbach (2002), Gupte (2004), Davis and Ruddle (2012), Mogensen and Ngulube (2001). Anthropologists' elaboration of the idea of "anti-politics" is also relevant here (Ferguson 1994, Nadasdy 2005). Chapter 3 will pursue this connection.

democracy theorists have developed for the quality of participation. Chapters 4 especially serves as an illustration of how these two fields can complement one another.

Town Meeting vis-a-vis Participatory Democracy Studies (Another Absence)

Town meeting's utility for participatory democracy studies is two-fold in a similar way to its utility for the anthropology of democracy: we should study it insofar as it is one more institution in the grand catalog of institutions, *and* insofar as it possesses certain characteristics that give it outsize value. This especial value comes from town meeting's archetypal character (D.Robinson 2011:3) and from the fact that it is one of the few Euro-American institutions where political power is exercised in a binding way by ordinary citizens, without mediation by representatives or other elites. This type of institution has been flagged as a particular gap in the literature.⁴¹ Most participatory (and deliberative) institutions have informational, consultative, or at best exhortative functions. Or, as in the case of juries, the jurisdiction is narrowed to a point. Town meetings, meanwhile, pass actual laws, with broad jurisdiction. Perhaps it is for this reason, or perhaps it is the hallowed history, that town meeting is perceived as the archetype of American participatory democracy. The fact, that town meeting can be and is used as a two-word metonym for participatory democracy,⁴² suggests that studying town meeting may offer unusually direct insight for the topic as a whole. Altogether then, insofar as studying extremes and ideal types often provides powerful illumination of more modest cases, town meeting offers researchers and theorists a special window onto participatory (and deliberative and direct) democracy.

⁴¹ Mansbridge et al. (2006:38-39), Ryfe (2005:61).

⁴² E.g., Morone (1990), Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), Schattschneider (1960:138; 1969:59-62).

To date, town meeting's potential has been little tapped by participatory democracy studies, or even by political science and political theory in general. Recent review works on participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, or direct democracy--all topics for which town meeting has great relevance--often have failed to include even a mention of town meeting, let alone a sustained consideration.⁴³ Other survey works reference town meeting only vis-a-vis the historical colonial institution, or they name-check it without citing any research or without saying anything about it. The major political science journals have never had a feature on town meeting,⁴⁴ and even relevant specialist journals have been empty. For instance, the *Journal of Public Deliberation*, now in its 16th volume (as of 2016), has had the term "town meeting(s)" or "town hall(s)" appear in the title, abstract, or keywords of an article precisely once. The discussion in that lone article (Klemp and Forcehimes 2010:24) consists of half a paragraph, three quarters of the way through, citing Mansbridge's (1980) discussion of power and status.⁴⁵

Turning to the social sciences broadly, within the last 60 years the only articles on town meeting that I have been able to find in a first- or second-tier journal are 1) R. Townsend's (2009)

⁴³ Thompson (2008), Chambers (2003), Freeman (2000), Macedo (1999) Elster (1998), Bohman and Rehg (1997).

⁴⁴ This was determined by Bryan (2004:15) a decade and a half ago; the situation has not changed. To nitpick Bryan's finding, there was abundant journal activity at the turn of the century in the inaugural issues of the prestigious *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, and Bates (1912) published a piece in Volume 6 of the *American Political Science Review*. We should say instead that there has been no journal article on town meeting since the onset of *modern* political science. In fact, there is an interesting story to be uncovered about the foundation of modern political science and the role of town meeting as an object of analysis. Key early figures in the discipline--like Edward August Freeman (1882), Herbert Baxter Adams (1882), and Albert Bushnell Hart (1893, 1894:133-146, 1903:170-179, 1914)--were abundantly interested in town meeting, but as the discipline turned away from historical methods (see Lipsett 1969:1-3), it also appears to have left town meetings aside.

⁴⁵ A second article in the journal, Ossoff and Kuehne (2006)'s "Snapshot of Civic Participation in a Small New England Town," has town meeting lurking on the periphery. Their study is set in a town meeting community, but they do not engage with that facet of its government, except to note that it exists (4-5).

discussion of communicative act sequences, in the communications journal, *Research on Language and Social Interaction*; 2) Salvino et al.'s (2011) examination of municipal spending patterns in *Applied Economics*; and 3) my own short essay in *Anthro Now* (Leslie 2013).⁴⁶

Within this same period, if we turn from primary research on town meetings to secondary works, and if we now include books too (but not ones focused specifically on town meeting, which we'll cover in a minute), we find that few writers have used town meeting in a sustained way--either comparatively or by itself--to try to say something about political theory or practice.⁴⁷

To be fair, there can be good reasons to ignore town meeting. Some authors explicitly explain that they are doing so because town meeting's confined geographical range or (assumed) inapplicability to nation-level politics make it uninteresting.⁴⁸ But other evidence suggests to me that such explanations are not the whole story. Most of the reviews cited above have no such focuses that would disqualify town meeting; instead they are general surveys of institutional forms and themes. In other cases, the author's concerns *beg* for a discussion of town meeting that never materializes. For instance, Ryfe (2005:61) remarks upon the rarity in the United States of deliberative institutions with decision-making force, and he therefore resorts to referencing institutions in other countries.

⁴⁶ Three additional articles can be found in lower caliber publications: Kerr (1964), Wheeler (1967), DeSantis and Hill (2004). None are worth digging out. There also is Potter (1957), a linguistic analysis in *The Southern Speech Journal* of colonial town meetings. Mansbridge's (1973) research dispatch in *Working Papers for a New Society* (reprinted as Mansbridge 1976) also must be mentioned; it remains a worthwhile read, since it includes a number of observations and insights that were not incorporated into her 1980 book. Bryan (1995) similarly published a precursor article in *The Good Society* en route to his 2004 book.

⁴⁷ Two notable exceptions are G.Smith (2009:30-70) and--to a lesser degree--Gastil (2008:181-183).

⁴⁸ E.g., Lupia and Masusaka (2004:365), Bohman (1998:419).

At least a couple other reasons come to mind for why town meetings have been so ignored. Is it because they exist in such a small proportion of American municipalities, and among the smallest ones at that? True, town meetings are directly relevant to only a few million people nationwide, and they have little direct scalability to national politics (W.Friedman 2006). On the other hand, scientists often find enormous profit in studying extremes or exemplary cases or cases from the margins.

Perhaps the problem with town meetings is that they exist in U.S. states--and furthermore the places within those states--with disproportionately White populations? I will be the first to say that studying New England town meetings is unlikely to be the *most* productive way of generating direct insights about the issues of race or immigration.⁴⁹ On the other hand, town meetings *are* a very productive setting for investigating a number of other kinds of diversity and difference issues, including gender, socioeconomic differentiation, religious sectionalism, and old-timer/newcomer dynamics. The racial homogeneity of town meeting communities therefore hardly seems like it would have foreclosed interest by political scientists and political theorists.

In any case, if town meeting has failed to penetrate these larger fields, it has not done much better among more local research constituencies--the field of New England studies, for instance, or the white-paper universe of New England's local governmental research bureaus,

⁴⁹ A place like Vermont *is* a terrific place to study Whiteness and White masculinity, and the understanding of these things *will* be of value to the larger issues of race and citizenship (Vanderbeck 2006). I also need to point out that race, citizenship, and immigration issues are not nearly as absent from a "White" place like Vermont as the Whiteness trope poses. See e.g., Wrinn (1997), Housekeeper (2017), McCandless (2009), Goodnough and Bidgood (2012), Ring (2012), Rowe (2008), and Sherman et al. (2004:534-543). Also worth noting is that Vermont's "Whiteness" is only recently established, insofar as large populations of French Canadians and other "ethnic Europeans" were reinterpreted as "White" only during the final third of the 20th century. Previously they had been strictly contrasted from White Yankee stock. On this point, see e.g. Senécal (2003), Gallagher (1999).

state agencies, public policy institutes, and good government organizations. All told, perhaps no other participatory institution has had such a miniscule ratio of empirical analysis to prominence.⁵⁰ An incredible volume has been written, said, and represented about town meeting, but only the slimmest sliver has been scholarly. I'm setting aside the extensive, excellent body of work by historians on the 17th and 18th centuries.⁵¹ (I think it is telling, in fact, that historians' collective interest in town meeting ends right around 1800--as though the contemporary institution and its recent history don't contain comparable mystery or payoff.) I'm also setting aside the essay genre. Some of the most illuminating insight on town meeting has come from essays, and there have been essays that exhibit ethnography-quality empirical sensibilities; nonetheless, these should be complements for the work of social scientists, not substitutions.⁵² In the monograph space there are only a handful of publications since the early 1900s, plus a similar number of unpublished dissertations.⁵³ Of this small number of studies, too many were conducted helicopter style: the researcher lands in town for the single day or week of the meeting, observes the proceedings, conducts some additional interviews, and departs. The exceptions are Von der Muhll's (1970) unpublished (and entirely un-cited) dissertation, and

⁵⁰ I am cribbing this formulation from Bryan (1988b:5), who wrote the observation in broader terms: "There is no political institution in America about which so much is said and so little is known as the town meeting."

⁵¹ *Just to scratch the surface*: Syrett (1964), Lockridge and Kreider (1966), Lockridge (1970, 1981), B.K.Brown (1967), Zuckerman (1970), Cook (1976), Daniels (1977, 1983, 2012), Bushman (1980).

⁵² *Among the best essays and memoirs on town meeting* are Jager and Jager (1977), Jager (1994), Mansfield (1993), D.Robinson (2011), Brooks (1976:135-185), Connery (1972: especially 139-152), Ploch (1987), and Nuquist (1947).

⁵³ *Monographs*: Zimmerman (1967), Mansbridge (1980), Zimmerman (1999), Bryan (2004). **D.Robinson (2011)**, a memoir by a political scientist who served for many years on a town Select Board, could be added to this list, as perhaps could the non-scholarly documentary effort by Rule (2012); although it is unabashedly boosterish, it collects a large amount of valuable material. Unpublished dissertations on town meeting are Von der Muhll (1970), Hixson (1971), Kotler (1974), Knickrehm (1979), and R.Townsend (2004).

D.Robinson's (2011) memoir of having been a Select Board member.⁵⁴ Other than these, a student of comparative municipal institutions has few resources for understanding the relationship between the town meeting and the town meeting's officers, or to understand how year-round community relations translate into the meeting itself.

Bryan (2004:14-15, 43) has speculated about why town meeting is so understudied: there is no effective substitute for in-person data-collection given the irregularity of local record-keeping,⁵⁵ it is not possible to observe more than a few per year due to their rarity and concurrent scheduling, and they are in remote locations that can be uncomfortable to get to for academics. This explanation seems a little glib to me, especially concerning qualitative research--consider especially the large numbers of professors who are drawn to exactly these kinds of communities as appealing places to live within proximity of their university. As an explanation for the dearth of quantitative research, meanwhile, I'm entirely unconvinced. The record-keeping is not *so* irregular, and researchers and governmental agencies have not had to work too hard to develop reasonably effective survey methods.⁵⁶

I don't have a better explanation myself, only the equally glib speculation that perhaps town meeting just seems so self-evident that research seems needless. As evidence, I would point to the frequency with which social scientists use town meeting in titles or headings without going on to discuss them.⁵⁷ I also would draw attention to the fact illustrated in the sidebar: the

⁵⁴ I don't include Bryan and Zimmerman on this list, despite the fact that both live locally, because their inquiries and methodologies are focused on town meeting itself.

⁵⁵ Video documentation of town meetings by public access cable channels has become more common since Bryan wrote. These videos capture many though not all dynamics of a meeting.

⁵⁶ Chapter 5's Appendix C catalogs a number of such efforts.

⁵⁷ For instance: Polletta (2002:26-54; see 30), Klemp and Forcehimes (2010).

complaint that town meeting has been the object of much attention but little research has been getting made and forgotten for two hundred years, like cognitive dissonance being skirted.

SIDEBAR 3: TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF COMPLAINTS ABOUT SCHOLARLY INATTENTION TO TOWN MEETING

Tocqueville himself, as he put town meeting on the map (see Chapter 1), complained that he could not find reference works about town meeting (H.B.Adams 1898:572). Sixty years later, Charles Francis Adams, Jr. (1892a:966-977) was expressing concern over the unrealistic and unempirical assessments of town meeting, and Edward Everett Hale (1892:241) was declaring, “The old ‘town meeting’ of New England [...] has never been studied as it deserves, not even by the men who praised it most.” When Harvard Professor John Fairfield Sly (1926a:444, 1930:126) began publishing on town meeting, he too remarked upon the inadequacy of prior research, noting that most of it “has been of an antiquarian character, and few scholars have viewed the subject in the light of a contemporary problem.” In the 1950s, Columbia professor Lincoln Smith (1955:174) was again complaining about the “recent neglect in academic circles,” noting that it extended back for “the last few decades.” Joseph Zimmerman has made the complaint in two different monographs, 30 years apart (1967:76, 1999:xi). The most recent voices to join this two-century round have been Frank Bryan (1988b:5, 2004:13-15), Rebecca Townsend (2009:70), and now of course myself.

With Bryan, I believe that town meetings actually have an enormous amount to contribute to political science in general, and to participatory democracy studies specifically. In addition to the reasons given above, the fact that town meeting is such an *old* institution is very useful. Fung and Wright (2003:22) have suggested that the purpose of what they call institutions

of “empowered participatory governance” (or “EPG”) is to transform the mechanisms of state power into permanently mobilized deliberative-democratic, grassroots forms.” Much discussion has occurred about how and whether this can happen, with particular attention going to topics like formalization, cooptation, routinization of initial charismatic leadership, the shifting relationship between civil society and state government, and the sustainability or lack thereof of citizen involvement in EPG. Within this discussion, town meeting could serve as a terrifically instructive vanguard, having been imbedded and re-imbedded in the state across 400 years of evolution to changing circumstances. We can look to town meeting for clues about what happens as EPGs become institutionalized and as they weather the challenges of time.

Similarly, town meeting--like participatory budgeting--has a rare combination of having a compulsory quality *and* being of perpetual duration. Jury duty is compulsory, but the panelists have no long-term association with one another. A democratically run non-profit has a perpetual existence (hopefully!), but people will start searching for other jobs if they feel alienated. Similar exodus occurs for activist groups that are run by deliberative or participatory principles. A frequent effect with such groups therefore is that they tend toward one or the other of two paths: they either avoid political controversy, or they self-select to a population with strong commonality (Ryfe 2005:61-63). With town meeting, though, there are high costs for exiting: having to sell a house or end a lease, pack and unpack all ones things, lose proximity to a social circle and to relatives, uproot kids from their school and their own social circle, lose connection to a place where one’s family might have been rooted for generations, etc. Because town meeting thus strongly forces community members to remain together and resolve their disagreements, town meetings can teach us about reconciliative processes that may be useful for other participatory institutions. On the flip side of the same coin, town meeting might be a valuable

cautionary tale, as we learn about how disagreement is at risk of being squelched when a deliberative institution has such an attenuated exit option for its members (see Mansbridge 1980).

Another point worth noting is that town meeting has had a modest historical role in the development of contemporary participatory democracy in the United States: during the second half of the 20th century, town meeting was an occasional talking point for the movements' thinkers (Ja. Miller 1987:94). This ancestry is a further reason for town meeting to be relevant to the field of participatory democracy.

Finally, for participatory advocates specifically, one further benefit of studying town meeting is its distinctly patriotic flavor. Unlike participatory budgeting (with its origins in Brazilian class struggle) or the many participatory institutions with roots in European anarchism, socialism, or democratic socialism (e.g. planning cells), town meetings are much harder to see as antithetical to the American obsession with individual rights. Critics call town meeting many things, but it's hard to charge it with not fitting American needs or values. Town meeting thus might help make participatory democracy palatable to people who otherwise might remain extremely skeptical.

Bootstrapping a Scholarly Literature on Town Meeting

An additional goal of this dissertation is to use footnotes and citational practices to bootstrap into existence a scholarly literature on town meeting. There is not currently a scholarly conversation on town meeting, only 1) a few isolated voices (who don't talk terribly tightly even among themselves), 2) a number of unpublished, forgotten, or overlooked works (some of which have flown beneath the radar even of town meeting specialists like Bryan, Zimmerman, and

Townsend), and 3) a tremendous amount of empirical insight buried within a vast non-scholarly literature. My goal is to pick up these conversational snippets and lost or isolated voices, to amplify them, and to script them into an artificially cohesive scholarly conversation. Inorganic as it may be, such an assemblage nonetheless will give a significant headstart to future scholarly conversation about town meeting. It will save a number of wheels from having to be reinvented. It will put lost findings back into circulation. It will expand the universe of citational possibilities for future analysts, who currently draw from the same pool of go-to references. It will help map which topics already have received considerable analytic attention vs. where the gaps are. Relatedly, it will inject various bits of little-known trivia, hopefully piquing the interest of researchers or enthusiasts to follow up more systematically, and in general demonstrating how much fascinating material lies beyond the usual, endlessly reiterated town meeting tropes. It will historicize the various things that have been said about town meeting--we'll be able to see when conceptual fragments or turns of phrase originated and how they have carried into the present, whether straightforwardly or in zigs and zags, and in other cases we'll be able to compare current tropes to older ways of describing town meeting that have fallen out of circulation.

In going out of my way to cram in invocations of other works and capsule descriptions of related and semi-related topics, I realize that I often stray beyond the boundaries of scholarly good taste. I know that I will be vulnerable to charges that I am trying to parade erudition or pad my bibliography, or that I possess the impulse-control of a child (“Ooh! This fact makes me think of this other fact that I want to share with you RIGHT NOW!!”). I hope my readers will indulge this practice, knowing that it has all the above purposes. To make these thickets of citation more easily skimmable, I've adopted the typographical device of presenting them in a visually distinct smaller typeface.

Town Meeting as an Institution

Prevalence

How prevalent is the town meeting in the United States? Most surveys have reported only a few hundred municipalities nationwide, but these have excluded municipalities below a certain population threshold,⁵⁸ and town meetings are most frequently practiced in precisely those communities that fall below those thresholds. My own comprehensive survey of New England municipalities finds slightly more than 1,200 practicing any form of town meeting: 116 using the representative form,⁵⁹ and 1,089 using the traditional “open” meetings (either in pure form or as some sort of hybrid with balloting). Figure 0.2 gives detailed breakdowns. New England town meetings therefore make up 3.1% of the approximately 39,000 general-purpose local governments in the United States.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ For instance, Folz and French (2005:16) look at municipalities of 2,500 people and above. K.Nelson (2002:2) does not specify her sampling threshold but is clearly using one, as is apparent from her New England numbers: she found that only 49.2% of New England municipalities use town meeting, whereas my finding is 80.2%. The 10-15 years between our data sets cannot be responsible for the discrepancy, given the magnitude and given the fact that the trend is actually in the other direction.

⁵⁹ The representative town meeting was devised as a way to retain town meetings in towns that have gotten too big for the traditional “open” town meeting. An RTM is essentially a representative assembly, with each neighborhood sending a certain number of delegates. Other residents still may attend and speak, but only the elected delegates vote. Most towns that practice RTM also have methods in place for the full citizenry to be able to overturn the meeting’s decisions within a certain window. For more on RTMs, see Zimmerman (1999:139-162), Gere (1984:47-66).

⁶⁰ The 2012 Census of Governments (Hogue 2013) tallied 38,910 general-purpose municipal governments. This figure includes municipalities, towns/townships, and counties (where those are the primary unit of local governance) but *not* special-purpose governments (e.g., for schools) and district governments (e.g., utilities, mosquito-control, etc.).

	CT		MA		ME		NH		RI		VT		all New England	
year of data			2017		2017		2010*		2017		2011		2011-2017	
total municipalities	168	100%	351	100%	405	100%	234	100%	39	100%	246	100%	1443	100%
open town meeting	103	61%	259	74%	343	85%	144	62%	0	0%	65	26%	914	63%
some questions by open town meeting, some by ballot	0	0%	0	0%	20	5%	0	0%	17	44%	111	45%	148	10%
SB2 ballot	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	70	30%	0	0%	0	0%	70	5%
representative town meeting	8	5%	36	10%	1	0.2%	0	0%	0	0%	1	0.4%	46	3%
Australian ballot	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	60	24%	60	4%
mayor or council variants	38	23%	0	0%	41	10%	7	3%	14	36%	0	0%	100	7%
city government	19	11%	56	16%		0%	13	6%	8	21%	9	4%	105	7%
source			MaMA 2017		MeMA 2017		+ NHDRA 2016		RI.gov		VTSoS data set, augmented by looking at warrants			

*SB2 data is from 2016

Figure 0.2: Prevalence of town meetings in New England

It is important to note, however, that town meetings also are practiced in multiple Midwestern states, including Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Town meeting also has a forgotten history of having been practiced in a number of additional states, and in Canada. With Illinois alone having more than 1,400+ town meeting municipalities,⁶¹ Midwestern town meetings actually substantially outnumber those in New England. This fact has been so entirely lost in both popular narrative and scholarly/practitioner discourse that it is worth saying a second time: *New England actually is home to a minority of the United States' town meetings*. While it is true that town meetings in these other states do not possess similarly robust lawmaking powers (Meadows 2013)--in most, in fact, the powers range

⁶¹ Owens (2013). I am grateful to Township Officials of Illinois and to Illinois State Archivist Karl Moore for assistance learning about Illinois township meetings.

from minor to trivial--they have clear kinship with their more famous, more empowered New England cousins. To date, almost nothing has been written about Midwestern town meetings, so documentary and comparative projects are long overdue. I regret that my own New England focus is contributing further to New England's monopoly on town meeting discourse, but I at least can assemble some initial resources for anyone who would like to resist the trend. (See sidebar.)

SIDEBAR 4: TOWN MEETING BEYOND NEW ENGLAND

States with contemporary town meeting traditions include:

- Illinois: See Presecky (2000), Meadows (2013), ComPortOne (n.d.). See also Morrill (1900:180-187) for historical description.
- Iowa: See Zacharakis-Jutz (2001), Poulise (2007).
- Minnesota: See MAoT (2018, 2015), Lake Vermilion (2017). There also is useful annual coverage in the *Park Rapids Enterprise*.
- Montana: See ACIR (1975:12); Lopach and McKinsey (1975:156-165). Note, though, that as of 1986, no Montana municipalities had taken advantage of the town meeting provisions (Zimmerman 1986:32).
- Nebraska: See NL (n.d.).
- South Dakota: See Hendrickson (1994), New Era (2007:7).
- Wisconsin: See Nichols (2000), Turonie (2014).

States that no longer practice town meetings but that once did include:

- Kansas: See Howard (1889:168n1 continued).
- Maryland: In the post-Civil War reorganization of Southern government, there was a brief, failed push in Maryland to adopt town meetings per the New England model (Myers 1901:433).
- Michigan: See Howard (1889:162-167).
- Missouri: See LotSoM (1872:186-189).
- Nebraska: See Howard (1889:162-167).
- New Jersey: See Morrison (1940)
- New York: See Middleton and Lombard (2011:450), Howard (1889:162-167)
- North Dakota: See Howard (1889:162-168).
- Ohio: See Howard (1889:167n1).
- Ontario: See Ontario History (1951, 1957).
- Pennsylvania: See Howard (1889:167n1). Cf. H. James (1921:275-276).
- Washington: See Price (1895:476-506).

Altogether, town meeting therefore is practiced at minimum in 7% of all U.S. municipalities, and perhaps as many as 10%. This range is based on my preliminary estimates of the prevalence of town meetings in Midwestern states, added to the definite number from New England.

Description

How do town meetings work? What happens at them?

The following is a portrait of Northmont. As we proceed, I'll call out key ways that other Vermont towns diverge from Northmont. For a description of contemporary town meetings in Vermont in general, the best sources are Bryan (2004) and Zimmerman (1999:83-102). Town meetings in other states follow roughly the outline of those in Vermont, although there are important variations in detail.⁶²

Northmont's annual meeting happens on the first Tuesday in March, at 9:00 in the morning.⁶³ Additional "special" meetings can be called at any point during the year to address

⁶² Zimmerman (1999) provides comparative descriptions of town meetings in all six New England states. See also Rule (2012) with a focus on New Hampshire, and D.Robinson (2011) on Massachusetts. Here are some of the biggest differences between Vermont and other states:

- Rhode Island's "Financial Town Meeting" has authority over a smaller range of topics.
- Many New Hampshire towns use the "SB2" form of town meeting: the assembly does not pass legislation, it merely deliberates the wording of questions that subsequently will be posed by ballot to the whole town several weeks later.
- The representative town meeting is much more prevalent in other states, especially Massachusetts. Vermont has only one of these, in Brattleboro.
- The traditional date of meetings differs in different states. Evening meetings also can be more common.
- The meeting will be scheduled to span multiple nights in some other states.

⁶³ The morning of the first Tuesday is traditional. Some towns have moved their meetings to evenings or to the weekend in search of better turnout. Moving the meeting does not produce a lasting improvement--and seems possibly even to have a negative effect--though it may affect the *composition* of attendees (Bryan 2004:90-92, 98, 197-199, 67n22).

particular issues, but these tend to be rare in Vermont; Northmont hasn't needed one in more than a decade. The meeting happens in the town hall on Main Street. Someday, if Northmont continues growing, the meeting location might have to be switched to the school gymnasium, as many towns have done. For now, though, the town hall remains a comfortable fit. It is a well-trod space for most participants. Across the year, many other community and private events also happen there: dances, dinners, children's' activities, fundraisers, art shows, performances, lectures, holiday events, weddings, parties... As R.Walker (2009) observes, the resonance of these other activities transforms town halls into "temples of a sort of civic discourse that runs parallel to, and presumably informs, official channels."

There is no pomp or grandeur to this space. It's a worn and rickety building, with much local labor and love having gone into keeping it usable. The accommodations are strictly functional. Every seat in the house consists of a metal folding chair--some people bring cushions for themselves from home. The Select Board and Town Clerk sit at folding tables, and the moderator's podium is a boxy particleboard affair. The amount of heat that can be coaxed out of the furnace keeps the drafty space just shy of comfortable; people tend to keep their winter layers on.

The Select Board sits at a plastic folding table at the front of the room, stage-right, facing toward the assembly. A mirroring table on stage-left houses the Town Clerk and one or two helpers. The moderator's podium stands between them. Beyond these placements, there is no hierarchy in the arrangement of the room.⁶⁴ Some of Northmont's most influential speakers do like to sit at the front of the room; an equal number prefer various spots off to the side and in the back.

⁶⁴ See Crane (1941:293).

No quorum requirement exists in Vermont,⁶⁵ and Northmont's meetings over the past decade have ranged from 8.3% to 16.6% turnout (average: 11.8%).⁶⁶ (See Chapter 5 for contextualization and discussion of this figure, which at first glance seems alarmingly low.) Attendance almost always peaks an hour or two into the meeting, then trickles away modestly or drastically (depending on the year) as the hours drag on.⁶⁷ Given this trickle-out effect, and given the year to year variability of peak turnout, Northmont's assembly at any one moment has ranged from 45 to 124 people. (For context, this is out of an adult population of 950.)

Participants skew heavily toward older residents but otherwise seem to be a fair representation of the community. See Chapter 5 for further discussion of turnout demographics. Perhaps 40% of the assembly in an average year will be composed of clockwork attendees who come every year and who often even sit (or stand) in a habitual spot. An equal portion of the assembly is comprised of semi-regular attendees--people who often come but whose absence in any given year isn't necessarily surprising. And finally there is a smaller portion of sporadic or first-time turnouts. Cutting across these categories, people who attend town meeting tend to be highly active (or soon become so) in other areas of the town's formal and informal community life.⁶⁸

Northmont's meetings have tended toward the quick. Averaging 3.5 hours, meetings have not required lunch breaks. Even the longest have let out by 2pm.

⁶⁵ Massachusetts has a modest quorum requirement (Zimmerman 1967:38, Cunningham 1959). Note, though, that the quorum requirements may exacerbate the already skewed demographics of town meeting attendance. See Zimmerman (1967:40) for an example of how, when town officials "beat the bush" for the necessary additional bodies, they turn first to calling their friends or fellow officials--radioing in the fire department members, for instance.

⁶⁶ These figures are for total cumulative attendees, *not* peak attendance by head count. For the latter, turnout has ranged from 6.9% to 12.7% (average: 10.2%). See Chapter 5 for discussion.

⁶⁷ See Chapter 5.

⁶⁸ Ossoff and Kuehne (2006:10), Hypes (1927:35-37).

In legal terms, everything that happens at town meeting is an emanation from the state legislature. Vermont is not a home-rule state, meaning that municipalities are not sovereign. Rather, by Dillon's Rule, the authority of towns to legislate is granted by the state legislature.⁶⁹

The major topics of the meeting include setting the tax rate and approving or rejecting the annual town and school budgets,⁷⁰ with or without amendment; electing officers; setting officer salaries; approving or rejecting certain kinds of town policy, including zoning; granting or denying funding requests from local social service agencies; deciding whether to authorize the issuance of town bonds; and addressing whatever ad hoc questions have arisen for a particular year. In many years there also is one or two "Social Issue Resolutions" (SIRs), enabling the town to weigh in with an opinion or call to action concerning statewide or national affairs. (Most famously, in 1974, several towns including Thetford passed SIRs impeaching Richard Nixon.⁷¹) The assembly has binding lawmaking power over all these issues, but its legislation is confined to the topics ("articles") that have been placed on the agenda (the "warning" or "warrant"). The "warning" is so called because it is published 30-40 days in advance, in large part so that voters may see whether there are articles that they wish to be present for. To protect this function, a well-developed body of case law has established the bounds of how far the assembly may stretch an article before it is considered a whole new topic that wasn't warned. The warning is prepared

⁶⁹ Massachusetts established Home Rule in 1966, and Maine in 1969. On town meeting vis a vis Dillon's Rule, see Young (1848:33), Kinsman (1857:2), DeWolf (1890:9, 94), Fairlee (1906:142), Garland (1906), Munro (1919:561, 566-567; 1924:137; 1936:741), Nuquist (1947:10), Lockard (1959:5), Stuart (1984:15), Gillies (1999:561-567), Bryan (2010:535).

⁷⁰ Some towns coincide their school district and town meetings; others do not. For those that do coincide them, typically the town meeting will start, and then the school meeting will be held during a temporary adjournment of the town meeting, before resuming with the town meeting. Even when the school meeting is separate, it closely mirrors the structure and culture of the town meeting, although it often is much, much shorter. Northmont's often does not reach ten minutes.

⁷¹ LEJ (1974), Butler (1974).

by the Select Board, or citizens may petition articles onto it.⁷² The details of the budget, meanwhile, are prepared starting the prior December by a Budget Committee in consultation with the town's various departments and officers.

Beyond elections and legislation, a major function of town meeting is for town officers to share news, and for Q&A to be able to occur. Or, as one Northmonter put it, it might be more of a "Y&A" session--"yelling and answer." As Chapter 4 will discuss, this engagement between voters and officers may be even more fundamental to town meeting than the direct legislation.

Often there are deep issues under the meeting's surface topics. Every year there will be some seemingly minor issue that roils on and on--whether to appropriate \$1,200 vs. \$1,000 to a local social service agency, for instance, or whether the Road Commissioner is making smart use of salt up on West Bend. In an oft-repeated local joke, a person will exclaim with mock exasperation something along the lines of, "We spend 35 minutes arguing about a three thousand dollar increase for the library, and then pass the million dollar general budget in three minutes."⁷³ (I've presented this joke here using the true figures from Northmont's 2013 meeting.) This is because the "small" matter traipses across the most deeply held ideological commitments and across intense interpersonal and local histories. The biggest unsolvable questions of political economy come to roost in the smallest decisions: personal responsibility, community obligation, fair taxation, and so on. So too, town meetings are, to use Mansfield's (1993:91 words, a reputational stock exchange (see also R.Townsend 2004:280). Many deliberations are about librarian wages or plow attachments only in name; really they are about establishing what and whom a community values. In this sense, policy-focused analysts get town meeting backwards: it

⁷² See Chapter 4 for further discussion of the preparation of the warning.

⁷³ Instances of this joke/observation in the literature: Sly (1930:150), Gould (1940a:36), Banner (1953), Willard (1961), Rollins (1962), BG (1972, 1974), Gere (1984:39), Bryan (2004:248), and Rule (2012:190).

is not that a community's values determine the policies that it sets; rather, the act of setting policies is how the community sets its values.⁷⁴ As Schwartzman (1989) argued, people don't hold meetings in order to solve problems, they get to have problems by holding meetings.

In all of this, there is no partisan organization whatsoever.⁷⁵ There is limited ideological framing too.⁷⁶ That is not to say that patterned fault-lines don't exist--common ones include villagers vs. backroad-dwellers, newcomers vs. old-timers, and liberal vs. conservative spenders--just that factions are not organized and that state and national parties play no role.

Town meeting is deliberative democracy. A moderator is elected at the start of each meeting--typically it is the same person for years or decades running--who then applies Robert's Rules. One person at a time rises to speak, says their bit standing in place, then sits. Northmont recently has started using a wireless microphone system, but many speakers still wave it off.⁷⁷ Any registered voter may speak, and any non-registered voter may speak as long as the assembly doesn't withdraw permission.⁷⁸ The meeting is open to the public, but only registered-voter residents may vote.⁷⁹ Non-voters must receive permission from the assembly to speak. This usually is granted. Voting happens by voice vote, then redone by hand-raising if the moderator

⁷⁴ Chapter 2 presents a similar argument about Northmont's elections.

⁷⁵ Von der Muhll (1970:78) observes that this nonpartisanship is an important ingredient in maintaining political equality: it means there are no faction heads who would be individually consulted by officers.

⁷⁶ See Ladd (1969:142) for a discussion of this point from an older New York case that nonetheless is highly applicable to the contemporary New England case.

⁷⁷ See also Mansfield (1993:92-93).

⁷⁸ There are numerous gleefully told stories about governors, legislators, corporate executives, lobbyists, etc. getting taken down a peg by an assembly flexing its prerogative to deny them speaking permission. For a written instance, see the memoir of Governor Madeleine Kunin (1994:393-395).

⁷⁹ Some towns allow non-resident property-owners to vote. Hall (1983:79-80) recounts an interesting variation: in 1948 Eastham (on Cape Cod) started holding a special summer town meeting so that summer residents could express themselves.

cannot discern the prevailing side. A secret ballot also can be requested by seven or more members of the assembly.

One might think all of this a recipe for excruciating formality, but reality is just the opposite. As Jager and Jager (1977:417) write, “The format of the meeting presents a neat paradox: the high pitch of the political self-consciousness symbolized there; and on the other hand, the low key of the process itself.” Or in the words of another observer, “Town meetings are serious, but they are seldom solemn” (Brooks 1976:162). The moderator and the assembly have considerable--though not limitless--tolerance for speakers’ segues and non sequiturs,⁸⁰ and Robert’s Rules are used more as an inspiration than a strict formula.⁸¹ Humorous commentary regularly punctured the tension,⁸² and the only suits that I ever saw in Northmont’s meeting were borne by visiting officials. Otherwise the dress ranged from business casual to muck boots.⁸³ The meeting’s social functions and status as a community gathering also are of primary importance.⁸⁴

I will not endeavor here to present the moods and flavors of the meeting. Later chapters will offer plenty such description, and this also is one area where the existing town meeting literature offers plenty of terrific coverage. Among the hundreds of essays, dispatches, and novels that sketch town meeting as a political and social event, I most highly recommend

⁸⁰ Through an inductive process, R.Townsend (2004) identified “speaking to the issue” as a core town meeting principle. Northmont’s exercise of this principle was relatively more loose. It is possible that the difference in our respective empirical observations is due to the much larger community in which she worked, and/or the fact that her site used a representative town meeting. Or perhaps one or the other of our fieldsites is simply peculiar! This speaks once again for the need for empirical study of many more individual towns, to sort out what is and isn’t idiosyncratic. See Chapter 4 for further discussion of the slack within Northmonters’ concept of relevance.

⁸¹ Mansbridge (1980:66) provides a wonderful depiction of this procedural semi-formality.

⁸² On humor at town meetings, see Rule (2012:173-185), R.Townsend (2004:204, 213, 215), DBG (1932).

⁸³ Gould (1940:18).

⁸⁴ Chapter 4 will engage briefly with these kinds of community-building functions. See also the citations in the next paragraph.

Mansbridge (1980:47-58), Kalman (2010:92-111, esp. 102-108), Mansfield (1993:81-111), Brooks (1975:151-163), Jager (1994:225-249), Jager and Jager (1977), and Bryan (2004).⁸⁵ The virtues of these works include that they are not overly stylized; that they perceive town meeting as historically dynamic rather than a direct reflection of a Puritan and Yankee past; that they are measured in both critique and praise; and that they recognize that not every member of a town experiences town meeting the same way. I also recommend R.Townsend's (2004:see especially 215-218) and Von der Muhll's (1970:40-137) catalogs of the behavioral and communicative norms of meetings.

Town Government Beyond Town Meeting

Between town meetings, the town's business is overseen by officers. The most important of these are elected at town meeting, and the rest are appointed by the Select Board. Going back to Tocqueville (1835:67), observers have been impressed by the number of officers in a New England town.⁸⁶ Northmont's current directory of officers includes more than 115 positions, occupied by almost 70 different individuals. These positions include 14 boards, 17 officer roles (not counting deputies, assistants, ceremonial positions, or positions that are traditionally bundled with another), and representatives to four regional boards. The sidebar highlights the major positions. The best reference work on these positions remains Nuquist (1964; see also

⁸⁵ Notable portraits of meetings written in older eras include A.Barron (1903), MacDonald (1895), Hart (1893), and Brackett (1892). I feel compelled to list Gould here too (1940a; see also 1940b), as a classic, oft-cited textual and visual representation of town meeting. I have always been turned off by Gould's seemingly willful stylization, by his nostalgia-drenched take, and by his subtle misogyny (reflected in the focus of the photographs, among other places) and Yankee-centric ethnocentrism. Bryan (2004:36n35) comments on Gould's Yankee overemphasis too.

⁸⁶ An old New England joke, recounted in L.J.Bigelow (1867:130-131), tells of a Justice of the Peace who was so exhausted from swearing in the endless parade of officers that he accidentally administers the oath of office to a bride and groom instead of their marriage vows.

Nuquist and Nuquist 1966:536-542). Many of the informal dynamics are not captured there, however--the crucial role of informal community brokers, for instance, or the fact that a majority of residents don't really understand the differences among town officers. D.Robinson's (2011) memoir of being a Selectman offers a partial window onto some of these dynamics, and Von der Muhll's (1970) unpublished, forgotten dissertation is an amazing resource on this front.

SIDEBAR 5: NORTHMONT'S MANY BOARDS AND OFFICERS

This list is not meant to be an entirely exhaustive catalog, only to cover the more significant positions and thereby to indicate the many functions executed by citizens.

Descriptions of additional less notable positions that I've omitted or that Northmont doesn't exercise can be found on the Vermont Secretary of State web page, "Who's Who In Local Government" (VTSoS 2008), and in Nuquist's (1964) partially obsolete but still valuable reference work.⁸⁷ Not all of these positions existed simultaneously; from 2008-2018, some positions were created, and others were eliminated.

- **Select Board** -- *5 members elected for terms of 2-3 years* -- The Select Board is the general purpose town council, with executive, legislative, and quasi-judicial powers. In Northmont, the Select Board doubles as the Water Commission.
- **Planning Commission** -- *5 members elected for terms of 3 years; some other towns choose to have their Planning Commissioners appointed by the Select Board* -- Responsible for developing drafts of the zoning bylaws and of a town plan, each to be ratified by the voters.

⁸⁷ Note that neither these references nor my sidebar describe the envoys that towns appoint to various regional boards related to transportation, the environment, waste collection, planning, etc. Some of these are permanent, others ad hoc for a few years; some comprise dozens of towns, others just a handful.

SIDEBAR 5, CONTINUED (2 of 5)

- **Budget Committee** -- *5 members appointed by the Select Board for terms of a single year; usually includes at least two members of the Select Board* -- Oversees development of the budget proposal that is brought to town meeting.
- **Development Review Board** -- *8 members appointed by the Select Board for terms of four years* -- A quasi-judicial board; hears appeals of Zoning Administrator decisions and issues and permits land use variances.
- **School Board** -- *5 members elected for terms of 2-3 years* -- Oversees school policy. Technically a position of the school district, not the town, though most towns have a school district that coincides with the town.
- **Library Trustees** -- *7 members elected for terms of 3 years* -- Oversees the town library.
- **Recreation Department Board** -- *8 members appointed by the Select Board for terms of 3 years* -- Oversees the town Rec Center and related activities.
- **Teen Center Board** -- *5 members appointed by the Select Board for terms of 1 year* -- Oversees the town Teen Center.
- **Community Garden Board** -- *7 members appointed by the Select Board for terms of a single year* -- Oversees the town Community Garden.
- **Conservation Commission** -- *6 members appointed by the Select Board for terms of four years* -- Promotes conservation in the town, including through informational programming, assisting the Planning Committee on related matters, and administering municipal conservation programs and properties.

SIDEBAR 5, CONTINUED (3 of 5)

- **Town Hall Committee** -- *3 members appointed by the Select Board for terms of 1 year*
-- Oversees maintenance and renovation of the town hall.
- **Listers** -- *3 members elected for terms of 3 years* -- Perform property appraisals for taxation purposes.
- **Auditors** -- *3 members elected for terms of 3 years* -- Audit the town books.
- **Justices of the Peace** -- *7 Justices elected at the November general election for terms of two years* -- Fulfill numerous functions, including serving as election officials, granting tax abatements, performing marriage ceremonies, and administering oaths and notarizations. Actually are officers of the county, but are elected by the town.
- **Cemetery Commission** -- *5 members elected for terms of 5 years* -- Oversees cemetery policy and upkeep. Northmont has two separate cemetery boards for each of the two major cemeteries in town.
- **Town Clerk/Treasurer** -- *elected for a term of 3 years* -- Manages town records, issues licenses, does the town and school accounting, issues payments on behalf of the town, runs town elections, administers state policy at the town-level, and serves as a general clearinghouse for town affairs and inquiries.
- **Town Meeting Moderator** -- *elected annually* -- Facilitates town meetings.
- **Road Commissioner** -- *appointed by the Select Board for a term of 2 years, although town meeting always has the option to elect its Road Commissioner instead* -- Assists the Select Board in managing road policy.

SIDEBAR 5, CONTINUED (4 of 5)

- **Fire Warden** -- *appointed by the Select Board for a term of 5 years* -- Enforces forest fire laws; issues burn permits.
- **Constable** -- *elected annually* -- Enforces municipal ordinances, maintains order at town meeting, serves civil processes, assists the Dog Officer and Health Officer.
- **Director of Disaster Preparations and Emergency Management** -- *appointed annually by the Select Board* -- Oversees local preparations for emergencies, including coordination with other towns and with state and federal agencies.
- **Delinquent Tax Collector** -- *elected for a term of 3 years* -- Pursues collection; authorized to work out payment plans.
- **Health Officer** -- *appointed by the Select Board for a term of 3 years* -- Investigates and documents public health hazards in town.
- **Animal Control Officer / Poundkeeper** -- *appointed annually by the Select Board* -- Responsible for various aspects of the town's Dog Ordinance.
- **Tree Warden** -- *appointed annually by the Select Board* -- Removes trees that are diseased, dying, dead, or a public hazard; manages arboreal beautification.
- **Zoning Administrator** -- *appointed by the Select Board for a term of 3 years* -- Enforces the zoning bylaws; approves or denies zoning permit applications.
- A number of **additional positions** are very, very lightly active (e.g., "Town Agent," who assists with litigation when requested by the Select Board), or are purely ceremonial as legacies of prior eras and now are used for honorific purpose (e.g., "Weigher of Coal" and "Inspector of Lumber, Shingles, and Wood").

SIDEBAR 5, CONTINUED (5 of 5)

- There are **additional positions** that Northmont does not have but that some other towns do (e.g., a Town Energy Coordinator).

Northmont, VT

My choice of Northmont for this study was driven by the fact that Northmont is exceptional. Northmont is not a microcosm of the United States or of New England, and it is not necessarily representative even of a Vermont town.⁸⁸ What Northmont is, is a “best foot forward” case for participatory democracy. Like other small towns in Vermont and New England, the town carries nearly every advantage that theorists have identified for the practice of direct democracy or participatory democracy, including smallness, population homogeneity, absence of mass-media mediation, strong community, stable governance structures, and actual legislative power on meaningful topics. Within this pool, Northmont advances as a best of the best cases. That is, Northmont doesn’t have any particular characteristics that make it *unlike* other Vermont or New England towns of similar size, it just is like an all-in-one version of many other towns’ best qualities where municipal governance and community vitality are concerned. According to multiple metrics, Northmont enjoys vigorous, widespread civic participation by citizens and high social capital in general: for state and national elections, it boasts one of the highest turnout rates in the state (and Vermont is one of the higher-turnout states to begin with); it does not struggle to recruit candidates for local office; trust in local officials is exceptionally

⁸⁸ Compare Warner (1949:xiv-xv; 1963:xiii, 5).

high; it has a disproportionate number of high-attendance community groups; the community calendar is packed with events. Regionally, Northmont is known for having unusually functional municipal government, and more than one elected officer from neighboring towns confided to me that they were envious of how successfully Northmont seemed to work through internal conflicts. Northmont also lacks a professional Town Manager--it has only an administrative Town Clerk/Treasurer⁸⁹--so this is amateur government at its purest.⁹⁰

A few words are in order about Northmont's general character beyond its government. Northmont is in northern Vermont, practically next door to Québec. It often is described as a recreational paradise thanks to its natural landscape and its proximity to a major ski resort. Nonetheless, it's not an unusually well-off community. It matches the national average for individuals under the poverty line, and median household income is 30% lower than the national average. Various other SES indicators also closely match national averages. Racially and with regard to national origin, the population is very homogeneous, in line with Vermont overall: the town is 99% white and 98% non-Hispanic, 5% foreign-born and 2% non-citizen. The most important demographic feature is the split between the "old-timers" who have generational roots and the "recent" arrivals since the late 1960s. Predictable economic and cultural differences are in play there.⁹¹ Socially, the town is somewhat self-contained, but the majority of residents do their earning and shopping elsewhere. It takes a solid twenty minutes to drive to one of the larger

⁸⁹ This is not to under-credit the extraordinary amount of professional knowledge that is required of a good Town Clerk/Treasurer.

⁹⁰ On the Town Manager position and how it impacts the town meeting system vis-a-vis professionalization and a "modernist crisis," see Fossel (1977), Nuquist (1964:107-111), Pelletier (1949), Hormell and Pelletier (1949), Flint (1940), Kalijarvi (1940), and Sly (1930:195-205, 231).

⁹¹ See Lindholm (2012), Young (2011), Bryan and Mares (1983, 2000), Bryan (1991), and Webster (1945:192-202). For an excellent ethnographic analysis of a New York community exhibiting similar dynamics, see Fitchen (1991); similarly, see Greenhouse, Yngvesson, and Engel (1994), which includes a New England community.

towns in the region that has a fuller offering of stores and amenities, and it's forty minutes in either direction to reach a true population center (by which I'm referring to 5,000+ people). Northmont does have a small grocery store, a Post Office, a K-8 elementary school, and a quite large per capita number of restaurants and bars. The latter is due to the nearby ski resort, which also gives Northmont a significant service economy and a very high percentage of housing stock not devoted to primary residence. (This high percentage is not out of the ordinary for Vermont towns.) Other prominent sides of its economy include a typical Vermont mix of small businesses, forestry, specialty foods, art, crafts, and agriculture.

The population of 1,200 people (950 adults) puts Northmont dead-on with the median Vermont town. In the 19th century, the town had boomed with the timber industry, but the 20th century saw a bust, resulting in a steady decline in both population and economy. The population decline finally leveled off in the 1960s, and a sharp upswing began in the 1970s. This growth, which has been unabated into the present, has greatly exceeded the generally rising fortunes of the state and the region; in each of the past two decennial censuses, Northmont posted 20% population growth, putting it into the top percentile of the state. What this means is that by the time of my fieldwork, only lifelong locals in their 80s or more had the memory of Northmont as a declining town. This growth has coincided with the rise of the aforementioned ski resort, although quite a number of Northmonters are insistent that the town's development is more independent than that. To my own eye, they have a point, at least as far as direct employment is concerned: the only major direct draw to town appears in fact to be the excellent public school, and not many parents are employed by the resort. (Chapter 3 addresses the town's relationship with the resort.)

Methodology

I conducted a cumulative 24 months of fieldwork in Northmont: the summers of 2008 and 2009, then a straight 15 months from June 2010 through August 2011, then the summer of 2012. Since the end of my main fieldwork, I have returned every March without fail for Town Meeting Day; I therefore have observed ten consecutive meetings, from March 2009 through March 2018. (The 2011 meeting was the only one that occurred within a continuous session of fieldwork; all the rest were special trips back.) I also have made occasional short visits unrelated to the March meetings, for a week or weekend, sometimes with my researcher hat on, other times “off the clock” simply to catch up with old friends and neighbors. (Because I am a “native anthropologist”--see the next section--it has been easy for me to swing by to Northmont too when I travel back to Vermont to see family.) While away, I have remained on the email listservs of community groups and town boards, and I’ve been religiously attentive to committee meeting minutes, which are posted on the town’s website.

During fieldwork, I attended all meetings of the enormous roster of town boards and officers, and I shadowed officers in their work. I also attended the meetings of civic and community groups--the Garden Club, Historical Society, Business/Community Association, Mountain Bike Club, Quilting Circle, the Meals On Wheels’ weekly senior lunch at the Public Safety Building, the monthly Community Art Night... and a dozen others. I went to school events, sport matches, community suppers, the tri-monthly blood drives, and annual events like Green Up Day, Harvest Festival, and Halloween Haunted House at the Grange. I rotated church services among the town’s three denominations, Catholic, Methodist, and Baptist. I participated in the regular pickup sporting events: Sunday pickup soccer, Thursday night volleyball, Monday

night frisbee golf. I also attended gatherings that were less formally organized, from parties to potlucks. Basically, if there was a meeting, an event, or a gathering, I was there. I also did the standard socializing and “structured hanging out” of an ethnographer. I furthermore volunteered extensively in town: coached kids sports, ran the Rec Center kids summer day camp for three summers, joined the town rescue squad, worked as a substitute teacher in the school, and showed up whenever a town or community group needed labor--which was often! I even served for part of a year as an appointed board member for the Teen Center. This volunteering was partially for the sake of ethnographic access and rapport-building, in larger part to give back to the people and officers who were so generous to me with their own time and hospitality, and in largest part simply because I was committed to Northmont as my home for those years, and volunteering has always been part of my relationship with my home places. (See the next section for discussion of doing ethnography in a home place.)

To partially address one of the limitations of ethnography--that it offers intensive exposure to a single place but little insight into how that place compares to other places--I dedicated a month in the summer of 2014 to attending Select Board meetings in other towns, catching at least one in thirteen other small-to-medium sized towns scattered around northern Vermont. My tentative conclusion from this far-from-systematic and far-from-immersive sampling is that Northmont’s municipal government is *not* dramatically an outlier in any single regard. For town meeting itself, I did attend a neighboring town’s conveniently non-conflicting Monday-night meeting one year, but other than that my comparative insight about town meetings specifically is limited to 1) what I observed growing up in another Vermont town, 2) what I

could follow in news reporting from across the state (print, television, and radio⁹²), and 3) the documentary research I did on town meeting as a cultural object both historically and in the 2000s.

This extensive, extensive, extensive documentary and historical research was an important complement to my ethnographic work. This consisted of aiming a bibliographic vacuum cleaner at databases and library catalogs, and doing the same with the World Wide Web. I then traced, obsessively, the citations of citations of citations in snowball fashion.⁹³ A massive archive of materials resulted, which I annotated and then collated the annotations into close to 100 topical note files. This process of assembling and analyzing a “*Town Meeting literature*” was something that I thought of as a kind of multi-sited fieldwork: I felt I could not understand what was happening locally in Northmont unless I understood the habits of mind represented in that literature, so I therefore left my fieldsite in order to pursue the thread (see Shah 2017:52-53). As a project of “collection,” this method helped me to historicize the discursive practices that I was finding in the present (Dorst 1987:207).

⁹² Vermont Public Radio has terrific coverage every year of Town Meeting Day, and its web archives will be an amazing resource for researchers and future historians.

⁹³ I owe an incredible debt to the interlibrary loan departments of the University of Chicago Library and the New York Public Library, which procured several hundred works for me. This was on top of the crucial resource of their extensive regular collections. The Chicago Public Library and the University of Vermont Special Collections Library also were essential. The documentary research side of my project also simply would not have been possible without the full-text resources of Hathitrust, Archive.org, Google Books, and the “*Making of America*” project by Cornell University and the University of Michigan. The “look inside” search feature of Amazon.com also turned out to be an unexpectedly effective scholarly resource.

Native Anthropology

A major part of my ethnographic method related to my relationship to Vermont and to Northmont as a home place, so this bears some discussion.

I grew up in Hardwick, another Vermont town just over an hour's drive from Northmont. Only last year, at the age of 33, did I finally stop thinking of myself as a "Vermont expat" who merely *resided* in Illinois, New York, etc.⁹⁴ I therefore was a "native anthropologist" during my fieldwork. And this nativeness was doubled when we consider the topic of this dissertation: both of my parents were heavily engaged in Hardwick's town government while I was growing up (my mother as a Justice of the Peace, my father on the school boards), and they often took me along as a child to meetings, town meetings, vote tabulations, and so forth. At the time I was bored to pieces and always retired to a corner with toys or a book, but there is no doubt that the tenor of those meetings informed my baseline assumptions about politics and citizenship. Nor is there doubt that civic engagement has been one of my most comfortable environments since I was old enough to remember. More recently, and for more than a dozen years, I've been a

⁹⁴ The widespread phenomenon of Vermonters retaining a strong homeplace identity even as they emigrate has received recent empirical attention by the Vermont Roots Migration Project (Morse et al. 2014, 2017a, 2017b). One aspect that is especially intriguing to me of the "Vermont expat" phenomenon, is the formation from 1805 through the 1930s of "New England Clubs" and "Vermont Societies" from New York to California. Town government and town meeting were not merely important parts of the heritage that these clubs celebrated, they also were how these clubs structured their governance and activities. For instance, the members of the New England Society of Los Angeles styled themselves as members of the town of "Boostville" and conducted town meeting burlesques for the enjoyment of the community (LAT 1911a, 1911b). The New England Society of Southern California used similar reenactments not just for humor but also for the serious business of electing its association officers--and it made a point of coinciding with the actual Town Meeting Day back home (LAT 1910a, 1910b; see also WP 1937 for a Washington, D.C. "Massachusetts Town Meeting Club organized in the form of New England town government"). For brief discussion of such clubs broadly, see Searles (2006:29, 93), Graffagnino (1985:13, 133), Conforti (2001:94).

heavily involved trustee of the Telluride Association, an educational non-profit that is run by deliberative and participatory methods and whose mission is to use democratic self-governance as a tool for developing leadership skills in young adults. All of this is to say: I am a local booster (although anything but a dogmatic or unreserved one) of 1) New England town meetings, 2) participatory democracy in general, and 3) Vermont as a place.

Anthropologists have spent a significant amount of energy exploring what it means to be a “native” anthropologist and what the advantages and pitfalls are.⁹⁵ The major theme that emerges from this literature is that a “native”/“non-native” divide is not a productive way to think about the relevant dynamics. The question of “insider bias” vs. “outsider objectivity” is no longer considered a productive or correct framework--not least because “outsiders” carry biases of their own--and the focus now is on the interaction-by-interaction relative position of the ethnographer. The “native” anthropologist, like any anthropologist, is subject to a host of situational and contextual factors affecting their relationship to the population they study. Identity and cultural competence always have multiple strands, and no society is completely homogeneous. This means that a native anthropologist is necessarily located somewhere within the internal variation of their society, and they will have varying degrees of cultural competence, comfort, and acceptance from one context to another within the culture. Ultimately, then, what matters for native anthropologists is what matters for *all* anthropologists: ethnographic skill, sensitivity to power and privilege, reflexivity, hard work, and the willingness and ability to be

⁹⁵ Hurston (1935), Srinivas (1967), De.Jones (1970, 1995), Medicine (1978), Nakhleh (1979), Fahim and Helmer (1980), Messerschmidt (1981), Ohnuki-Tierney (1984), Haniff (1985), Kondo (1986), Chock (1986), Strathern (1987), A.Jackson (1987), Altorki and El-Solh (1988), Limón (1991), Narayan (1993), Cerroni-Long (1995), L.Nelson (1996), Okely (1996), Williams (1996), Passaro (1997), Rodriguez (2001), Jacobs-Huey (2002), Ortner (2003), Nordquest (2007), Ceja-Zamarripa (2007), Brugger (2007). See also Moffatt’s (1992) and Cattelino’s (2010) review articles on Americanist anthropology, and Spradley and Rynkiewich’s (1975) reader on American culture.

surprised. In Ortner's (2003:17) words, ethnographic fieldwork is always complex, and being a native is simply "differently complex."

My personal accounting of my relationship to Northmonsters therefore is as follows. Vermont is a place where large numbers of people relocate from urban cultural centers in order to pursue intellectual or cultural work.⁹⁶ This migration pattern started in the early 20th century and intensified during the counterculture and back-to-the-land movements of the 1960s onward. In this sense, I was assimilated quite easily by Northmonsters to a common local type. Coming from a place like Chicago, affiliated with a fancy school, speaking with white-collar diction, doing something for a living that didn't entirely make economic sense to old-timers: none of this was much different from a hundred other Northmonsters who had starting arriving in the early 20th century. Even insofar as I was engaged in a documentary project, I was not completely unique: one writer was working on locally-set novels; another was writing essays about his experiences in town; a couple who produced tour guides decided to create an entry on their new home; multiple painters and photographers were doing studies of local life; and members of the town historical society--the majority of whom had not been born in town⁹⁷--engaged in a series of oral history and other documentary projects about recent decades.

At the same time as falling into the "newcomer intellectual" category, I also presented to Northmonsters in the "local boy" category, as a result of my Hardwick upbringing. Hardwick and Northmont are far enough away from one another that I previously had only met one person from the latter, but second and third degrees of separation turned up routinely. Being networked to

⁹⁶ Granville Hicks' (1946) *Small Town* remains a perfect portrait of this dynamic, excepting its masculine focus.

⁹⁷ Greenhouse, Yngvesson, and Engel (1994:164, 205n4) discuss a similar case of newcomers being more likely than old-timers to become invested in the local historical society.

Northmonters' kin and kith and workmates in this way made me local in a way that was highly salient locally. Also relevant was Hardwick's statewide reputation as a hard-knock place. The fact that I had grown up there, and that I had gone to Hardwick's public school, instantly earned me a significant amount of "real Vermonter" credibility, regardless of Chicago or impeccable diction or anthropology.

Setting aside other people's perceptions, I considered Northmont my home, and I embraced the role of *participant* observer over the alternative of "neutral" observer. Over time, I developed two aphorisms that crystallized my approach: *the greatest rapport comes from risk* and *some things you feel not see*. (More on these in a moment.) Neither of these things are unique to an ethnographer working in a home space, but I think both were intensified. A participant observer always does what the locals do, along with them, as opposed to standing on the sidelines with a notebook. But my sense is that most participant observers try to avoid impacting their field of observation with their own actions. I observed this principle too, though I think to a lesser degree than most. Both this lesser degree and the two aphorisms are exemplified in my decision, starting at the beginning of my second summer of research, to switch my voter registration to Northmont, where I kept it there for two years even past the end of my main fieldwork. (I continued to vote absentee, in my "expat" capacity residing variously in New York and Chicago.) During those four years, I voted my own conscience during town meetings, including during officer elections when I had to choose among people who all had been very good to me, and I reserved for myself the same right of privacy as any other local voter. At one town meeting, I spoke from the floor in favor of an article. (One time out of several years is not very much for me, relative to how I historically have participated in places outside of Northmont. You can see, then, that I was not wanton in my impact. I certainly had my own limits. I knew

without hesitation, for instance, that I absolutely had to refuse when people tried at various points to recruit me to join either the Development Review Board or the Select Board; these were positions that were simply too hot to be compatible with my research goals, even if I would have been highly interested under other circumstances.) Whenever other Northmonsters asked for my opinion on local affairs or conflicts, I gave it--tactfully, to be sure, but I did not try to keep myself concealed. Fortunately, I have a natural talent for seeing all sides of an issue, so it was not hard for me to empathize at least in part with nearly everyone, even if I also articulated reservations.

“Aren’t you worried that you’ll affect what you’re supposed to be studying?” one Northmonter asked me when I shared the news with him that I’d just registered. “No,” I replied, “If I were capable of *that* much impact then I should quit anthropology and become Northmont’s king. But I’m not!” This is a variation of the methodological observation that Duneier (1999:338) relays, that people’s behavior is far more powerfully channeled by social structure than a lone anthropologist is capable of disrupting.

And meanwhile, for the paltry cost of a negligible or temporary, I gained insights into local participation that otherwise would have been impossible or at least elusive. For voice votes at town meeting, I discovered how pleasurable it could feel to chant the unanimous low “aye”--it was *fellowship*, literally resonating in my chest and everyone else’s on a mutual frequency. When the votes were on controversial subjects, I got to experience the sense of anxiety over who might hear and take offense. Hand votes were even worse! But this stress in turn gave me insight into the post-meeting experience of rebuilding relationships with people who find you politically suspect and vice versa: the initial tiny changes in eye contact and the sudden mutual interest in discussing national affairs in place of the usual voracious review of local news, but then--after

the weeks or months or sometimes only days of continuing to live together--the eventual unremarked snap-back to normalcy after successfully partnering again on some other community enterprise. After a good meeting, I would be buoyed for hours. After a tense meeting my stomach was acid and I didn't want to talk to anyone. These are the kinds of things I mean by *some things you feel not see*.

As for what I mean by *the greatest rapport comes from risk*: It would have been safer not to be registered to vote, because, as I've already indicated, having a vote meant having to pick sides and to sometimes be seen doing so. By engaging with people as one opinionated person to another instead of as a "neutral researcher" to opinionated subject, I risked having some Northmonters see me as an enemy not to be helped or trusted, and with any action I risked causing someone to feel disappointed or angry or upset or betrayed.⁹⁸ I was not outspoken or dogmatic or fierce with my opinions about town politics--none of these things are in my personality anyway--but being active even in a modest way meant being embroiled in local disagreements. "What do you think about..." and "Can you believe that they..." were staples of local conversation, and I had to face people's negative reactions when I explained that I believed that the town *did* need to raise taxes for a new public works building, or that--contrary to any of the conspiracy theories that people periodically would accuse town officers with--I could testify that town officers were *not* acting in bad faith, or that I was relieved that so-and-so had not been elected because I thought they would have introduced too much discord onto the board. I could tell that my answers sometimes introduced a temporary chill into my relationship with someone, but in the long-term such moments of tension or disagreement nonetheless were enormously

⁹⁸ For a narrative exploration of an anthropologist encountering these risks in a higher-stakes case, see Parry (2015:126).

productive of rapport. I think it was meaningful to people that I participated in these conversations, instead of just vacuuming up *their* opinions and then deflecting attention from my own. It put us on an equal footing that they could judge *my* opinions in addition to me judging theirs. I think that Northmonsters--especially those with whom I had less instant commonality--respected and appreciated the fact that I was not using the role of “neutral researcher” to keep myself distant from them and to insulate myself from having to be accountable to them for my judgments and affinities. That’s to say, vulnerability to disapproval simultaneously made me trustworthy, made me relatable. Northmonsters could see and experience that I was committed to relationships with them, including all of the tension and occasional antagonism that are present in any relationship. One person said as much. Having previously labeled himself “one of those Tea Party people,” on one occasion he suddenly told me, “I really respect you.” This was on the heels of my having shared a perception of town politics that I knew he wouldn’t agree with. He made the statement with such wide-eyed seriousness that I thought he was play-acting and that he momentarily would reveal he was mocking me, but he then explained, “You could have hidden behind being a researcher, but you’re not like that, and I really respect that.”

Chapters Overview

Chapter by chapter, this dissertation reconsiders stereotyped understandings about town meeting, and uses them as the basis for new insights about participation.

I begin, in **Chapter 1**, with the received wisdom that town meeting has been a core symbol of American political identity going back to the nation’s colonial origins in the early 17th century. My historical inquiry discovers that in fact town meeting is an invented tradition of the

19th century. In describing how and why town meeting became symbolically important at that precise moment, and how and why subsequent narratives posited a 17th century origin, the chapter establishes that ideas about participation are always politicized, never neutral, even if they have become common sense. By historicizing the overpoweringly stereotyped contemporary understanding of town meeting, I make room for subsequent chapters' ethnographic "re-seeing" of town meeting.

Chapter 2 presents a first illustration of how democratic stereotypes make it hard to see what is actually going on with an institution. I look at Northmont's municipal elections, confronting the common view (held by political scientists and laypersons alike) that such elections tend to be--and should be--apolitical. I show how Northmonters' avoidance of "politics" in their local elections was, at a deeper level, about making and re-making foundational political norms, such as how individuals would relate to the collectivity and how political relations were to be conducted between community members. Theorists of participatory and deliberative democracy have tended to focus on the overt purposes of participation, like impacting policy outcomes. This chapter demonstrates in contrast that participation simultaneously shapes communities in ways that are much more subtle but no less important.

Chapter 3 identifies a democratic deficit that lurks underneath the valorization of town meetings. I describe the massive expansion of a nearby ski resort to show how some of Northmonters' most sharply felt local concerns eluded town meeting governance almost entirely. The absence of these concerns from the various forums of town government, however, sat perfectly easily with the local common sense about the appropriate reach of democratic governance. By juxtaposing Northmonters' expansive sense of democratic efficacy with their narrow sense of what was democratically actionable, I raise the possibility that the formula,

“more participatory democracy,” may have as much potential to be an anti-politics (Ferguson 1990) as it does to be a cure for what ails American democracy.

Chapter 4, in a spirited continuation of the project of “re-seeing” town meeting, upends the primary association of town meeting. Rather than an archetype-come-to-life of direct democracy, I show that town meeting actually functions primarily as an institution of *representative* democracy. I insist, though, that this recharacterization is not a reason to lose respect for town meeting as a participatory institution, because the town meeting system still yields highly robust and impactful citizen participation--much higher than within most representative systems. Recognizing town meeting in this new light unsettles the traditional view within political theory that maps the antinomy, “strong democracy” vs. “weak “democracy,” onto an antinomy between participatory democracy and representative democracy. This recognition also suggests the inadequacy of several widely used unidimensional participatory models, such as Arnstein’s Ladder and the IAP2 Participatory Scale.

An **appendix to Chapter 4**, is meant to quash a temptation that many readers will experience as they read Chapter 4. “If town meeting now is an institution of representative democracy,” they will reason, “it is because town meeting has devolved from its glory days of direct democracy.” Against this golden age-ism, I marshal primary sources to show that town meeting is currently riding a 100+ year upswing when it comes to its ratio of direct to representative democracy, and I use secondary sources to argue that town meeting has never exhibited the extreme direct democracy character of its legend.

Chapter 5 considers one of the major criticisms of participatory democracy: that voter turnout tends to be much lower than for ballot democracy. Reviewing the turnout literature, and applying Northmont as a case study, I identify multiple errors and neglectful assumptions

regarding measurement and benchmarking that have led to a serious exaggeration of the “low turnout” trope. Controlling for these, I find that town meeting’s “abysmal” turnout is only narrowly rather than massively lower than ballot turnout, reaching a level where one might no longer need to be an enthusiast of participatory democracy to find the gap acceptable. In the course of supplying these empirical correctives, the chapter serves as a saying-by-doing meditation on empirical method in the social sciences.

The **Conclusion** brings together the dissertation’s major claim (that stereotyped notions of participation actively constrain the possibilities for democratic politics) with the dissertation’s methodological fixations. I detail the consonance between participatory democracy and participant observation, identifying both as methods for transcending stereotypes.

CHAPTER 1. “Almost Unnoticed as a Palladium of Liberty”: The 19th Century Invention of Town Meeting as an American Political Icon¹

“The town meeting emerged from the charter period almost unnoticed as a palladium of liberty[...] It was not until Alexis de Tocqueville looked at us in the early thirties, that town meetings were given anything like a formal attention.”
-John F. Sly, *Town Government in Massachusetts* (1930:221, 223)

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In contemporary U.S. political culture, the New England town meeting is a symbol of democracy, governmental accountability, freedom of speech, etc., with a pedigree that is traced to foundational moments of the nation, including the early Puritan settlements and the Revolution. This chapter shows that this pedigree is an anachronism: for the first two centuries of its existence, the town meeting was merely practiced, not iconized. Only in the 1820s-1840s did the

¹ This chapter contains the first part of a larger project tracing how town meeting has arrived at its current meaning as a symbol in American political culture. For the larger project, I owe tremendous thanks to many prior works from which I have raided sources: Daniell (2012), Bryan (2004), Zimmerman (1999), Mansfield (1993:81-111), N.Kotler (1974), Rule (2012), Shalhope (1996), Conforti (2001), and Westbrook (1982), among others.

town meeting emerge as a symbol and as an object of nationalistic history-writing. The first part of the chapter establishes (including through an examination of Thomas Jefferson's writings) the anachronism of attributing town meeting boosterism to the Revolutionary generation. The second half of the chapter then shows the rise of the new discourse in the 1820s-1840s at the confluence of multiple historical currents: economic, industrial, political, religious, literary, historiographical, aesthetic, and geopolitical. By identifying town meeting boosterism as an invented tradition, I have two goals: First, to draw attention to how the town meeting symbol is used within contemporary sociopolitical struggles. Second, to historicize the overpoweringly stereotyped contemporary understanding of town meeting, to make room for subsequent chapter's ethnographic "re-seeing" of town meeting. In describing how and why town meeting became symbolically important at a particular moment, the chapter establishes that ideas about participation are always politicized, never neutral, even if they have become common sense.

Introduction

Town Meeting: An Invented Tradition

Thomas Jefferson described the New England town as the “wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government” (letter, 1816.07.12 to Kercheval), and he used it as a model for his famous proposal for a nationwide system of “ward” government. Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, devoted such wildly disproportionate, laudatory attention to New England towns that an arguably more accurate title would have been “Democracy in Massachusetts.” Within the town meeting booster literature, Jefferson and

Tocqueville have become mascots, being quoted and re-quoted and then quoted again. The reason is clear enough: when town meeting's virtues are voiced through the mouths of other icons of American history, town meeting's own patriotic history comes to the forefront. Key historical associations include:

- Puritans and Pilgrims in some of the earliest, foundational moments of the American experiment
- the Massachusetts ferment that sparked and guided the American Revolution
- the Constitutional convention in Philadelphia in 1786, when the Founders were inspired to maintain a balance with decentralized democracy

Likewise, Jefferson's and Tocqueville's stature as icons of American democracy calls up town meeting's own democratic symbolism: popular government, direct democracy, freedom of speech, representatives' subservience to the Will of the People, self-government, liberty, equality, etc.

If Thomas Jefferson gave two hoots about town meeting, though, he certainly did not give a third. And when Tocqueville was describing New England in the early 19th century, he was not simply bringing a standing American tradition to the attention of a fascinated international audience, he also was contributing to the *creation* of the object of that portrait. This chapter proposes a sea change in our understanding of town meeting's history: as a political *practice*, town meeting is legitimately traced back to the 1600s, but as a political *icon*, town meeting is considerably younger, dating only to the 1820s-1840s, when Tocqueville and others began deploying town meeting in a symbolic way. (Other major players included Timothy Dwight IV, Jared Sparks, George Bancroft, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.) During the two intervening centuries, no one made a fuss about town meeting. No one suggested it had any

larger meaning about American democracy or political identity. No one sang it hymns on formal occasions. Even New England's boosters didn't think town meeting was worth listing in their catalogs of New England's virtues. The 19th century, though, in repositioning town meeting as an object of veneration, also retrospectively attributed that attitude to the likes of Jefferson and the Puritans, cherry-picking evidence that could support the attribution.

This chapter is about the difference between the lowercase governmental practice and the capitalized icon: town meeting vs. *Town Meeting*. *Town Meeting* the American icon is an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) spun from the raw material of town meeting the governmental practice. Hobsbawm and Ranger describe invented traditions as having quite recent origins despite appearances of much longer duration. With scrutiny, the continuity with the past is revealed as artificial or factitious. Two aspects of Hobsbawm and Ranger's theorization of invented traditions are particularly useful to this chapter's effort:

First is the difference between invented traditions and routines (Hobsbawm 1983:3). Routines, in their definition, have "no significant ritual or symbolic function." When a tradition is invented, routines often are put to use as raw material; a longstanding routine achieves new meaning. Its practice, instead of being unremarked, becomes highly ritualized. The ritualized treatment, though, would be entirely unfamiliar to the ancestors. An invented tradition spun out of longstanding routine is thus partially "authentic" and partially "fictitious."¹

Second, the major purpose of identifying a tradition's invention is to learn something about the role that it plays in contemporary ideologies. In this regard, the existence of invented traditions is a subspecies of the general phenomenon of history being used as a resource for

¹ In other cases, the invented tradition not only applies novel ritualization to a routine, it also invents the routine in the first place (Trevor-Roper 1983).

meeting contemporary needs (Hobsbawm 1983:12-13). Invented traditions are especially useful for meeting two needs in particular: 1) stability, 2) group cohesion. With regard to stability,

Hobsbawm (1983:2) writes that invented traditions

are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations [...] It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the 'invention of tradition' so interesting for historians of the past two centuries.

As for group cohesion, Hobsbawm (1983:9-10) suggests that invented traditions are especially helpful in the modern period for filling the gap left by the breakdown in traditional forms of solidarity. Moreover, in societies that are democratic and formally egalitarian, invented traditions can help preserve a core of hierarchy. That is, some invented traditions aid group cohesion by providing a point of affectively powerful commonality while simultaneously encouraging some within the group "to feel more equal than others."

Town meeting of the 17th and 18th centuries was a routine: it was unremarked and lacked any exceptional symbolic meaning. In the early 19th century, the routine was ritualized and imbued with symbolic significance. The question is why. My answer: Responding to economic, political, and demographic upheavals, *Town Meeting's* northeastern inventors developed *Town Meeting* as a fixed point on which to hang their identity as New Englanders and their claims to New England's continued preeminence. And while *Town Meeting* served as a symbol of the nation, it also claimed special status for the Northeast as an American sub-region. Furthermore, within the Northeast it justified the status of New England elites, delegitimizing competing political outlooks and minimizing the presence and worth of ethnic minorities.

I should be very clear about what kind of cultural history I am doing here. Graeber (2013:177) has bitingly argued that historians "have to look beyond the sitting rooms of the

educated gentry” if they want to discover the real origins of American democratic sensibilities (see also Osterander 1999). He is entirely right. But our purpose here is precisely to understand the development of elite discourse. As Graeber himself discusses, these elite conceptions are the ones that anthropologists of democracy find themselves confronting everywhere they go. And the elite discourse certainly has influenced popular culture. As Bourdieu (1990:153-154) has taught us, it’s a tricky thing to separate “popular” culture from “elite” productions; if you ask “the people” about their beliefs, they’ll sincerely regurgitate what they’ve absorbed from prior rounds of elite cultural production. How 19th century elite conceptions of town meeting influenced 20th century popular conceptions of town meeting, and how the masses were thinking of town meeting in the interim, are stories for another time. For now, our interest is in precisely what was happening in those sitting rooms.

Why It Matters That *Town Meeting* Is Invented

The invented traditions idea has been criticized, especially by anthropologists (e.g., Handler 1984), for its suggestion that there is such a thing as “genuine” traditions contradistinct from “invented” ones. After all, the historical continuity of *every* tradition is at least partially a matter of selective attention. Furthermore, even an invented tradition can become the basis for “genuine” new cultural forms (Bourdieu 1990:153-154).

The value of the invented tradition idea, though, is not as a criterion for distinguishing “genuine” traditions from “false” or “manipulative” ones, but as a tool for understanding the contemporary ideological functions of the tradition that is under consideration. I’m not trying to debunk *Town Meeting*’s origins in order to tell contemporary actors that they have to stop invoking town meeting when they want to make points about democracy or about national or

regional identity. Rather, what I want is for my audience to see and accept *Town Meeting* as a political object from its origins, so that when they hear someone using *Town Meeting* in the present to make a point about democracy or regional identity or whatnot, they don't take the claim entirely at face value. As Harrison (2006:6-7) puts it in a study of landscape, symbols have the power to create expectations about what is right and normal; denaturalizing symbols therefore can be a potent way to denaturalize expectations. A claim that deploys *Town Meeting* for symbolic support may be entirely valid and laudable, but it needs to stand on its own merits instead of relying upon the moral weight of *Town Meeting* for a shortcut. Historically, an enormous amount of intellectual and political persuasion went into naturalizing the *Town Meeting* symbol, with the result that now it can be deployed effortlessly to give a leg up to other claims. I want us to understand the advantage that *Town Meeting* confers.

Consider the example of a politician holding a constituent meeting and calling it a "town hall." The term presents the meeting as a direct, authentic democratic interaction. In most such meetings, however, that quality is all veneer (Muir 1994, Croy 1999, Herbeck 1999, Su.Clark 2009). By understanding why and how *Town Meeting* has come to possess such a pull on our heartstrings, we increase our immunity to its use in manipulative enterprises. The reason why *Town Meeting* became such a powerful symbol in the first place was because historical actors were trying to use it to persuade their listeners of a whole set of other sociopolitical ideas. Should we now believe that *Town Meeting* is natural, neutral, or innocent? I want us to ask, *What are the side benefits, and to whom, when we take town meeting's sanctity as a given?* Historicizing that sanctity is a way to feed our instinct to ask that question.

Then again, a painstaking journey into the 19th century might be *helpful* for building such immunity, but surely it is not *necessary*. After all, any reasonably sophisticated observer can

readily recognize, even without a historical briefing, that a mass-mediated “town hall debate” is not a terribly authentic democratic encounter.

Let’s therefore take a more invisible, more morally complex case: the role of the *Town Meeting* symbol within the 2016 United States Presidential election.² The loss in the general election of Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton has been attributed at least partially to the perceptions by some voters that Clinton was some combination of the following: a corrupt political insider, a corporate lackey driven by personal ambition rather than the public good, and a wooden bureaucrat who lacked the basic human ability to connect to or care about the fellow citizens with whom she came face to face.³ Among the things fueling such views of Clinton was the way that Clinton’s opponent in the Democratic Party primary, Vermont Senator Bernard Sanders, positioned himself as a foil to her.⁴ The town meeting tradition of Sanders’ home state was one of the several symbols that his campaign used to suggest that his moral-democratic purity was superior to Clinton’s. The trope was present in his campaign kickoff speech:

American democracy is not about billionaires being able to buy candidates and elections. [...] According to media reports the Koch brothers alone, one family, will spend more money in this election cycle than either the Democratic or Republican parties. This is not democracy. This is oligarchy. In Vermont and at our town meetings we know what American democracy is supposed to be about. It is one person, one vote--with every citizen having an equal say--and no voter suppression. (Sanders 2015)

Following the Super Tuesday primaries, he likewise declared,

This campaign is not just about electing the president. It is about transforming America. [...] It is about recognizing that in our state, we have town meetings and people come out, they argue about budgets, and then they vote. One person, one vote. In Vermont, billionaires do not buy

² The following observations are indebted to conversations with Cassandra Gaddo.

³ E.g., Bordo (2017), Clinton (2017).

⁴ Lest my following point be sidelined by the ad hominem attack that I’m an aggrieved Clinton partisan, I don’t mind revealing that I cast my 2016 primary vote for Sanders. And it may be worth noting further that, as someone who was registered to vote in Vermont from 2002 until 2016, I have been a Sanders supporter through multiple prior races as well.

town meetings, and in America, we are going to end a corrupt campaign finance system. (Sanders 2016)

With these kinds of remarks,⁵ he was speaking to a hundred-year pattern of Americans looking longingly to town meeting for answers to problems with national politics.⁶ *The political system is corrupt; town meeting is pure. (Hillary Clinton is too cozy with the system!) Politicians are remote, indifferent, and dissembling; town meeting involves sincere, close-up engagement and rigorous accountability. (Hillary Clinton wouldn't last two minutes in an unscripted, face-to-face context like town meeting!)* And his message took--perhaps too well, when it turned out that the Republican operation in the general election was able to keep Clinton boxed into the frame that the Sanders campaign had so effectively reinforced.

When *Town Meeting* is used in our contemporary sociopolitical contests, there are winners and losers--sometimes inadvertent ones. Should the Sanders campaign have refrained from invoking *Town Meeting*? Could the campaign somehow have applied the "purity" connotations of *Town Meeting* with greater precision? I don't know any useful way of approaching questions like these. What I *do* know is that during the 2016 campaign, *Town Meeting* slipped effortlessly into a broth of other effortlessly absorbable symbols and discourses, and the sum had global impact.

It's the effortlessness of each of these symbols that I want to address. Blatantly manipulative deployments of a symbol like *Town Meeting* are relatively easy to catch. The

⁵ See also Sanders (2012).

⁶ See Morone's (1990) writing on "the democratic wish." The following are examples from my own catalog: Janes (1894:514-515, 515-516), Woodruff (1918:43), Denny (1937:111-112), Gallup (1939:14-15; with Rae 1940:12-13, 206), Willkie in DBG (1950), Mumford (1961:322), Doughton and Bailey (1996), Bryan (2007b, 2008a:5; with McClaughry 1989:4, 9, 25), Fernald (2011a, 2011b), Crawford (2013). Aspirations to better *international* politics also have been expressed in the *Town Meeting* idiom, including at the founding of the United Nations (Rockwell 1943; Time 1946, 1947; Listener 1948; Luns 1953; Burns and Peltason 1952:605) and during the Cold War (BG 1963, Shain 1963).

words are not always literally in the headlines of a primetime program, though. It's when the symbol is a minor player, flying by and dropping off its little dose of impact without us even realizing that anything has been deposited, that I believe that historical work like that in this chapter is most valuable. Turning to history to denaturalize *Town Meeting* is a way of permanently affixing a flashing red light to *Town Meeting's* chassis. Then, at every appearance, even when it's in the background, it attracts our critical notice. If we believe that *Town Meeting's* meaning is straightforward and inherent, we have no reason to linger upon it when it's mentioned. Once we have seen how its meaning emerged from disagreement, though--not to mention how its meaning has not been static but has continued to evolve in response to each generation's new debates--we cannot help but think critically when we hear it invoked. The flashing light will be in our eye.

Recovery and Advancement of Prior Insight

I am not the first to observe that *Town Meeting* was birthed only in the 19th century. In the early 1900s, Harvard professor John F. Sly objected to the idea that Puritans saw themselves in the same light as subsequent filiofetters:

In the face of [the original colonists' conditions of life], political theory was almost dumb. It was not at all a philosophy of self-government that stimulated the people of Dorchester to meet[...] It was the hard fact of maintaining community harmony that an increasing and diverse population was making necessary. For two hundred years there was no formal attempt to eulogize the device. [...] The town meeting was a perfectly apparent and workable method that had little attraction beyond its utility, and the records are searched in vain for that fervid commendation that marked the emotional references of the 'middle period.' The time was to come when it epitomized a theory of political development and operated as a powerful political machine that would have amazed its founders[...] So the town meeting emerged from the charter period almost unnoticed as a palladium of liberty[...] It was not until

Alexis de Tocqueville looked at us in the early thirties, that town meetings were given anything like a formal attention. Their active part in the Revolutionary War (largely popularized by the stirring events in Faneuil Hall) had clothed them with a kind of national sanctity that served to further solidify their structure. The eulogy of the clever Frenchman did more, however, than to substantiate this position--it called attention to an institution that was the exemplification of Jacksonian democracy.” (1930:220-221, 223)⁷

Four decades after Sly, and independently of him, Wickwar (1970:39-44) argued that the British/American cult of local self-government had gotten a surprisingly late start. Wickwar pins 1848 as the birth year, showing that peak activity was not reached in the United States until the 1870s and 1880s. The very term “self-government,” Wickwar contends, did not exist in English prior to the British writer Joshua Toulmin Smith (1851).

A third precedent is Westbrook (1982:141), who noted of the 17th and 18th century: “Notably lacking among these historians, diarists, and writers of annals was an interest in any but the religious, moral and social aspects of town life; to civil government they paid very little attention. This kind of interest did not develop significantly until after the Revolution” (141).

Alas, Sly’s, Wickwar’s, and Westbrook’s insights are interred in the remotest graveyards of forgotten academic research. Other aspects of Sly’s book were highly cited and became central to the modern understanding of town meeting, but his discovery of anachronism was ignored by his contemporaries and has never been revived. As for Wickwar and Westbrook, they are not cited in any of the subsequent literature on town meeting, whether boosterish, critical, or analytical.⁸ Even histories of town meeting that have attended specifically to town meeting’s

⁷ See also p. 55 and 106, the latter of which reads, “The famous Chapter Five in de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* compelled attention to an institution that had [...] been received as a matter of course since its inception two centuries before. It was the middle of the Jackson era when a large part of the people were deeply impressed with a new democracy.”

⁸ Wickwar appears in Zimmerman’s (1999) bibliography but actually appears nowhere in the text.

evolution as an American symbol (Daniell 2012, Bryan 2004) have accepted the revisionist history of the 19th century as the actual history of the 18th. For instance, both Daniell and Bryan take Jefferson as exemplary of his age's attitude toward town meeting.⁹

The present chapter is meant to resuscitate the insight from Sly, Wickwar, and Westbrook, and to buff it up. I offer several corrections, I thicken the citational basis of the argument, and I add a new dimension: an investigation into *why* town meeting was “discovered as a palladium of liberty” at the time that it was. Combining 1) keyword surveys in historical text corpuses with 2) close, historicized readings of key texts, I substantiate *Town Meeting*'s absence from pre-1820s texts. Then, to understand how the new tradition become possible (and indeed perhaps necessary), I turn to work by cultural historians and historical geographers on a variety of related historical currents. Although I am not able to produce a *comprehensive* causal map, the ground that I do cover is enough to show that New Englanders of the 1820s-1840s had ample reason to reconceive town meeting as *Town Meeting*, and that conditions were ripe for the rest of the country to embrace their creation. Having opened this line of inquiry, I hope that historians will be able to fill in and correct my initial sortie here.

My own analysis departs in a number of ways, some modest and some important, from Sly's, Wickwar's, and Westbrook's. Sly grants singular credit to Tocqueville, whereas I identify a half dozen additional important actors. I also am more careful to place these actors within historical context, avoiding the implication that human intellect alone birthed the new tradition. Multiple macro contexts (economic, geographical, geopolitical, etc.) were hugely important. I also am more insistent than Sly that these actors were not merely *recognizing* for the first time something that had existed quietly all along, but were *creating* something new by their

⁹ Committing anachronism against his own point, Sly (1930:218) cites Jefferson too.

recognition. Sly, I would suggest, followed too faithfully the framing of his immediate scholarly antecedents, the fin-de-siècle Anglo-Saxonist historians such as Charles Francis Adams (1892a:813-814). Finally, I pay attention not just to *when Town Meeting* was invented, but also *where*: the invention of *Town Meeting* was not a product of any nationwide intellectual climate, as one might assume from Sly's description, but was pushed by New Englanders specifically. (We'll see that even Tocqueville was a "New Englander" by proxy.) This regional responsibility is something that Westbrook emphasizes. Westbrook, however, only briefly describes the onset of attention in the 1820s-1850s (143-145): after making the observation that earlier writers devoted virtually no attention to governmental institutions, his focus hastens forward to the scholarly debate from the 1860s to 1900 over the origins of town meeting as a political institution. The result is an inadvertently misleading impression of the period when *Town Meeting* achieved its symbolic load in the first place. The themes that Westbrook identifies for the 1860s-1900s overlap partially but incompletely with the themes that are relevant for the 1820s-1840s. For instance, ethnic chauvinism was a major factor in both periods, but it was expressed in significantly different ways. The other limitation of Westbrook's analysis is that it overplays the 18th century precedents for interest in town meeting, such as the remarks by Jefferson and John Adams (142-143, 144) that we shortly will reevaluate. As for Wickwar, his dates are modestly off base, for both the onset and the peak of the self-government concept. Earlier precedents than Toulmin Smith also can be found.

In core insight, though, Sly's, Wickwar's, and Westbrook's works are crucial precedents for my own. Beyond Sly, Wickwar, and Westbrook, this chapter also has been indebted to Conforti (1988, 2001) and to a number of other geographers, historians, literary scholars, and art historians who have explicated long-duration transformations of New England regional identity,

and who have discussed the various ways that American culture has been “New England-ified.”¹⁰ In some ways, my contribution in this chapter is merely to slot the history of town meeting into their collective framework. My other intellectual debt is to Shalhope (1996) and Kammen (1978), each of whom instructively shows how new cultural symbols emerge as a synthesis of competing ideologies during political and economic ferment, not necessarily emerging in the exact terms of the “winning” side’s position, but carrying multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings that meet the broader needs of the new shape of society.

Chapter Structure

This chapter consists of four sections. The first reconsiders Thomas Jefferson’s supposed celebration of town meetings. Within the *Town Meeting* booster literature, he is treated as emblematic of the Founders’ regard for town meeting. If we can establish that *he* in fact was uninterested, that will be a compelling initial indicator that that *Town Meeting* did not yet exist. To corroborate that indicator, the chapter’s second section zooms out from Jefferson to other thinkers of the period, searching for *anyone* from the Revolutionary generation who used town meeting in a laudatory symbolic way.

The chapter’s third and fourth sections skip forward to the period of invention.¹¹ I first present the new discourse about town meeting, then I explore the conditions of its emergence.

¹⁰ Rhoads (1976), Buell (1986), Wood (1991; with Steinitz 1992), Bowden (1992), Sweeney (1993), D.Brown (1995), Nissenbaum (1996), Harrison (2006), Searls (2006). A further inspiration has been the group of Vermont historians who have produced accounts of the generation by generation transformations of state icons and historiography (Graffagnino 1978; Potash 1991; Sherman 1991a, 1991b; Hand and Potash 1991:71-75; Lipke 1991; D.Brown 2003; Duffy and Muller 2014).

¹¹ Regarding the skipped period: there are interesting and important things to be said about the very first stirrings of *Town Meeting* as a political symbol in the disputes between the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, but those stories will remain for another time.

Town Meeting for the Revolutionary Generation

Thomas Jefferson Reconsidered

Thomas Jefferson's commentaries upon New England towns have become talismanic objects within the *Town Meeting* booster literature, quoted and re-quoted and then quoted again.¹² The widespread deployment of Jefferson's putative enthusiasm for town meeting style governance makes him a prime choice for reexamining Revolutionary era attitudes toward town meeting.

In a separate essay (Leslie forthcoming #1), I historically contextualize Jefferson's writings and perform a systematic close reading of them. In short, Jefferson only discussed town meetings (as opposed to towns and the New England system of elected officers) on *one* occasion. Furthermore, his discussions of the latter exhibited little interest in or awareness of the principles that animate the modern practice of town government (direct democracy, participatory democracy, etc.), aside from concern at a general level for e.g. governmental accountability.¹³ His major interest had to do with sheer scale: the geographical accessibility of the town hall, the closeness of representation, the mechanics for ensuring that a minority or an incomplete assembly (especially one populated by society's lesser elements) couldn't speak in the majority's

¹² One exceptionally intense example is Rule's (2012) recent book on town meeting. The book--which is a celebratory insider treatment intended to provide a popular New England audience with enjoyable trivia plus food for thought--contains no fewer than four repetitions of Jefferson's "wisest invention" line, plus one more reference to the "divide the counties into wards" letter (63, 74, 83, 189, 219).

¹³ One exception: There *is* a version of the Political Education Hypothesis that extends through Jefferson's letters: citizens' heightened attention to ward affairs would inspire them to a republican commitment to liberty. This is one point on which *Town Meeting* boosters *can* take Jefferson as a forebear without fear of anachronism.

name. Jefferson had no wish to instantiate nationwide localized direct democracy, he only was searching for ways to ensure the sanctity and efficacy of representation. The sidebar offers one small illustration of how Jefferson's writings have been misunderstood.

SIDEBAR 6: WHY JEFFERSON *REALLY* CONSIDERED NEW ENGLAND TOWNS

“THE WISEST INVENTION EVER DEvised BY THE WIT OF MAN”¹⁴

Jefferson in fact never said that New England town meetings were the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man. He said that New England *towns* were. And his reasons for this remark take us even further from a celebration of participatory direct democracy.

The letter in which Jefferson made his “wisest invention” remark (1816.07.12 to Kercheval) actually was one of his most thorough presentations of republicanism as an essentially representative enterprise. “Let it be agreed,” he wrote,

that a government is republican in proportion as every member composing it has his equal voice in the direction of its concerns (not indeed in person, which would be impracticable beyond the limits of a city, or small township, but) by representatives chosen by himself, and responsible to him at short periods. In a series of long discussions, Jefferson then assayed each institution of U.S. government with this principle in mind. When he reaches the question of county administration, we finally see what it looks like when it *is* practicable for citizens to have their equal voice in person. “Divide the counties into Wards,” he advised,

of such size as that every citizen can attend when called on, and act in person, ascribe to them the government of their wards in all things relating to themselves exclusively. A justice chosen by themselves, in each, a constable a military company, a patrol, a school, the care of their own poor, their own portion of the public roads, the choice of one or more jurors to serve in some court, and the delivery, within their own wards, of their own votes for all elective officers of higher sphere will relieve the county administration of nearly all its business, will have it better done, and by making every citizen an acting member of the government, and in the offices nearest and most interesting to him, will attach him

¹⁴ This is excerpted from Leslie (forthcoming #1).

SIDEBAR 6, CONTINUED (2 of 2)

by his strongest feelings to the independence of his country, and it's republican constitution.

So far so good for the *Town Meeting* interpretation of Jefferson. But in the very next line he reveals the primacy of officers in these matters, and it is in here that the “wisest invention” line appears:

The justices thus chosen by every ward, would constitute the county court, *would do its judiciary business, direct roads and bridges, levy county and poor rates, and administer all the matters of common interest to the whole country.*

[Emphasis added.] These wards, called townships in New England, are the vital principle of their governments, and have proved themselves the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government, and for its preservation.

Later in the letter, Jefferson returned to the idea that “every citizen, personally” should have “a part in the administration of the public affairs,” but this role consisted of a combination of three representative aspects. First was the close oversight of officers, including the ability to recall them. As Jefferson explained in a follow-up letter to Kercheval (1816.09.05), the key safeguard of republicanism was that “the people retained organized means of acting on their agents” (see also Rahe 1997, Boorstein 1948:191-192). Second was the fact that large numbers of citizens would have the opportunity to serve *as* officers, thanks to the enormous multiplication of roles in a newly decentralized system. Third was the ability to conduct nationwide referenda in a way that was administratively efficient and democratically unambiguous: on constitutional questions, mayors would convey votes from their wards to the county courts, which in turn would bundle the results and pass them along up the pyramid.

None of this is what boosters have in mind when they take Jefferson as a *Town Meeting* hymnist.

Even if one stubbornly rejects my reading of Jefferson and insists that Jefferson *was* a proponent of *Town Meeting* style participatory democracy, a serious problem remains for that interpretation: Jefferson's discussions of "wards" occurred 34 to 48 years after the Declaration of Independence (with most landing at the 40 year mark). In other words, Jefferson's attention to New England towns didn't occur until the very cusp of the invention period anyway. In this sense, the quotation of Jefferson, which typically is meant to evoke reverential overtones of the nation's birth, is doubly anachronistic: it reads *Town Meeting* into texts from the 1810s-1820s, and then conscripts those distorted texts to speak on behalf of the 1770s-1790s.

If Jefferson is an exemplar of the period's attitudes toward town meeting, we therefore must conclude that the period was decidedly uninterested in *Town Meeting*.

Other Revolutionaries: Samuel and John Adams, Jedidiah Morse, Ethan Allen, Etc.

If *Town Meeting* enthusiasm existed at all among the Revolutionary generation, New England's native sons would be a good place to look. If we cannot find it among them, we can safely conclude it did not exist.

A first place to look might be Bostonian Samuel Adams, who later was taken up by *Town Meeting* boosters as town meeting's patron saint (Hosmer 1884).¹⁵ Adams' belief that town

¹⁵ Hosmer (1884:36-37) went so far as to suggest that George Washington was a mere military implementer of the democratic spirit that Adams had cultivated:

We are accustomed to call Washington the 'Father of His Country.' [...] He established our country's freedom with the sword, then guided its course during the first critical years of its independent existence. [...] It is impossible to see how without Washington the nation could have ever been. But after all, is 'Father of America' the best title for Washington? Where and what was Washington during those long preliminary years when the nation was shaping as the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child? [...] There is another character in our history to whom was

meetings served as a protection against tyranny is often cited right next to Jefferson's (putative) praises within *Town Meeting* boosterism: "While we retain those simple Democracies in all our Towns which are the Basis of our State Constitutions, and make a good Use of them, it appears to me we cannot be enslaved or materially injured" (1784.04.04 to Webster). Once again, however, we are dealing with a fragment that has been taken out of context. Adams was participating in the post-Revolution debate about "self-created societies": whether spontaneous popular assemblies were a protection of liberty or a threat to the rule of law (Alexander 2009:70; Frank 2010:128-155). Adams, taking the latter position, sought to offer reassurance that liberty easily would survive prohibition of the practice. The Constitution's guarantee of regular free elections "will set all right, without the Aid of any self Created Conventions or Societies of Men whatever." The remark about town-level democracies followed this argument. In other words, much like Jefferson, Adams was focused upon town meeting's utility within the electoral scheme: it was a tool for (in modern parlance) "throwing the bums out."

Samuel's second cousin, John, is another Revolution-era New Englander who gets quoted repeatedly within the *Town Meeting* literature. In a letter to Congress while President, he declared town meeting to be one of the principal sources of New England's and the nation's character (1780:182). On the other hand, later he would state effusively that town meeting's influence paled in comparison to the militia (1823:69-70). One finds only a few additional instances

once given the title 'Father of America'--a man to a large extent forgotten, his reputation overlaid by those who followed him,--no other than this man of the Town-meeting, Samuel Adams. As far as the *genesis* of America is concerned, Samuel Adams can more properly be called the 'Father of our Country' than Washington. [Italics in original.]

Hosmer's ploy was repeated for the American bicentennial when Canfield (1976) published a book titled, *Samuel Adams's Revolution, 1765-1776: With the Assistance of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, George III, and the People of Boston*.

of praise for town meeting if one combs through his diaries (1774:92-93; 1786:400;)¹⁶ and letters (1775.10.29 to Adams). In this letter to his wife he expressed an early version of the Political Education Hypothesis.¹⁷ That same letter, though, began with an embarrassed self-reflective observation that his New England enthusiasm might be due to a provincialism that he admitted was worthy of censure.¹⁸

Provincially blinkered or not, John Adams had plenty of praise for New England--just not for town meeting, aside from those fragments. In this respect he is exemplary: New England boosters in the late 18th century claimed scores of special virtues for New England, but town meeting almost never made the list. Consider Adams' distant cousin, Hannah, whose *Summary History of New England* (1799) has only this much to say about town meetings:

¹⁶ In the first of these diary references, moreover, it's unclear if he's attributing the effect specifically to town meeting rather than to the political culture of Massachusetts generally:

There is so much of a Republican Spirit, among the People, which has been nourished and cherished by their Form of Government, that they never would submit to Tyrants or oppressive Projects. The same Spirit spreads like a Contagion, into all the other Colonies, into Ireland, and into Great Britain too, from this single Province, of Mass. Bay, that no Pains are too great to be taken, no Hazards too great to be run, for the Destruction of our Charter" [by the British administrators]. (Jo.Adams 1774)

¹⁷ "The Division of our Territory, that is our Counties into Townships, empowering Towns to assemble, choose officers, make Laws, mend roads, and twenty other Things, gives every Man an opportunity of shewing and improving that Education which he received at Colledge or at school, and makes Knowledge and Dexterity at public Business common."

¹⁸ "There is, in the human Breast, a social Affection, which extends to our whole Species. Faintly indeed; but in some degree. The Nation, Kingdom, or Community to which We belong is embraced by it more vigorously. It is stronger still towards the Province to which we belong, and in which We had our Birth. It is stronger and stronger, as We descend to the County, Town, Parish, Neighbourhood, and Family, which We call our own. -- And here We find it often so powerfull as to become partial, to blind our Eyes, to darken our Understandings and pervert our Wills. *It is to this Infirmary, in my own Heart, that I must perhaps attribute that local Attachment, that partial Fondness, that overweening Prejudice in favour of New England, which I feel very often and which I fear sometimes, leads me to expose myself to just Ridicule.*" (Emphasis added.)

The first form of government established by Mr. Williams and the people of Providence appears to have been a voluntary agreement, that each individual should submit to, and be governed by, the resolutions of the whole body. All public matters were transacted in their town-meetings, and there all private disputes and controversies were heard, adjudged and finished” (57; see also 63)

Most compelling of all is the absence of *Town Meeting* from the extensive catalog of Jedidiah Morse. Morse’s geographical works, now familiar only to specialist historians, were incredibly widely read at the time and were a crucial ingredient in the development of post-Revolutionary American nationalism. As Conforti (2001:84-108) and Gribbin (1972) show, Morse built a substratum of New England boosterism into his nationalist works wherever he could. Yet town meeting, judging by its near total absence from the text, apparently did not occur to him as having any utility for advancing that agenda. He celebrated New England’s religion, schools, ethnicity, revolutionary history, and even its state-level political heritage, but he made only a few scattered references to town meeting--few enough that they can be enumerated. In the *Compendious History* (1804:167), he bloodlessly referred to New England town government as being “of the democratic kind.” His *American Universal Geography* (1802:403) made passing reference to the “democratic spirit” of the Bostonians who had rejected a transition from town meeting government to a city charter. A passage from his *American Geography* (1789:249) came closest to a celebratory depiction:

[The custom of yearly elections] seems to have originated from a spirit of pure republicanism. [...] I cannot but notice, with pleasure, the happy tendency of this act, to disseminate through the state such information and such principles as are calculated to cherish the spirit of freedom, and to support our republican government. The frequent collection of people in town-meetings makes them acquainted with each other, and assimilates their ideas and their manners: Their being invested with power, makes them feel their importance, and rouses their ambition--Their town-meetings will be a school, in which all the free citizens of the state may learn how to transact public business with propriety, and in which they may qualify themselves for the higher offices of the state.--The number of

public offices will be increased, without increasing the expenses of the state; and as the desire of promotion is innate in human nature, and as ambition to possess the requisite qualifications commonly accompanies this desire, the probability is, that the number of persons qualified for public offices will be increased, and of course the number of good citizens proportionably multiplied, and the subordinate civil affairs of the state more faithfully and more regularly transacted.¹⁹

Certain seeds of the later discourse are evident in this passage, but ultimately it is a thoroughly *republican* praise, not democratic: town meeting is valuable not as a tool of popular sovereignty, but rather as a recruiting ground and training school for state officials.

Three additional facts underscore that town meeting was not a core symbol for Morse. First, only his early output contains even these small bits of praise; there is no systematic expression that carries across his body of work. Second, the abridged versions of the *American Geography* (1790), which was published as a school text, found the above passage expendable. And finally, the passage just quoted actually comes in a chapter on *New York* rather than one of the New England states. Given Morse's attempts to claim for New England nearly every other thing that he perceived as an American virtue, his willingness to leave town meeting to another state--and to omit mention even of town meeting's existence in many of the chapters on New England government--suggests he simply did not find town meeting very meaningful.

If town meeting was an unremarkable presence in Morse's nationalism, it was even less present in the burgeoning Vermonterism of the same period. Vermont's earliest mythologizers started celebrating the state's political independence even before it was a state (Graffagnino 1978, Duffy and Muller 2014), but town meeting was not one of the symbolic resources they drew upon in pursuit of that goal. In the 20th and 21st century, town meeting has served as the symbol par

¹⁹ This passage is slightly reworded in his 1793 revision and expansion, but not meaningfully so.

excellence of Vermonters' independence and sovereignty.²⁰ When the state's founders needed to establish the same points in the 18th century, though, they marshalled very different symbolic resources. In contesting New York's claims to the Vermont territories, Ira and Ethan Allen pointed not to town meetings but to the economic independence of proprietors working the land, and to the willingness of those proprietors to militarily defend their liberty and property.²¹ As far as I have been able to find, neither Ira nor Ethan had anything to say about town meeting--ever.²²

Return to the national context, we can continue piling up the evidence for *Town Meeting's* absence. The *Proceedings* of the Massachusetts Historical Society, which stretches back to 1791, is barren of special attention to town meetings. Jacques Pierre Brissot, who in 1788 preceded Tocqueville as a Frenchman traveling in the United States to observe its culture, commerce, and politics, made no mention of town meeting (Brissot 1792). Englishman Edward Augustus Kendall's *Travels Through the Northern Parts of the United States, in the Years 1807 and 1808* (1809) did describe various aspects of New England government, including town

²⁰ Town meeting appears routinely in findings from surveys about Vermonters' identity and values (e.g., CFV 2009:10; GCVF 1988:6; Bolduc and Kessel 2008: see Governance Appendix 2; see also Sherman and Versteeg 1996:6-7 for an instance from the 1930s). Here are some illustrations: The 1994 Vermont Commission on Democracy (VCD 1994:20) writes, "No subject goes more to the heart of what it means to live in Vermont and call ourselves Vermonters than the idea of democratic empowerment embodied in Vermont Town Meeting." Gillies (2012), a former Deputy Secretary of State, similarly writes, "Town Meeting Day is the whole point of being a Vermonter. No other event so purely defines our independence or connects us to our history and tradition as the first Tuesday in March, the day the people rule." See also Wolf's (1990:v) and Bohjalian's (2005:20) use of town meeting to argue that Vermont's core identity is surviving the tides of change.

²¹ Graffagnino (1978), Sherman, Sessions, and Potash (2004:xv). For instance, see Ira Allen's (1798) discussion of how Vermonters "governed themselves" in his retrospective *Natural and Political History of the State of Vermont*: "That the district of the New Hampshire Grants, on revolutionary principles, was the oldest in America. That the people had governed themselves by Committees of Safety and Conventions, against the oppressions and tyranny of New York, eight years before the colonies of America took familiar measures against Great Britain" (42).

²² This excludes references to particular town meetings as historical events (e.g., Graffagnino 1992:74-75, 235-236).

meeting, but in a consummately dry style. Tocqueville himself struggled to find precedent for his own work. Sly (1930:106n1) explains:

Town government in Massachusetts had received only the most cursory attention from students of history and politics. Even as late as 1832 Jared Sparks wrote that “no books treat of this matter” and Alexis de Tocqueville in a letter dated December 2, 1831, stated, [*translation of the French*] “The only work in which I have been able to draw some light upon the practical proceedings of your town system is titled *Town-officer*.”²³

We thus have an implicit admission from Tocqueville that he was inventing his portrait.

The Revolutionary Generation: Summary

This, then, was how the Revolutionary generation “celebrated” town meeting: rarely, without theoretical elaboration or grounding, and with plenty of ambivalence and uncertainty on those few occasions when something *was* said. Only from the perspective of post-Jacksonian America could this weak corpus be taken as plausible evidence of a Revolutionary era enthusiasm for participatory democracy. To the contrary, most of the founders had been desperate to keep a lid on populist government, and sang the praises instead of the representative principle and of an elitist republicanism (Lockridge 1981).

We now can look at what changed.

²³ Sly identifies Tocqueville’s citation as Bacon’s (1825) *Town Officer’s Guide*, but Tocqueville actually appears to have been using Goodwin’s *Town Officer* (1825/1829). See Tocqueville (1835:64n6).

The Invention of Town Meeting

When theatrical performer Stephen C. Massett toured the country in the 1850s with a one-man musical show, one of his most popular numbers--used as a show finale in many cases--was his parody of a "Yankee Town Meeting."²⁴ His success demonstrates that by the early 1850s, the New England town meeting was a familiar object from Kentucky to California. (Well, a familiar object at least to the classes that could afford the \$3.00 ticket--crudely equivalent to \$90 in the present. How the lower classes understood town meeting, or whether it was on their radar at all, is another question.) Starting in same time period, we find *Town Meeting* being deployed as a point of common reference by Midwestern writers and orators.²⁵ Town meetings and *Town Meeting* had achieved national currency.

What had changed between the close of the 18th century and the middle of the 19th? This section shows how a series of New England boosters found in town meeting the raw material for a portrait of *Town Meeting*, starting in the 1820s. This newly fashioned icon was their special weapon in a culture war fought to shore up New England's relatively declining national standing. Notwithstanding their literary and scholarly talents, though, these boosters were not so much masterminds as lucky beneficiaries of history. A confluence of trends--economic, industrial, political, religious, literary, historiographical, aesthetic, geopolitical--had made *Town Meeting* possible to think with.

²⁴ DAC (1852), LDC (1859), Massett (1863:120-287), Estavan (1939:6-7).

²⁵ E.g., Prescott (1855:347), O'Connor in Adel (1873:1122), and Garfield (1877:49) from Ohio, and Howard (1889:74) from Nebraska.

The Praise Begins

One of the very first to write in the new vein was Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale College and an influential theologian, scholar, and author. In 1821, he described New England towns as “inferior²⁶ republics, possessing, under the control of the Legislature, the necessary powers to adjust all their local and peculiar concerns” (1821:241). Town meetings, Dwight said, acted as a local legislature “with the power to make such orders, rules, and constitutions, as may concern the common welfare of the town” (242). The “strictest propriety” and “very honorable decorum” earned Dwight’s acclamation, as did the legal transparency of the system, the absence of oration that was “merely for show,” and the absence of “noisy, tumultuous proceedings, and rash measures, so generally found in great assemblies of men” (248-250). Even Athens and Rome had been less impressive on that last point, Dwight noted. He approved that local concerns were settled by those who best know them, rather than by remote administrators (249). He also articulated a version of the Political Education Hypothesis (249, 250-251): the schooling of public opinion was what made republican government possible. Likewise, the multiplication of local offices within the town system taught citizens to be judicious, and it furthermore prepared them for higher offices.

Town Meeting popped up throughout the 1820s,²⁷ but the discourse really took flight in the mid-1830s when a trio of giants took to the topic: writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, statesman and historian George Bancroft, and French social scientist Alexis de Tocqueville.

Emerson, having been invited to speak at the 200th anniversary of the town of Concord in 1835, prepared himself through an immersion in the local archives. The resulting address

²⁶ In the sense of “smaller.”

²⁷ E.g., James Fenimore Cooper’s *Notions of the Americans* (1828:345-348).

invented a new kind of local historiography, one that basked in a regional identity and showed local events as a reflection of and contributor to national and world history.²⁸ The town meeting was one of the institutions that Emerson used to draw such connections. “In a town-meeting,” he famously declared, “the great secret of political science was uncovered, and the problem solved, how to give every individual his fair weight in the government, without any disorder from numbers” (17). He went on to acknowledge town meeting’s faults, but he did not take these to be damning. Instead, they served as all the more proof that town meeting was the ideal institution of government: a perfect reflection of the flawed humans who would practice it.²⁹ Emerson also became one of the first to suggest that town meeting was a world-historical accomplishment in the advancement of democracy. “The British government,” he noted,

has recently presented to the several public libraries of this country, copies of the splendid edition of the Domesday Book, and other ancient public records of England. I cannot but think that it would be a suitable acknowledgment of this national munificence, if the records of one of our towns, --of this town, for example, --should be printed, and presented to the governments of Europe; to the English nation, as a thank-offering, and as a certificate of the progress of the Saxon race; to the Continental nations as a lesson of humanity and love. (19)

Aside from a pair of brief reflections upon town government in his journals and notebooks (S.S.Smith 1990:207; Emerson and Forbes 1912:420-421), the Concord speech was Emerson’s sole contribution to theorizing *Town Meeting*. As a one-off work, though, its impact was monumental. At the time, the speech had little circulation outside of the area. Within

²⁸ Westbrook (1982:144-145) makes a related point.

²⁹ “He is ill informed who expects, on running down the Town Records for two hundred years, to find a church of saints, a metropolis of patriots, enacting wholesome and creditable laws. [...] In these assemblies, the public weal, the call of interest, duty, religion, were heard; and every local feeling, every private grudge, every suggestion of petulance and ignorance, were not less faithfully produced. Wrath and love came up to town-meeting in company. [...] [I]f the good counsel prevailed, the sneaking counsel did not fail to be suggested; freedom and virtue, if they triumphed, triumphed in a fair field” (17-18).

Massachusetts circles, though, it was a sensation, and its indirect influence through a score of other writers and statesmen was immense.

The following year, Bancroft, “the father of American history,” gave an address of his own. The occasion was the 4th of July, and the setting was once again a Massachusetts town. He enthused,

Were I to proceed and recount all the incidents, which demonstrate the democratic spirit of early New England, the hours of day would pass away, and the shades of evening gather around us, before my task were done. [...] New England was settled by way of towns; each separate village was a real and perfect democracy within itself; each town-meeting was a convention of its people; all the inhabitants, the affluent and the needy, the wise and the foolish, were equal members of the little legislature. Truth won its victories in a fair field, where pride, not less than benevolence, might join in the debate; where selfishness could secure no special favors; where justice and learning claimed no privilege. Our town meetings were the schools in which our lawgivers were educated; and these bear in perfect the impress of democracy. (1836:19)

He echoed and expanded these remarks in the second volume of his seminal 10-volume history of the United States, which was published the following year:

Each town-meeting was a little legislature, and all inhabitants, the affluent and the more needy, the wise and the foolish, were members with equal franchises. There the taxes of the town were discussed and levied; there the village officers were chosen; there roads were laid out, and bridges voted; there the minister was elected, the representatives to the assembly were instructed. The debate was open to all; wisdom asked no favors; the churl abated nothing of his pretensions. Whoever reads the records of these village democracies, will be perpetually coming upon some little document of political wisdom, which breathes the freshness of rural legislation, and wins a disproportioned interest, from the justice and simplicity of the times. As the progress of society required exertions in a wider field, the public mind was quickened by associations that were blended with early history; and when Connecticut emerged from the quiet of its origin, and made its way into scenes where a new political world was to be created, the sagacity that had regulated the affairs of the village, gained admiration in the field and in council. During the intervening century, we shall rarely have occasion to recur to Connecticut; its institutions were perfected. For more than a century, peace was within its borders; and, with transient interruptions, its democratic institutions were

unharmd. For a century, with short exceptions, its history is the picture of colonial happiness. To describe its condition is but to enumerate the blessings of self-government, as exercised by a community of farmers, who have leisure to reflect, who cherish education, and who have neither a nobility nor a populace. (1837:60; see also 1852a:148-149)

Direct celebration of this sort was only the first part of Bancroft's contribution to the development of the *Town Meeting* tradition. His Jacksonian slant also rendered town meeting thematically notable, and his "New England-ification" of American history furthermore rendered town meeting prominent. Particularly within the Revolutionary period, he magnified New England's role (Van Tassel 1960:116-119; Buell 1986:45), initiating the now-familiar tradition of focusing upon the Massachusetts ferment. Episodes that involved town meeting were given special attention, and the New England town meeting thus emerged as a heroic character alongside the human revolutionaries.³⁰

As influential as Bancroft and Emerson were, the impact of Volume 1 of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* was even greater (1835). Published in France in 1835, the book was promptly translated into English, though an American publication was not achieved for several more years (see H.B.Adams 1898:39). Tocqueville gave remarkable praise to the New England town, and he presented it as the centerpiece to an understanding of American democracy. He turned to the New England town (Chapter V) immediately after elucidating the principle of popular sovereignty (Chapter IV), posing the former as a historical, sociological, and philosophical explanation of the latter. To understand the federal government, he explained, one had to understand the state; to understand the state, one had to understand the county and town; and to understand the town, "I have thought it expedient to choose one of the states of New

³⁰ E.g., 1837:427-428; 1852b:193-197; 1854:472-430, 516-518. See also Bancroft's role in magnifying British leader Lord George Germaine's into a primary antagonist of the Revolution, through an exaggeration of Germaine's antipathy to town meetings. (Leslie forthcoming #2).

England as an example,” since the principles of American government “have been carried further and have produced greater results in New England than elsewhere” (61; see also 65). In contrast, he explained, the further one went to the south, the more attenuated was the American public spirit (79). His attention to the New England town, he explained, also was recommended by history: all nations “bear some marks of their origin” (26), Tocqueville believed, and New England was the germ of the United States:

In the English colonies of the North, more generally known as the New England states, the two or three main ideas that now constitute the basis of the social theory of the United States were first combined. The principles of New England spread at first to the neighboring states; they then passed successively to the more distant ones; and at last, if I may so speak, they interpenetrated the whole confederation. [...] The civilization of New England has been like a beacon lit upon a hill, which, after it has diffused its warmth immediately around it, also tinges the distant horizon with its glow. (30-31)

Later in the work he attributed the United States’ democratic successes even more clearly to the New England town:

In the laws of Connecticut, as well as in all those of New England, we find the germ and gradual development of that township independence which is the life and mainspring of American liberty at the present day. The political existence of the majority of the nations of Europe commenced in the superior ranks of society and was gradually and imperfectly communicated to the different members of the social body. In America, on the contrary, it may be said that the township was organized before the county, the county before the state, the state before the union” (40; see also 56, 59, 65, 164).

Tocqueville therefore proceeded with an admiring portrait of contemporary town government (61-77). He was especially impressed with the system of local office-holding,³¹ and

³¹ Tocqueville possessed a lingering incredulity over this feature. During his research he asked his Bostonian interlocutor Jared Sparks whether all of these positions really get filled, and whether all the office-holders really discharged their duties. Accepting Sparks’ (1832:16) assurances, Tocqueville felt compelled to offer extra attestation for his own potentially skeptical readers: “All these magistrates actually exist,” he wrote in a footnote (1835:64).

he credited town meeting as the critical institution on which all superior levels of American democracy rested:

Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it. A nation may establish a free government, but without municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty. (61)

This was incredible praise for an institution that only a decade or two previously had sat inconspicuously.

Smaller Voices: An Idea "In the Air"

Dwight, Emerson, Bancroft, Tocqueville: these were famous men. Simultaneously-- antecedently in many cases--*Town Meeting* was being put to use by countless smaller voices. The themes from the prior section are visible in a variety of contexts: travelogues (e.g., Tudor 1820:307-310), geographies (e.g., Snow 1830:16-17), histories of the Revolution and of the 17th century colonization (e.g., Tudor 1823:444-446; Pitkin 1828:266-267; NAR 1831:193-194), the burgeoning genre of local history (e.g., Worthington 1827:142-143), and oratories (e.g., Jo.Davis 1825:12-13; Choate 1834[1878]:55-57). *Town Meeting* is thus a case of an idea being "in the air" before finally being memorably formulated by significant individuals (Bowden 1992:22).

The Uses of Town Meeting

What I want to emphasize is not just that town meeting now was receiving considerable attention and celebration, but that that attention was being used for more than descriptive purpose: *Town Meeting* was being deployed rhetorically within debates over contemporary affairs. Dwight as a conservative and a Federalist used *Town Meeting* as an orderly foil to an unruly radical republicanism that he worried was ascendant in the United States. To almost

opposite effect, Bancroft presented *Town Meeting* as a vindication of Jacksonian and Jeffersonian democracy (Buell 1986:200-201). As a nation-building historian, Bancroft also used *Town Meeting* as part of a case for the country being worthy of global attention despite its youthfulness; his larger thesis was that American liberty was unique in the history of the world. For Emerson as a transcendentalist and humanist, *Town Meeting* was a demonstration that government did not have to encroach upon individualism in order to achieve its ends, and that an ideal government for humans was one that reveled in rather than tried to correct their human imperfections. For Tocqueville as a reformer, *Town Meeting* was a foil for deficiencies in the French state, not just at the administrative level but also at the philosophical. He also used *Town Meeting* to support for the “providential fact” (1835:6) that democracy was on a global march, and that this was a fact to be greeted with enthusiasm rather than alarm; *Town Meeting* showed that a great nation could successfully occupy the middle ground between anarchy and despotism.

In still other contexts, *Town Meeting* started being treated as a marker of civilization and a basis for American sovereignty. One example of this comes from the debate over Vermont statehood. In the prior section, we saw the Allen brothers’ justification for independence from New York rested not upon town meetings but upon yeoman independence and military self-organization. In the 1820s, references to the town meeting as an institution of domestic self-governance now began to augment the justification. For instance, an early Secretary of State described Vermont as having existed in a state of nature, but then “town meetings were held, committees of safety were appointed” (Slade 1823:xix). *Town Meeting* was the necessary and sufficient condition for a new political community to claim sovereign rights.

This civilizational theme had a darker side too: *Town Meeting* also found use in debates about racial distinction. For instance, the *North American Review* (NAR 1830:102-103)

suggested that American Indians' capacity or incapacity to participate in town meetings could be taken as a sign of whether they could progress out of "barbarism."³² Similar arguments were made about Irish immigrants: their supposed tendency to wreck New England town government was posed as evidence of their unworthiness for citizenship (e.g., Abbott 1835:246). One author even implied that a worldwide comparative ethnology was possible based on consideration of which populations were and were not "fitted" to town meeting (Abbott 1835:264).³³

These examples show that *Town Meeting* had emerged not just as an object of praise, but as a symbol that could be used to say something about larger themes of American democracy and identity.

New Englanders, All—Even Tocqueville

If *Town Meeting* was an object of political utility, we won't be surprised to realize that some political actors had stronger incentive than others to peddle it. *Town Meeting* was a distinctly northeastern framing of American political identity and values, and most of the major voices in promoting it were New Englanders--and New Englanders at that who had heavy

³² "If these Indians are too ignorant and barbarous to submit to the state laws, or duly estimate their value, they are too ignorant and barbarous to establish and maintain a government which shall protect its own citizens, and preserve the necessary relations and intercourse with its neighbors. And if there are any serious practical objection to the operation of these laws, growing out of the state of society among the Indians, it would be easy for the state authorities to make such changes and interpose such securities as would protect them now, and lead them hereafter, if anything can lead them, to a full participation in political rights. *New York has acted upon this principle, in authorizing the Brothertown Indians to hold town meetings and elect town officers.*" (NAR 1830:102-103, emphasis added)

³³ The idea of town meeting as a measure of the world historic progression to freedom, and the concomitant idea that some peoples were more able than others to participate in that forward march, was one that 19th century chroniclers of town meeting took to new heights (e.g., Fiske 1890, 1902:81-82; E.A.Freeman 1882; H.B.Adams 1882; C.F.Adams 1892a, 1892b; see also Parton 1871:37, Borgeaud 1894, and Jordan 1898:591). See Bl.Adams (2014) and Westbrook (1982).

investment in New England's old institutions: the universities, Congregational ministries, literary circles, family dynasties, and political regimes. Those promoters who weren't from New England were not so far removed: they were New Yorkers or Pennsylvanians, who were of a social circle with the New Englanders, or who had exposure to upstate towns' governments, which in those years in many cases was quite similar to the New England system.

Even Tocqueville, the foreigner, should be counted as a New England voice--we might call him a ventriloquist's dummy. His intellectual indebtedness to New England boosters was enormous.³⁴ Tocqueville had been unfamiliar with the institution of New England towns before he visited Boston in late 1831, early in his trip. Conversations with various local noteworthies--almost all of whom took great pride in their institutions (Pierson 1938:411)--not only introduced him but furthermore led to a paradigm shift in his thinking (Mélonio 1986:16-17; Gannett 2003:5). Exposed to a torrent of highly developed analysis from so many men of intellectual and civic distinction, Tocqueville decided nearly overnight that the New England town and town meeting system were the key to understanding American democracy. He remained in Boston for more than three weeks to pick brains and to conscript assistance in gathering and synthesizing other information. This stay in Boston was considerably longer than anywhere else during Tocqueville's trip, with the exception of New York (where he spent a cumulative month on either end of his trip--18 days, then two weeks). Even Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, the United States' recently established and former capital cities, received only two weeks each.

³⁴ H.B.Adams (1898), Pierson (1938:397-425), Gannett (2003:5), Brogan (2006:181-182). When Bryce (1888) followed in Tocqueville's footsteps as a foreigner analyzing American government, he too was overwhelmingly influenced by particular native voices from the Northeast (Schudson 1998a:338n5).

The most influential of Tocqueville's Boston interlocutors was the minister, historian, editor, and educator Jared Sparks.³⁵ The two men had met previously during Sparks' trip to Paris in 1828, and following their 1831 Boston engagement they traded several more rounds of letters (H.B.Adams 1898:7-8). The climax of this correspondence occurred when Sparks in February 1832 mailed Tocqueville a 4,000-word set of "Observations on the Government of Towns in Massachusetts," containing Sparks' own analysis as well as responses to a questionnaire that Tocqueville had left him (Sparks 1832). Tocqueville's argument that the town was the germ of the republic, both in principle and historically, came straight from Sparks (1832:17-18, 29). So did the portrait of town meetings as calm, virtuous bodies characterized by political egalitarianism and a lack of class enmity (Sparks 1832:36-38). And Tocqueville's use of Massachusetts as an illustrative model in the first place also is likely due to some combination of the enthusiasm he absorbed from Sparks and other Bostonians, and of the sheer fact that the only relevant reference works he possessed (Sparks 1832 and Goodwin 1825/1829) were about Massachusetts (Pierson 1938:411).

Tocqueville himself never witnessed a town meeting (a fact which he later lamented) (Gannett 2003:5), and his itinerary exposed him only minimally to the small towns of New England and New York. For instance, he spent a day in Stockbridge, MA on his way to his Boston residency. His understanding of the New England town therefore can be characterized as thoroughly secondhand. In fact, by contemporary academic standards, we might even use the term "plagiarizing" to describe the transfer of concepts and wordings from the oral and written

³⁵ Tocqueville's other Boston interlocutors are discussed in Pierson (1938:397-425) and Mélonio (1986:16-17).

briefs of Tocqueville's Boston interlocutors into *Democracy in America* (see H.B.Adams 1898; Pierson 1938:398-403, 405-411).

The exchange between Tocqueville and his New England interlocutors was beneficial for both. They provided the material and framing for the analysis that would earn him celebrity; he made their treasured *Town Meeting* famous in the course of his own ascent, furthermore giving it the validation of an external observer's "objectivity."

Historical Circumstances

Why was this generation suddenly interested in a topic that prior generations had not been? And what--beyond the sheer analytic and literary talents of Tocqueville, Emerson, etc.--was responsible for the willingness of the country at large to adopt a self-aggrandizing provincial discourse?

What follows is a series of sketches that 1) show why New England's boosters were in need of developing *some* new discourse in the 1820s-1840s, 2) gesture toward why *Town Meeting* fit the bill particularly well, and 3) gesture toward why the nation was so receptive to a northeastern symbol. One insight that emerges powerfully from what follows is that *regional* identity-making and inter-regional competition can be hugely important inputs into *national* identity-making, worthy of more attention from scholars (Sherman 1991a:xi-xii).

External Threats

"I would suggest," the historian Stephen Nissenbaum (1996:47) writes,

that New England did not fully emerge as a self-conscious cultural entity until [...] the third decade of the nineteenth century. It did so in response

to two, interrelated threats to the authority of its elite groups. The first threat was posed by post-Revolutionary republican politics; the second, by the region's economic collapse during the years before and including the War of 1812.

He continues,

After 1800, New England as a region began to undergo severe economic and political decline. Jefferson's presidency undermined the national hegemony of the Federalist party; his Embargo Act of 1807, followed by the War of 1812, virtually shut down the transatlantic shipping trade, on which New England's commercial prosperity hinged. In desperation, members of the Federalist elite met at Hartford in 1814 to discuss possible defensive measures. One such measure was regional secession. When the war ended in apparent glory a few months later, the Hartford Convention began to exude the unpleasant odor of a treasonable cabal. The whole debacle accelerated the disintegration of Federalism as a national force and the discrediting of the region's Federalist leadership. New England's political force seemed spent, and its economy lay in shambles. (47-48)

Buell (1986:207) augments Nissenbaum's list:

Westward expansion, the extension of slavery to the territories, the strengthening of the Fugitive Slave Law, the failure of the Whig Party at the presidential level, New England's declining percentage in the national population--this succession of developments was not, by any means, bemoaned by all New Englanders; but in toto it represented a blow to the regional ego.

Or as Pierson (1955:14-15) puts it,

No sooner had they joined the union than the New England states must have begun to realize that they were in the minority. Physically and politically they were too small. The rejection of the Federalist party and standards, the ascendancy of the Virginia dynasty and Jacksonian democracy, the obvious flight of American society from the ideal of moral perfection toward western power and wealth--all these must have been intensely disturbing. Hence a feeling of neglect, even of injury, and a need to justify themselves.

Extensive as these catalogs of woe are, they are only the half of what New England was facing. Jefferson's Embargo, the Non-Importation Act, and the War of 1812 were only one component of a thirty-year stretch of continual economic dislocation within the region (Duffy and Muller 2014:72-73, 211). When hostilities ceased, British competitors came roaring back into play, possessing the additional competitive advantage of capital reserves undepleted by wartime stasis.

Domestic competition was another squeeze: Midwestern agricultural was producing in full swing, and thanks to transportation innovations--including the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825--the goods were washing over New England's markets (Sherman, Sessions, and Potash 2004:200).

Some historians (C.Harris 2007, H.Barron 1984; see also Duffy and Muller 2014:214-215) have argued that New England's economic decline in the period was overstated or even imaginary--that the sense of embattlement was largely a matter of *perception* among New England's elites and culture-makers of the period. For our purposes in exploring the invention of *Town Meeting*, the point is moot: whether or not the difficulty was real or imagined, it inspired a cultural counterattack.

The threat to New England's political power is worth further detailing. To begin with, there was the embarrassment of New England's inability to hold on to the U.S. presidency. Massachusettsan John Adams was acrimoniously displaced in 1801 after a single term in office. With Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe each securing a double term, Virginians monopolized the presidency through 1825, when Adams' son eked his way into the office after high drama in the Electoral College. Having vindicated his father, though, he too was good for only one term--and the agent of displacement was again a southerner.

Moreover, with every new state that joined the Union, New England's share was diluted in the Electoral College and the Senate. In this regard, the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 was a portent of stupendous marginalization (W.Nugent 2008:65; Roberts 2002:106).³⁶

³⁶ New England authors went so far as to promote a myth that the Midwest was a "Great American Desert" of no potential for colonization. "These elite New Englanders wanted the United States to encounter a barrier to the country's headlong plunge westwards" (Bowden 1992:13-14).

The Louisiana Purchase was a threat in another sense as well: New England's Yankees³⁷ were conscious that the Louisiana Purchase also represented a competing direction in terms of the nation's ethnic future (Conforti 2001:118-121; W.Nugent 2008:65-66). Conforti explains,

As one Federalist put it, Jefferson's territorial acquisition invited into the republic a '*Gallo-Hispano-Indian omnium gatherum* of savages and adventurers.' 'Let us no longer pray,' another Federalist argued as he contemplated the new French and Spanish inhabitants of the republic, 'that America may become an asylum to all nations.' [...] Many Federalists increasingly took refuge in their descent 'from the best English stock.' (119-120)

The country's economic, political, *and* ethnic future thus seemed to be passing into the hands of other regions of the country.

Internal Turmoil

Matching these external threats were internal turmoils.

Even without Jefferson's foreign policy or the Midwest's agricultural ascension, New England was experiencing more than enough economic upheaval within its own borders. Luck itself seemed to be tilted against the region: a series of "financial panics, epidemics, plagues, crop disease, and climate anomalies" upended one sector of New England's economy after another (Duffy and Muller 2014:72-73, 211). The commercial revolution of 1790-1820 (Bowden, cited in Nissenbaum 1996:44) and the ongoing process of industrialization were remaking the previously agricultural landscape with mills and factories (Nissenbaum 1996:51; J.Wood 1991:43). Traditional social organization was directly impacted, as dwellings concentrated into village centers, replacing the dispersed settlement pattern of old.³⁸

³⁷ The "Yankee" term was actually just around the bend. See Conforti (2001:123-202).

³⁸ Bowden (1992:18-20), Wood and Steinitz (1992:109), Wood (1991:36), Nissenbaum (1996:44).

Simultaneously, immigration was inducing panics among nativists.³⁹ Religious heterogeneity was another source of conflict. Even setting aside the growing footprint of Irish Catholicism, by 1818, the population of Baptists, Episcopalians, and Methodists had grown so dramatically that Congregationalist churches were now in the minority (S.Green 2010:123).

Sheer population growth, regardless of demographic breakdown, was another issue. This was the onset of the urbanization anxiety that has dogged New England for 200 straight years. New England had been slow, relative to the rest of the country, to participate in the American “municipal revolution,” but the dam broke in 1820 (Pinkham 1992, Teaford 1975). Prior to that year, only six city incorporations had occurred in New England, all in a batch in 1784, but no more had occurred in the interim.⁴⁰ Advocacy efforts had intensified, though, and formal urbanization entered a streak between 1820 and 1836 (see Figure 1.1). The true pile-on would wait until 1846, and the great majority of towns in the meantime still maintained town meeting, but the bellwether transitions in 1820-1836 were greatly unsettling. Resistance to abolishing town meeting government had been prolonged and fierce, so when the tide turned, it therefore seemed like a true turning point had been reached in history. Each new incorporation also posed a practical existential threat to the sovereignty and coherence of surrounding towns, and of town organization overall; as Pinkham (1992:17) puts it, “That selected towns could be elevated above their sister localities to become cities posed serious jurisdictional issues.”

³⁹ Higham (1963:9-10, 137), Solomon (1956:66-7, 73, 160), Bl.Adams (2014:28, 178, 183), Conforti (2001:124).

⁴⁰ During this period, Connecticut did re-incorporate three towns as “boroughs.”

Hartford, CT	1784	Manchester, NH	1846
New Haven, CT	1784	Roxbury, MA	1846
Middletown, CT	1784	Bath, ME	1847
New London, CT	1784	Charlestown, MA	1847
Norwich, CT	1784	New Bedford, MA	1847
Newport, RI	1784	Cambridge, MA	1848
		Worcester, MA	1848
		Portsmouth, NH	1849
<i>Bridgeport, CT</i>	<i>1800 (borough)</i>	Augusta, ME	1849
<i>Stonington, CT</i>	<i>1801 (borough)</i>	Gardiner, ME	1849
		<i>New Britain, CT</i>	<i>1850 (borough)</i>
		Calais, ME	1850
<i>Guilford, CT</i>	<i>1815 (borough)</i>	Hallowell, ME	1850
<i>Essex, CT</i>	<i>1820 (borough)</i>	Lynn, MA	1950
<i>Killington, CT</i>	<i>1820 (borough)</i>	<i>Derby, CT</i>	<i>1851 (borough)</i>
<i>Danbury, CT</i>	<i>1822 (borough)</i>	Newburyport, MA	1851
Boston, MA	1822	<i>Danielson, CT</i>	<i>1852 (borough)</i>
<i>Colchester, CT</i>	<i>1824 (borough)</i>	Springfield, MA	1852
<i>Newton, CT</i>	<i>1824 (borough)</i>	<i>Wallingford, CT</i>	<i>1853 (borough)</i>
<i>Waterbury, CT</i>	<i>1825 (borough)</i>	Belfast, ME	1853
Providence, RI	1830	Concord, NH	1853
<i>Stamford, CT</i>	<i>1830 (borough)</i>	Nashua, NH	1853
Portland, ME	1832	Waterbury, CT	1853
Bangor, ME	1834	Lawrence, MA	1853
<i>Norwalk, CT</i>	<i>1836 (borough)</i>	<i>Greenwich, CT</i>	<i>1854 (borough)</i>
Bridgeport, CT	1836	Rockland, ME	1854
Lowell, MA	1836	Fall River, MA	1854
Salem, MA	1836	Biddeford, ME	1855
		Dover, NH	1855
		Chelsea, MA	1857
		Lewiston, ME	1863
		Taunton, MA	1864
		Burlington, VT	1865
		Meriden, CT	1867
		Saco, ME	1867
		New Britain, CT	1870

Figure 1.1: Timeline of New England city incorporations, 1784-1870
Sources: Dates are from Sly (1930), Pinkham (1992), and independent research.

Another trend, in all six states, was governmental centralization, which posed a serious threat to town meeting's relevance (Sly 1930:117-125, Whitten 1898). Even *within* the scope of town government, though, town meeting was yielding ground. For instance, there had been a sea change in the oversight structure for education, with the town meeting and Select Board having yielded jurisdiction over schools to a separate School Committee and School District Meeting (Whitten 1898:31). Another small revolution in the substance of town government followed from religious disestablishment. The privatization of funding for New England's churches--occurring respectively in 1807, 1818, 1819, and 1833 for Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts (Green 2010:119ff)--meant that a considerable expense and area of oversight was now fully removed from the meeting agenda (Olds 1994).

Simultaneously, financial and organizational burdens upon local government were intensifying, straining the competency of town meetings to handle their remaining jurisdiction. For instance, poor relief expenses in Massachusetts in the three decades prior to 1820 had increased at 2.5 times the rate of population growth (Whitten 1898:43). One way of understanding the ballooning complexity and burden of town government is to look at the infrastructure that was needed merely to manage the record-keeping: some towns felt the need to add whole rooms to their town offices, simply for the sake of storage (Sweeney 1993:90).

If town government was changing in substance, it also was changing in style. In its original practice, town meeting was a consensual institution (Zuckerman 1970). Other moods--Liberal, adversarial, individualist--had penetrated long before the Revolution, even (Lockridge 1981), but the early 1800s saw a marked further decline of the consensual style. The aforementioned demographic and legal-structural changes were among the drivers of this decline, as were two additional developments:

First was the exploding national conflict between the Federalist Party and Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans. Both parties were developing formal organization that extended to the local level (W.Robinson 1916:61-63; Formisano 1983:33ff). Between 1800 and 1805, the parties organized committees of correspondence and election across New England and instituted permanent party workers. Newspaper editorialists expressed dismay as party-line voting took over town meetings, and as pre-meeting party caucuses (for the sake of compiling candidate slates) became a normal part of the local political calendar.

A second source of adversarialism was denominational. Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, and others had been chafing for a century over Congregationalism's legal privileges, and we saw a few paragraphs previously that they successfully achieved disestablishment in this period. As Green (2010:119-120) writes, the movement "was continuous in New England between 1800 and 1833 and represented one of the leading political and social controversies of the day," contested bitterly and much on all parties' minds. The tradition of consensual local politics thus "deteriorated rapidly in the 1830s" (Sweeney 1993:88).

In a fascinating article, Sweeney (1993) shows how these party and denominational conflicts found expression spatially and architecturally. From the late 18th to early 19th centuries, New England's houses of worship transformed "from meetinghouse to church," with the functions of the formerly singular meetinghouse splitting across two newly distinct spaces: a purely spiritual church space, and a secular town hall. In some towns, the church

expelled town meetings to assert the primacy of the meetinghouse's religious identity. In other towns, growth and the town's division into different religious societies encouraged the removal of secular business from meetinghouses. Elsewhere, dissenters undoubtedly objected to the transaction of municipal business in buildings used by the established church for worship service. (68)

The 1810s and 1820s saw an acceleration: new laws and court decisions increasingly facilitated the transfer of town meetings to the new spaces, and the disestablishment in several states of the Congregational church was an especially powerful prompt (87). The pace of town hall construction/acquisition shows the momentum. The data from Sweeney’s survey of Massachusetts towns is represented in Figure 1.2. A similar pattern was exhibited in Connecticut (88).

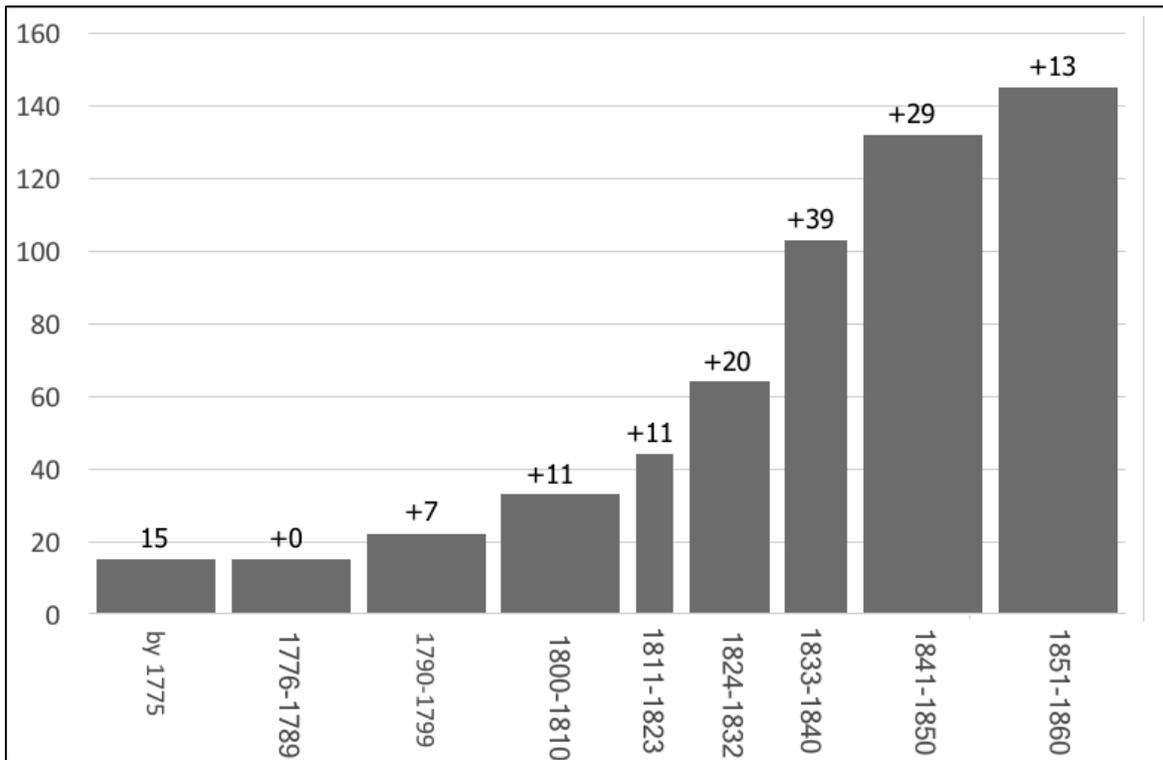


Figure 1.2: Cumulative number of town halls constructed or acquired 1775-1860 by the Massachusetts towns in Sweeney’s (1993:85) sample
 Source: Raw data is from Sweeney (1993:85).

Symbolic Palliation and Cultural Counterattack

Culture was the arena where New England’s elites mounted a counterattack to their diminishing national prestige, and where they found consolation for their unsettling local

circumstances.⁴¹ A defensive eruption of symbols, historical narratives, and cultural claims allowed them to reclaim their status as the United States' most important, most defining region, and to weave the loosened threads of their worldview into a new coherent pattern. This eruption included:

- the identification of the Puritans and Pilgrims as revered ancestors⁴²
 - the “New England-ification” of American history. One aspect of this was the “Pilgrimization” or “Puritanization” of the colonial period, at the expense of other possible ancestors, such as South Carolina’s Huguenots, Pennsylvania’s Quakers, and Virginia’s settler.⁴³ Another was a new portrait of Massachusetts as the leader of the Revolution.⁴⁴
 - the village green ideal⁴⁵
 - the positive revaluation of the Yankee character (Conforti 2001:150-171)
 - the Greek Revival town hall (Sweeney 1993)
 - the myth of pre-colonial New England as a dense primeval forest (Bowden 1992:10)
- (This symbol enjoys less currency in the present compared to the others.)

Town Meeting can be added to this catalog. In fact, it shares parentage with them: the names of Town Meeting’s inventors--Timothy Dwight, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jared Sparks, George Bancroft--all pop up repeatedly in scholarly work on these other developments.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Nissenbaum (1996:47, 48), Conforti (2001:123-202), Wood and Steinitz (1992:106), Buell (1986:207), Jaffee (1999:247-248), McWilliams (1973:474).

⁴² Buell (1986:193-213), Conforti (2001:80, 171-195).

⁴³ Buell (1986:193-213, especially 196-197), Conforti (2001:80, 171-195). Conforti (2001:182) discusses an unsuccessful historiographical counteroffensive by proponents of Jamestown.

⁴⁴ See the prior discussion of Tudor, Pitkin, and Bancroft.

⁴⁵ Meyer (1975), Wood (1991), Wood and Steinitz (1992), Bowden (1992:18-20), Nissenbaum (1996:43-7), Conforti (2001:124-144).

⁴⁶ To list just a few instances: Nissenbaum (1996:47), Conforti (2001:181-182, 193), Kammen (1978:47).

Like the village green and the Puritan national ancestor, *Town Meeting* offered a point of (supposed) stable cultural persistence amid much change. Like the Greek Revival town hall, the newly laudatory framing of Yankee virtues, and the primeval forest myth, *Town Meeting* offered proof of New England's moral virtue. Like the claim to historical preeminence in the founding of the nation, *Town Meeting* offered grounds for continuing to believe in New England's regional superiority. Like the village green ideal, the Greek Revival town hall, and the Puritan ancestor, town meeting resuscitated a Federalist-influenced conception of orderly liberty but in a way palatable to the newer Jeffersonian and Jacksonian frameworks (Conforti 2001:116). Like the village green ideal, the figure of the Yankee, and the Puritan ancestor, *Town Meeting* asserted New England as a bastion of ethnic purity. Like the Greek Revival town hall and the village green ideal, *Town Meeting* could help one forget the devastating moral and political issues of slavery, and to instead bask in a stable tranquility. At other moment, *Town Meeting*, like the Yankee identity, instead could be marshalled as a point of contrast with the depravities of a corrupt South. Taken together, these symbols offered a coherent, heartening understanding of regional identity and mission in the new 19th century.

A few of these points bear elaboration.

The positioning of *Town Meeting* as part of the nation's Revolutionary history should be clear enough from what was presented in the preceding section, but now we can connect both *Town Meeting* and the new American historiography to the Puritan/Pilgrim ancestor. During the Revolution, the Puritans already had been repainted as "proto-republicans who had resisted an earlier English assault on civil liberty" (Conforti 2001:80). In the 1820s and 1830s, the Puritans and Pilgrims now were mined for even more (Conforti 2001:171-201). They became the sole font of

American civil liberty (e.g., Hawes 1830:62-63), and in this respect their practice of town meeting was a powerful possible citation. The *North American Review* (NAR 1831:193-194), for instance, wrote,

Having established themselves on the most secure footing they could gain in America, they formed a Government of a very primitive kind--every freeman having a voice in public affairs. [...] All matters of interest are [...] submitted to the popular will in town meeting, and abide by the decision of the majority. Such was the system established in former days, and such it is now;--a system which gives to each member of society his proper importance, and secures a hardy independence of character in the yeomanry, very different from the sickly servility, and fawning adulation, paid to the upper classes by the peasantry of older countries. We have thus very imperfectly attempted to explain the great principles of the Puritans by their measures.

The very physical space in which town meetings were held was now helping to construct new meaning with and for *Town Meeting*. “Before the American Revolution,” Sweeney (1993:89) writes,

town houses, with notable exceptions, usually had been unadorned secular alternatives to meetinghouses, which represented more important architectural expressions of ideology and more substantial outlays of money. In the half century after independence, town houses were not infrequently buildings shared with county governments or schools or remodeled meetinghouses or courthouses. By the 1830s, however, town houses were more likely to be costly embodiments of civic aspirations and physical expressions of republican political ideals. Even in rural towns these new town houses were larger and architecturally more ambitious.

With a proclivity for Greek Revival architecture, the new town halls

suggested longevity and order, qualities that some found reassuring the often turbulent political world of the Jacksonian era. Because of its use for government buildings throughout the Union, the employment of the style had nationalistic overtones. In New England the Greek revival style also asserted the dignity and independence of town government, which until relatively recently had been joined constitutionally to the church and the steepled meetinghouses. (92)

By the 1820s, Sweeney says, town halls were supplying an effective alternative to the old religious meetinghouses as a symbol of corporate community identity; civil government could take the place of the now fractured religious unity (86, 92). This unity of course was aspirational-

-we saw previously that secular factionalism was running rampant too--but that is precisely the point: New Englanders were looking for reassurance wherever they could.

Uptake: How New England's Claims Became American Culture

New Englanders were not the only ones trying to position themselves as special during the early 1800s. Many states were making competitive claims to their Revolutionary contributions (Van Tassel 1960:54-56, 75; Kammen 1978:56) and were identifying Revolutionary heroes from within their own ranks (Duffy and Muller 2014:75). New Englanders, though, showed an especial genius for--or perhaps just an obsessive dedication to--regionalist self-promotion. Maine, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut founded their historical societies between 1822 and 1825; Massachusetts had preceded them in 1791. Vermont was the sole latecomer, waiting until 1838. New England thus preceded most of the rest of the country by a decade to decades (Van Tassel 1960:56-57 95-100, 115, 181ff). Historical societies, moreover, were only one part of a broader trend. The academy movement, the lyceum movement, the "New England society" movement, and the village improvement society movement all began or peaked in the 1820s and 1830s.⁴⁷ A series of Puritan sermons and texts, newly identified as "classics," were published in this period, and the Pilgrim Society was founded in 1820.⁴⁸ Even putatively "national" organizations like the American Antiquarian Society were captured by the disproportionate involvement of New Englanders (Van Tassel 1960:65).

Even prior to this institution-building, New England possessed certain competitive advantages, not least its longstanding literary dominance anchored in a far more strongly

⁴⁷ Wood and Steinitz (1992:112, 105), Buell (1986:204, 195-196), Conforti (2001:129-130).

⁴⁸ Nissenbaum (1996:48, 50), Conforti (2001:28, 193).

developed infrastructure of publishers, newspapers, magazines, universities, and literary institutions.⁴⁹ For instance, the capital available to New England authors, publishers, and historical societies greatly exceeded that of their Southern and Western counterparts (Van Tassel 1960:99). New England also had enjoyed an early entrance to the nationwide movement to mandate the inclusion of “American history” within school curricula--Massachusetts passed its law in 1827--and the textbook industry therefore slanted toward New England-centric coverage, even after other states became consumers (Van Tassel 1960:65, 87, 90-92). This cultural domination did not pass unnoticed. As one Southern writer noted in 1835, “let them [our northern neighbors] write our books, and they become our masters.”⁵⁰ The remark was prophetic; soon industrialization’s restoration of New England’s economic clout, combined with victory in the Civil War, ensured the dominance of New England’s cultural representations as well (Kammen 1978:53).

The New England-ification of American culture was not solely a matter of successful conquest, though. There were ways that other regions welcomed New England’s innovations.⁵¹ In *Town Meeting*’s case, the symbolism was consonant with broader currents of American political culture, and it offered solutions to certain shared national problems. Specifically, 1) *Town Meeting* could ground a post-Revolution American identity, 2) it resonated with the ascendant Jacksonian democracy, and 3) it could provide Jacksonian democracy with a pedigree.

The emergence of interest in New England’s town government, Westbrook (1982:141) suggests, “was doubtless a result of an intensifying sense of national identity.” The conclusion of

⁴⁹ Nissenbaum (1996:40-41), Buell (1986: e.g. 49).

⁵⁰ *Southern Literary Messenger* (1835:591), quoted in Van Tassel (1960:117).

⁵¹ For the example of the nation’s receptiveness to New England-inspired architecture, see Rhoads (1976) and Wood (1991:44-45).

the Revolution left Americans with a dilemma: having been impelled to war as the result of insults to their *English* identity and rights, but having ended up independent in the process, they had a vacuum to fill for their national identity (Conforti 2001:77-122; Breen 1997:26-37). As Breen (1997:27-28, 30) and Kammen (1978:16, 26) respectively put it, before 1760 “the colonists did not have a shared tradition capable of providing a common identity separate from that of Great Britain,” and thus, “between 1783 and about 1820 the young republic underwent an anxious quest for cultural cohesion” (see also Van Tassel 1960:111 and Pfister 2014). The 1820s, Kammen shows, were a definitive, sharp turning point (43). For instance, beginning with Massachusetts in 1827, states started mandating the inclusion of “American history” within school curricula (Van Tassel 1960:90-91).

Bowden (1992:10, 20-21) suggests that Americans “turned to Nature” for their solution, anchoring their identity in the heroic accomplishment of clearing ground for civilization on an imposing new continent. *Town Meeting* offered a political complement, and it served as an example of one of the institutions that Americans had invented as they struck out from their English heritage. *Town Meeting*, like the Puritan/Pilgrim ancestor that emerged in the same period, highlighted a distinctly American political heritage--one that was equal or even superior to that of any country of the old world.⁵²

The other special utility of *Town Meeting* was its solution to the problem of revolutions: How could the Revolution be justified (let alone celebrated) without licensing potential future revolutions? Kammen (1978: see especially xviii, 28) suggests that various devices have been developed across post-Revolution history to de-revolutionize the Revolution--to reframe it as a matter of

⁵² The *North American Review* article that I previously quoted concludes, “And now, we boldly challenge the world, to produce any instance where these ideas have been more perfectly conceived, and fully executed” (NAR 1831:195).

continuity rather than rupture. *Yes*, the logic runs, *1776 may have been a break in legal terms, but that was merely to preserve the underlying continuity of culture*. An institution like town meeting, which conveniently predated the Revolution by 150 years while still postdating the departure from Britain, presented a rupture that was perfectly placed in time. It could be used to explain why 1776 was *not* a revolution and why subsequent revolutions *would* be.

The other dynamic in play was the onset of the Jacksonian era.⁵³ Jackson's presidency from 1829-1837 marked a newfound enthusiasm for *democracy*--previously a term of disparagement--as opposed to *republicanism*. As described above in reference to Bancroft's histories, *Town Meeting*, with its popular participation and egalitarian leveling of participants, was a perfect symbol for the new age. Never mind that town meeting had a long history as an institution of deference-based politics (Ferraro 1991:643-644; Schudson 1998:16-24); that was not something that needed to be part of the *Town Meeting* story.⁵⁴ Jacksonianism gifted *Town Meeting* with a newly receptive climate, and in return *Town Meeting* offered Jacksonian democracy historical roots. Rather than a dangerous, chaotic novelty, Jacksonianism could be seen as a natural outgrowth of America's foundational political tradition.

Conclusion

Town Meeting, with a birth date in the early 19th century instead of the early 17th, is half as old as we think it is. From the moment of its birth, it has been used as a symbolic resource within sociopolitical struggles--in fact, it was born as a *result* of sociopolitical struggles. In

⁵³ Hanson (1985:126-132), Shalhope (1996:324-327), Daniell (2012:74), Dupuis-Deri (2010).

⁵⁴ In this regard, the Federalist Dwight, as one of the earliest progenitors of *Town Meeting*, was betrayed by his progeny's subsequent development.

historicizing the overpoweringly stereotyped contemporary understanding of town meeting--in describing how and why it arose--the chapter establishes that ideas about participation are always politicized, never neutral. That is the case even--indeed, especially--when such ideas have become common sense.

“Invented” does not of course automatically mean “not valuable,” nor do I mean to imply that *Town Meeting* is some sort of artificial layer on top of town meeting as a “real” routine. In fact, *Town Meeting* discourse is now very much part of local practice, despite--or perhaps because of--being an incomplete and sometimes inaccurate account of the latter. In any case, having seen that *Town Meeting* is a particular, selective, non-neutral way of framing the practice of town meetings, we have a new ability to consider town meetings outside the well-worn grooves. Starting with Chapter 2, we now use a combination of ethnographic and quantitative methods to “re-see” town meetings in other lights.

CHAPTER 2. The Ballad of Walter:

Northmont's Ballot Box as a Trust and Unity Machine

CHAPTER SUMMARY

A dominant view of local elections in the United States is that they are most frequently referenda on incumbent competence, rather than choices between competing ideological or policy options. Within this view, municipal government is an apolitical, mostly technical enterprise, and the citizenry's role reduces in a correspondingly apolitical way: they become consumers who are satisfied or not with services under the status quo. This chapter argues that this view is accurate but also crucially incomplete. I show how Northmonters' avoidance of "politics" in their local elections was, at a deeper level, about making and re-making foundational political norms, such as how individuals would relate to the collectivity and how political relations were to be conducted between community members. Specifically, Northmonters used their electoral process to create themselves as a unified community where interpersonal political relationships were based around trust rather than pluralist negotiation. Thus, the citizenry's participation in elections was not merely as satisfied or dissatisfied consumers of municipal services, but also as a community-constituting collectivity. Theorists of participatory and deliberative democracy have tended to focus on the overt purposes of participation, like impacting policy outcomes, but

this chapter thus demonstrates that participation simultaneously shapes communities in ways that are much more subtle but no less important.

Are Voters in Municipal Elections Political Animals or Consumers of Services?

In July of 2011 I asked longtime Northmont Select Board member Dale Shields to explain to me why people run for office in town.

DALE: I think most people approach it in terms of, ‘Well, if I can help out, I’ll see what I can do to help out.’ And I guess one man’s ‘agenda’ is another man’s honest feeling of what needs to be done. [...] Most of the time [laughing] it seems like they’re saying, ‘I have no idea what [the office] is, but I’ll give it a shot.’ That’s kind of how it’s approached. And there’s no campaigns. That always kills me too, because if you look at the newspapers coming into town meeting, in Ellington and Pickfield [*the larger neighboring towns*] there’ll be ads, and people will have their pictures there, and they’ll have ‘vote for so-and-so.’ That never happens in Northmont, I’ve never seen it. [...] When I was elected, it was five [candidates], but it was five nominations from the floor where someone turned around in a ‘would you do this’ kind of thing, and [the people being asked] are like, ‘ok.’ But it was never a campaign. I’ve always said I will never campaign for this. You know, if people want to elect me that’s fine; if they don’t that’s fine too. And so, yeah, I think Northmont’s a little odd [laughing] in that regard. [...] I think it’s kind of refreshing, because, you know, you never see an ad or a poster, or like that. And we’re not that much smaller than Pickfield or Ellington.

I followed up: “Can you think of counterexamples? Like if that’s the broad pattern, have there been occasional times when it’s been different?” Dale paused for three seconds before offering that Fred Chirsui had inspired “a lot of controversy” as a Lister--not as the result of any “preconceived agenda,” Dale clarified, but simply because “he just had a reputation for being kind of a jerk. [...] And he had trouble working with people, and... trust, and that kind of thing.”

Dale then talked me through another case from ten years previous involving two Planning Commission members who had been suspected of joining the board to change a zoning bylaw that was affecting some family members.

And then, giving a little shrug as if to say there was no point in further avoiding the elephant in the room, Dale finally brought up Walter Heuson. Walter was a long-time presence in town government, having continually held various positions since the 1970s. An “old guard” dissident, he had waged a war, first cold and then hot, against a loose collection of other town government regulars, among them Dale and Dale’s wife Melanie. We might as well call this loose collection “the anti-Walter-ites,” since there were no other ways by which they cohered as a group. That feud had begun in the mid-1990s amid interpersonal frictions and technical disagreements about municipal management. With passing years, Walter laminated those grudges onto Northmont’s most politically salient demographic and socioeconomic fault-line, posing himself as a spokesperson for “old-timers” and other fiscal conservatives, against “newcomers” with their supposed impulse to tax and tax and tax. In the early 2000s, Walter successfully landed a seat on the Select Board, defeating an absent competitor, but he left under a cloud in late 2004. The event was a minor legend in town: when the rest of the board rejected Walter’s allegations of misbehavior in the highway department, he resigned in protest and tried to take his case public. His bid for public support not only failed, though, it backfired, shredding his reputation. Thereafter, even many of Walter’s friends and allies questioned his interest and ability in being the kind of team player that a town board needed. When he started running again in 2007, he encountered humiliating defeat after humiliating defeat, year after year after year, even as other members of his claimed constituency enjoyed normal electoral success. With each failure, he raised the stakes, presenting his candidacy with increasing explicitness as a

referendum on the direction of town government. By 2012--eight months after my interview with Dale--Walter was making barely-veiled personal attacks, and in 2016 he articulated campaign promises with bullet-point specificity, something that was unheard of in Northmont's elections. As one of my interviewees put it, "Walter's a special case."

Considering this history, Dale was soft-pedaling by more than a little when he merely described Walter as follows:

I know Walter always has the thing about spending too much money on salt, or spending too much money on sand, or the [road] guys' personal vendetta against him, and that kind of stuff. [...] When he was on the board, his drumbeat was 'reduce your expenditures, cut the taxes,' that kind of thing.

Dale was a former military officer with a firm sense of transparency and fair play; it wasn't in his character to badmouth an absent party to someone writing a book. Like most people in town, he also tended to downplay ideological and sectional conflicts by reinterpreting them as "personality issues." I therefore wasn't surprised when he rapidly pivoted away from a specific consideration of Walter:

I think there's less ideological decision-making in small-town government than there is practical. We're trying to get things done and improve things for most people. And I don't think ideology fits into it.

This was a characteristically perceptive summary from Dale of town government. His comments in general, in fact, perfectly summarize mainstream scholarly and layperson understandings of small town politics¹: the predominance of practical rather than political issues, the amateur ethic, the important role of trust and neighborliness, the avoidance of conflict, the reduction of disagreements to "personality issues," the amateur ethic, the importance of dedication over expertise, the absence of campaigning, and the fact that there are always a few "characters" in town who stubbornly and vocally buck the community consensus. These features

¹ E.g., Palmer et al. (1992:167), Zimmerman (1967:26).

of small-town politics, in fact, have been compellingly tied by ethnographers to causal social and economic structures (Ladd 1969:135-146, 186ff; Vidich and Bensman 1958).

Some of these features apply not just to small towns, but also to municipal government at all scales. In fact, it was a mayor of New York City, Fiorello La Guardia (1934-1945), who popularized the phrase, “There is no Democratic or Republican way to clean the streets,” in order to characterize municipal government as an apolitical administrative enterprise. The La Guardian view came to dominate 20th century thinking about municipal government (e.g., G.Rutherford 1931:73), and a wave of recent scholarship has affirmed it as an empirical fact. For instance, political scientists have described how municipal elections in the United States tend to serve as referenda on incumbent competence rather than as choices between competing ideological or policy options.²

It is important to draw out the corollary of this view: when government is a technical administrative enterprise, the role of citizens is to be consumers, to assess during each election whether they are satisfied with municipal services under the status quo.³ Perhaps, then, humans are political animals only when they think beyond their own neighborhoods.

This chapter argues that these characterizations of small-town and municipal politics are accurate as far as they go but also crucially incomplete. Service delivery is *one* dimension of municipal elections. The battle over the community’s character can be just as important. The case of Northmont shows that smoothly running municipal services were not the only thing being pursued during each trip to the ballot box. For Northmonters, the preference for incumbents was *partly* about not rocking a boat enjoying tolerably smooth sailing. It *also* was about making and

² Oliver et al. (2012) and Speakman (2011:704).

³ See Clarke et al. (2007) for a related discussion of the implications of citizens as consumers.

re-making foundational political norms, including how individuals would relate to the collectivity, and how political relations were to be conducted between community members. It was about building the community as one kind of community rather than another, and it also was about doing “community building” in the colloquial sense. Specifically, Northmonters used their electoral process to create themselves as a unified community where interpersonal political relationships were based around *trust* rather than pluralist negotiation.

The La Guardians thus may be right when it comes to the often technical nature of municipal government, but there is a second level at which municipal elections *are* political, in a fundamental, community-constituting way. Following Mansbridge’s (2003:190-191) observation that the division of “administrative” vs. “political” issues is anti-ethnographic, this chapter therefore is using ethnography to show that the La Guardian view is based upon too narrow an understanding of “politics” or “ideology.”

Walter will be our ethnographic anchor. By tracing his career and his stubborn struggle to be reelected, we will have a potent demonstration of the politics involved in making local government apolitical.

Walter vs. Anne at Town Meeting Day 2009

Northmont’s elections were done every year at town meeting, by secret ballot with pens and scrap paper slips. Following the nomination process, voters would form a line running down the center of the town hall, waiting to deposit their makeshift ballots into a slit-topped plywood box set on a folding table. Meanwhile the town hall would be awash in activity: people greeting and chatting and catching up, people borrowing pens, people running out for smoke breaks or to

grab coffee from the market across the street. It took as long as 22 minutes, more typically 12 to 16, to process everyone through the line and then to have the Town Clerk's designated ballot counters dump out the ballot box and sort the 40-100+ slips into piles. Ballot votes therefore were a substantial interruption of the rhythm of the meeting. Some other Vermont towns had switched to an Australian ballot system, conducting elections separately from town meeting; the large time cost was one part of the reasoning. But from the perspective of this chapter's argument about elections as a moment of community constitution, there is something poetically appropriate about the older electoral form, wherein a "time-wasting" upsurge of community hobnobbing causes a delay in further discussion of the nuts and bolts of municipal operations.

With Northmont's five member Select Board comprising three three-year seats and two two-year seats, the cycle of term expirations made for two elections every year--or three when a sitting member occasionally resigned or died mid-term. Nonetheless, the clockwork regularity of two seats coming "available" each year didn't necessarily mean they were *available*. In the absence of any political scandals having occurred during the prior year--no easily identifiable misconduct, no particularly controversial decisions, and no members having displayed strongly partisan conduct in the performance of their duties--it was unlikely that voters could be rallied to oust an incumbent. Why fix something that wasn't broken? That's not to say that incumbents weren't ever challenged, just that the odds were poorer than waiting for someone to retire, so aspirants to office tended to wait. The greater number of candidates anyway had no standing desire to be elected, but--as we'll see--only ran upon being nominated, and most nominations in turn happened only as townspeople scrounged to fill a vacancy. If an incumbent wasn't vacating, the whole motivational chain for running was snipped at the first link.

Figure 2.1 shows that from 2002 to 2016, 17 of 32 elections were uncontested (53%). Of

the remainder, only five were challenges to an incumbent (16%), whereas 10 were the rush into the void of someone’s retirement (31%).⁴ Of those five challenges to an incumbent, only one succeeded.

	<u>3 year seat</u>	<u>2 year seat</u>	<u>3rd seat</u>	<u>ratio, contested seats to uncontested</u>	<u>contests between an incumbent and a challenger</u>	<u>any incumbents unseated?</u>	<u>contests not involving an incumbent</u>
2002	incumbent reelection; 2 candidates	<i>incumbent retiring; 2 candidates</i>	n/a	2:0	1	no	1
2003	<i>incumbent retiring; 1 candidate uncontested</i>	<i>incumbent retiring; 4 candidates</i>	n/a	1:1			1
2004	<i>incumbent retiring; 2 candidates</i>	incumbent reelection, uncontested	n/a	1:1			1
2005	incumbent reelection, uncontested	<i>incumbent retiring; 2 candidates</i>	n/a	1:1			1
2006	incumbent reelection, uncontested	incumbent reelection, uncontested	n/a	0:2			
2007	incumbent reelection, 2 candidates	incumbent reelection, uncontested	<i>incumbent resigned mid-term; 2 candidates</i>	2:1	1	yes	1
2008	incumbent reelection, uncontested	<i>appointed incumbent reelection; 2 candidates</i>	n/a	1:1	0 or 1*	quasi*	1 or 0*
2009	incumbent reelection, uncontested	<i>incumbent retiring; 2 candidates</i>	n/a	1:1			1
2010	incumbent reelection, uncontested	incumbent reelection, uncontested	n/a	0:2			
2011	incumbent reelection, uncontested	incumbent reelection; 2 candidates	n/a	1:1	1	no	
2012	incumbent reelection, 2 candidates	incumbent reelection, uncontested	n/a	1:1	1	no	
2013	incumbent reelection, uncontested	incumbent reelection, uncontested	n/a	0:2			
2014	incumbent reelection, uncontested	incumbent reelection, uncontested	n/a	0:2			
2015	incumbent reelection, uncontested	incumbent reelection; 2 candidates	n/a	1:1	1	no	
2016	<i>incumbent retiring; 4 candidates</i>	<i>appointed incumbent reelection; 3 candidates</i>	<i>incumbent resigned mid-term; 4 candidates</i>	3:0	0 or 1*	quasi*	3 or 2*
OVERALL:				15:17	5 or 7*	1 or 3*	10 or 8*

lighter shading = contested election; darker shading = contested by more than two candidates
 italic = "open" seat (no incumbent)
 *In 2008 and 2016, there was a "quasi" incumbent: an appointee filling in for an elected Selectperson who resigned mid-year.

Figure 2.1: Select Board Races since Northmont adopted a five-member board

⁴ “Incumbent” here includes only Select Board members who were elected to their position; it excludes the two instances of a mid-year appointee serving as a temporary replacement for a resignee. If these appointed “quasi-incumbents” are counted, the ratio of incumbent challenges to rushes-for-the-void increases from 5:10 to 7:8.

Town Meeting Day 2009 was one of those years where only a legal formalist or someone new to town from far away could exist under the misapprehension that there really were two open seats. The three-year seat was held by Don Cleary, the board's chair and a veteran of town government going back decades. Don was nowhere near to running out of steam, and electorally he was unassailable: an old-timer who had managed to work extremely productively with newcomer residents too, he was widely respected for his dedication, patience, fairness, track record of community service, and knowledge of the town's history and ongoing affairs. (That's not to say he had *no* bad blood in town, just a relatively much smaller amount, and even people who disliked him for being a Cleary tended to at least respect his work as an officer.)

Fortunately for a would-be candidate in 2009, the other incumbent was leaving. Jeff Marcheau, who had spent years supplementing his farm income with various part-time wage jobs, had managed to parlay one of the latter into a full-time position with benefits. Stepping back from the board would allow him to jump on the opportunity. His emptying two-year seat therefore was where the action was most likely to be.

And action certainly was expected. Walter Heuson had been trying to get back on the board for years, for reasons that were widely known. "I was born in 1934," Walter told me, "and I'm still I guess probably much further out in fiscal conservatism than other people today. I don't want money spent unnecessarily." Here he is in exemplary form at town meeting one year, rising to contest a proposed line item in the Fire Department's budget:

The point here is that it's a small amount, but there are other items that together would lower the [tax] rate by two cents, and those two cents mean a lot to people. It wouldn't jeopardize the department's ability. They've been under-spending, and if something goes wrong on those trucks, \$2,000 isn't going to be enough to fix it anyway. This year and possibly next year we need to help [the taxpayers] as much as we can.

When other members of the assembly leaped to the Fire Department's defense, he took the floor

again to double down: “Right now a lot of people are hurting, hurting bad, and if we can even reduce the rate by one penny, it’s going to help some people.” The anticipation that Walter would find *something* each year to call out as a prodigal expense had led certain regular attendees to all but punch Bingo cards when he inevitably met their expectations. No, there was no mystery as to Walter’s interest in rejoining the board.

Following his miscalculated resignation in the winter of 2004-2005, Walter had laid low for a couple years, then had been soundly rejected by the voters in back-to-back elections in 2007 and 2008. With Jeff’s retirement in 2009, perhaps he believed the third time would be the charm for his message of municipal thrift.

If Walter’s interest and motivations were no secret, what *was* unknown was whether he would have any challengers--whether he’d be able to walk back onto the board simply by virtue of being the only choice. Candidates were a somewhat rare commodity, and it wasn’t uncommon for an election to go to the sole nominee--who themselves might have been rustled up only with effort and at the last minute. Despite the local valorization of public service, there also was widespread acknowledgment of the practical, social, and psychological. Few people possessed the special combination of time, financial security, inclination, and thick skin required to initiate interest in a difficult, emotionally trying part-time job that offered little real power or aggrandizement. And have we mentioned that it was essentially unpaid? The salary had been flat at \$1,000 for three decades, long enough for inflation to have eroded its real value by more than half. Recruitment efforts therefore were essential, but--in the words of a poetically inclined Northmonter--recruitment had about the same success rates as cultivating peach trees in northern Vermont: after exhaustively combing branches, your annual harvest would be lucky to include a single mature fruit. As we see by referring back to Figure 2.1, many elections therefore went

without contest to a sole nominee.

Some of Walter's old adversaries were determined to prevent this walk-on scenario. This determination, though, was *not* because they were opposed to his penny-pinching.⁵ The 2008-2009 Select Board already contained an expansive range of ideological positions, from old-school New England fiscal conservatives (Don and Archie) to a self-described old hippie leftie (Eliza) to a process-oriented ideological agnostic whose non-municipal political commitments leaned liberal (Dale). At different points, each of them told me how much pleasure it had given them to have been able to conduct their board deliberations in a spirit of mutual respect and in an absence of partisanship adversarialism. They felt that they explored town issues together as each issue arose, with the board collectively feeling its way toward the good of the whole town, rather than each board member representing a particular constituency or position. The absence of conflict on a smoothly functioning board was one of the reasons that many of Northmont's volunteer officers (not just Selectpersons) gave for enjoying their service, and most said that they would reconsider serving again if their board turned acrimonious. *The wrong person can wreck a board*, I was told repeatedly.

The anti-Walter-ites feared that Walter was exactly such a person. They had misgivings about his personal style and his judgment. They perceived him as trying to act as the spokesperson for a faction rather than as someone working for the town as a whole. They found him personally difficult to work with, describing him as a confrontational, unrelenting personality. And they also carried a lingering personal mistrust, feeling that Walter had burned--nay, napalmed--his bridges.

⁵ See Appendix B for further refutation of the possibility of liberal bias against Walter, beyond what is discussed here.

Walter counter-accused that the current board “just [did] what comes into their minds” instead of following process, and that it was willfully disenfranchising the town’s conservatives with a tax-and-spend agenda pursued behind closed doors. He often attended board meetings to keep an eye on them and prevent them from attempts to--in his view--sneak in any further debt spending, zoning restrictions, prodigal road upkeep, or nepotistic use of public properties. He complained that the anti-Walter-ites were engaging in unprincipled tactics to sideline anyone who dared challenge their pursuits.

The difference in how each side framed the conflict is worth dwelling upon. The anti-Walter-ites opposed Walter because they thought he was not community minded. Walter opposed the anti-Walter-ites because he thought their political positions were ruinous. Where the anti-Walter-ites saw untrustworthiness and an offense against community unity, Walter saw a no-holds-barred factional struggle.

A few days ahead of 2009’s Town Meeting Day, Melanie Shields therefore approached Anne Evans. Melanie was heavily involved in town affairs as a Lister and as a powerhouse on the Budget Committee, and she was married to Select Board member Dale Shields. Anne was a retiree who had served as a Lister alongside Melanie for a term. Anne additionally had held a couple of minor town positions and perhaps was best known for her work with the garden club and its beautification of the Village Green.

The recruitment of Anne represented the third year in a row that this scenario was playing out. Walter’s losses in 2007 and 2008 each had been at the hands of candidates supported or recruited by the anti-Walter-ites. It was Gabe Georges in 2007, and in 2008 the anti-Walter-ites had pulled Archie Wellington--a popular Selectman from the 1960s-1990s--out of civic retirement. “Why did you run?” I later asked Archie. “They wanted me to run because they

figured I could beat Walter,” he replied, a touch of amusement in his voice. “They” were right: Archie took in more than twice as many votes as Walter. Gabe in 2007, meanwhile, had scorched Walter by a factor of three.

The 2009 election would begin as elections did every year: with public nominations from the floor. No one ever nominated themselves. Self-initiating candidates always asked someone else to put them forward, and candidates who had been recruited--whether days, minutes, or seconds ahead of time--would be nominated by whomever had made the entreaty. Sometimes a name was called out without advance consent having been secured; this would result in a moment of excitement as the surprised nominee had to make a snap decision under the scrutiny of the whole room whether to accept or decline. On some occasions, they had to ask what a position was responsible for doing.

If only a single candidate seemed to be forthcoming, long-time moderator Dean Gregory always asked for nominations a few more times just to be sure, and then that would be the end of that. A pro forma vote would be taken without anything more being said, not even remarks by the candidate. Vermont statute required that Select Board members and certain other positions be elected by ballot rather than voice vote, but the assembly was allowed to save time with a procedural device: via a unanimous voice vote, they could direct the town clerk to cast a single written ballot for the lone nominee on the assembly’s behalf. This ritual always was done with modest ceremony: everyone’s eyes would be upon Cathy as she would make a show of writing down the candidate’s name. She then would hold the paper aloft before depositing it into the ballot box, where she could proceed to “count” it.⁶ When Dean would “announce” the tally, it of

⁶ Jager and Jager (1977:414) describe a similarly overstated formalism in a 1970s New Hampshire town.

course was no surprise to anyone.

In elections that did have multiple candidates, it was customary for each one to stand up, prior to the ballot, and give a short statement introducing themselves and explaining their reasons for running. In the absence of campaigning ahead of Town Meeting Day (see below), and with even the grapevine typically having little if any time to do its work, candidate speeches at town meeting itself were the practical and symbolic heart of the electoral system.⁷

These speeches were short, averaging less than a minute each (see Figure 2.2). They only even were *that* long thanks to Walter having single-handedly pulled up the average by 14 seconds. The shortest speech occurred in 2015: Ben Flanners rose, declared “I’d be honored to represent the town,” and sat down; the microphone handler hadn’t yet had time to reach him from ten paces away. Little bits of laughter emerged from the assembly as people realized that what they had thought was the preamble to a speech actually *was* the speech. A wag called out, “That’s it? ... He’s a Vermonter!”--a reference to the legendary terseness of old-timers. It was the ideal La Guardian speech, refusing to call any attention whatsoever to the speaker’s biography, social identity, motivations, or plans. Instead, it implied that the speaker could be an interchangeable representation of anyone else--that there was literally nothing worth saying for preferring him over anyone else who also simply would get the job done.⁸ Walter, meanwhile, always packed his speeches with content about how he was distinctive: distinguishable

⁷ Only recently have the speeches taken on this role. Mansbridge (1980:51) relates how the residents of “Selby,” VT in the 1970s were puzzled by a newcomer’s suggestion for nominees to give statements, and Von der Muhll (1970:406n47) likewise reported an absence of campaign speeches in Plymouth, MA in the late 1960s. In Northmont, habitual town meeting attendees weren’t sure if candidate speeches were happening even as recently as the 1990s.

⁸ Actually, Ben would have been known to a large percentage of attendees as a long-time conservative, but see Appendix A for an argument that background knowledge about candidates’ unstated positions was not driving the system.

objectives, special qualifications, explicit contrasts with other board members, and so forth. All of these things clocked up; he was responsible for three of the four longest speeches.

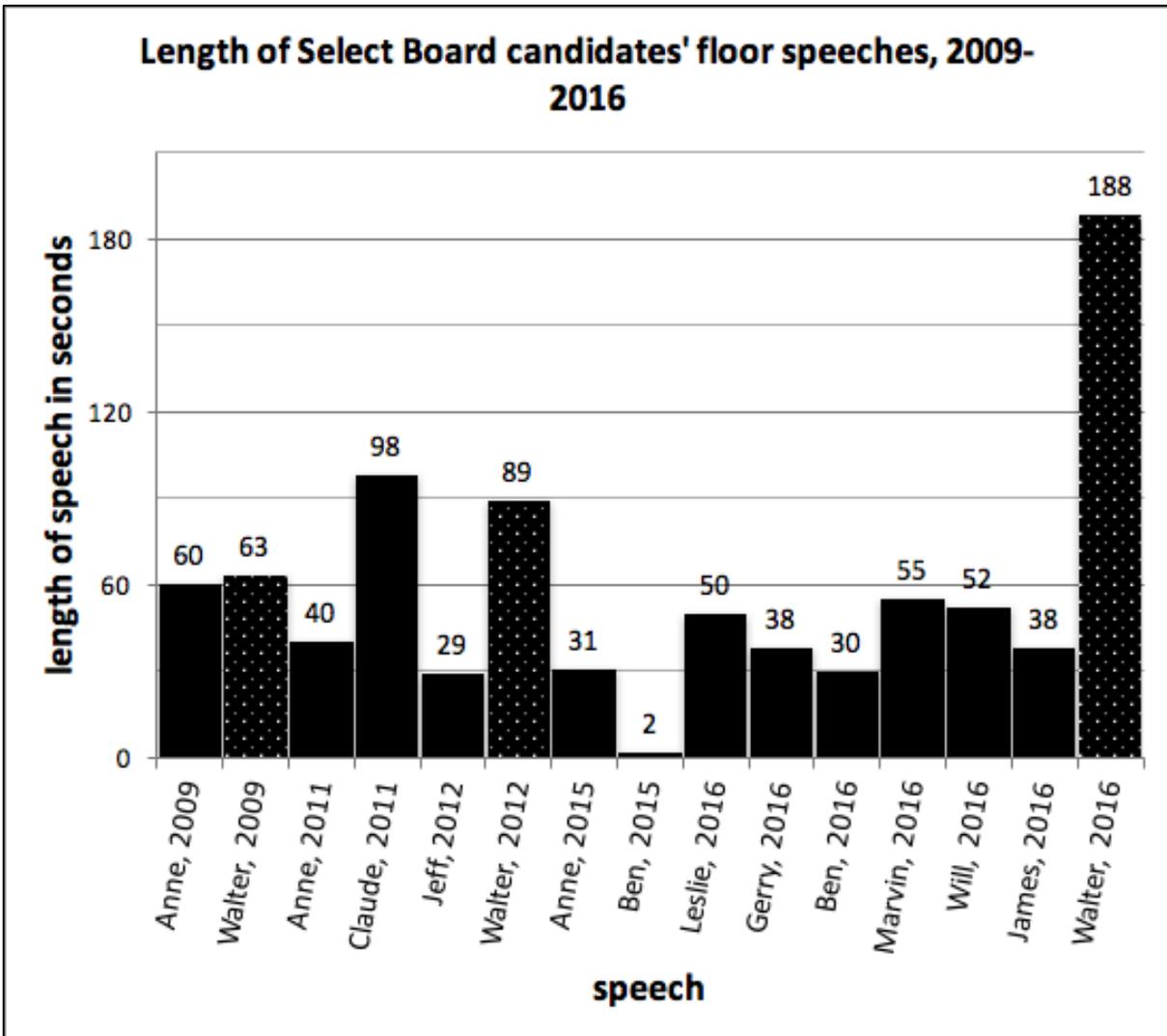


Figure 2.2: Length of Select Board candidates' floor speeches, 2009-2016
 Speeches by Walter are speckled.

There was no debate following these speeches, nor was there any glad-handing by either candidates or supporters as voters fetched ballots. (Nor, as we'll see, was there any campaigning ahead of Town Meeting Day.) As voters waited in line, they would chat about everything *except* the reason they were standing there. On a number of occasions I overheard a person who was unfamiliar with a candidate ask someone else for more background in order to be able to place

the candidate socially, but this always was done with a neutral economy of words: who the person's relatives were and where they lived, maybe what they did for work or what activity groups they had been involved with in town, maybe what car they drove, maybe a memorable past action ("You know, the one who pulled Edgar out of Gerald's ditch this winter!"). I never heard any commentary or speculation on what the candidate might be planning to do if elected.⁹

Town meetings always carried an electric air. You never knew just what might happen, plus there was an effervescence merely from the act of assembling. In 2009 the Select Board election was the first item capable of absorbing that energy; the prior five items of business had passed like water through sand. In the course of just seven minutes, Dean had been rapidly re-elected as moderator, the state congressional district's Representative had provided an unusually brief bit of face-time, the reports of the town officers had been accepted with one quick correction from the floor, the pro forma annual vote to let the Select Board appoint the Road Commissioner had been taken, and the Town Clerk/Treasurer had been re-elected to both offices without incident. After this rapid, plain sailing, the anticipation of a contested Select Board seat had people leaning forward in their seats, eyes peeled and ears perked for wherever activity might emerge within the room. Different attendees knew different permutations of the facts: that Walter would be attempting another breach of the Select Board's walls, that Jeff wouldn't be playing defense, that the anti-Walter-ites had been trying (or could be expected to have been trying) to muster an alternative. Only a fraction of those present knew that Anne had been recruited a few days previously, since neither the anti-Walter-ites nor Anne herself had made any serious effort to publicize Anne's candidacy.

⁹ See Appendix A for refutation of the possibility that voters were relying upon background knowledge about candidates' ideology and goals, or that these were being inferred from things like relatives and occupation.

“Article 4c,” Dean called out from his podium, “a Selectperson for a term of two years by ballot. Nominations please.”

“I nominate Anne Evans,” Melanie matter-of-factly offered.

“Walter Heuson,” called forth Russ Mayfield, equally coolly. He was sitting near Walter in a cluster of the town’s “old guard” of fiscal conservatives.

“Any other nominations?” Dean asked. Seeing none, he invited the two candidates to “say a few words.” In subsequent years Northmont began to shuttle a wireless microphone around the room for speakers, but in 2009 Anne and Walter rose in turn from their folding chairs they had to rely on the power of their own voices within the modestly sized town hall.

“Um, hi,” Anne began, “I’m a--I’ve been--I’m fairly--fairly a newcomer to Northmont. I found Northmont in 2002 and fell in love with it. Bought a house and moved here. ... And, uh, I really would like to see Northmont... maintain its character, and, uh... improve if necessary, if possible.” She briefly described the several small positions she had held in the town government, and also the energy she had devoted to the Village Green with the garden club. “I have no agenda,” she concluded, “I just enjoy the town and would like to see it continue as it is and make it better.”

A few seconds of diplomatic applause gave soundtrack as she sat back down. No one seemed to be clapping with any great amount more enthusiasm than anyone else, nor did anyone appear to be sitting on their hands. If any wild supporters or frigid opponents had escaped my eye and ear, their attempts at signaling must have been modest enough to be receivable only to those chairs immediately adjacent.

Then it was Walter. “I didn’t ask to be nominated,” he began, “but I’ve always accepted whenever I [have been]. As most of you know I’ve served for twenty-nine years, and have the

ability, the knowledge, [inaudible]. I served as dog officer, my first position back in 1980. Lister. Collector of Taxes. And... Select Board, and so forth.” He then referenced the scandal that had closed out his prior term on the Select Board: “Of course the last time I was on the Select Board, I had a problem, we had a problem, and... we couldn’t get it solved, and I took it public. That was some very poor, uh, judgment. I thought maybe the people would put pressure on the board to take care of the issue. It didn’t happen. And since then, I’ve been kind of sentenced to life, I guess.” Several people in the room laughed at the understatement. Walter then wrapped up: “I certainly have the ability... and the will to represent you well on the board, and... it’s up to you. Thank you.”

He too enjoyed a round of polite applause, then Dean reviewed the process for lining up to cast ballots. Chairs scraped back even before Dean finished--the routine was well known. Chatter sprung up immediately, and the election attendants rushed to their stations; voting was in full swing.

A dozen minutes later, Dean shouted people back into their seats. “58 votes cast,” he announced, “Walter Heuson 19, Anne Evans 38, and one spoiled, and... you have elected Anne Evans as Select Board person for a term of two years.” It was exactly a two to one margin, not that anyone was calculating the ratios so closely at the time. Applause broke out as Dean was finishing his sentence, and this time it was enthusiastic. The crowd seated around Dean participated politely. Dean indulged the accolade hardly a moment as he maintained momentum into the next article, the other Select Board seat. Sixty seconds later, Don Cleary had been re-elected, as expected, to his three-year term, by the town clerk’s pro forma single ballot.

These 2009 contests have given us the flavor of Northmont’s elections: the patchy contestation of seats, the casual nature of floor activity, the magnitude of everything that happens

under the deceptively smooth surface, the great importance of personal dynamics, and the way that electoral politics occur in a near-spontaneous burst at town meeting itself. It also provides our first instance of Walter's repeated electoral rejection, as well as the repeated asymmetry between Walter and his opponents: him with an agenda, them without. Let's begin analyzing what it all means.

A Sense of Community / To Be Memorable as a Candidate

Listen to a pair of multi-decade participants in Northmont's municipal and community affairs help talk me through (in October 2011) this chapter's theme, echoing and elaborating many of Dale's points. (Transcript is lightly edited.)

AVERILL: One of the hypotheses that I have after seeing a number of town meetings now, and going to all these board meetings, is that it seems to me like very few people if anyone, um, when they run for an office in town, or when they want to be appointed to an office in town... Um, they don't really have an agenda when they're doing it, like there's very rarely specific things that they're running to achieve, like a specific project, or a specific change in how, um, the town government's run--

LINDA TILLOTSON: Right. I think that's correct. I think that's correct.

AVERILL: So that's my question, is... do you think that's accurate, or can you think of counter-examples, or exceptions that prove the rule, or...?

LINDA: Well... I can as far as the Select Board is concerned. *[She chuckles lightly.]* Walter.

EVELIN HINMAN: Yup.

LINDA: You know, he always has an agenda.

EVELIN: Yeah, but it's not in the best interest of the town.

LINDA: It's not in the best interest of the town. Usually.

AVERILL: Why--and what would that agenda be?

[2.5 second pause]

LINDA: To...

EVELIN: Domineer.

LINDA: Right, to dominate. Right, exactly. He always, always, always finds fault with the

highway department. Whether it's how much salt they're using, how much gravel they're using, what road they're working on... um... what time they're out plowing... I mean, the man--

EVELIN: If your glass is half full, it's half empty to him.

LINDA: --just has this vendetta against the highway department. That's his agenda for getting on there, is the highway department.

AVERILL: Ok, so kind of like to pursue that... antagonism.

LINDA: *Exactly.* Exactly. But he's the only one ever that I knew that ever ran for anything where there was an agenda. I think people run because they *truly* want to--

EVELIN: Serve.

LINDA: --volunteer. And serve. And because they have... maybe a passion for what it is they're going to run for. You know, like the library board. It's because they really and truly believe in the library, and they want to make it better.

[3 second pause]

EVELIN: Well, you know, when Claude ran for Select Board *[in March 2011, seven months previously]*, he got up and gave a very good speech about--

LINDA: Claude Stiles?

EVELIN: Yes. What he wanted. You know, his... feelings, and... what his goals were, and everything. I don't think I've ever heard anyone say that, like the way he worded it.

LINDA: Who was he running against? ... I don't remember. I could look it up in my book *[referring to the annual Town Report]*.

AVERILL: Uh, it was, uh... Anne. ... Yeah, at this last Town Meeting.

EVELIN: But, he gave a very good speech--

LINDA: Yup.

EVELIN: I have to admit that.

LINDA: Yup

[4 seconds pause]

AVERILL: And so you can't really remember people... kind of laying things out the way he did, with specifics?

EVELIN: No.

LINDA: No, I don't ever remember anyone. That was a very good--

EVELIN: He's the only one I remember.

LINDA: His reasoning--

EVELIN: Yeah.

LINDA: About why he wanted to be a selectman.

[3 second pause]

EVELIN: That's the only one I've ever [seen].

[We segue into a several-minute discussion of how difficult it can be to get people to stand for office, before I return us to the topic.]

AVERILL: So then why do people run if it's not to achieve something specific? Because when you have a *presidential* candidate, or the governor, or a senator, they're--

EVELIN: It's a sense of community.

AVERILL: --always like, 'Elect me so that I can do... *this* for you.' And so--

EVELIN: It's a sense of community!

LINDA: Yeah.

AVERILL: Sense of community?

LINDA: That's what I think it is.

[4 second pause]

EVELIN: It really is. I mean, people have a... sense of obligation. Most people.

LINDA: Yup.

[1.5 second pause]

EVELIN: Everybody should serve at some point for their community.

There are many things I want to highlight from this conversation. Foremost is that public spiritedness and “sense of community” are posed as the normal, laudable motives for townspeople to become candidates, as opposed to pursuit of what Dale called “preconceived” objectives, or as opposed to the “vendettas,” negativity, and “domination” that Evelin and Linda described Walter as embodying.

I also want to flag how unique Evelin and Linda considered Claude Stiles to be, for how he articulated his reasons for running. (Remember, this interview happened prior to Walter's runs of 2012 and 2016). And there is a related, easily overlooked but telling detail: Linda couldn't remember, even just seven months later, whom Claude had been challenging. That is, while Claude stood out, Anne blurred indistinctly into the other incumbents on the board.

Let's look at this 2011 race between Anne and Claude. It was Anne's first reelection challenge, and there were about 70 people in the assembly, somewhat less than average turnout. With nominations complete, Dean (ever elected moderator) invited speeches.

[Candidate statements are coded as follows: **highlighted** for objectives; **boldfaced** for assertions of candidate qualification; underlined for language related to what Evelin called “sense of community.”]

DEAN *[from his mic-equipped podium on the stage at the front of the room]:* If there's no objection we can ask the nominees to say a couple of words. Anne, would you like to say a word or two?

[On the spot, she noticeably tenses and doesn't say anything at first. Her hesitation inspires some good-natured laughter from the assembly.]

DEAN: You don't have to! *[More laughter.]*

ANNE: I didn't know you were going to ask me to do this!--

DEAN: I'm sorry! *[More laughter.]*

ANNE *[rising from her seat at the Select Board table at the front of the room]:* -- I'm not prepared. Um, I'd just like to say I--you know, **this is my first term, uh, on the Select Board.** Uh. And, uh, I have to say, it's really been an experience. Um. Nobody, uh, who hasn't done it realizes what's involved with it, and I think it's been a wonderful experience. Um. I've participated in a lot of interesting projects. Uh. And I've put in a lot of time, and, uh... yeah. I hope that people feel that I've done a decent job. ... That's my speech!

DEAN: Claude?

[Claude accepts the microphone. He too speaks from a standing position at his own seat, which for him is in the assembly. His voice goes a little quavery at points.]

CLAUDE: Hi, my name's Claude. I--I know quite a few of you. Um. The reason I'm running is I just want to be more involved in the town. I live right here on Main Street. My heart and soul is, uh, based now in Northmont, and I just want to give back to the community. Uh, I run the Gallatin Inn along with my partner, Henry. Um, I'm not in NACA like Henry is. *[Henry was Claude's partner, who was a main player in the Northmont Area Community Alliance, a recently formed business association that had gotten into several public spats with the Select Board for the latter's perceived failure to provide sufficient support to Northmont's business community. See Chapter 3.]* Um, but I do, uh, have an interest for the business community in, uh... providing jobs for our local residents. You know, **I have so many friends who are working in Stockton City** *[the 14,000 person commercial center about a 45 minute drive away]* **and throughout the, uh, state,** and, you know, my goal is to... really to work on making Northmont a really friendly environment for businesses. Um, so that when I post a job on Craigslist I don't get 38 responses for a housekeeper. Um. So... **I went to college, I have a four year college degree. I have a lot of time,** and I really have an interest in... giving back. I'm on the library board. I...we do the fundraiser, uh, every year at the Gallatin Inn, the wine and cheese silent auction, which is raising around \$6,000 a year. Um, so I'm very good **at, um, coordinating events and working in a team.** And I have a great deal of respect for the current Select Board, and the only reason I'm running is I just want to just put my hat out there, and, uh, if anyone's interested I'd be glad to serve. Thank you.

To an outsider accustomed to federal and state elections, or even to someone accustomed to the City Council elections of Stockton City, Claude's speech might have been considered vague, even vacuous.¹⁰ It included two articulations of a loose policy interest, but it did not give

¹⁰ Certainly other scales of American politics can be equally vacuous. Only a few months after Claude stood for election in Northmont, an American presidential candidate from one of the two dominant parties launched his campaign by saying he believed in "an America of freedom

even a first level of elaboration with regard to specific focus or to an implementation approach. Following Schudson (1998b), I'm inclined to read these vague policy gestures as instances of a common phenomenon: candidates in fundamentally apolitical context such as "elections of team captains, class presidents of student councils, elections in fraternities and sororities, most elections of school boards, many elections of local government, and most elections in professional associations," nonetheless "feel obliged by Progressivist ideology [*the idea that politics equals policy*] to concoct some pseudo-policy statements, [even though] only under the most unusual circumstance would any voter decide on this basis." In any case, Claude's speech also did not identify any points of differentiation between Claude and his opponent. In fact, Claude actively undercut a sense of differentiation through his closing statement of respect for the sitting board.

If an old hand like Evelin thought *this* was "a very good speech about what [a candidate's] goals were," what were Northmonters making of typical speeches like Anne's, where intentions were even vaguer? As noted, these speeches were nearly the sole kind of campaigning that occurred. If contrasting candidate goals were not the motor for local electoral politics, what then was?

Let's assume that the candidates themselves were not vacuous, nor the voters. Let's

and opportunity," contrasting himself to an opponent who "sees a different America and has taken us in a different direction" (Romney 2011). The difference, though, is that the presidential speech--during its nearly 20 minute length--went on to offer several policy differentiations that were at least moderately concrete (e.g., making hard decisions about cutting spending rather than raising taxes), and the campaign subsequently pinned down any number of policy platforms and campaign promises in speech and in campaign documents. Claude's speech, meanwhile, lasted a minute and a half and was preceded and followed by almost no other campaign activity. In other words, American presidential voters encounter a *mix* of vacuous and concrete presentations from their candidates, whereas the Northmont municipal speeches were *solely* vacuous.

assume that, like political actors the world around, Northmonsters generally made sound decisions according to locally relevant criteria, and that their decision-making methods were organized in a locally sensible way. On what basis *were* local electoral politics being conducted?

A line from Anne's "empty" speech gives a clue: "I hope that people feel that I've done a decent job." This was an invitation to the assembly to do exactly what it did every year anyway, with or without invitation: a retrospective assessment of an incumbent's performance.¹¹ The conclusion to Claude's speech points in the same direction: in his last line, he offered himself up as an Option B if the citizenry were dissatisfied with its existing officer. When Anne was elected over Claude, 49 to 19 (72% to 28%), it wasn't about what Anne or Claude might do next, it was about what Anne had or hadn't done previously. Neither candidate was a metonym for a particular political platform; they were symbols respectively only of the status quo and of "something else."¹²

"Blank Candidates": Spontaneity and Entreatment in Elections without Campaigns

Having seen several public speeches from candidates, and having heard Linda and Evelin's analysis of candidate motivations, let's now ask the candidates directly about why they ran.

I interviewed Marie Dahl a year into her first term on the Select Board. "I was never, ever

¹¹ See Oliver et al. (2012) and Speakman (2011:704).

¹² Von der Muhll (1970:776-777, 563) too found that particular political actors in Select Board elections did not function as metonyms of policy causes.

involved in politics in any way, shape, or form in Connecticut,” she told me, “but I’m very interested in [town meetings] here.” She had become a clockwork attendee, but she never had attended any of the town’s Select Board meetings. How then, I asked, did she come to be elected to the board? She took me back to a few days before the prior year’s town meeting:

MARIE: I’ll tell you how! I was bringing wood in from my porch, and one of the other Select Persons, Eliza Gray, was walking by, and we said hello. We really like each other. And she said, oh, by the way, would you ever consider sitting on the Select Board? And I said, Me!? *[laughs]* And she said, ‘Yes, you know, there’s going to be a seat opening up, and you know, [we were] talking about people we thought might be interested and we would love to have participate; your name came up, and we just thought we would ask you and see if you would have the interest.’ I told her I wasn’t well educated or well versed on the issues politically. She said that was ok, they understood that, and that was the case for her as well when she first started. And I had just been lamenting that it’s all older people at town meeting, and what’s going to happen in the future; what younger people are going to participate? And so I thought, well, I was *just* feeling passionate about this issue, I should put my money where my mouth is. Even though it’s completely foreign to my nature! *[laughing]*

“And why were you interested in running,” I pressed.

“Because someone I respected asked me to do it,” she answered, “and I am sort of service-minded.” The conversation continued:

MARIE: I guess personal responsibility is the best way I can say it. It was sort of like the door was opened and I was invited in, and to say no at that point would have been remiss.

AVERILL: Was there anything in particular that you wanted to accomplish?

MARIE: ... *[3 second pause]*... Um ... *[2 second pause]* No, like, did I have an agenda in mind?

AVERILL: Yeah, like specific projects or--

MARIE: No.

AVERILL: --specific concerns?

MARIE: Unh-uh. Just... fairness

AVERILL: What do you mean?

MARIE: I think with my participation in anything... I hold integrity and I’m fair minded. That the process holds integrity, that would be my interest, in whatever was brought to the [board’s] table.

When I posed the same questions to Anne Evans, she laughed. How had she gotten elected to the Select Board? “Damned if I know!” she whispered. “Probably because no one else

would run.” She shared the story of Melanie Shields calling her up a few days ahead of the meeting. “I was really surprised,” Anne noted;

I had absolutely no idea what the Select Board did, I mean how they worked or anything else. So I thought it would be interesting. I mean, plus it all goes back to, gee, I like Northmont, and I’d like to--I have free time, and a lot of other people have jobs and things like that, so why not give a little? And plus I thought it would be interesting to see how it functioned.

Was there anything in particular that she wanted to accomplish?

No, I wanted to learn. ... And I was fortunate enough [once I got on the board] to be given the project on the town garage, and I love doing that kind of thing. And I think it turned out pretty well, and that makes me feel like I’ve contributed.

Later in the interview, Anne started talking about the chain of small things that had gotten her involved in town governance in the first place, thus bringing her to Melanie’s attention and creating the conditions by which she herself would become receptive to Melanie’s approach.

“It’s insidious!” she said, “The more interested you become, the more you delve into it.” She had started out as a Lister--that office *also* having been one she took on as the result of someone asking her--and in the course of that work she had been looking at the land parcels map when she spotted the town forest. She had never heard of a town forest, let alone known that Northmont had one, and she “thought it was neat.” She therefore pulled out the forest’s management plan, but, finding it sparsely articulated, became interested in developing it further. Putting in some trails and access points could be good for the town, she decided, and she started shopping the idea around. Note the order of Anne’s motivations: it wasn’t that she got involved with town government in order to pursue her policy goals, rather, she started developing policy goals only once she was involved.

The same kinds of details played out again and again in my interviews with other Select Board members and candidates: Not being the one to initiate the idea of running. The idea coming up only a few days in advance of Town Meeting. Being in the middle of something

mundane when the second party approached. (This seemed to be a storytelling trope for underscoring a lack of personal ambition.) Being taken by surprise by the idea of it. Self-deprecating one's qualifications. Not even quite knowing how the board worked or what its responsibilities were. Not having been to very many or to any prior meetings. Expressing general care and concern for the community. Feeling some sort of obligation or duty. Being curious to learn more about the community or the mechanics of town government. Wanting to help with the general application of fairness and good government. Not having any particular policy agenda.

These findings corroborate those of a valuable but thinly supported prior study about community participation in Vermont:¹³

Many participants have a sense that community involvement is necessary for an individual's health and well-being. In addition to simply 'feeling good about yourself,' many participants speak about community involvement as an antidote to boredom, depression and excessive self-concern. On the other hand, participants also acknowledge that for some people becoming involved is an ego-feeding, self-serving proposition. [...] The sense that they can make a difference is a key reason people choose to participate. Concern about a particular issue also causes people to become involved. In rural communities a sense of responsibility to the community is a central reason for being involved (in the Burlington focus groups, this notion of 'needing to give back' to the community was much less apparent).¹⁴ Participants also acknowledged that at times people get involved for less than noble reasons, for example, in order to affect the outcome of an issue in a way that is personally advantageous. (McCormack 2000:4-5, see also 13)

Here too we see the grudging acknowledgment of the existence of Walter types.

Especially notable is the frequency with which candidates found themselves *asked* to run. In fact, from 2008-2015, Walter was Northmont's only self-initiated candidacy.¹⁵ Actually,

¹³ The statewide study drew from seven focus groups involving a total of only 36 people.

¹⁴ The distinction here of Burlington from other towns is interesting, speaking to how scale affects the "sense of community" dynamic of local elections. Burlington is Vermont's only proper city, with a population of >40k and a surrounding metropolitan area comprising very nearly a third of the state's total population.

¹⁵ I did not have the chance to interview the 2016 candidates, and more recent years are outside of the chapter's sample.

“asked” might be too light a description; “entreated” gives a more accurate sense. Town resident Becca Gregson explained, “At Town Meeting it’s just hard to get anyone to fill positions, and so basically people are kind of just pulled off the floor: ‘Hey, will you do it?’ ‘Oh, ok.’ And then they’re nominated and they run.” Numerous other interviewees talked about the “couple of days” or the “short notice” of candidate recruitment.

This spontaneity is a strong contrast to electoral campaigning in the usual sense. The New Oxford American Dictionary (NOAD 2010) defines a “campaign” as “an organized course of action to achieve a particular goal”; the verb “to campaign” is to “work in an organized and active way toward a particular goal.” To turn to a definition from a more local source, the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (Marsh and Marx 1981:81) offers something very similar: a campaign is “any organized or coordinated activity undertaken by two (2) or more persons, any part of which is designed to influence the nomination, election, or defeat of any candidate or the passage, defeat, or modification of any public question.” And the VLCT has a “candidate” as “an individual who has taken any affirmative action to become a candidate for public office”; “affirmative action” is subsequently defined as accepting contributions, spending money, filing a petition, being nominated, or publicly announcing intent.

By these definitions, in many years Northmont had no campaigning at all, and in most of the other years the activity was so faint as to qualify only under the most technical reading (e.g., friends telling one another that so-and-so was going to stand for election). There were no campaign teams, no coordinated activity. All of the usual techniques of campaigning were absent: yard signs, posters, door-to-door knocking, flyers, mailings, glad-handing community groups, endorsement-seeking, get-out-the-vote efforts, etc. By statute, \$500 was the reporting threshold for local elections; in Northmont no one could remember an occasion when someone

spent as much as a penny. The town lacked a newspaper of its own and was on the periphery of two different regional papers. Neither of these printed formal profiles of Select Board candidates for any of the towns in their coverage area, although candidates and supporters in the larger towns (not Northmont) did post ads and letters to the editor.¹⁶ Northmonters submitted occasional letters to the editor on other topics throughout the year, but town meeting season yielded printed crickets.

Modern digital forums were no different. Facebook was barren of local electioneering, and other social media lacked a user base. A statewide community internet forum, the “Front Porch Forum,” reached Northmont in December of 2013; in the five town meeting seasons that followed, a mere three posts popped up about town meeting topics, none of them addressing elections. This was despite the repeated encouragements from FPF administrators to use the forum to discuss town meeting.

And email lists of community and activity groups? On only one occasion was someone’s candidacy announced on one of these. This was for Claude, a message from the president of the NACA business group to its small (even by Northmont standards) membership. Sent a full fourteen days prior to the meeting, the mailing was a double anomaly in that it was sent so far ahead of the election, and that it was sent at all. Many longtime locals perceived NACA as--in the words of one of them--“outsiders [who] don’t understand how things work here,” so the mailing falls firmly into the category of “the exception that proves the rule.”

¹⁶ These print media communications weren’t any more specific regarding candidate platforms than were candidate speeches. Typically candidates used advertisements or letters merely to broadcast the raw fact of their candidacy, offering only the same kinds of statements about experience, community involvement, and public service that we’ve seen. Von der Muhll’s (1970:406n47) found newspapers playing the same role in Select Board elections in Plymouth, MA in the 1960s.

Setting aside its fundamental anomalousness, though, the mailing actually hewed closely to the sensibility of a standard speech:

Claude Stiles, co-owner of Gallatin Inn has decided to put his name forward to run for a vacancy on the Select Board at this year's Town Meeting. Claude, who to date has been a very active Library Board director in addition to taking Gallatin to the point where in 2009 it was voted the best B and B in the State of Vermont by the state, is willing to give of his time, energy and expertise to the Select Board if elected. I have no doubt the community would benefit greatly from his involvement and do hope you will join with me in supporting our NACA friend and colleague and spread the word about Claude's decision. Please invite friends and family to come out and support Claude in his efforts to contribute to the local community by electing him to the Select Board.

Even the grapevine saw limited use toward elections. In the lead-up to meetings, I always kept my ears perked as I went around town, hoping to overhear some bit of town meeting gossip. I was disappointed. Before or after social club events? Almost nothing. After church? Nothing. In the grocery store or post office? Nothing. Around and about town elsewhere? Nothing. Certainly I was not everywhere every-when, and I could have missed numerous instances. Nonetheless, the frequency of election talk indeed must have been low, or I would have encountered more of it on a random basis.

I *did* encounter evidence that people talked at least occasionally about elections within their in-groups. For instance, the old-timer breakfast group at the Main Street Diner sometimes talked--loud enough for the whole room to hear--about what could be expected come Town Meeting Day, sharing what each had heard. The Listers similarly could raise names of potential candidates as they clustered around their data-entry computer in the back room of the town office. It is entirely possible that gossip chains extended forth from these kinds of conversations, eventually reaching a substantial number of townspeople in haphazard fashion. If that can count as campaigning, though, it was campaigning of a strange form, in its nearly systematic avoidance

of more public opportunities where more people could be reached.¹⁷

All of this is to say: although some kinds of advance talk about elections did happen in Northmont, electoral campaigning as an organized, active activity was highly attenuated.¹⁸ Old-timers told me that Northmont's elections had worked this way as long as they could remember.

Adversarial Pluralism vs. Sense of Community within Asymmetrical Elections

Walter attempted two more runs (to date), in 2012 and 2016. These saw him boil over into naked antagonism, but what is notable is that the antagonism was not reciprocated; these were asymmetrical elections. In looking at how Walter's candidacy differed from the candidacies of others, we gain a clear picture of the community-making work that the electoral process was doing.

Walter's Blitz of 2012

At his highest pitch of antagonism, Walter also scored his lowest tally of votes. The 2012 race was to replace Don Cleary, who had passed away just days previously. The community was raw with grief; the meeting opened with tearful tributes to how Don had brought everyone together. When elections were reached, the first nominee (Jeff Marcheau, reversing his not-so-

¹⁷ Perhaps this selectivity can be interpreted as an attempt merely to "rally the base" (ensuring that predictable supporters would come out to vote rather than trying to secure new supporters)? If so, it could have been enormously more systematic. It also could have been enormously more extended in time, instead of just the week ahead of the meeting.

¹⁸ Appendix C refutes the counter-interpretation that campaigns are absent only because the elections have been conspiratorially choreographed by an insider clique.

long-ago retirement) delivered an exemplary blank speech, expressing his aspiration to live up to Don's broad-minded approach. Walter then blindsided everyone, proceeding to build, step by antagonistic step, into a full-bore blast. "I'm not a smooth talker like that guy in the White House," he began. This partisan barb against President Barack Obama was an unforced error, needlessly interjecting the specter of D.C. viciousness into a forum that most people preferred to think of in more unitary terms. "I'm not a politician," Walter continued, "I'm a bit rough around the edges at times." The implication was that his opponent's agreeable demeanor was a political construct, whereas Walter's prickliness was itself proof of authenticity. The equation of "politician" with "inauthentic," however, was something that Northmonters reserved for extra-local politics. Within *local* affairs, the stronger meaning of the word "politics" was precisely the one that Walter now was running afoul of: the equation with "antagonism."

He continued: "But I have a track record for the past 32 years serving the town, serving you people, and I get the job done." He proceeded with a detailed--too detailed--review of his service since 1980, enumerating positions and accomplishments. Candidates in recent years had spent no more than a sentence on their prior deeds, and the crowd quickly got antsy. Watching, I scribbled an exploratory note on my scratchpad: *Walter spends too much time focused on his deeds rather than his [current] trustworthiness??* That night I inserted an elaboration: *Electable candidates don't need to marshal evidence, they just need to show up and be recognized.* I had in mind the Constable race from the prior year, when the lone present candidate had declined to give a speech. Moderator Dean, apparently feeling that *some* sort of ritual encounter between candidate and constituents was important, fished for words to achieve what was missing: "Jonathan, do you just want to stand up, so they can... take your measure?" The room laughed, and Jonathan complied. "Having one's measure taken" seemed like a very good encapsulation of

what elections actually were based on: the assembly just needed to look in someone's eye (nearly literally!) and know that the person was sincerely committed to service.

But back to 2012. Walter tried to drive home his point about experience and dedication with an analogy to a 1970s commercial for Life cereal: "It was kind of like you know that commercial, 'Give it to Mikey, he'll eat it'? Well, it's always been when there was a job to do, 'Give it to Walter, he'll do it.' And I did it." Walter was misremembering the commercial's premise, however. The line is spoken by two boys who are skeptical of whether a "nutritional" cereal could possibly be appetizing, and they therefore decide to use their little brother as a guinea pig: "Let's get Mikey! Yeah, he won't eat it, he hates everything!" Disagreeability was not the self-description Walter intended, but as a poetic accident it's an apt description of Walter's rebellion against the trust and unity mode of Northmont politics.

Walter then transitioned into an attack on Melanie Shields, implying that Jeff was her tool and patsy:

And I've always been accepted, except for the last couple of times when there was an opening on the Select Board, I was rejected. And that's primarily, and sad to say, because there's a certain individual, which is a very good person otherwise but has a personal grudge against me, and somehow has managed to turn people against me. But anyway, I want to say that with the loss of Don, god rest his soul, there's one huge void on that board, in experience and know-how and knowledge. And so the choice is yours, folks. You can either... uh... aid and abet someone that's holding a grudge--has been for seven years now, because of the letter I wrote to the editor of the *Gazette* in 2005. A nice person otherwise. But anyway, you can either aid and abet that, or, I think you can do what you would have to agree is just plain common sense and appoint someone that has the experience, the know-how, the knowledge, to fill Don's seat on that board.

Wrapping up, Walter now added a few more words about his friendship with Don. It was too late to take the communal tack, though. When Walter sat, there was no applause; the room

was frozen. Silence hung for a long several seconds before Dean rescued things with a dive back into process, ushering people into the familiar routine of lining up to cast ballots.

After the meeting several people commented to me that Walter's speech had been "out of bounds." Even two of Walter's friends told me that "Walter goes too far." Another person implored me, "I don't want you to get the wrong idea for your book." Their sense of insult perhaps was soothed by the fact that Walter had been trounced, 76% to 24%, the worst loss of anyone in a decade.¹⁹

2016's Seven Candidates: Two Faction Heads, Five Public Servants

The Select Board races of 2016 illustrate the stark contrast between Walter's approach to candidacy and the standard approach. The year featured the simultaneous retirement or resignation of three incumbents, and the void attracted a total of seven candidates. (Not all seven candidates ran against one another simultaneously--see Figure 2.3.) This was a volume unseen since 2001, when the board had been expanded from three members to five, which likewise resulted in three open seats. Four of these seven were first-time candidates for any office; one was hoping to transition to the Select Board from the Planning Commission; one was Walter, and one (Ben Flanners, of the two-second speech in 2015) was the quasi-incumbent, having been appointed as a midyear replacement for Anne when her health declined. In such a crowded field, we might expect candidates to have felt pressure to differentiate themselves or to marshal a constituency. That happened only with Walter and Ben, however.

Here are the speeches of the other five candidates, arrayed back to back in the order of

¹⁹ Excluding races with candidates running in absentia.

delivery.

[Speech coding is the same as before: **highlighted** for objectives; **boldfaced** for assertions of candidate qualification; underlined for language related to “sense of community.”]

LESLIE PINDAR

Good morning. Uh, my name is Leslie Pindar, and I’ve been a resident of this town since 1999. I’ve been employed as a teacher in the town of Mendleton for the last 16 years. I have been on our library board. I have two small children currently enrolled in our school. And the future of our town is very, very important. Uh, if I’m elected to the board, I... plan on... being a voice of... reason, and thoughtfulness... and... would do my duty to make sure that I’m representing the voice of the townspeople and the taxpayers. ... And... I’d like to approach this... thoughtfully... uh, reasonably, and... financially, um, responsibly. Thank you.

GERRY LECLERK, IN ABSENTIA, VIA A STATEMENT READ BY MELANIE SHIELDS

Gerry sent this email, and it said, ‘I would like to offer my name to be nominated for one of the open Select Board positions. **I have a very extensive background in business administration, especially in procurement. I am sure my background would be an asset to the town of Northmont.** I have been a member of the Northmont family since 1990, *[she breaks out of reading to speak for herself]* and he had been a volunteer EMT for the rescue squad for just under 18 years. Um, he wasn’t able to be here today, but he was hoping that someone would nominate him for one of the open positions, so I did so, and [a couple inaudible words].

MARVIN PHELPS

Thank you. I appreciate the nomination. I--I’m very honored by it. Uh... My wife and I own the Gallatin Inn. [The Phelps had purchased the Gallatin from Claude and Henry 2.5 years previously.] We... run the business, uh... uh, since buying it, and, uh, we love Northmont, we love this town. We feel somewhat like evangelicals in that we weren’t born to the town, but we’ve come to love it even more passionately than maybe someone who’s even been here all their life. ... Uh, if elected I certainly promise to... run the town and help run the town, uh, as a business. Uh, making sure that, uh, we improve the infrastructure, take care of what needs to take care of, serve the people of the town, and, uh... safeguard the, uh... tax base, and do what we can to maybe even reduce expenses to continue... uh... bringing back some of that tax money back to our, uh... to our people. So... I appreciate your support, and, uh... hopefully your vote. Thanks very much.

WILL ALBERTS

Hi, my name’s Will Albert. I live on Mill Run Road. ... Uh. ... Married to Hillary Tranor. I think she’s third, our kids are fourth generation Northmont. ... Uh, **I’ve got a degree in public resource management. It’s pretty much what... I went to school for. I chose to do solar as my career path in life.** ... Yeah. ... I feel like we have a lot of opportunity as a town to move forward in... a very positive direction. ... Uh, looking at our downtown, looking at... you know, what we have as resources. ... I think we have... a great town. Um, I think there’s a lot of things we can do if we look at grants,

and I--and I basically have an 80 percent success rate with every grant I've ever written, so... Let's move forward and... look at what we can gather as a town. And as a Select Board member I promise to represent you all... equally, and, uh... With the opportunity at hand... you know, I think we can all move forward together.

JAMES JEFFREY

So, I'm--I'm James Jeffrey. Um, I live on Mill Run Road. Um... I've, uh, served on the Planning Commission for the past... five or six years... I think. Um, and in that time I've learned a lot about the town, worked closely with the Select Board... Um, I've learned a lot about... uh, hearing lots of points of view and trying... as hard as we can to reach consensus that's... equitable... and hopefully what people like. ... Um... after moving here--I lived in a lot of small towns, but I've never lived in a place that has as big a sense of community as this one, and, uh... I just want to do whatever I can to help that... sustain and grow and be vibrant in the future. So, thank you.

These speeches notably never drew direct contrasts between themselves and their fellow nominees, and they offered precious little information that would have helped voters to reach conclusions of their own. Statements of qualification were spasmodic, skeletal, or omitted entirely. Statements of goals and priorities were indistinguishable, platitudinous, or absent. As with Claude's speech, many or most of the goal-like statements seem more obliged than considered.

In contrast to the anemically phrased policy objectives, consider the richness of the statements speaking to a sense of community. Along one dimension, the candidates declared who they were vis-a-vis the community, including details about:

- their emotional relationship to the town,
- their social and familial relations,
- their tenure in town,
- their prior service,
- (irregularly) their employment and/or education.

Along a second dimension, the candidates made claims to what they could offer as a member of the Select Board:

- common sense, thoughtfulness, fairness,
- track records of service, fairness, reliability, etc.,
- commitments to representing the townspeople,
- commitments to hearing all points of view,
- vaguely defined commitments to things like fiscal responsibility and sound management,
- a deep sense of care for the town.

Considering these two dimensions, a reexamination of the speeches shows that many of the statements that at surface-level were about goals or qualifications turn out to have been simultaneously conveying a much stronger imbedded message about community relations.

These findings recapitulate Von der Muhll's (1970:406-407) from 1960s Plymouth, MA:

Certainly [competition within town meeting elections] has not compelled the competitors to define their stand on the issues of the day. Incumbent selectmen assert that their 'long record of service to the town speaks for itself'; they perceive the need for 'planning ahead for the needs of the community' while 'protecting the rights of the individual' and 'maintaining a sharp watch on the taxpayer's dollar.' Contestants proclaim that 'it is time that someone took an interest in the town's welfare,' and declare their 'sincere desire to serve the people of this community.' Occasionally, an incumbent will 'take pride in' the 'improvement of our harbor and waterfront facilities' or the 'beginning of radio dispatch and communication in town-owned vehicles' without specifying his causal relationship to such developments. Aspirants are generally wary of giving any operational indication whatsoever of how they would use the selectmen's powers. Common features of most campaign platforms include emphasis on length of residence in Plymouth, an effort to link occupational experience to the demands of the office, an expression of faith in Plymouth's prospects for economic growth, and scrupulous avoidance of any reference to other candidates.

Speeches were not *supposed* to differentiate the candidates. Precisely the opposite: the interchangeability of the candidates was the virtue of the system, suggesting the fundamental unity of the community, the lack of *need* for distinguishable candidates. For the citizenry to elect Leslie (for instance) would have been to mandate that "the future of the town was important" and

that “reason and thoughtfulness” should be the board’s guiding principles. This was no more or less than what Gerry, Marvin, Will, or James stood for. There was no real choice here--and that was the desired outcome.

Now let’s consider the very different speeches from Ben and from Walter. Ben, departing radically from the two-second tack of his previous run, presented himself in veiled but pointed terms as a factional candidate:

BEN FLANNERS

Morning, everybody. ... Uh, **I’ve filled in for, uh, Anne since she... uh, resigned...** And it’s been a... challenging, uh... place to be. ... And what I’ve done is, uh, represented the people... who... it seems everybody else on the board, uh, *doesn’t* represent. ... And uh... I’ve been, uh--... I’d be honored... to have your vote today to continue. ... Thank you.

Walter in turn offered bullet-point specificity on policy--an unprecedented thing. The sharpness of his tone likewise had no precedent aside from his own blitz in 2012. As he spoke, his clipped syllables, stiff posture, and tightly held jaw suggested barely checked anger.

WALTER HEUSON

Well thank you. [...] When I took the nomination, there’s four very important areas among many. I’ll tell you what they are and what I’ll do. We need a financial plan. We need to *eliminate* our long-term debt. Build a healthy reserve. We need a Class Two-Three road policy. And we may need to address the amendments to the [zoning] regulations again. As far as the financial plan, I would prepare a spreadsheet, give it to every office in town... Fire, rescue... rec... library... everybody. Starting in 2017, they would list any expense that’s five-thousand or more than the annual budget. It may be two[-thousand], three[-thousand], four[-thousand], whatever the Select Board thought. Do that for the next four years. The Select Board would take those five years, consolidate [them] into one. We would have a five-year plan and know *exactly* what to anticipate for expenses. Long term debt: I would submit a plan to *eliminate* our long-term debt. We’re just chugging along with these thirty, forty year, uh, bonds, and so forth. Some of these little kids around here’s going to be *paying* for our debt. It can be done... very simply. It won’t be done in five years, but it will be done. We build a... reserve fund of \$500,000. ... Sounds like a lot. Right now... our... debt service is *fourteen* percent... of our town budget. Around \$159,000. If we eliminate our debt, you can see we could put one-hundred-fifty to -sixty thousand *a year*... in a reserve fund. We’d have \$500,000 pretty quick. If you don’t take the first step, it don’t get done. ... I would draft a... road policy... for Class Two and Three roads. We have it for Class Four. I would work with the road commissioner and the men in the town garage. We would develop a policy

adopted by the Select Board. Very important. When people come to the town garage, or the selectmen, and they have a problem, you open it up, here it is in writing, adopted by the Select Board. I've seen it work for the Class Four policy, settle a dispute with the Select Board very simply. As far as the [zoning] regulations, if the board agreed, I would... act as a liaison... between the board and the Planning Commission. **I served as Planning Commission chair several years. I was Zoning Administrator several years. I'm currently on the DRB [Development Review Board].** And I'm confident we could come up with amended regulations next year that would be accepted by the majority of the voters. The regulations--these amendments there... this year... need a lot of work.

[At this point Carl Bernard tries to cut in with a point of order. Knowing Carl, it likely was to protest that this was turning into debate that belonged elsewhere in the agenda. But Carl goes unrecognized by Dean as Walter continues speaking, and Carl doesn't persist.]

Anyway. **I believe--... Food for thought: When you hire somebody, whether it's automobile repair, home appliance, whatever, you look for the person that's going to do the best job for you, that has the experience and the knowledge. ... I would think! It's just common sense. And logic, when you hire somebody to work for you in the town office, you want somebody that's gonna do the best job for you, that has experience and the knowledge.** *[Abruptly:]* Thank you.

Sense of community was absent from either of these speeches. Instead they enacted an acrimoniously adversarial pluralist understanding of town politics, and they presented the candidates as metonyms for distinct directions for the town. To elect Ben was to endorse the idea that there was a group hitherto politically excluded, and to mandate its inclusion moving forward. To elect Walter was to do that and further mandate implementation of specific fiscal, zoning, and road policies. The other five candidates carried no comparable metonymic load.

But hold on. Political anthropologists and cultural critics have shown many times over that the criteria for what counts as politically "neutral" are themselves politicized. Protection of the status quo, for instance, isn't necessarily an "agenda-less" position. If the anti-Walter-ites were trying to block Walter's agenda, surely at some level they therefore must have held an agenda of their own.

That idea is exactly what Northmonters disputed, in word and deed. To their view, the opposite of an agenda wasn't a counter-agenda, it was a commitment to generic fairness and

service. Listen to Beth Cleary:

Maybe [candidates] are also motivated when they look at what the potential alternatives are of people who might be interested. ... At this point, the Select Board goes out there and starts knocking on doors [in order to find candidates]. But the doors that they knock on are people that have that same kind of open mindset, people that they have seen within the community that are *fair*. You know, they're not looking for controversy. They're looking for fairness. I would guess that some people have actually gotten on the board because they've seen unfairness. And probably seeing that makes them realize that 'The only way that's going to stop is if someone like myself is there.'

These were *asymmetrical* elections, where "blank" candidates could face off against agenda activists, each kind of candidate running on their own incommensurate terms.

The way that Northmonters remembered elections supports this asymmetricality interpretation. As Tolstoy might say, happy candidates are all alike, but each agonistic candidate is disagreeable in their own fashion. The particularity of the latter made for memorability, whereas the former were an endless parade of interchangeability. Thus Linda and Evelin could remember Claude vividly but couldn't recall which of the several incumbents he had challenged. Blank candidates were perceived as such even by Walter's supporters. They never spoke about Walter's opponents, only about what *Walter* was trying to achieve. They too couldn't remember many of Walter's various opponents, and they too had Walter on the tips of their tongues--never any of his opponents--when I asked for examples of people who had run with agendas.

None of this is to say that "blankness" *really* was apolitical. Precisely this chapter's point is that the pursuit of blankness *is* a political matter. But blankness is a qualitatively different kind of ideology or agenda than something like fiscal conservatism. Thanks to Walter and Ben, voters *did* have a meaningful choice: not a choice between competing agendas, but between an agenda or none. Electing any of the five interchangeable blank candidates was a renewal of the community's unity, and was an endorsement of the La Guardian view of apolitical municipal

governance. Electing either of the two metonymic candidates, Walter or Ben, was an assertion that the community contained meaningful divisions and that town governance required political struggle.

In 2016, Northmont’s voters made the choice decisively. Walter and Ben, making their factional stands, were the two worst-faring candidates (Figure 2.3). (I’m discounting Gerry, since absent candidates almost always polled in single digits, and defeating one therefore was trivial.²⁰)

	Seat 1, 1st ballot	Seat 1, 2nd ballot	Seat 1, 3rd ballot	Seat 2, 1st ballot	Seat 3, 1st ballot	Seat 3, 2nd ballot
Leslie	28%	48%	58%			
Gerry	6%	10%	5%			
Ben	30%	42%	38%	19%	16%	12%
Marvin	34%	withdrew	withdrew	28%	25%	21%
Will				53%		
James					46%	67%
Walter					13%	withdrew

Figure 2.3: Vote shares of the 2016 Select Board candidates

Red bars indicate relative levels of support for each candidate within each ballot, stretching from zero votes at left to however many votes were received by the ballot’s leader at right.

In the first ballot for seat #1, Ben stayed firmly with the pack, but his clear ceiling of support became visible in subsequent ballots as the former supporters of receding candidates flooded toward Leslie over Ben by almost a 4:1 margin (she picked up 31 votes; he, 8). He didn’t end up within 20 points of her, and in the races for the next two seats, his relative support plummeted. Considering the usual advantage of a quasi-incumbent, this was a particularly poor showing.

²⁰ It is worth repeating that Walter’s one-time success in landing a seat in the early 2000s was in a race against an absent candidate.

Walter’s support, meanwhile, was dead on arrival. His poor performance was the humiliating culmination of his post-2005 attempts (see Figure 2.4). His margin of loss in his three attempts from 2007-2009 had averaged over 40 percentage points. In 2012, it had topped 50. Now he didn’t even chart, landing fourth of four candidates, achieving only 13% of the vote. He dropped out following the first ballot.

	Walter's margin of loss (percentage points)	total votes	Votes cast for the...							
			winning candidate	2nd-place candidate	3rd-place candidate	4th-place candidate	5th-place candidate	6th-place candidate	[spoiled votes]	
2001--seat #1	53%	64	49 77%	15 23%						
2001--seat #2										
2001--seat #3, 1st ballot	11%	71	30 42%	22 31%	11 15%	4 6%	3 4%	1 1%		
2001--seat #3, 2nd ballot	6%	65	30 46%	26 40%	9 14%	withdraws	withdraws	1 2%		
2001--seat #3, 3rd ballot	14%	66	37 56%	28 42%	withdraws	withdraws	withdraws	1 2%		
2002	wins by 86% vs. absent candidate	113	105 93%	8 7%						
2003	doesn't run									
2004	doesn't run									
2005	doesn't run									
2006	doesn't run									
2007	50%	56	42 75%	14 25%						
2008	37%	57	39 68%	18 32%						
2009	33%	58	38 66%	19 33%					1 2%	
2010	doesn't run									
2011	doesn't run									
2012	51%	70	53 76%	17 24%						
2013	doesn't run									
2014	doesn't run									
2015	doesn't run									
2016, seat #3, 1st ballot	33%	111	51 46%	28 25%	18 16%	14 13%				
2016, seat #3, 2nd ballot	x	110	74 67%	23 21%	13 12%	withdraws				

Figure 2.4: Loss margins in Walter’s seven races
Walter is highlighted in blue. His margin of loss is indicated in the shaded column.

It was precisely the lack of any threatening ambition that made a candidate electable. Townspeople were outspoken to me with their negativity about candidates like Walter and Ben. “This past year with Ben is the first time that things have felt *political*,” one of the retiring board members told me after the election. “He took up this position that he *represented* a certain group of people.” She firmly objected to that approach: “You have to leave your agenda at home, that’s not what it’s about! It’s about caring for the people and infrastructure of the town.” She was relieved to be stepping off the board after the tension, she said, but she noted her excitement for the new crop of board members, whom she thought would be strong team players.

One regular voter I interviewed voiced similar objections when thinking back to Arnie Green's speech from a decade previously--she still remembered it. The speech had been "very critical of the people on the board," and she had decided as a result not to vote for him.

Even Claude's modest 2011 speech was considered by at least one person to have been too activist. Having been to a couple of Select Board meetings herself, and "having seen how smoothly they work and how much time and consideration they put in," she was leery of Claude's suggestion that there was something different that the board should be doing.

Conclusion: Unity and Trust

Two words capture Northmont's orientation to elections: unity and trust.

Unity: Northmont's elections were about creating a board whose internal unity would reflect and protect the unity of the electorate. The more a board member was capable of representing the full community without requiring any supplement (in the form of another board member with a non-overlapping constituency), the better. Good: a Select Board comprised of five politically indistinguishable members, each with the same constituency: everyone in town. Alarming: a Select Board of counterpoised standard bearers, each speaking for the distinct interest of an identifiable sub-community. Good: *each member* of the board being a microcosm of the community. Alarming: the board *as a whole* being a microcosm of the community.

Board dis/unity was not merely a *symptom* of community dis/unity, though. Nor could unity on the board *create* unity in the community. Rather, accomplishing board unity was one of the ways that the community performed itself *into* unity. The ballot box was not a technology to reveal the citizenry's previously unknown candidate preference; it was a method of community

making. The board's real job was to sustain the idea that both it and the community were unified (Varenne 1977:94-95).

Trust. A successful performance hinged on the establishment of trust: trust by community members in the board, and trust by board members in each other. Each Select Board member had to be unimpeachably an impartial steward of community affairs and a shepherd for community consensus. If any board member started championing a particular cause in the face of other members' resistance or disinterest, that indicated their constituency had become particular. Townspeople who were not a part of that particular constituency would not be able to trust that board member to the same degree as those who were. In contrast, in a truly unified community/board, the only paths forward would be shareable by everyone, and a champion for some particular route wouldn't be needed. Every member of the community equally had to be able to possess equal trust in each of the five Select Board members.

In the course of my fieldwork, I attended fifty meetings of Northmont's Select Board. I came away impressed by how hard the Board worked to address difficult community problems without allowing *differences* to become *disagreements*. To succeed, they 1) conducted their business via mutual exploration rather than via persuasion, and 2) used a conservatively paced "percolation" process that built community consensus through small exploratory increments. (See Varenne 1977:140 for a related but not identical process.)

The viability of those methods depended on the composition of the board. It was methodologically crucial for the five board members to share the same goals (the collective good) and constituency (a constituency of the whole). Officers who saw themselves as factional spokespersons or as activists for a specific cause would have undermined each of the board's two methods: 1) Activist officers would have known where they wanted to go and how they wanted

to get there; they would not have needed to explore, they would have needed to persuade. 2) Activist officers would have wanted to achieve their aims with maximal feasible haste, thereby upsetting or preempting the delicate process of percolation.

If activist officers were a danger, activist candidates had to be nipped in the bud. Any hint of a candidate's personal or political agenda was a threat to the communalistic unity that residents aspired to. This was the case regardless of whether "agenda" referred to a policy objective or to a personal grudge. A candidate like Walter, who was suspected of both, was to be doubly avoided.

Anne and Walter present us with the contrasting archetypes. Anne: politically and personally inoffensive, keen to work collaboratively, possessing few objectives of her own, largely uninvolved in any local feuds. Walter: abrasive, confident he already knew the answers, pursuing a laundry list of objectives, waist-deep in personal animosities. Both were motivated by public spirit (or at least believed themselves to be), but where Anne pursued the community good in an open-ended way, Walter already possessed clear, forceful, dogmatic ideas. For any question that might land on the Select Board's plate, Anne would have no option other than to dive headlong into the percolation process; Walter might be tempted to forego it. In a word, Anne was trustworthy, and Walter was not. This had nothing to do with reliability or honesty. This was trust over who would reflect political questions back to the community rather than answer them themselves.

The unpleasant truth was that politics in Northmont *could* be adversarial. By happenstance, the entirety of my observation period, June 2008 to March 2018, landed in one of the extended "quiet periods" that small municipalities experience between intermittent local

controversies.²¹ Northmonters shared the stories with me, though, of the historical blow-ups. At those moments, unabashedly metonymic candidates had found a place.

Walter, however, was approaching elections as though adversarialism were a blanket condition rather than a particular circumstance. Or perhaps he merely was premature in his diagnosis that Northmont had reached another breaking point. Either way, his cross-decade drumbeat put him out of step with the majority of his neighbors.

It was because far more than the technicalities of road maintenance and municipal finance were at stake that Walter could find no traction. The avoidance of “political” candidates did much more than keep the apple cart of municipal services upright. It also reproduced the community as a certain kind of community: gently unified and able to work out potential conflict through collective efforts (some in public, some behind the scenes) rather than through pluralistic confrontation. Elections were the chance to make and remake Northmont’s sense of community. Northmonters aspired to be a community of neighbors--the kind who are generous, good-natured, and trusting, not the kind who are jealous, petty, bitter, suspicious, and forever bickering. As with love and hate in any intimate relationship, it was a short travel from one orientation to the other. The electoral system was one of the ways that Northmont kept itself on the right side of the looking-glass.

Walter was the system’s anti-ideal, the burr in the saddle who offered a continual reminder that adversarial pluralism was available as an alternative modality for local politics. This was not a reminder that the majority of Northmonters wanted, at least not during the peaceable times. Quashing him--painting him as abnormal and then refusing him entry--was the function the electoral system was designed to execute.

²¹ See Bryan (2004:236-239); Oliver et al. (2012:8).

Pace, then, Mayor La Guardia: The idea that street-cleaning is apolitical is possible only insofar as another, deeper political struggle already has been resolved. The evacuation of “ideology” from municipal government is possible only through the comprehensive supremacy of another kind of ideology. Citizens’ participation as consumers of services is possible only by having participated in the political work of unity-making. Theorists of participatory and deliberative democracy have tended to focus on the overt purposes of participation, like impacting policy outcomes. We’ve seen here, though, that participation simultaneously shapes communities in ways that are much more subtle but no less important.

APPENDIX. Alternative Explanations

This appendix refutes three alternative explanations of the ethnographic facts I've presented:

- A. that voters had *background information* about candidates' agendas that made explicit discussion of agendas unnecessary.
- B. that Walter's electoral misfortunes were due to voters' anti-conservative bias masquerading as community spirit.
- C. that a cabal of powerful local government insiders were promulgating a rhetoric of community spirit to dress up their attempts to neutralize him as a threat to their interests.

A. Background Knowledge

Maybe it is mistaken to expect that the real meat of electoral politics in a tiny place like Northmont would emerge within the deliberative public sphere, or even over the grapevine. Local partisanship might have entered into voter choices via other means. As we saw hinted throughout the chapter, many voters in this small town possessed all sorts of prior knowledge about candidates: biographical and social histories, familial and social affiliations, prior things they'd said at meetings or in conversations, how they'd behaved in the community or in office in the past, etc. Given voters' baseline intimacy with their candidates, perhaps there was no need to speak aloud the policies, ideologies, or priorities that candidates could be expected to advance. In fact, if explicit articulations of position were redundant anyway, the true function of the speeches

may have been precisely to draw attention *away* from the existence of the politicized background knowledge that was driving everything; the platitudes about service and involvement may have been the acceptable idiom for expressing one's motivations. Candidates even may have internalized that idiom to the point where my interview probing found nothing but smooth surface. Under this theory, there was an adversarial reality that underlay the "sense of community" that I identified as the motor of Northmont's elections.

This theory is both right and wrong. It's right insofar as community members' background knowledge indeed was crucial in elections. It's wrong insofar as it was used by voters for the opposite purpose: not to identify the candidate with the most agreeable unspoken platform, but to identify the candidates who had platforms at all, to weed them out of consideration. Here's what one person said about "candidates who run with an agenda":

I don't think those people are usually successful in being elected, because people know that they have a personal agenda. I mean, that's one thing about a small town, you kind of have an idea of what people, especially people running for offices, have as their *[laughs]*--you know.

Claude's run was the clearest example of this. Despite his self-distancing from the NACA group, many townspeople knew enough to identify him (accurately or not) as "the NACA candidate." Not all of them had any particular opinion about NACA, but they knew A) that NACA had been involved in controversy and had some "radical" ideas about the purpose of town government (see Chapter 3), and B) that Anne was safely blank.

The definitive evidence against this alternative explanation, though, is that my interviewees did not report upon any such knowledge about candidates' unspoken positions. A dozen different lovers of gossip would have jumped at the chance to tell me "the real deal" about candidates. No such gossip emerged.

B. Anti-Conservative Bias?

Perhaps it was Walter's and Ben's conservatism rather than their adversarial approach that was turning voters off; perhaps Northmont at large simply had a liberal bent. This was what Walter and Ben themselves believed, describing the town to me as having been washed over by liberal newcomers over the prior several decades. At least part of this claim was correct: Vermont overall *had* "flipped blue" in one of the 20th century's most remarkable electoral college shifts, and--judging by the results of state and national elections--Northmont had gone even more blue than the rest of the region.

Nonetheless, the "liberal bias" interpretation lines up poorly with empirical evidence. Initial evidence that the electorate was not factionalized, even if some of the candidates were, comes from the town meeting voting patterns in 2016 (refer back to Figure 2.3). If a conservative voting bloc had existed, we would expect it to have consolidated around Ben on the ballots where Walter's presence was not splitting the vote. Instead, in Walter's absence during the race for seat #2, Ben did only two votes better than in the first ballot for seat #3. And in the two ballots for seat #3, Ben's level of support *fell*--even if only slightly--after Walter withdrew.²²

The most devastating fact against the "liberal bias" hypothesis, though, is that conservatism simply wasn't an axis along which Walter and Ben were different than more successful candidates. Both Leslie and Marvin had gestured in their speeches toward lowered taxes. Marvin posted consistently better numbers than Ben, and Leslie was elected. Background

²² With no way of knowing for sure, I suspect that after seat #3's first ballot, a number of Ben's relatively moderate supporters decamped for James, finding him tolerable and wanting to nudge him over the victory threshold to save time. Why endure additional rounds of balloting in resisting the inevitable? Meanwhile, I imagine that Ben's count then was filled back in by partisan voters who initially had supported Walter.

knowledge about these two candidates would have allowed a voter to know that Marvin quite possibly would be soft on tax reduction despite the line in a speech, but Leslie was a solid conservative bet. Meanwhile, in prior election cycles, Don Cleary and Archie Wellington--each a dyed-in-the-wool New England Republican--had been embraced. Recall that once Archie even had been recruited as an anti-Walter-ite candidate. Don's case is particularly powerful, because he and Walter had overlapping social circles. They even played together in a regular "old-timers" poker game, and Don sometimes endured some ribbing from other Selectpersons for this relationship. Ideologically, Don and Walter actually were pretty aligned. Don told me that one of his proudest accomplishments on the board was having been able to maintain a level-funded budget throughout the 2008+ recession, avoiding the need for a tax increase. And while most other board members signed off perfunctorily on the biweekly packet of town bills, Don looked through page by page, item by item, every single time, attentive to any waste. Despite all this, Don didn't encounter so much as a shadow of Walter's electoral misfortune.

Nor, when Anne's health declined in 2015-2016 and a mid-year appointee was required, had the anti-Walter-ites tried to find a liberal alternative to Ben, whose conservative opinions were no secret. It was only after they'd had a taste of Ben's working style that they became concerned.

Finally, there is the fact that Walter posted perfectly respectable numbers in his pre-2005 races (refer back to Figure 2.4), when he hadn't yet embraced his polarizing tack. Walter blamed immigration for having changed Northmont's partisan tilt during the intervening years, but that interpretation does not align with Northmont's voting patterns in Presidential and Gubernatorial elections (see Figures 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8). For one thing, the tilt's change clearly had commenced long before Walter started experiencing his electoral failure. Moreover, although the Presidential

voting patterns do suggest that the gap was widening during the period between Walter’s initial success and his later failures, the trends in the Gubernatorial and State Representative Races do not align nearly so well.

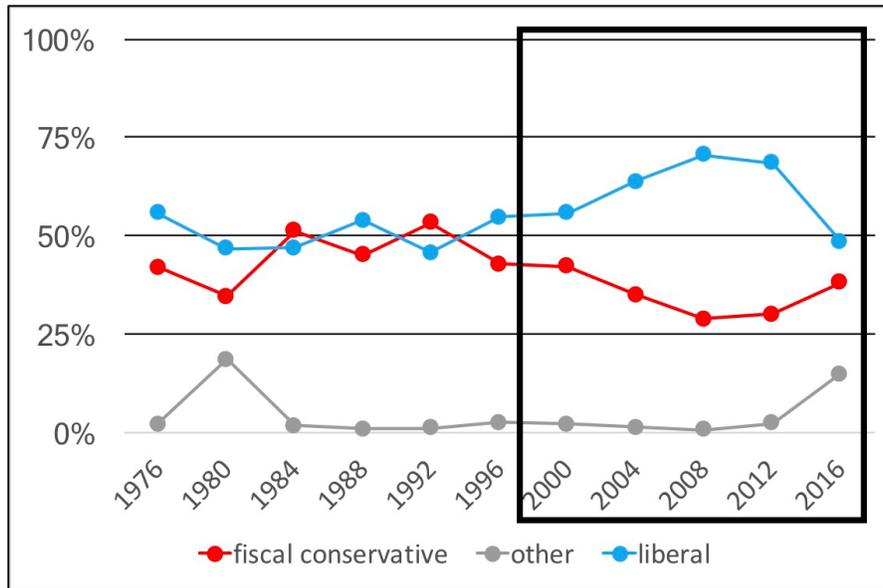


Figure 2.5: Northmonters’ voting patterns for President, 1976-2016
 Each line sums the votes cast for each type of candidate. “Fiscal conservative” candidates include Republicans, Libertarians, candidates from other fiscally conservative parties, and independent candidates with identifiably fiscally conservative positions. Mutatis mutandis for “liberal” candidates. Raw data is from the VT Secretary of State. The box indicates the period in which Walter was active as a Select Board candidate.

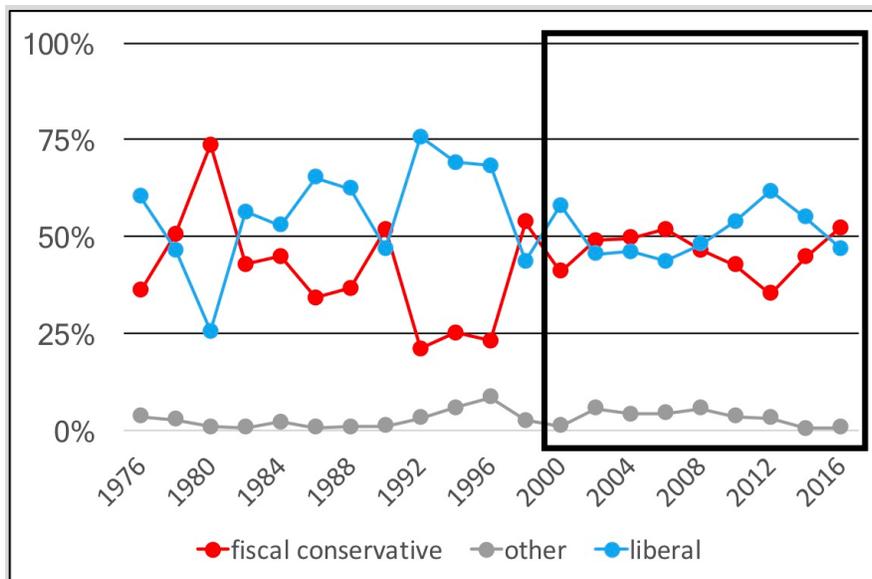


Figure 2.6: Northmonters’ voting patterns for Governor, 1976-2016
 See explanation to Figure 2.5.

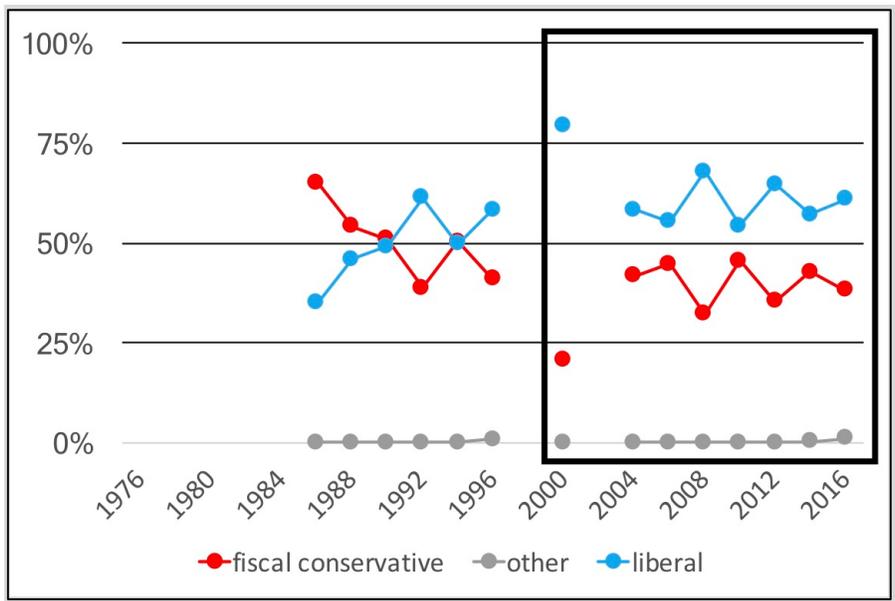


Figure 2.7: Northmonters' voting patterns for State Representative, 1986-2016
See explanation to Figure 2.5. Uncontested races in 1998 and 2002 are left blank.

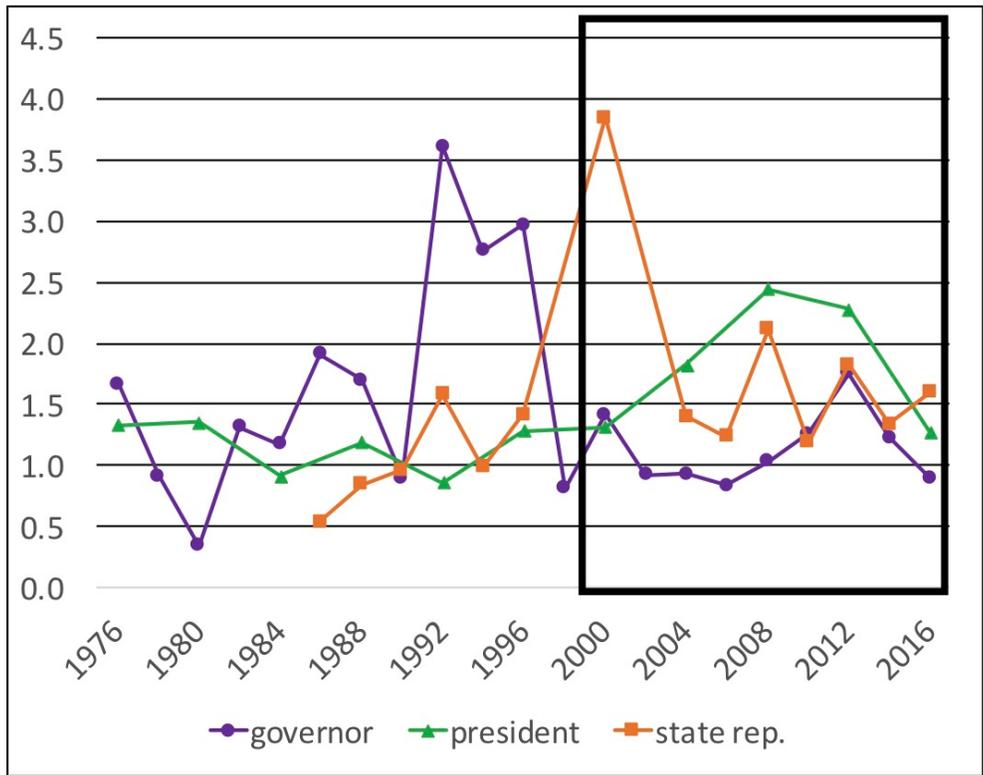


Figure 2.8: Ratio of Northmonters' votes for liberal to conservative candidates, 1976-2016
See explanation to Figure 2.5.

C. “Village Tweeds”?

If campaign activity was unnecessary, maybe I’ve misidentified the reason: maybe it had less to do with trust and unity than with the possibility that races were fixed from the outset. A century’s worth of commentaries have advanced different versions of the conspiratorial idea that New England towns are run from behind the scenes: “village Tweeds,” “little rings,” “rural bosses,” “village cliques,” “small-town oligarchies,” behind-the-scenes “string-pullers,” etc.²³ In Northmont the idea certainly was floating around, and the anti-Walter-ites’ continual effort to exclude him hint at the possibility. Under this view, communal unity is a red herring, and the real story is one of power consolidation.

Were “blank” candidates like Anne and Marie being recruited by a cabal to serve as innocuous cover? The idea starts falling apart rapidly.²⁴

For one thing, the contours of the cabal differed depending on whom you asked. The old-timer faction (which included Walter and Ben among others) believed that the Select Board was stacked with spendthrifts and progressives who were determined to take expensive municipal initiatives at breakneck pace. The NACA business group believed that the Select Board was stacked with conservative old-timers determined to box out anyone who threatened even minute updating of the status quo. Certain of the town’s 20- and 30-somethings believed that a vaguely

²³ Holland (1875:27-33), Bryce (1888:475-476), Bennett (1893:611), Furniss (1893:110,118-119), Sedgwick (1897:181), C.N.Hall (1900:52), WSJ (1905a), Garland (1906:9), WaMQ (1918:278), Banning (1935:153-154), McGuire (1940:233), Pierce (1951), Chapin (1957:338), R.Wood (1958:284), Vidich and Bensman (1958), Nuquist and Nuquist (1966:531), Fesler (1967:518), Bearnse (1968:92), Berman (1975:154), Elliot and Ali (1988:224).

²⁴ I only have investigated the version of the cabal theory where a core of town officers provides direction for the whole town. Vidich and Bensman (1958) describe a situation in an upstate New York town (which lacked town meetings but did share the Select Board structure) where the people with true, enduring political influence were careful never to sit on any of the boards themselves. In Northmont no locals ever posited this version of the cabal idea; whenever anyone made a cabal accusation, it was about sitting officers.

defined agglomerate of town government insiders--always referred to simply as “they”--were determined to keep running municipal services and contracts in a way to privilege themselves; these insiders spanned the liberal-conservative spectrum. And seemingly any time that anyone had an issue with something related (or fancifully related) to the town, they were prepared to give an earful about how the town’s power structure was rule-bound (or inconsistent), outrageously conservative (or progressive), power-hoarding (or pettily ineffective), overbearing (or uninterested), self-dealing (or do-nothing)... and so forth. Plowing, zoning permits, water system meters, annoying neighbors, troublesome dogs, stormwater runoff--all of these and more gave rise to conspiracy theorizing. Even the Select Board held a conspiracy theory about the Select Board: through long experience, they had become certain that the Select Board was stacked with unfortunate souls--idiots, really--who jealously guarded their prerogative to be unable to win no matter what they did. They repeated this joke to me or to each other on numerous occasions.

A neat illustration (Figure 2.9) of the incompatibility of different people’s cabal theories occurred in 2010, when the NACA business group accused the town of having attempted to secretly sell off a popular tract of public river land from under the community’s nose. For this to have been true, it would have required the Select Board to have been working in cahoots with the Agent to Convey Real Estate. The Agent, however, was... Walter. The idea therefore was laughable. Walter in turn, unaware that other actors were drawing the line with him on the inside, had his own ideas about the contours of the cabal. Just like the NACA leaders, he described the affair as one where the Select Board had acted in backdoor fashion to thwart the ordinary voters. The difference, though was that he identified the board’s co-conspirator as Becca Gregson’s crowd--which NACA heralded as an *ally* in the river land affair.

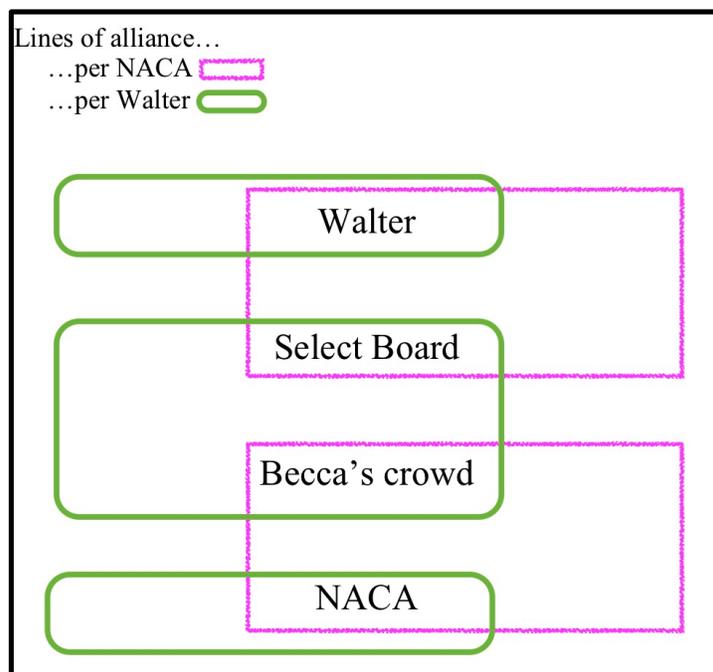


Figure 2.9: Conflicting cabal theories

Beyond this incoherence, even stronger evidence is available that Northmont had no master schemers who were trying to arrange town affairs behind the cover of blank candidates: the blanks were turtles all the way down. Marie, for instance, had been recruited by Eliza, Eliza by the Shieldses, and Dale Shields by Kent Cleary (brother of Don). Kent passed away before I could sit down with him, but given his close relationship with his brothers, my interview with Don can serve as a passable proxy. By now the tropes are familiar to us:

AVERILL: Why were you interested in running?

DON: I don't know, I'd always been interested in the community, you know, and the town and stuff. Um, I thought it was interesting process. I like to contribute. I kind of figured I had a common sense approach on things. And uh, hopefully I've made a difference.

AVERILL: Was there anything in particular you wanted to accomplish when you first ran?

DON: Uh, no real agenda, you know? [...] I did have a personal agenda when I went on the School Board, cuz I wanted my daughter [to have a] decent school to go to. But you know, that was the only thing. [...] I don't think I've ever really had a big agenda, you know? There was a lot of things that needed to be done. Uh, we needed a new fire station. [...] But really no major agenda other than just an interest in the community overall.

Don didn't identify anyone in particular who had encouraged him to run, but if the turtles had

any ultimate firmament, it therefore lay at least one level beyond anyone who was currently involved with the board.

There is of course a limit to how much we can rely upon officers' self-reports, since no one is likely to self-describe as a scheming partisan. If my interviewees were attempting to obscure their deeper intentions, though, their interviews and their conduct across years of observation were master classes in deception. And in that case, why were they squandering their acting talents toward the collection of the minimal spoils available to the volunteer officers of a 1,200 person town, rather than pursuing critically acclaimed Hollywood roles or making a killing in corporate espionage?²⁵

In any case, officers' self-reports were supported by how third parties spoke of them. Under the theory that there's no one better than a small-town neighbor at peeling back the veneer of a false front or a self-delusion, I invited townspeople to engage in their most strident critique and conspiracy theorizing. Who in town was pushing an agenda, I asked? The most frequent response, far and away, was not the Clearys, nor any of the anti-Walter-ites. In fact, none of the anti-Walter-ites received a mention at all.²⁶ No, the most frequent response was... Walter himself, the perpetual outsider.

²⁵ As 20th century author and Vermont-booster Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1922:644) put it, "There is blessedly so little money involved in most Vermont operations that it is hardly worth the while of specially adroit rogues to frequent town meetings." This idea appears to have arisen at least by the late 19th century (Levermore 1886:290-291; cf. Sedgwick 1897:180).

²⁶ Actually, Dale Shields received two mentions, but not in relation to anything having to do with Walter. Rather, they were for his "penchant for policies," which one woman found annoyingly bureaucratic, but which led another person to comment admiringly, "Dale Shields definitely seems to have a vision of where he wants the town to go, but it's not a self-serving vision." These observations struck me as fair; Dale's signature lines at meetings were "I've got no dog in this fight," "What's the town's equity?" and "It doesn't matter to me which way we decide it, we just need to have a policy either way so that we're consistent in the future."

CHAPTER 3. Valorized, Vigorous, and...

Sidelined? The Anti-Politics of Town Meeting Democracy in a Free-Market Age

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Many Northmonters referred to their local government--anchored in the institution of town meeting--as the only remaining place in the 21st century United States where regular citizens could practice meaningful democracy in the face of widespread political corruption and encroaching market oligarchies. Yet upon close examination, the town meeting res-publica turned out not to be such a public thing after all, with some of the most sharply felt local concerns eluding town meeting structures almost entirely. This chapter explores the case of the massive expansion of a nearby ski resort to show how Northmont's town meeting democracy was left on the sidelines even as Northmonters valorized it and practiced it vigorously. Everyone in town agreed that the resort's expansion had enormous implications for the town, but almost no one attempted to address or even discuss the matter within the various structures of town government. Instead they left the grounds of possible intervention to market mechanisms and the realm of private contracts. Boosters of town meeting democracy thus celebrated their political institutions as ensuring that their lives were democratically tractable yet readily left much of that traction to private hands. The specter this case raises is that the formula, "more participatory

democracy,” may have as much potential to be an anti-politics as it does to be a cure for what ails American democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The Monday after Northmont’s 2013 town meeting, freshly adjourned from the first Select Board meeting of the new term, I was at one of the bars in town for a bite to eat before heading home. Located next door to a ski resort, Northmont has more bars and restaurants than you’d expect for a 1,200 person town, and I had chosen the Alpine Pub because it had looked low-key that night; I’d wanted some space to write up my meeting observations. Waiting at the bar for my plate to emerge from the kitchen, I was energetically scribbling when a gravelly voice from three seats over opened up a conversation: “Whatcha writing?” I looked up to find a young man, 25 years old maybe, who was gesturing toward my notebook with his beer bottle--clearly not his first of the evening. When I explained that I was taking notes for my dissertation on town meeting democracy, he responded with enthusiasm. In the studiously slur-free but slow diction of someone trying not to reveal their inebriation, he declared that he knew “exactly what you’re talking about, *exactly*,” because “my parents are big into that.” “I’m a snowboarder,” he continued, offering the remark as if in explanation for why he would leave that sort of thing to his parents. Then, despite his own non-participation, he embarked upon a Monday night taproom ode to the direct democracy of the New England town meeting. “It’s great that we still fucking have that,” he summed up. “It’s important that there’s somewhere where it still works.”

“It” presumably was democracy, *real* democracy driven by citizens. But if democracy “still worked” in Northmont, what were the criteria for that?

I do not mean this question in the usual senses, of whether town meeting as a governmental institution is or is not truly democratic--whether the turnout is too low compared to ballot democracy, for instance, or whether the assembly lacks the capacity to make enlightened decisions, or whether the format too heavily privileges certain participants over others.¹ Our snowboarding bar fly, like other local enthusiasts, has a firm sense that these questions were answered in the negative. My method here will be to follow these boosters in that assumption--to look at town meeting from the most bullish possible angle--in order to pursue a different set of questions. If town meeting met their definition of success, how was that definition structured? What community concerns remained untouched when a “successful” meeting concluded?

To address these questions, this chapter explores Northmonters’ relationship to a major ski resort, Mount Harmon, located in the neighboring town. In an internationally financed, capital-intensive series of developments, “the mountain” (as locals called it) was transforming into a four season destination with world-class amenities--a development that itself was only the first step in the Resort’s ambitious, half-billion dollar economic revitalization program for the whole northeastern part of the state. To give a sense of scale, the entirety of Vermont’s 2011 gross state product was just under \$26 billion. The resort’s existence and expansion had huge ramifications for life in Northmont on an array of fronts, and residents talked on a continual basis about it: job prospects, property-value effects, environmental concerns, opportunities for local kids, stresses upon municipal services, and a score of other topics. Yet, with only a few exceptions, Northmonters did not raise address or even discuss their hopes or concerns within

¹ See R. Wood (1958), Fiorina (1999:415-416), Zimmerman (1967, 1999), Bryan (1995, 2004:25-48).

any of the various structures of town meeting democracy. This absence was motivated, I believe, by Northmonters' subscription to a liberal and neoliberal common sense under which "the market" as an aggregate of individuals freely engaging in private contracts was not a space for democratic intervention (Walzer 1978). The resort's impacts, I suggest, were seen as communal but not as civic; the realm of private enterprise was seen as lying outside the jurisdiction of town meeting democracy.

In simpler terms, Northmont's town meeting was *valorized* and *vigorous*, but it also was *sidelined*. I would frame this situation as a cultural paradox: Boosters of town meeting celebrated their political institutions as ensuring the democratic tractability of their lives, yet they simultaneously perceived some of the biggest actual determiners of their lives--those perceived as lying within the sphere of "private enterprise"--as being properly outside of democratic influence. In other words, town meeting boosters' sense of democratic efficacy was at odds with their sense of what was democratically actionable. They *self-limited* their otherwise expansive sense of town meeting's democratic possibility, naturalizing the various institutions of town meeting democracy as inappropriate venues for engaging with topics like Mount Harmon Resort. They thereby were able to perceive the containment of democratic efficacy not as a failure of democracy but as a matter of democracy's inapplicability to foundational questions about political economy.

Given that boosters frame town meeting precisely as a nourishing alternative to the poisonous impact of market forces upon American democracy,² we have cause for pause when we recognize that town meeting too is thoroughly structured by liberal and neoliberal market logics. For all of its demonstrable vitality, then, the democracy of town meeting is arguably a

² E.g., Teachout and Clark (2012:5-7), Kauffman (2010:221).

sandbox.³ The larger implication, if the fundamental issue in American politics is a fanatically overbalanced exaltation of the autonomy of private enterprise, is that participatory democracy will not be any more successful than representative democracy. The formula “more participatory democracy” may have as much potential to be an anti-politics (Ferguson 1994)--taking participants’ attention precisely away from the important underlying issues--as it does to be a cure for what ails American democracy.

VALORIZED

Many residents in Northmont, Vermont referred to their local government--anchored in the institutions of New England town meeting--as the only remaining place in the 21st century United States where regular citizens could practice meaningful democracy in the face of widespread political corruption and encroaching market oligarchies.⁴ Our snowboarder’s taproom ode was echoed in many of my interviews. Eldon Grear, a fifty-something-year-old member of the town’s Planning Commission, provides a fine example. Having grown up a couple of towns over, he clearly had spent the better part of the past forty years thinking about the meaning of citizenship and local government. He told me how he as part of a small group of citizens recently had been able to establish a new community garden site opposite the village ball

³ To be clear from the outset, I am making a very different point than the frequently encountered charge that town meeting’s powers have been trivialized by ever greater centralization of powers to state legislatures and bureaucracies (e.g., Sutton 1972; Sale 1980b:497; Bryan 2004; Sly 1933:117-125, 419; see also Vidich and Bensman 1958:99-100). That is a question about *who* exercise the power, whereas my question is *what* the power is. Neither the centralized state nor the devolved towns tread upon the autonomy of private enterprise.

⁴ S.Clark and Teachout (2012:esp. 55), R.Clark (1985), Royte (2008), Kauffman (2010:221), Sanders (2012, 2015, 2016). For historical cases and versions of this point, see Dow (1990), Flower (1904:390).

field. The previous community garden under different management had fizzled a few years previously, but Eldon had had a sense of how it could be revived as a vital community hub, and he went in to the Select Board to request usage of some land. He followed the Board's requirement to establish a Community Garden Board with designated officers, then knocked off a few logistical hurdles, and then tilled out eight plots. People in town at first had laughed, he told me--who would need community garden space in a rural town where almost everyone had their own land? But once put into motion the gardens were rapidly embraced, both by gardeners and by those who enjoyed the truly splendid view that greeted a motorist upon rounding the bend into town: ten-foot tall sunflowers above neat vegetable patches and explosions of floral color. Eldon clearly was proud not only of his own effort to live out the duties of an active citizen, but also of his community, which he repeatedly characterized as having a combination of two crucial traits: a) the political structure that made intervention by individual citizens possible and b) the openness and mutual respect that allowed the spirit of civic volunteerism to flourish. In this regard, he compared Northmont not only to the questionable democracy at the national level but also to other towns in the region that according to him were run by power elites.

He expressed worry, however, that Northmont might not be able to maintain itself in the future as this type of democratic haven, since to his mind younger residents were losing familiarity with the institutions of local government, particularly as a result of standardized testing curricula in schools that left no time to teach the fundamentals of citizenship. Noting that many people now needed to have the various town offices explained to them before Town Meeting Day elections could proceed, he said, "It's amazing how ignorant people truly are. I have a hard time believing it." He paused a long six seconds as he searched for the way to explain why this ignorance mattered, and then suddenly he beamed. as he exclaimed, "This is

democracy with a small ‘d.’ And this is probably the last true democracy that exists in most of our country!” He met my gaze, his mood darkening. “And people don’t even know it when it’s right under their feet.”

Similar contrasts to the corrupt democracy of the nation reappeared time and again in casual conversations I had with Northmont residents. They grumbled over their newspaper at the breakfast counters, during water breaks during mountain-bike rides, in the down time before or after municipal meetings, over drinks and at parties. They complained about the role of big money in American politics, about the corrupting effects of mass media, about the professionalization of big-time politics, about the inability of regular citizens to have any impact or voice. The implicit or explicit contrast was to the institutions of their local government, where things like popular sovereignty, the accountability of elected officials, and egalitarianism were posed as facts rather than spoiled ideals. In this view, town meeting democracy, unlike the rest of American democracy, actually put the people in charge of their own lives and future.

The *Town Meeting* literature is replete with similar descriptions of absolute democratic empowerment. “All mundane matters, major or trivial, affecting the town may be brought before the town meeting to be debated and decided,” wrote one of town meeting’s two most dedicated scholarly documenters (Zimmerman 1967:28). “Real Democracy” is what the other titled his monograph (Bryan 2004), and he and a co-author have exulted that “Town meeting *is* democracy--arguably, the world's most perfect working example” (Clark and Bryan 2005:84). The Vermont League of Cities and Towns pays like tribute: “Town Meeting, as many commentators have said, is ‘democracy being practiced in its purest form.’ It is the day when all the legal voters of a town have an opportunity to air their grievances, a day when true town business is addressed” (VLCT n.d.). This enthusiasm has unfurled to such an extent that legal

scholars and municipal government consultants have felt professionally obligated to try to rein it in: for 150 years, they have been trying to remind town meeting boosters that towns are *not* sovereign corporate bodies with control over all they survey, but are Constitutionally dependent upon the authority of their state legislatures.⁵ Nor is this boosterism confined to New England. For instance, in the topical articles on Town Meeting Day that appear in national newspapers and magazines each spring, a common closing trope is to dwell upon the ability for citizens to “have a say” or to “make a difference” at town meeting (e.g., Clymer 1983, Hemingway 2006).

As a final word on town meeting’s valorization, here is essayist Howard Mansfield’s (1993:105-106, 109-111) celebration of town meeting as a last remaining place where Americans still can democratically grapple with their collective existence in framings of their own making. I quote at length because of the power with which Mansfield counterposes town meeting to the trends of our privatizing, individualizing, commercializing, free market-ifying age:

Think of town meeting as a question: How did we, as a nation, get here? We started out in small citizen assemblies, and now three hundred years down the road we are a long way from direct action. From these New England meeting houses to the triple-locked doors of modern life is one measure of the American journey.

We have a mass democracy too big for direct participation, a democracy in which half don’t vote. Town meeting unmasks the deception, and by contrast our system seems lacking.

People find town meeting unnerving the way we find children difficult who ask too many questions: Why? Why? Why? [...]

We tell ourselves the textbook story of government and know the truth is something other, something hidden behind the Fourth of July patriotism--but we don’t dare look. Town meeting is one of the few places we confront democracy outside the civics textbook.

[...]

While you are in New England, town meeting is no anachronism. People expect to voice their opinions. Increasingly when I travel, I visit people who live in condominium complexes policed by hired guards, and who shop in malls patrolled by a private security force, scanned by

⁵ Young (1848:33), Kinsman (1857:2), DeWolf (1890:9, 94), Munro (1924:137; 1919:561, 566-567), Stuart (1984:15), Gillies (1999:562). The Maine and Massachusetts legislatures passed Home Rule provisions in the 1960s.

security cameras and observed from behind two-way mirrors. At work, too, they are often under the watchful eyes of a private police force. Even their urine may have been tested, policed. In this setting, the very idea of democracy at all begins to seem like an anachronism, the words *republic* and *inalienable rights*, pricey antiques.

Everywhere there is the rise of a rent-a-cop feudalism. Private security guards now outnumber public police. The public realm is rapidly shrinking. In the last two decades, we have traded in common ground, as it was once known, for a climate-controlled safetyland. We are not free to picket or leaflet at a mall, now the nation's Main Street. (Do the shoppers care? No. They want convenience. Leaflets, opinions, debate, that's all inconvenient.) There are few places to congregate, few places to come together. [...]

Oh, but we are free. In a good year, 55 percent of all eligible voters turn out to vote in national elections, and in off-year elections, such as in 1990, only 36.4 percent. [...]

But here is the town of Washington, New Hampshire, ready to take on thirty-four articles on a warm, breezy day. [...] I see the townspeople rising up, row by row, town reports in hand, all open to the same page. They sing forth like a boys' choir at Oxford, [...] singing the dog warden's report, singing the budget line by line[...] They start asking questions, start asking all the questions beyond capital reserve, questions about life, religion and true meanings. They sing, each voice adding to the next, in unison, and their voices go upward, up past the epoxied eighteenth-century belfry, up through the hole in the ozone layer and out into space. We'll be all right.

Won't we?

VIGOROUS

All this valorization is no idle ideology. Boosters of town meeting democracy put the tradition into practice with vigor. Northmont's town meeting each year absorbed from 200 to 500 person-hours. Nearly the entirety of this time was spent in close concentration. Budget items were carefully weighed, policy proposals received close scrutiny, town officers were pressed for explanations and details. Most attendees sat with a copy of the annual town report in their lap or looked on with a seatmate, using it to track the agenda and often keeping a pen in hand to mark

down amendment text or vote results, or to add more extensive notes. Some people kept a reference shelf at home consisting of years' worth of these personally annotated annual reports.

There are many ways that we could mark the vitality of the town meeting tradition in Northmont, but for the sake of not retreading the same ground as a hundred previous descriptions, let's take our tour solely through sound. Every change in speaker produced the metal creak of folding seats and the rustle of spines sliding against jackets hung on chair-backs, as large numbers of people turned to see the new speaker. The light rustle of a turning page from somewhere or another in the hall was nearly omnipresent, as folks culled the town report's various tables and records for information germane to the discussion afoot. Brief whispered conferrals with seatmates were common, as were chuckles sparked by murmured flashes of wit. Also common were all manner of stage whispers and interjections into someone else's floor time: little calls of agreement ("Amen!" "Hear hear!") or negation ("Not likely!" "Hunh!"), or topical jokes too good to pass up ("Maybe with the way *you* drive on your road, Cal!"). Rounds of laughter met speakers' jokes or their accidentally humorous pronouncements, and clapping and cheers occasionally sprang up following a particularly appreciated speech. The door crashed open and then banged closed every few minutes with the light stream of churning participants. And through it all, for two-and-a-half to five hours in any given year, the moderator's speech was a hypnotic rhythm of repeatedly applied procedural formulas buoying the assembly from one process to another and from one speaker to the next.

If I've presented this as a happy soundscape, it is because that is how most boosters would present it. Many Northmonters' experience of town meeting, of course, was characterized instead by negative emotions: fear, anxiety, anger, frustration (Mansbridge 1980). For them town meeting was not a joyous or affirming experience. Nonetheless, they too attended closely and

with the same seriousness, and their dedication *in spite* of those feelings therefore may be an indicator of town meeting's vitality that is even more powerful than the boosters' delight. (This is not to say that their negative experience isn't a first-priority area for reform--see the latter part of Chapter 5--but only that town meeting is vigorously practiced even in its current form, which is so inhospitable to such a large number.)

Because the remainder of this chapter will be critical of town meeting government, it is important to show both a) that Northmont isn't an unrepresentatively poor specimen,⁶ and b) that I am fully cognizant of that specimen's vigor. Let's therefore look at instances of the two most frequent kinds of town meeting activity that Chapter 4 will identify: scrutiny and disciplining of officers, and the deliberative "settling" of legislative questions. These will show that the critique is not based on an under-credited caricature of town meeting government.

Vigorous Engagement with Officers: Russ's Grilling of the Road Commissioner

A discussion in 2013 of funds for a new front-end loader for the Roads Department lasted more than ten minutes, three quarters of which was taken up by two different rounds of Russ Mayfield interrogating the Road Commissioner, Jeff Marchaeu, about plow attachments, prices, leasing terms, trade-in values, and road salting materials.

⁶ Bryan (2004:271-273) has pointed out that a significant amount of criticism of town meeting has been based on analyses of towns with conditions unfavorable to participatory or deliberative democracy, including populations on the large end of the spectrum and atypical amounts of socioeconomic stratification. At an even greater extreme, critical portraits of places that *do not even practice* town meeting are taken as evidence that town meeting government is inequalitarian. For instance, Coleman et al. (2009:668, 767n27) apply Floyd Hunter's (1980) and Robert Dahl's (1961) studies of Atlanta and New Haven to cast doubt on town meeting's prospects!

[9:45am]

RUSS: I have more questions on your loader. We went through this [*at the informational meeting earlier in the week*], but I'm doing this for everyone else. Uh... How big a loader are you getting?

JEFF: We're getting one slightly bigger than the one we have, but I don't think it's going to be too much bigger. I think it's only a few more horsepower bigger, but the height and everything is going to be good for the bridges and everything. I think the bucket's going to be a little bigger, like a quarter of a yard bigger, so that's--it was comparable in price, so that's why we decided to go a little bit bigger, but not extremely bigger.

RUSS: And you've got attachments.

JEFF: Huh?

RUSS: You've got other attachments coming with this. ... Right?

JEFF: Well, we haven't decided a hundred percent on the attachments. I mean, we're looking at getting forks and everything for it, but we'll see what the bottom line is. I mean, pretty much right now we've just got some prices, and I don't--you know, I don't know if we'll go with the attachments or not. We'll see what the price is.

RUSS: What do you have for prices, new versus used?

JEFF: New, we started at a hundred twenty-nine thousand for Caterpillar, and with the trade-in you're looking at around one-hundred thousand. And then John Deere was like a hundred and thirteen thousand. And with the trade-in we're down to like eight, nine, or somewhere in that area. But with the lease, John Deere came in around eighty-one thousand. Lease to own. So we would buy the piece of equipment for a dollar after the lease was up. And the lease interest for John Deere was two point three percent, and Caterpillar was three point two percent. And I think Caterpillar's total price with the lease equipment was eighty--nine thousand. So, I mean, we still haven't decided one hundred percent which way we're going, you know, which piece of equipment we're going to get. I mean, Caterpillar is a lot higher value when you trade them in, so that may be the route we're going.

MARK GREGSON: Jeff--

RUSS: Also--

MODERATOR: Excuse me! Excuse me! I'd like to keep this at this point to discussing the amendment. Once the amendment either passes or fails we can continue to discuss the loader in general, but right now we need to make the determination on the amendment, which is to delete the last words, "...with the first payment due in 2013." If you can confine your discussion to the amendment, we can always discuss the loader after the amendment passes or fails, if there's no problem with it.

JEAN CHAMBOISE: Call the question on the amendment.⁷

⁷ "Calling the question" was among the most common and most loosely interpreted procedural maneuvers in town meetings. It roughly mapped onto a "previous question" motion in the formal terms of Robert's Rules of Order, but its communicative functions were much richer. Catcalled from the galley, it expressed an opinion that discussion had gone on long enough, in

MODERATOR: It's been called, the question on the amendment. Any objection to calling the question on the amendment? No objection having been heard, we will call the question to amend the article. We will still be voting on the article, but this is to amend it to read that the town authorize the town to purchase a replacement front-end loader to be paid out of the machinery replacement fund and to borrow up to one-hundred thousand dollars for a term of up to ten years. All those in favor of accepting the amendment as read, say aye.

[Ayes.]

MODERATOR: Nos?

[Silence.]

MODERATOR: The ayes have it, and we've amended the article to read that the Select Board purchase a replacement front-end loader to be paid out of the machinery [fund], and to borrow up to one-hundred thousand dollars for a term of up to ten years. Discussion on the article as amended. Walter?

WALTER HEUSON: In my understanding, Jeff, the attachments--instead it would be eighty-nine thousand?

JEFF: Yes. I think the attachments are like five thousand more for the forks, the pallet forks. But I'm not sure how often we really need those attachments. We were just getting prices, and you know, we hadn't put anything in stone yet. We just wanted to get prices to get voted on.

MODERATOR: Evelin.

EVELIN HINMAN: Jeff, what would be the projected life of this new loader? You said that the one we had right now was 1988; was that new when we got it?

JEFF: Yes. It was new.

EVELIN: So we got twenty-four years out of that loader.

JEFF: Yes we did.

EVELIN: So do you think if we got a new one, we'd get another twenty four years?

JEFF: I would hope so. And the other thing we're looking at is getting the extended warranty for seven years from five. We did that on one of our trucks and it saved us a lot of money, because the truck had a major breakdown, and it was covered under that extended warranty. I think the warranty is going to be like

hopes of pressuring a) the current speaker to wind down, b) future speakers to pass, and c) the moderator to start hustling along toward a vote. Northmont's longtime moderator regularly denied such calls with reminders that they could be made only by someone who had the floor. Expressed by a speaker who did in fact have the floor, calling the question represented a formal request to cut off any further discussion. The proper moderator response was to ask if anyone objected, and if no one did--which was the case more often than not--then unanimous consent allowed the vote to proceed without any further ado. If anyone did object, two thirds of the assembly had to vote in favor of calling the question in order to proceed to the main vote. Making a call could be motivated by impatience with either the debate overall or an individual speaker, or it could be tactical. For instance, a person might believe that their side had the necessary votes, and they therefore might not want to waste time in debate or to risk a swing in the room, or they might want to deprive opponents of a chance for moral retorts. See Bryan (2004:142-143) for a related use of secret ballots over voice votes.

thirty-five hundred, so it's well worth the money. The town of Pickford had a truck the same year as ours, and they had the same problem, and they had to spend twenty thousand on their truck. So I think the extended warranty is going to be a good thing. Don Cleary wanted us to do it.

MODERATOR: Russ.

RUSS: Back where I was. *[laughter from the assembly]* The forks and the hydraulics, the quick disconnect bucket. Do you--this is on the salting, putting chloride on the roads. Are you still planning on using the bagged stuff like you did last year? Versus requiring a tractor trailer to come in and to spray?

JEFF: No, I think we're going to go with the spraying. I think the bags was more expensive, and we have a tank now, and they're bringing in, and they're spraying with the little truck. We put a tank in the back, and we're putting it on ourselves, which I think is more cost effective.

MATT BANNERS: Mr. Moderator, I call the question.

RUSS: *[ignoring Matt]* Last year James said the flakes, with the way they were putting it on last year, it was like one-hundred percent usable, and your liquid stuff was watered down, and only like fifty percent.

JEFF: But it seemed the liquid seemed to stay on better than the flakes, and the cost... You know, that's why we tried the flakes, but it just didn't seem to work as well, and it's harder to handle too, the big bags.

RUSS: Yeah, it was, but I just assumed that's probably why you were getting forks for the loader, because--

JEFF: I think that's one of the reasons, and the other reason is if you have the forks on--when you're trying to put the blades on the grader or something, instead of having a big bucket, you can just have the big fork and put a chain on it, so it would be easier on the work crews, you know, to move equipment around in the building too.

RUSS: Ok. Now the cost of this loader, let's say you went with the Caterpillar. I think nine twenty-four is the number?

JEFF: Yes.

RUSS: For a quarter-yard bucket which is just a little bigger than what you have now. What kind of price do you have on that?

JEFF: The new price is a hundred and twenty-five thousand. So once you do your trade-in, you're a hundred thousand. So you're looking at a hundred thousand for that. And that's with the forks.

RUSS: Yup. Right--

JEFF: So you take the forks off.

RUSS: Don't you get a town discount?

JEFF: That's with the discount. That's the municipality discount.

RUSS: Ok, ok, so now you take off the discount, you take off your trade-in, twenty-five thousand.

JEFF: Well, a hundred and twenty-five thousand is the base price. With the discount then you take twenty-five thousand dollars off that so you get to a hundred thousand.

RUSS: Oh. Ah, you told me a hundred twenty-nine eight-fifty was--well, ok.

MELANIE SHIELDS: *[interjecting]* Call the question!

MODERATOR: You must first be recognized. Russ still has the floor.

RUSS: Ok, so--

BERNIE FIND: *[interjecting]* Point of order. None of these questions are germane to what's on the floor.

JEFF: *[ignoring Bernie]* I mean, we haven't--I'm open to any suggestions. You know, when we start--if it's voted on, anybody can come and talk to me and we'll sit down and figure out what the best deal we can get. We haven't got a deal in stone yet. We just got the prices up--

MODERATOR: *[interrupting]* The point of order is well taken. We're voting on whether or not to approve *up to* one-hundred thousand dollars. There's always negotiation.

RUSS: One more question. *[laughter from the assembly]* Financing. How many years do you plan on financing?

JEFF: Up to ten years.

MODERATOR: *[overlapping with Jeff, apparently trying to hustle things along]* Up to ten years.

RUSS: You were saying payments of up to seventeen thousand dollars a year. That's a hundred and seventy thousand.

JEFF: Seventeen thousand was around seven years. And our current truck payment is twenty-two thousand, so you're looking in that ballpark.

MODERATOR: *[cutting in]* The point of order was well taken. We are voting on whether or not to borrow up to one hundred thousand dollars for a term of up to ten years. Melanie?

MELANIE: I just wanted to call the question.

MODERATOR: Is there a second? Is there a second?

[Multiple seconds all at once.]

MODERATOR: Moved and seconded we call the question. Is there any objection to calling the question. If there's an objection it will require a two-thirds vote. If there's no objection, we can proceed immediately to calling the question. *[With the barest pause:]* No objection having been heard, all those in favor please say aye.

[Ayes.]

MODERATOR: Opposed say no.

[Silence.]

MODERATOR: We've approved Article 5 as amended and as read.

[9:56am]

No one talks for ten minutes about plow forks and chloride solutions unless they're engaged in a serious way. The question then becomes: was Russ a lone crank or an embodiment of the town meeting spirit? Is this transcript evidence not of town meeting's vigor but of its ability to provide a forum for curmudgeonly rants?

Clearly other members of the assembly (grey-shaded speakers in the transcript) began to get impatient as Russ's questions kept coming, and they eventually exerted the moral and procedural pressure to get him to stand down: tactical mutterings, increasingly frequent hollers of "call the question," and finally a point of order about the relevancy of Russ's questions to the specific motion at hand. Every year would feature several discussions like this that went into dizzying detail in a back-and-forth among a small number of participants; sometimes they got shut down, other times they were allowed to roll to their eventual conclusion. If nothing else, then, we know at least that the assembly paid enough attention, even when bored, to be able to discriminate the value of continued talk.

But there also was the fact that, while Russ may have hung on too long, he also wasn't alone in his attentions. Mark (without success), Walter, and Evelin also had questions for Jeff. All three of them, moreover, entered the conversation even after Russ already had been going for some time. And in a subsequent agenda item, Walter took the floor again to put the screws to Jeff on how the road crew was applying gravel.

Meanwhile, for other topics across the course of the meeting, the likes of Russ and Walter would fall silent, and a different cast of characters would put the relevant officers on the hot seat. How the Town Clerk was apportioning her hours, how the Select Board was spacing out municipal debt, how the Listers were conducting property value appraisals, how the Select Board was pacing its resolution to a certain zoning dispute, how the Youth Center Trustees were or weren't promoting attendance, how the Select Board was warning its agenda items, and so on. (The Select Board always caught a lot of heat.) These exchanges could range from hostile to curious to assistive, and from expressing disapproval overtly, to casting shade via questions designed to embarrass, to performing due diligence, to brainstorming solutions, to declaring

overt appreciation or support. Regardless of tone or purpose, and whether doggedly pursued or said as a one-and-done, they were wholehearted engagements.

This kind of scrutiny, even when taken to lengths like Russ's--perhaps especially when taken to lengths like Russ's--was widely perceived as part and parcel of town meeting, if not the very soul of it. At lunch with several town officers after the 2013 meeting, I asked Jeff what it was like being grilled like that in front of the entire hall. He shrugged off any idea that it was intimidating or unpleasant. "You just have to be as prepared as you can be so that you can answer people's questions," he said. He had known that the attention would be coming, since Russ already had been to the pre-meeting informational meeting with the same lines of inquiry. Jeff thought it was a little silly for Russ to have gone through the entire thing again as a performance in public, "but," Jeff shrugged, "I suppose it's his right." In this regard, it's noteworthy that Jeff pointedly passed on the opportunities handed to him by the moderator and by other assembly members to escape the exchange.

Perhaps motivated by Jeff's grace under fire, and perhaps with years' worth of similar exchanges at Select Board and town meetings in mind, the Chair of the Select Board published a poem in the Historical Society's newsletter that reiterated a popular joke in the *Town Meeting* canon.⁸

SPRING HAIKU:
On Town Meeting day
everyone knows more than the
Road Commissioner.

⁸ E.g., Shamy (2010), Danziger (1979:n.p.), Lee (1955:57).

At one level this common joke functioned as a complaint; at another, it reflected citizens' dogged energy as a norm. In legend and in practice, then, town meeting was a vigorous encounter between officers and residents.

Vigorous Legislative Deliberation: A Raise for the Librarian

Budgets and other legislative acts became lively debates of policy and underlying values, and they further served as occasions to revisit interpersonal histories. When the town library, a mostly volunteer-driven facility with one part-time librarian, had its budget up for annual review in 2013, the Library Trustees included a new request for a \$3,000 increase so as to increase the librarian's hours. This prompted a 35 minute discussion, the longest of any that year. In deliberating whether to allocate \$15,000 vs. only \$12,000, speakers touched on the town finances, on the library's role in town, on the comportment of library Trustees and staff, on the appropriateness of different styles of civic process, on the relative values of various town services, and on the previous decade's demographic and social trends. The arguments played out a series of complexly interacting historical tensions and factional fault lines: the Library Trustees vs. the Select Board over the latter's attempts to impose procedural rigor on the former; library boosters vs. a collection of other townspeople who perceived the library as an exclusionary social club; embattled fiscal conservatives vs. the liberal spenders to whom they saw themselves as having steadily lost ground over the course of decades; people who found Eva Gregson sanctimonious and were therefore tempted to vote *against* anything she supported merely for the sake of just desserts, vs. people (many of them the same people!) who found Ally Eason untrustworthy and were therefore inclined to thwart whatever *her* secret motive might be by

voting *for* anything that she was opposing. To a person familiar with the hundred micro-histories at play, the discussion was saturated with the emotional overflow of months and decades past.

This was the kind of discussion that could have continued for any number of more minutes; the volume of hands waving for the moderator's recognition was not abating. The moderator, however, exercised the subtle form of guidance available to his office. At the next chance, he offered his standard solicitation for further debate but, with a rapidity that foreclosed interruption, immediately transitioned into an inquiry as to whether the assembly was ready for a vote and then into the voting formula itself. If any speakers were so intent on putting in their further commentary, they would have had to assert themselves with the voting proceedings already under way, having to raise their voices and self-consciously interject. With the stakes thus raised, potential speakers tended to take an extra moment or two to reevaluate the importance of their commentary, and each extra moment of reflection raised the stakes that much further.

The reaction from the assembly at large to the moderator's intervention was an immediate sigh of relief. As for the half dozen individuals still hoping to speak, reactions spanned the gamut. I saw one person's face flash with annoyance, no doubt feeling disenfranchised. I knew another of the hand wavers well enough to know that he'd be taking the stoppage with equanimity. Others might even have been glad in retrospect to have been saved from a too-hasty impulse to repeat arguments that already had been well trod during the prior half hour. Reflecting a bit of all these sentiments, one of the Library Trustees told me during the voting break, "I wanted to speak, but probably no more needed to be said."

With the moderator having thus cut off debate, one of the vocal opponents of the amendment--Ally Eason, in fact--immediately called for a paper ballot. Supporters groaned, and

even before the moderator could finish explaining that the threshold for conducting a paper ballot was seven requests, ten or so people had shot to their feet--all or most of them opponents, it appeared to me. This was a classic procedural split, with opponents of a social services expenditure feeling “blackmailed” into support by a public vote (or believing that swing voters might be so blackmailed), and supporters bemoaning the extreme procedural inefficiency of balloting. Indeed, a full fifteen minutes was required for a line to form and for 84 people, two at a time, to be checked against the voter list before dropping their handwritten “aye” or “nay” into the large wooden ballot box. To pass the time, conversations in pairs and small groups sprang up around the hall, some replaying the preceding floor debate, others taking up unrelated topics, some occurring between confederates, others crossing the scrimmage line; some cheerful, others taking on resentful or conspiratorial tones. These conversations continued as the voting line spent itself and the count began. The Town Clerk upended the box, and she and several Justices of the Peace clustered in to cluster the “aye” and “nay” slips into little paper mountains.

When the moderator called for a resumption of order so as to announce the vote result, the room quickly hushed, and conversationalists hustled to reunite with their seats. The amendment, we learned, had passed, and a round of clapping greeted the announcement. With discussion reverted to the main motion as newly amended, an opponent of the increase immediately took to the floor, to exhort the Library Trustees to work with the Select Board to establish a more rigorous budget planning process and to please not ever increase employee salaries again without getting direct approval from town meeting. A former Library Trustee jumped on next, intending to rebut a perceived slander that had occurred during the amendment debate, but the moderator interrupted with a reminder that that discussion was over, so she shifted gears and simply called the question, meeting no objection. It often was the case that

deliberation of an amendment would exhaust the substance of the main question as well. Actually, forget about exhaustion of substance; the real issue was the exhaustion of *participants*, emotionally. There also was the fact that an amendment vote was an all but guaranteed tip as to which way the main question would go. Often, therefore, there was little appetite within the assembly to keep at a contentious topic after an amendment vote had already occurred; the subsequent main vote was just a formality.

The yea-sayers this time now included quite a number of the previous amendment's opponents, who preferred to swallow the increase than to issue a wholesale rejection of the library's services. The announcement of the final result--the article passed--yielded no cheer this time. The silence, I imagine, was due in equal parts to the predictability of the news, since the real battle had been concluded with the amendment's passage, and to an immediate step-back by the victors who knew or could sense that gloating would be dangerous. But in the moment there was no time anyway for reflecting on such things; the moderator paused not at all between calling the result and taking up the next article on building maintenance.

Not every one of Northmont's deliberations featured such intense engagement, but every year at least one or two instances if not three could be counted upon. These items served as focal points for themes that potentially could have replayed at a half dozen other moments on the agenda but that therefore didn't have to. After a theme was played out once or twice, additional run-throughs didn't occur. Sometimes the themes were put into play at the first opportunity, with whatever happened to come up first on the agenda. Other times a specific item later on the warning would be a conspicuous target for discussion, and people would "save up" their commentary for that point. Only during the most viciously confrontational years--when there was blood in the water (and bad blood at that) from years of interpersonal and political tensions

finally coming to a head--did the assembly rehash the same fights on each successive item. Northmont actually has not yet had a meeting of that sort in the decade that I've been observing it, but residents told me stories of times past, and I also heard about them occurring in other towns. And the *Town Meeting* literature is full of such stories.⁹

Whether bloody or convivial, though, these legislative deliberations show the vigor with which Northmonters practiced their town meetings.

FURTHER VIGOR: SOCIAL ISSUE RESOLUTIONS

There was a subclass of town meeting boosters--perhaps even constituting a majority--who possessed an even more expansive sense of empowerment from town meeting. To the rest of boosters, the kinds of things we've seen so far were and ought to have been the end of town meeting's utility: local topics lying squarely within the town's legal jurisdiction and for which concrete outcomes could be directly legislated. The other subclass of booster, though, has developed a broader repertoire of topics and tactics, finding imaginative ways to use town meeting to achieve democratic traction on matters that traditionally were considered "extra-local." I am referring here to the much debated phenomenon of "social issue resolutions" ("SIRs").¹⁰

⁹ E.g., Bryan (2004:234-238). For the further specter of physical violence at town meetings, see Hebert (1979:193-194), Rule (2012:237-8), Hill (1990:155), and Lockridge (1970:114).

¹⁰ For a portrait of a contemporary SIR debate, see R.Townsend (2004:126-142). For pro/con arguments for including SIRs in town meetings, see Bryan (1982; 1984; 2004:50; with Mares 2000:82; with Clark 2005:53), Bookchin (1987:269-270), Dewalt (2013), J.Dillon (2009), S.Miller (2005), Mehren (2005), Leahy (1982), NYT (1982b), Silberdick (1982), Good (1983), Gillmor (1983), R.Townsend (2004:173n25), Wills (1974), and G.Margolis (1982). For related debates about SIRs in earlier periods, going back as far as 1794, see Benton (1856:540) and Brooks (1976:157-158). For discussions of town meeting's role during the colonial period as a forum for addressing extra-local issues, see Avery (1904:221), Hart (1894:146; 1903:173), Daniell (1981:238), Hale (1873b:388), Levermore (1886:209-210), Ferraro (1991:126-127), but cf. D.Robinson (2011:114) for an

The standard history of SIRs is that the town of Thetford, VT electrified the nation in 1974 with a resolution calling for the impeachment of Richard Nixon--a dramatic application of a local assembly to a national matter--and that the Nuclear Freeze movement of the 1980s helped solidify this new use of town meeting, with towns calling for regulatory legislation or enacting local bans of their own.¹¹ The ensuing thirty years have seen SIRs mushroom into a regular, if still much debated, agenda item for many towns.

In Northmont, by the early 2000s an appearance of one or two SIRs had become a clockwork regularity, sometimes petitioned onto the official meeting warning and other times brought up from the floor. Topics have included the U.S. President's power to conduct a first-use nuclear strike (2018), defense of the country against foreign and domestic enemies (2017), the impact of manure spreading upon air quality (2016), the creation of a state bank (2014), tar sands pipelines (2013), genetically engineered foods (2013, 2002), the U.S. Supreme Court *Citizens United* decision (2012), collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin (2011), the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant (2010, 2009), the Iraq War and impeachment of George W. Bush (2008, 2007, 2005), statewide groundwater resources (2007), the statewide Education Fund (2006), statewide election voting laws (2002), and abortion (2001). The repertoire of SIR tactics can be as broad as the subjects: instructions or demands can be issued to legislators or other representatives,

important point of context on that function. For notable instances of SIRs from the 19th and early 20th century, see Horsman (1981), B.Hall (1983:79), NYT (1937), and Willard (1937). For treatment of SIRs in arts and culture, see G.Margolis (1982), Danziger (1979:n.p.), Newcomb (1999, 2017), and *Newhart* (1982a at 18 minutes 34 seconds). For analysis of SIRs, see Von der Muhll (1970: 98-99) and R.Townsend (2004:262-268).

¹¹ On the Nixon impeachment resolutions, which Thetford actually was not alone in advancing, see NYT (1974), Kifer (1974), LEJ (1974), Butler (1974), Wills (1974). On the nuclear freeze resolutions, see NYT (1977, 1982a), BG (1980), WP (1982). Examples of the standard history that takes these episodes as an origin point include Bryan (2004:50), Rathke (2007), and Jonathan (2005). By wielding the word "standard," I do mean to convey a modest amount of skepticism: as the historical citations in the prior footnote imply, there is a longer history past 1974 that is worth exploring.

political figures or private entities can be censured or commended, moral stands can be taken, solidarity can be expressed, declarations can be made to the effect of “not in our name” or “not in our community,” and certain activities can (with questionable legality) be outlawed within the town’s borders (e.g., an attempted moratorium on use of genetically engineered crops in 2002).¹² Other towns have been even more innovative than Northmont in finding surprisingly organic ways to apply the limited tools of municipal government to statewide, national, and global issues,¹³ making SIRs into far more than opinion polls or “publicity stunts.”¹⁴

Some of these motions no doubt sound fanciful, and there certainly were members of Northmont’s assembly who believed on principle that a town body shouldn’t be entertaining them. Every year scoffs and groans would be heard when the latest SIR came up, and it wasn’t infrequent for opponents to succeed in tabling the motion. Some participants simply started ducking out of the hall once the “real” meeting matters finished, leaving the “leftie loons” to their “damnfool pursuits.” (I should note that progressives have made much greater use of SIRs, but there are conservative instances as well.) Other times I was surprised at how willingly the whole assembly--conservatives and SIR-skeptics included--piled on in support of a resolution, and I haven’t yet been able to tease out what the principle of distinction is between a SIR being

¹² In 2008 two Vermont towns entertained and passed resolutions to prosecute President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney for war crimes and perjury, and the resolutions included instructions to local police to make arrests on sight should either person set foot within the jurisdiction (Curran 2008, Smallheer 2008, Sullivan 2008).

¹³ For examples, see D.Robinson (2011:102, 104), R.Townsend (2004:29, 87, 262-268), and Sherman et al. (2004:157, 243).

¹⁴ For a noteworthy instance of the “publicity stunt” interpretation, see Bryan (1982, 1984). For a noteworthy instance of the “opinion poll” interpretation, see U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy’s (D-VT) letter to the editor of the *New York Times* (Leahy 1982). Leahy further suggested that such resolutions put a leash on officials (“It is absolutely essential to remind elected officials that they have neither a corner on wisdom nor a blank check on policy”), and that they were one of the ways that a citizenry could serve as the moral compass for experts and professionals.

identified as “leftie loonie” vs. “common sense.” No matter; the point is simply that there is a particular breed of booster that reads the purview of town meeting in a remarkably expansive way.

To these boosters, social issue resolutions are profoundly empowering. A participant in the 2002 statewide campaign to get resolutions against genetic engineering onto town meeting warnings, wrote at the time,

Town meeting campaigns can empower communities to make decisions based on the greater good of society and the environment, instead of narrow directives from the powerful few. One of the many ways we can cultivate this process of community empowerment is to decide with our neighbors how to address dangers to our food safety, ecological integrity, and community autonomy posed by genetic engineering. When citizens gather together like this, we begin reclaiming the freedom to govern ourselves, which the biotechnology industry, the federal government, and international trade-regulators like the World Trade Organization are trying to make us forget ever existed. (Grosscup 2002)

In Northmont, when a resolution appeared at the end of the 2012 meeting addressing the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* ruling,¹⁵ the usual opponents of such resolutions immediately raised a motion to pass over. Doing so inspired several reactions of no little passion. Allison Blanser shot to her feet from the back of the room. She had been a limited participant during the course of the meeting to that point, and now her voice quavered but also was filled

¹⁵ The text read:

Article 10. In light of the United States Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision that equates money with political speech and gives corporations rights constitutionally intended for natural persons, shall the Town of Northmont vote at its Town Meeting to urge the Vermont Congressional Delegation and the United States Congress to propose a United States Constitutional amendment for the States' consideration which provides that unlimited money is not political speech, that corporations are not natural persons under the United States Constitution, that the General Assembly of the State of Vermont pass a similar resolution, and that the town send its resolution to Vermont State and Federal representatives within thirty days of passage of this measure?

with anger; the latter seemed to be carrying her through her dear preference not to have to speak at all. “I want to know,” she demanded, taking the motion to pass over as an insult to democracy itself,

why you would want to postpone this. It seems to me that town meeting historically in Vermont has always been a time where we *can* at the end discuss things outside of that town financial [type of] business, and affect the world. This is a Vermont tradition. It’s always gone down, and... You know, I really feel that as a town member I have a right to be able to discuss this and put things towards my legislature, and I kind of resent it when people who don’t want to hear that--... It’s the end of the meeting, why not just leave, and let the people who want it discuss this and put something forward do that. [*Some slight clapping.*] It’s not going to *hurt* anybody.

Mark Gregson followed on her heels with a defense of the resolution in procedural terms. In the slow, slightly clipped tones of someone dispensing some seriously needed common sense, he argued that it was perfectly within the meeting’s scope to address the question:

To me this is simply an opinion poll of the town, that all that will happen if it is passed is that the town will transmit this opinion to the aforementioned people or bodies. If one does not wish to do this, then they should simply vote no. If one does, they should vote yes. I don’t see any need for a pass-over. Just vote yes or no on the amendment.

As he sat, clapping erupted. As Hap Scott put it on another occasion, “It doesn’t carry legal weight, but it carries that people are concerned with this issue.”

What we have with people like Allison, Mark, Hap, and all the clappers, and with all of the SIR proponents in New England at large, was a subset of booster who felt expansively empowered by town meeting, and who positively bristled when told that town meeting should mind its own business. Anything that townspeople were collectively concerned about, these boosters believed, *was* town meeting’s business.

The paradox was that even this type of booster did not raise their concerns about Mount Harmon within meetings.

“THE MOUNTAIN” AS A PUBLIC CONCERN

Residents of Northmont shared almost universally in a sense that the resort’s expansion potentially would have large implications for life in town: economic, demographic, social, environmental, recreational, governmental, infrastructural. There was much disagreement whether or to what degree of change should be expected along any particular dimension, as well as whether different kinds of potential change should be anticipated with enthusiasm or with alarm or with a shrug. Worry mingled with hope and excitement; the bottom line was a perception that the town’s future was significantly wrapped up with the resort’s. Maybe not immediately--plenty of people believed that Northmont remained decently well insulated for the time being--but it was coming, or at least potentially coming. People in the anxiousness camp tended to discuss the resort with either a sense of helplessness or a pragmatic attitude of “wait and see.” People who were primarily excited still talked about the resort’s expansion as something that was happening *to* them. The diversity of prognostications and perspectives was itself evidence of the collective character of the concern. *What kind of employment opportunities would arise for locals? What might happen to property values, to property taxes, to the housing market? What kind of tourism spillover could be expected?--or would the resort’s newly intensified gravitational field actually suck away some of the town’s economic vitality? Would new people move to town? What kind of people? How would they fit in? Would any locals decide to leave or find themselves pressured out? What might happen to the sense of community? Was the quality of the school at risk? Would municipal services come under strain? Would new economies of scale become achievable? Would there be traffic? Trash? Parking problems? Would the State Department of Transportation start devoting the desperately needed additional*

maintenance to state highways in the area, to keep up with the wear-and-tear from all the construction traffic? How would wildlife be affected? Were local waterways in any danger from run-off or toxins? What new recreational and cultural opportunities would open up to Northmont's adults and children?--big-name musical acts without having to travel 80 minutes to Burlington, a tourney-quality golf course with cheap tees on the off-days, an NHL-sized ice rink, a water park!? Was "Disneyland" now opening up just over the hill? Was commercialism about to take over? Was Northmont about to transform into "another Stowe"--the state's widely mocked "gold town"? Was an old way of life going to be lost? Would improved telecom services be on the horizon? Would the local Fire and Rescue Squads finally end up with reliable radios within Northmont's mountainous terrain, by piggybacking off Mount Harmon's amped-up transmission relays or by taking advantage of newly built cell phone coverage? Would the existing ski lifts and trails get overcrowded? How about the off-resort trails for biking and hiking and snowshoeing and cross-country skiing? Would new labor and funding for the off-resort trails start manifesting? Would the recreational offerings of Mount Harmon and the region at large transform from a "hidden gem" to a cashed out crowded hub?

These were conversations that happened between parents at kids' sporting matches, that could be overheard at the Main Street Diner's counter and the Alpine Pub's bar, that popped up before and during and after social or activity gatherings, that appeared on social media, that featured in run-ins on the street and at the post office. This omnipresence too indicated the collective character of the concern.

But actually, the topic was *not* omnipresent--not quite. There was one space in which it seemed almost scrupulously absent: the forums of municipal government.

SIDELINED?

Let's explore the Resort's absence from the three major institutions of town government: town meeting, the Select Board, and the Planning Commission.

Town Meetings

From the present back to 2000 (I have not checked warnings further back), the Resort has not appeared as the direct subject of any article. Of course, as we will see in Chapter 4, speakers often had an expansive sense of what was relevant to the formal topic of an article. I therefore combed my meeting transcripts from 2009-2016¹⁶ for Resort-related keywords, discovering only four moments when the Resort's hovering presence peeked into the assembly's business.

1. 2015's discussion of a new zoning bylaws proposal from the Planning Commission saw an assembly member argue that the town needed to take proactive measures to prepare for the Resort's spillover effects. A little ways into the debate--which had taken the familiar shape of property rights vs. conservation--Becca Gregson contributed a new angle: "Mount Harmon is exploding," she said, "We don't know how many people are going to decide that yeah, they really like it up here, that they want to be close to the mountain instead of right at it. They're coming up with bucket-loads of money. I don't want to see their mansions on the hillsides. I think that's all Planning is trying to do, is to protect what we have." (In fact, the Planning Commission hadn't been thinking

¹⁶ During 2017 and 2018 I was busy with other forms of documentation and was not paying systematic attention to the deliberation itself, and I have not yet fully transcribed the audio recordings.

directly about the Resort, as we'll see in the subsequent section, but had been thinking about development in general.) The debate promptly shifted back to the question of wildlife connectivity vs. property rights.

2. In 2014, an assembly member similarly called for proactive attention to the Resort's spillover effects. This occurred during the annual discussion of whether to elect a Road Commissioner or let the Select Board appoint one, an article that often turned into a general forum for discussion of road-related issues. Hap Scott rose to make a few points. "And the third issue," he concluded, "is that if we are going to have some... uh, *rise* from what goes on at Mount Harmon, I think we need to have a more pedestrian-friendly village and center." The sidewalks were in disrepair, he noted, so he wanted to encourage the Road Commissioner "to consider that." He encouraged local business owners to speak to the effect upon them and sat down. As members of the assembly started seizing on the invitation, a member of the Select Board intervened, saying, "I think we're a little off topic, which is whether or not we appoint or elect. Maybe let's carry on this discussion later in the meeting." When that later moment finally was reached during the "other business" section at the tail of the meeting, however, the energy had dissipated. A number of folks already had left, and when Hap reiterated his request, no one else took up the thread. During the year, Hap got engaged with a different community project, and he didn't bring up sidewalks again the next year. The Select Board and Road Commissioner, meanwhile, had their hands full with other things, and without any continued pressure, they reasonably allowed the topic to lapse as a non-priority.

3. Also in 2014, after the winter roads budget was moved and seconded, someone in the assembly muttered, “Is Mount Harmon involved?” This--a reference to how badly the Resort’s construction vehicles were tearing up the connecting state highway--was a public expression of displeasure about the Resort’s impact on everyone’s lives. It remained literally outside of the meeting’s formal attention, however. The mutterer did not attempt to repeat their concern formally from the floor, and no one else took up the torch.
4. In 2012, Walter Heuson mentioned during a candidate speech how he and Don Cleary used to attend dances together at the Resort ballroom in the ‘70s. This mention was entirely incidental, and I include it only to show how deeply we have to scrounge for invocations of the Resort during town meetings--and also as a small further indication of the intimate ways that the Resort was involved in people’s lives.

These references show the hovering presence of the Resort, but they also suggest the lack of purchase within the space. To Northmont’s town meeting participants, the Resort seemingly was a less appropriate topic for the meeting’s attentions than Presidential impeachments or GMOs or nuclear power.

In Chapter 2 we applied the methodological tool of mapping Northmonters’ memories. I suggested there that the patterns as time passed of what they remembered vs. what they forgot was powerful evidence of one or the other of two things: what they found salient vs. insignificant, or what they needed to repress in order to protect against cognitive dissonance. The same method is useful here. During my trip to Northmont for the 2016 meeting, I asked a series

of longtime meeting attendees, “Can you think of a time that Mount Harmon was discussed at town meeting?” They came up empty, not even recalling the several instances we’ve just listed.

Select Board Meetings

I attended nearly 50 meetings of the Select Board during the course of my fieldwork.

Here too there were so few mentions of the Resort that we can bullet them out.

1. In July 2008, the Resort’s name came up in reference to the purchaser bid it had submitted for an old snow plow the town was selling.
2. On a number of occasions, Board members griped that the construction vehicle traffic to the resort was tearing up the state highway. *What could be done*, they wondered, *to pressure the state to stop dragging its heels on repaving?* The district’s state representative was successfully recruited to pressure the Department of Transportation, but the effort ultimately went nowhere; the dept. had other priorities. At no point did the Board discuss reaching out to the Resort itself.
3. In August 2010, amidst construction of Northmont’s new public works building, the contractor responsible for monitoring the project made a suggestion to the board: “And if this area really grows because of Mount Harmon, then really we’ll need some more security on the doors.” The Board addressed the immediate problem in those terms, agreeing with the assessment and discussing what kind of security would be most effective.
4. In November 2010, one of the resort’s Vice Presidents attended a meeting to request the designation of a park-and-ride carpool lot on town property that could

be used by resort employees who lived in town. The Board identified a workable space, discussing the technical challenge in isolation from any larger concerns over the Resort's impact upon town.

5. From 2009-2011, the Northmont Area Community Alliance (NACA), a business association and community group, brought a series of requests to the Board that were motivated by fear that the Resort's development would suck away Northmont's economic vitality. The conflict that ensued between NACA and the Select Board merits extended consideration, which we'll give in a subsequent section. For now, we can summarize the Board's reaction as a perception that NACA's proposals weren't appropriate as an area of action for town government and were half-baked anyway.

Board members weren't naïve; they knew the Resort mattered. This was apparent in the frequency with which Resort-related topics appeared in the casual talk of Board members before and after meetings, when they would solicit one another for local news. ("The things you learn [about the community] is a real perk," a member told me about serving on the Board.) During this before and after time--time that notably was split off from official business--the Resort came up with frequency: the progress of construction, a board member's or relative's experience in going to one of the new Resort restaurants, a niece's or grandchild's participation in programming at the ice rink or water park, news that so-and-so had been hired to such-and-such Resort position, etc.

A series of perfectly reasonable factors displaced the Resort from the Board's formal attention, however. They addressed Resort-related issues as specific one-off technical challenges. They operated under the premise that most Resort-related issues were the province of the state

rather than the town: things like transportation infrastructure and environmental regulation. They believed zoning policy, which was the major interface that they saw between town government and the Resort, was the responsibility of the Planning Commission. They believed that town government ought to *support* the town business climate, but that it wasn't the role of government to take a leading role.

Planning Commission Meetings and the Town Plan Process

The Planning Commission was the body responsible for updating the Town Plan on a five-year cycle and then updating the zoning bylaws to reflect the Town Plan. The 2010 Town Plan introduces itself like this:

The purpose of a municipal plan is to help guide decision-makers to chart the future of a community. A plan is a town's vision for the future. It states related goals and objectives based upon a brief reflection of the past and an analysis of existing conditions. [...] In other words, a Town Plan is a calculated vision which is put together by the residents of the Town. A Town Plan will help Northmont control its future by providing it with the means to control change. A Town Plan does that by providing the community with a plan of action, or blueprint, which shows a community what it will be like in the future. A Town Plan shows a community what things are going to stay the same and what things are going to change. It defines how those changes are going to happen, and how quickly, or slowly, they are going to take place. A Town Plan gives Northmont the power to guide change, and the pace at which change will occur, so that change does not control the Town's future. If the recommendations of the plan are implemented, the quality of life in Northmont can be positively affected.

Here, then, is a board and a document that we might expect to be closely concerned with the Resort. But that is not what we find.

In the Plan itself, there are only three references to the Resort. The first and longest appears in Chapter 6 on recreation:

The Towns of Harmon and Riverfield, located to the east of Northmont, are home to the Mount Harmon Ski Area (elevation 3745 feet) which offers downhill skiing, cross-country skiing, and snowboarding. Mount

Harmon is an important asset to the area because of the amount of tourism activity that goes on at it. Although located in Harmon, the Mount Harmon Ski Area brings in more potential tourists to their town and its bordering neighbors like Northmont. Mount Harmon owns approximately 2,600 acres; of which 1,500 acres will remain forever wild by Mount Harmon's choice and 1,100 of which is to be used for some type of development based on the Mount Harmon Master Plan. Presently, Mount Harmon has between 1,200 and 1,400 beds. Six million dollars is slated to be spent on future units that will consist of townhouses and more hotel rooms. Mount Harmon has built an 18-hole golf course and an indoor ice rink since 2005. A four-season operation is vital to Mount Harmon's future. The four-season program will have a very positive impact on all of its neighboring communities and provide more year round employment for its staff, many of whom reside in or around Northmont. (25)

This entire passage was reproduced nearly unchanged from the 2005 Town Plan: the verb tense was updated to reflect the fact that five years later the 18-hole golf course was now complete instead of being under way, and a reference was added to the new ice rink.

The Plan's second and third Resort references likewise were carried over essentially verbatim from 2005: "The major influences on the traffic flow in Northmont are local businesses, local civic and social functions, recreational activities at Mount Harmon Ski Area, and seasonal activities such as hunting, fishing, skiing, hiking, and foliage viewing" and "Northmont has a high percentage of second homes that has increased from 1990 to 2000. Second homes are primarily related to the ski area, Mount Harmon, which is only miles from the Town."

Particularly notable is the fact that the Plan's chapter on the economy does not mention the resort, aside from a sentence referring the reader to Chapter 6 "for discussions of tourism resources." One then finds the passage quoted above. There is no treatment, though, of Mount Harmon's impact on employment or property values. Nor are environmental effects or population draw discussed within their respective chapters in the Plan.

We thus have a town plan that largely passed over one of the most powerful influences upon town life.

The major reason for this omission was simply the inertial nature of the town planning process. Several factors combined toward this effect. Planning Commissioners were community-member volunteers working a few hours a month, not full-time professional planners, and they all but never possessed the experience, training, and time to comprehensively review existing plans. The board therefore was more likely to tinker within the existing plan's framework, perhaps introducing or thoroughly revisiting one or two hobby-horse areas of particular board members, but otherwise simply updating the surface-level historical references of everything else. (In 2010, the board was particularly attentive to conservation and wildlife connectivity, as the result of one member's initiative.) Existing omissions and commissions in the plan thus were easily preserved.

Joining the Planning Commission involved climbing a steep learning curve: coming to grips with Vermont's bewildering complex of zoning frameworks, land use regulations, and legal structures. Even in a good year, therefore, the board might be lucky to produce even a basic revision of the town plan. The 2010 update, though, was not coming in a good year. The board was wrestling with the additional hurdle of restarting a stalled board; from 2007 to 2008, quorum to conduct business had been achieved only once. Headed into 2009, several new members got involved, and, though energetic, they had to reckon with learning the ropes at the same time as needing to turn around a new plan in a single year's time.

In theory, these constraints upon a volunteer layperson board were supposed to be combated by expert consultation. This was one of the roles of Vermont's Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs). The professional regional planners, however, were stretched thin themselves and could offer each constituent town only a certain number of assistance hours, many of which went to 1) basic overview and education, and 2) specific areas of inquiry like the

2010 conservation and connectivity interests. The attention of these advisors therefore had limited potential for reassessing the omissions and commissions of the previous plan.

And in one way, the assistance of the RPC may itself have been helping to drive the Resort's absence in Northmont's plan. Northmont was the RPC's most eastern-lying constituent, and the Resort lay still further east. With most of the RPC's business driven by the very different economic dynamics of the western Lake Champlain region, the RPC may have had the Resort little on its mind. Mount Harmon was absent from the RPC's own 2007-2012 regional plan.

All told, then, the Planning Commission too proved not to be a forum for engagement with the Resort's existence.

THE MARKET AS THE DOMAIN OF ACTION

The Resort, despite being a fervent collective concern, thus did not appear as a topic for collective *political* consideration.

Let's consider who Northmonters believed did (or should) have agency over the Resort's future. Much of Northmonters' normative talk about the Resort came in the form of moral criticisms of the owners and managers, who were known on a face-to-face basis. Northmonters who worked at the Resort, or who were hoping to, would express disappointment, anger, frustration, or incredulity about "how we're being treated." "Monday morning quarterbacking" also featured. (This was a description by a critic of the critics.) That is, Northmonters would point to various decisions by Mount Harmon's management as being counter-productive or even "idiotic"; they feared that the idiocy would take down the whole region with it. But that's how it went, that was up to the Resort's management.

When I pressed Northmonters for why no one ever talked about Mount Harmon at town meeting or board meetings, they said things like: “That’s their [the Resort’s] business,” “Who are we to tell them how to run things?” “That’s not town meeting’s job to tell them what they can do,” “What can we do anyway?” “Isn’t that the state’s job?” “Yeah, you’d think with the hoops that they [*the state*] made me jump through to build *my* septic system that they’d be more on it for Mount Harmon,” “What’s the Select Board supposed to do about it?” “I wouldn’t want everyone up in *my* business.” One person teased me, “What, are you a commie?” This was from a career leftie, so I joked back: “No comment! But seriously, I hear everyone talking all the time about the mountain, so why don’t they at town meeting?” “If they’re not violating zoning or the state regs,” he responded, “it’s no one’s business.” These were strong messages that market mechanisms and--to a lesser extent--state-level regulation were the appropriate domains for the determination of the Resort’s future.

But the most powerful illustration I can give of Northmonters’ subscription to this premise is the case of the Northmont Area Community Alliance.

NACA Gets Nowhere

The Northmont Area Community Alliance (“NACA”) straddled the line between a community group and a business association. Led by Jeni Narier and Henry Godfried, both proprietors of lodging businesses, the group formed in the late summer of 2009 out of fear that Northmont would be boxed out of the Mount Harmon’s economic promise. The group embarked on one project after another, trying for two years to convince town officers and community members to share their belief that the Resort’s expansion *was* a concern for town government. They found no purchase whatsoever. Within half a year, the group had dwindled to three active

members beyond Jeni and Henry. All but one of these five was a recent arrival to town within the prior ten years, and to a significant degree they were socially and politically isolated from the rest of the town. Nor did their confrontational tactics and “difficult personalities”--more on this term in a moment--help them build new bridges. Townspeople and town officers saw NACA variously as a laughingstock, a pain in the ass, a troupe of incompetents, a half-cocked group of rabble rousers, “a bunch of insufferable pricks,” and a well-meaning (according to some; self-interested according to others) group “with no clue how things work.” After those first two years, the group gave up on town government as a venue for action and starting doing what everyone had been telling them to do all along: work as a private entity on (manageably sized) projects of their own. Within another two years, two of them had left town permanently, and another two had decided to direct their energies elsewhere--including to a bitter lawsuit with their housing association; eventually it reached the Vermont Supreme Court. (I bring this fact up not as gossip but because litigiousness in small communities, especially by “outsiders,” often reinforces other community members’ sense that the plaintiffs are anti-social or “unneighborly.” See Merry (1990), Yngvesson (1993), and Greenhouse, Yngvesson, and Engel (1994). NACA’s experience of finding town government to be a “brick wall” will show us that the erasure of the Resort from town government was not just an oversight but was an act of active boundary maintenance within the local conception of government.

Certainly differing perspectives on the role of local government in local economic affairs was not the only factor in play. First and foremost among many others was NACA members’ “difficult personalities.” This was what community members called anyone who was hard to work with interpersonally, regardless of whether one agreed or disagreed with their intentions. Someone with a “difficult personality” was seen as inadvertently sabotaging themselves--acting out

a mini tragic play where they were their own undoing. In these terms, NACA's members were an Oedipus or Orestes or Willy Loman: giants of the genre. Townspeople and town officers had a long, long, long list of interpersonal and work-style complaints about NACA.

- They saw NACA as untrustworthy or non-credible, since it “played fast and loose” with facts, and “you couldn’t count on the things they said.” You’d come out of a conversation thinking that one thing had been established, several people told me, and then you’d learn that NACA “was off 180 degrees on something else,” or that it still was “out there bad-mouthing you about the same thing” that you thought you’d just settled.
- They considered NACA’s proposals to be too vague to be actionable. The vagueness also produced a political risk for town officers specifically: what would happen if they endorsed a proposal thinking it meant one thing but later on it actually turned out to be, or morphed into, something different and objectionable? “They weren’t coming back with the details we needed,” one Selectperson explained to me.
- They saw NACA as a loose cannon, barreling forward with half-baked ideas-- grandiose ones at that--without having done the requisite preparation, and without sticking around for the follow-through (or fall-out!) either.
- They were rubbed the wrong way by NACA members’ “taking a bit of their New York City mentality to Vermont, and we’re very much clashing with the way they do business.” (None of NACA’s leaders were from New York specifically, but the uptake of them via the archetype of a pushy outsider with a superiority complex is telling.)

- They were frustrated that NACA didn't seem to understand even the basic mechanisms of town government.
- They thought that NACA's prognostication was fundamentally flawed. The Resort, a fair number of Northmonters believed, was still several years away from impacting Northmont. And if anything, they thought, the impact to local businesses would be positive.
- They felt burned personally by accusations NACA made.
- They thought that NACA members were self-interested instead of community minded. One person trenchantly formulated the point to me as, NACA being "a *lodging* businesses association pretending to be a [general] *business* association pretending to be a *community* association."

And this is not even a comprehensive catalog.

NACA members of course had their own interpretations of all these things, and their own counter-complaints. The point here, though, isn't to tell the full story of the conflict, let alone to adjudicate it. What is important for this chapter is how and why NACA failed to find purchase. That requires acknowledging that NACA's failure may even have been *primarily* a matter of the interpersonal dynamics. The following ethnographic descriptions are meant to show only that differing attitudes about the role of local government was a part of the story *too*. There is a well-known phenomenon in small town politics in which fundamental differences are explained away as purely a matter of personal conflict instead of as a mix of both things; the prospect of the existence of the former makes community members, who aspire to community harmony,

uncomfortable.¹⁷ I have tried to write the ensuing description in a way that recognizes that *both* “difficult personalities” *and* disagreements about the scope of government were causal factors.

...

NACA’s two biggest initiatives during the period 2009-2011, when it still was hoping that town government would step up as a partner, were both promotional. The first was to make, Beaker Fall (known locally as “the Beak”), a local “hidden gem” swimming hole, more physically accessible and well-known. Waterways were public resources in Vermont, but most of the land that surrounded the Beak was privately owned, and years previously those owners had gotten fed up with the traffic and noise and trash, and they therefore had restricted access via their land. The result was that getting *to* the public waters was an issue, as was parking.

NACA’s second initiative was to apply for an “e-Vermont” grant from a statewide development organization. NACA planned to use the funding for a grab-bag of digital improvements, including improved telecom infrastructure, additional computers for the school and library, and--above all--a town website. The town already had a municipal website, but NACA’s leaders were disappointed that it served primarily as a municipal resource for residents (publishing meeting agendas and minutes, hosting forms and the text of ordinances, etc.), without actively marketing Northmont to potential visitors or making the town’s goods and services visible to consumers.

NACA first pitched the swimming hole idea to the Select Board at an August 2010 meeting. The town owned a sliver of land connecting the Beak to the state highway, so NACA hoped there was some possibility for creating a new access point. The path along that sliver was a moderately demanding climb, though, and there wasn’t much room for parking. Essentially

¹⁷ Ladd (1969), Vidich and Bensman (1958), Varenne (1977), Fitchen (1991).

NACA was looking for help brainstorming: did the Select Board have any ideas for what could be done or for how to approach other landowners? Jeni, in broaching the subject, suggested that the situation was dire. “We have *got* to compete with Mount Harmon,” she said, “Between the discounting of the golf tickets and the new restaurants and the push to go east that Jim Rumford [*the Resort’s CEO*] has with his new hotel in St. Hunna...” She trailed off, contemplating how Northmont’s businesses wouldn’t stand a chance. St. Hunna was the city 45 minutes in the other direction from Northmont, and if that eastbound corridor developed, the westbound might not ever be able to catch up. “We have got to compete,” she repeated. “The swimming hole, Mount Harmon doesn’t have that.”

The Board asked several questions, and a short dialog ensued, but there was an unusually long line of other visitors at the meeting. The Board therefore asked to bookmark the question so as not to keep everyone else waiting. By the time everyone else had finished, Jeni had had to excuse herself for the evening, so the five Board members (Don, Dale, Eliza, Anne, and Marie) resumed the topic just among themselves.

“What are we going to do about NACA?”, Anne cautiously asked. The two bodies already had had a few minor run-ins with one another.

Dale and Eliza flagged the “overbearing commercial interest of the proposal,” and Eliza repeated Jeni’s words a few times: “ ‘Compete with Mount Harmon.’ ” The framing clearly did not sit well with her.

“If you put developing the hole to a town vote,” Don said, “people would vote against it in a minute. Because it makes it for no place for local people to go.”

They all started discussing what a problem the hole had been a decade previously, with traffic and noise and trash. Re-opening that can of worms, let alone actively promoting the Beak

as a tourist attraction, wasn't something the Board necessarily wanted to do without a clear benefit for the town at large. "Will it actually even fill our motels and restaurants?" Eliza wondered, "It didn't then." Anne suggested doing nothing until NACA brought a more specific proposal, and the rest of the Board concurred that that's what they would tell NACA.

At the next meeting two weeks later, Jeni's presentation was still on their minds.

Don: I've been thinking a lot about her comment the other night about competing with Mount Harmon. I'm not sure we're in the business of competing with Mount Harmon. People access it [*Beaquer's Fall*] who want to.

Dale: I don't think it's government's job to—

Don: Compete.

Dale: Well, to actively promote and create tourist attractions. I agree with what you're saying, Don, I completely agree.

[...]

Don: I kind of feel like we should do nothing, and if they want to find it [*an access point*] they'll find a way.

Dale later elaborated to me on this thinking:

To be quite honest, I don't necessarily think that the town should be in the business--that the municipal tax payer should be in the business of doing that [*promotional work for businesses*]. I think the town government should be supportive but essentially neutral, and that the taxpayer shouldn't be subsidizing that kind of stuff. [...] If they [*NACA*] want to do stuff, do it, but don't try to co-opt the taxpayer into doing it for you.

Back in the meeting, Eliza followed Don and Dale's exchange to note Jeni's constant use of the word "promote." The Select Board "isn't there to be a chamber of commerce," Eliza said, "They [*NACA*] can do it."

"I think this is not Select Board business," Anne agreed. "If they want to make a tourist site out of it and they can do it legally, more power to them. It's not a Select Board issue."

"Well," Don interjected, "I think it is, because we own the land around it. We ought to have some input, or at least know what they're doing. To see the impact on the people around where it's going to be." But Don was not speaking in support of the idea that the Select Board should take on a promotional role. Rather, the relevance that he saw was the narrow issue of the

town's rights and responsibilities as a landowner, and as a guarantor of public safety and peace. Following Don's framing, the Board talked its way through noise, trash, legal liability for accidents, and so forth. If they were going to let NACA do something, they had to make sure that it wouldn't have negative effects on anyone else. If it were neutral, NACA could go ahead; if it weren't, then they weren't in the business of deciding whose private interest to favor. Jeni's framing of a duty to compete with the Resort--a suggestion that the municipality itself had an interest in developing the Beak--did not re-enter their conversation. For the better part of the following year, NACA and the Select Board would go back and forth on the swimming hole, talking past one another on the same points.

The e-Vermont grant reached a similar impasse, with the Board reluctant to give NACA the letter of support that was required for the application, because the Board found itself unable to endorse the underlying premise of NACA's effort. Ordinarily the Board happily signed off on efforts from community members or groups with no more than basic due diligence, but this case presented a dilemma. The *outcomes* of NACA's grant were an unimpeachable good, and to be seen "saying no to free computers for the school" would have been disastrous to their reputations. On the other hand, to endorse some of NACA's *premises* would have been just as politically toxic. In the following meeting dialogue, we see the Board trying both to navigate this bind and to tease apart the "difficult personality" issues from the material issues.

Eliza: I'm trying to step back, to ask what is really making me nervous: the person, the grant itself, or...?

Marie: I was getting caught up in the minutiae, but if they want to put in all this work, what's the worst that could happen? If they want to burn themselves out on it, let them do it.

Anne: It's just they want to have us endorse it.

Marie: The grant says that we won't be responsible for doing any work.

Eliza: I don't know, things have a tendency to become the responsibility of the Board. [...] But they [*NACA*] really have the energy, so maybe it's fair to support that energy.

Marie: I certainly don't think they have anything with bad intent.

Anne: I just hate that everything she [*Jeni*] seems to want is--

Marie: It's so vague. ... She's frenetic.

Don: Everything they spend the money on is going to be decided on a later date. So I don't--

Eliza: It's almost like a wishlist.

Don: I told Jeni the last thing I want is the board to go down as anti-business. So I kind of agree with Marie that if there's no commitments later down the road, and apparently there isn't from what I've read, [then it's ok]. Have you guys sat down and read the grant word for word?

Anne: They make statements that are half-truths, or that are... And I don't want to be endorsing that.

Marie: I don't think it's underhanded. It's just not smart.

Anne: Let them go get it, but don't ask for my blessing.

Don: Without our blessing, they don't get it.

At the next meeting, Eliza came in with a new reflection, echoing the Board's position on the swimming hole matter: "What I'm feeling," she said, "is why are we deciding whether e-Vermont is good for Northmont or not? It seems like it should be a private matter." "Because we'd be on the steering committee," Marie responded. And they were back at the dilemma of having no way to be neutral.

In the end they did provide a letter, but one that was carefully worded to avoid any implication of support for *NACA* itself or even of *NACA*'s grant. Instead, they picked out the two (of many) outcomes from the grant that were unambiguously uncontroversial and that didn't tread upon "private" territory. The result was bizarre: a letter of support that was nearly a non sequitur to itself.

Dear Henry and Jeni,

I am pleased to offer this letter of support by the Northmont Selectboard for the e-Vermont Community Broadband proposal being submitted by *NACA*.

The Town of Northmont hopes the future will bring improved emergency communications and affordable broadband service to all community members.

Good luck with your proposal!

Even this anodyne, pinpointed expression was able to secure only a 3-1 vote in support. It was one of only a handful of votes across the whole year that weren't unanimous. At NACA's next meeting, NACA members described this text as "a slap in the face," and when the granting agency ultimately declined the application, NACA blamed the Board for sabotage.

As we've now seen, the distinction between the role of public town government and the role of a private chamber of commerce was pivotal in the Board's thinking. At some points NACA members themselves subscribed to this distinction. "So," I asked during an interview with Elaine Bleuforte, another hotelier on NACA's board, "the Select Board hasn't been selling the town; is that the job of the town?" "I don't think it is," she replied, saying that "They do the meat and potatoes stuff to keep the town running. They're not a chamber." A little later she added, "But then again, they probably shouldn't try to *restrict* people who are trying to get exposure." (Select Board members would have responded that they weren't "restricting" NACA's own efforts, they were just declining to let a private interest speak in the town's name. This difference in interpretation was a gap that the two bodies never were able to cross.)

At other times, though, NACA was espousing a fundamentally different role for town government. A month ahead of Town Meeting Day in 2011, NACA's board was brainstorming who they might be able to recruit as a candidate against the incumbents. This was the origin of Claude's run, which we saw in Chapter 2. Henry was certain that townspeople would agree that the current board wasn't living up to the best interest of the town. It was self-evidently outrageous, he explained, that NACA was "having to beg [the Board] for a grant they don't even

have to administer!” Jeni was nodding vigorously. “That’s what we’re electing people for!” she exclaimed. They all then talked about how the Board should be helping develop the swimming hole resource.

In an interview two months prior, I had asked Jeni what she thought the Select Board should be doing that it wasn’t. “Looking for and actively soliciting things to bring into town,” she answered. “Not just bare minimums of what do we need [for maintaining our roads and facilities]. The town has to be proactive, not reactive.” The current Select Board, she repeated, wasn’t “being proactive when it comes to the town’s economic concerns.” For instance, “The Select Board could and should be promoting cell service, coordinating an active push for it.” (Coverage across town ranged from dismal to nonexistent.) Later in the interview, on an unrelated topic, she cataloged some of the things that she loved about Northmont, and I followed up: “Is there any things the town is missing?” She returned to the earlier theme, instantaneously responding, “Cell phone service!” She laughed, took a moment to reflect, and continued into an elaboration of her earlier remarks: “I think a proactive approach, a clearer design as to where we are going from here. Do we want to see population growth here? Do we want to increase the tax base? Where do we fit with the Mount Harmon?”

To the Select Board’s perspective, these kinds of questions were what the Planning Commission was for. “I would have liked to have seen [NACA] involved in the Town Plan process,” one member told me. The reasons why NACA had *not* participated in that process are not important to our current discussion, but if NACA *had* participated, I am certain that the scenario merely would have been tweaked, not altered in any fundamental way. The way Jeni or Henry understood the meaning of “being proactive about the town’s economic concerns”

wouldn't have been any more palatable as a plank in the Town Plan than it had been as the basis for various specific proposals to the Select Board.

...

The Select Board's comments from the earlier transcript, about "frenetic vagueness" and "a wishlist," are worth some additional attention. Marie shed some light on them when I asked her in an interview why there was such conflict between NACA and the Board.

It just seems like when they come in and want something, they don't have their ducks in a row. What they want is almost not even something they can have. What are they asking for? Like they're just "Aaah!" So much energy!

Other people likewise described NACA as energetically flailing around, throwing one idea at the wall after another with no sense of strategy and with no clear end goal in mind. "It just seems like the requests are a little all over the place," another Board member explained. A more colorful version of the same point came from Angela Chirsui, a minor town officer. Throwing up her hands, she vented to me, "What does it actually look like if Northmont succeeds at 'competing' with Mount Harmon?" She threw air quotes with her fingers. "How many people in [hotel] beds, how many storefronts on Main Street? Does Henry actually want something?" She compared him to her baby nephew: both just kicked and screamed aimlessly because they were upset about something they were helpless to address directly or even put into words. Her tone mocking, she announced the punchline: "Henry just needs his diaper changed!"

In an indirect way, these observations--even the meanness in the last one--contained a germ of sympathy for NACA: a recognition that ultimately NACA simply was acting out a feeling of helplessness.

And in a parallel universe, this feeling of helplessness might have found space to be acknowledged and addressed overtly. Buried within NACA's poorly executed and confusing

efforts, and obscured by their several additional motivations, was a kernel of truth: the anxious fact that Northmonters had no democratic traction when it came to something like the Resort. Town government was *not* equipped to handle something like the Resort, and meanwhile the “proper” forums were useless. After all, feelings of disenfranchisement from state government, to say nothing of the Feds, were why townspeople valorized town government in the first place. Judging by other Northmonters’ talk *outside* of the institutions of town government, they understood only too well what it was like to feel democratically helpless. In a better executed program, NACA therefore might have been able to build community support on this deeper commonality. Specifically, with the benefit of hindsight I wonder if NACA’s refrain of “competing with Mount Harmon” was a poor choice of framing. The solution required by that framing--that the Select Board had a responsibility to help Northmont’s businesses to stay competitive--led community members to perceive NACA members as acting out of self-interest for the immediate needs of their own lodging businesses. Instead, NACA might have been able to frame their own immediate concern as an *instance* of the larger, shared value: that Northmonters should be able to democratically self-determine their own future, not bob along in the wake of a private juggernaut.

...

Perhaps the most curious facet of the whole saga of NACA’s efforts was how minimally it made use of town meeting itself. NACA interjected itself as an organization into the meeting only twice, in the back-to-back years of 2010 and 2011, and both times exhibited NACA at its least radical.

At the 2010 meeting, early in NACA's existence, Henry stood up at the end of the meeting, when community announcements were traditionally made, to encourage people to join.

The extra-governmental thrust of his speech is notable:

I would just like to make an announcement for those who were not aware. We have a new organization in the town of Northmont, called the Northmont Area Community Alliance. It's an organization dedicated to improving the business in town to the extent possible, as well as working to improve the overall quality of life. [...] We will be beginning in the next few weeks an active solicitation for businesses to join. Business dues will be fifty dollars, but of course interested citizens can also join, and dues would be twenty dollars. The intent of this organization... Unfortunately the local chambers, such as the Barselle County Chamber or the Harmon Area Chamber of Commerce, have not really focused directly on the town of Northmont and those businesses that operate in the town of Northmont, so our need is for a more centrally focused community alliance. Thank you.

This was purely recruitment for a private entity, arising from the perceived deficiencies of other private entities. There was no suggestion that there was anything for the town meeting assembly to take up, nor that any of the town boards should take action.

The second instance was a year later, involving Claude's attempt to unseat one of the incumbent Select Board members. At their monthly meeting in late January, NACA members workshopped how to announce Claude's candidacy. Should they perhaps keep quiet until the day of the election? No, they decided, but they *would* make a tactical omission of the controversy that had motivated them to recruit Claude, and instead they instead would focus fully on Claude's expansive community service. The result was the mass email from Jeni that we've already seen in Chapter 2:

Claude Stiles, co-owner of Gallatin Inn has decided to put his name forward to run for a vacancy on the Select Board at this year's Town Meeting. Claude, who to date has been a very active Library Board director in addition to taking Gallatin to the point where in 2009 it was voted the best B and B in the State of Vermont by the state, is willing to give of his time, energy and expertise to the Select Board if elected. I have

no doubt the community would benefit greatly from his involvement and do hope you will join with me in supporting our NACA friend and colleague and spread the word about Claude's decision. Please invite friends and family to come out and support Claude in his efforts to contribute to the local community by electing him to the Select Board.

Claude's own speech as a candidate went even further, disavowing any relationship with NACA, with NACA's agenda, or with NACA's dim view of the Select Board. The full speech was given in Chapter 2; here are the most relevant excerpts:

I'm not in NACA like Henry is. But I do have an interest for the business community in providing jobs for our local residents. [...] My goal is to really work on making Northmont a really friendly environment for businesses. I have a great deal of respect for the current Select Board, and the only reason I'm running is I just want to just put my hat out there, and if anyone's interested I'd be glad to serve.

Articulated without reference to the Resort, this interest in a "friendly environment for businesses"--which was a generic trope in candidate speeches--was a rather different formulation than NACA's.

I believe Claude's disavowals were sincere rather than tactical, but the difference is academic; there are only two points that matter for this chapter's concerns:

First, Claude lost the race by an almost 3 to 1 margin. Chapter 2 showed us the dynamics that would have been responsible for this landslide: the voters' satisfaction with the Select Board's status-quo activity (lack of commercial promotion and all), suspicion of NACA's known desire to turn the Board into an activist entity, and interpersonal suspicion of NACA's members. (This last sentiment was more directed toward Henry and Jeni than Claude, who suffered by association.) Jeni's email was too little too late, as was Claude's speech, to overcome a year's worth of grapevine headlines about NACA's behavior and intentions, all of which was imputed (fairly or not) to Claude. Regardless of Claude's intentions, Northmonters used his candidacy as a referendum on NACA's activism, which they wanted nothing to do with.

Second, whether it was NACA's board *and* Claude who were being tactical, or whether it was NACA's board alone, the key point is the same: even NACA felt that its challenge to the existing norms of town government's scope was unspeakable within the central institution of town meeting democracy.

A MODEL FOR STATE AND NATIONAL POLITICS?: TOWN MEETING AS AN ANTI-POLITICS

Many prior observers have documented the narrow focus by town governments upon fiscal matters and other concretely defined technical challenges.¹⁸ Ladd (1969:205), for instance, observes that "Political life in Putnam is almost completely devoid of conflict over the scope of government" (205). Specifically, Putnam's politics did not feature proposals to expand or shrink governmental services, and even the most significant local political divide, that between "progressives" vs. "standpatters," featured two camps that were

strikingly alike in their orientation to public life. They were pragmatic, 'close to the ground,' had highly 'realistic' expectations about what politics could bring, knew each other well socially, and were inclined to see politics as people rather than issues. (220-221)¹⁹

In an argument that is parallel to this chapter's, Von der Muhll (1970:124-127; see also 772-775) identified a paradoxical disconnect between the "governmental efficacy presupposed in the town meeting creed" and the narrow scope in practice of governmental action. Transformations of the

¹⁸ E.g., Kotler (1974:239-240), Ladd (1969:91, 138-142), Von der Muhll (1970:124-127). See also the citations from Chapter 2 concerning the idea of municipal government as a technical rather than political affair.

¹⁹ Verb tense in quotations from Ladd and Von der Muhll have been switched from present to past throughout this section.

economy or of the social status hierarchy, Von der Muhll noted, not only were strictly absent from his fieldsite (Plymouth), but the very thought of them violated local common sense. “That these limits received so little explicit acknowledgement,” he wrote, “is largely because of the tacit assumption that ambitious governmental initiatives were in any case unfeasible and undesirable.”

Common sense is a tremendously powerful structuring force upon political possibility (Biehl 2005:9-10, 239, 247). Heiman (2015:16) describes the term like this:

I use ‘common sense’ here as Gramsci does, not to be confused with ‘good sense,’ but rather the uncritical, unconscious way of perceiving that is deeply ingrained and is part of how we act and feel without thinking. It is something that we experience as an ‘instinct’ but that is in fact an ‘elementary historical acquisition.’

Common sense stakes out what is “natural” and incontrovertible, and what therefore is fanciful or upsetting to imagine trying to change. For instance, D.Brown (1995:216-218) shows how the effects of the tourist industry accumulate into a kind of de facto societal planning, but this governance effect is absent from public policy debates. The effect, she explains, is thought to be “natural.” Eliasoph (2013:75, 95) similarly discusses the de facto societal planning effects of decisions made by (unelected) corporations and wealthy individuals. Only a “radical,” though, would challenge their right--a fact that is implicit in Eliasoph’s turn to anarchist theorist Emma Goldman to make the point:

Take another milder case of privatized decision-making: the case of gardeners in Los Angeles. Goldman would ask, ‘Who decided that so many people would spend their working hours watering flowers and mowing grass in people’s backwards? What if all of their labor went into digging new subway lines, supervising kids after school on the playground, or fixing potholes on the street? Who decides how the society as a whole uses its resources, its creativity, its labor?’ Goldman would angrily answer that neither the gardeners themselves nor the public as a whole make the decision. Only those people who have enough money and land for a gardener decide. Instead of a democratic decision-making

process, of ‘one person = one vote,’ we often have ‘one dollar = one vote.’ For Goldman, solutions that do not touch these fundamental relations of production are ‘band-aid’ solutions. What is worse, for this line of thinking, is that pretending that you are equal citizens is a *harmful* fiction, because if you convince yourself of this, you will not push for real democracy. Real democracy would include more control of the economy than most of us now have. (37; italics in original)

Our imaginations are not currently configured, Eliasoph suggests, to think of private enterprise as a space of democratic action.

Ritualized complaining was one way that Northmonters expressed their collective anxiety over the Resort without violating either their common sense over the sanctity of private enterprise or their valorization of town meeting as a comprehensively empowering institution. “Perpetual pining” is the term that Ladd (1969:190) used to describe how townspeople in his fieldsite endlessly restated certain community problems without showing any desire to have government actually try to solve them. Problems of the “perpetual pining” type were ones that

everyone talked about and agreed upon the need ‘to do something about that,’ but which were not in fact deemed urgent and which few actually expected to change. An example was ‘providing more opportunities to keep the young in Putnam.’

Such talk was “essentially ritualistic,” Ladd observed. Extending upon Ladd’s point, we can say that complaints about such problems were of a kind with complaints about any other unfortunate natural facts like mud season²⁰ or aging: not to mobilize for change but simply to commiserate on shared suffering.

The larger issues were thus compartmentalized, then erased. The situation calls to mind James Ferguson’s (1994) concept of an “anti-politics machine.” Ferguson developed the concept to describe how international development agencies are equipped to address only narrowly defined technical challenges (e.g., a lack of schools, the poor conditions of roads), and how their

²⁰ “Mud season” is New England’s fifth season, between winter and spring, when all the melting snow transforms the dirt roads to mud.

operations displace opportunities for participants to engage with deeper political issues (e.g., the question of why resources are so unevenly distributed in the first place). By making apolitical work the only work that can be done at any given moment, perpetually, an anti-politics machine is doing profoundly political work. With repeated operation, the machine entrenches and naturalizes particular ways of thinking about politics and political economy and affects the kinds of social change participants even can imagine (see also Nadasdy 2005).

To borrow this framing, the democratic politics that town meeting boosters celebrated was abdicating engagement in a broader politics even as it played out vigorously within the boundaries of its self-defined sphere.

Of their own volition, Northmonters wrote the Resort out of their institutions of government, leaving intervention to private contract and market mechanisms. Even the most enthusiastic boosters of town meeting--the ones who offended the merely "regular" boosters by injecting SIRs into meetings--strictly held this line. The very same citizens who sang town meeting's praises for its ability to render any matter under the sun democratically tractable didn't take town meeting as a relevant venue for their concern about the Resort. The very same citizens who had a demonstrated track record of imaginatively applying town meeting to any number of unexpected topics seemed to lose their interest when they turned in the Resort's direction.

I am not saying that Northmonters necessarily *should* have been addressing the Resort at town meeting or board meetings. I wouldn't necessarily challenge the idea that the issues raised by the Resort indeed were best handled at the state and national levels. What *does* concern me is that an anti-politics institution is being suggested as a model for politics in general.

Northmonters posed a contrast between visibly sickened national democracy and vital local democracy, and they wished the former could be more like the latter. As we saw in the

Introduction Chapter, echoes of this local view can be found across the country, in the decentralist fantasies of conservatives and liberals alike. But what if town meeting and other local government is not a last-institution-standing of American democracy, but simply is a place where the friction between democracy and the free market doesn't have to be felt? Part of the reason that town meeting government appears so democratically pure and vital, I suggest, is that it has been absolved of responsibility for the hard questions of political economy or distributive justice. At Northmont's town meeting, participants were able to take a specific public/private distinction as a natural starting point rather than as one of the very contests that politics is about. When I hear people say that they'd like to see the spirit of town meeting pervade the rest of American politics, I therefore always wonder to what degree their wish might be animated by a fantasy: that *all* politics could be just a matter of solving concrete immediate challenges instead of wrestling through serious disagreements on fundamental questions²¹--including how to frame the questions! That is not to say that town meeting's business is easy, or that it too can't involve deep, hard questions about justice; anyone who observes a town meeting will be able to see immediately that the contrary is true.²² Conflicts within a sandbox can be perfectly real and meaningful and even life-determining. They cannot, however, be a model for the other level of politics, the constitutional one where people decide where and how to build the sandboxes and what will go inside them. Town meeting may be worthy of emulation in many ways, but the allure of an anti-politics is also exactly why we can't take one as a model for the entirety of our politics. In Northmont, our snowboarding bar fly left town meeting to his parents, and his parents left the ski mountain to him.

²¹ See Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002).

²² See Bryan (2004:234-238) for a number of gut-wrenchers.

CHAPTER 4. Town Meetings Are Not

Direct Democracy: Representative

Democracy as Participatory Democracy

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In recent years, researchers and democratic practitioners have exhibited a surge of interest in participatory government and direct democracy. Critics, arguing that representative mechanisms are unavoidable and/or laudable, have dismissed the movement. This chapter uses a close reexamination of the New England town meeting--an archetypal institution of participatory direct democracy--to argue that the two positions are more compatible than previously thought. Using qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze Northmont's meeting, I turn town meeting's reputation on its head: in actual practice, town meetings involve hardly any direct democracy, and instead they primarily serve representative functions. As representative institutions, however, town meetings nonetheless are highly participatory, in ways that confound unidimensional scales like the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum and Arnstein's ladder. In sum, "weak democracy" and "strong democracy" are not always oppositional categories; the New England town meeting provides an example of a highly participatory representative system.

INTRODUCTION

What does it take for a democratic government to successfully reflect the will of the people? Enthusiasts for participatory democracy argue that hands-on involvement by citizens is crucial--the more, the better.¹ This strain of thought is exploding anew in the early 21st century, with scholars and practitioners exploring new methods of citizen governance: participatory budgeting, citizen juries, deliberative polling, Consensus Conferences, National Issues Forums, 21st Century Town Meetings, and many, many more.²

Participatory democracy has no shortage of critics, however, who advocate instead for the necessity and superiority of representative institutions. Participatory institutions, these critics contend, place unrealistic demands upon citizens' time and competency. Moreover, citizens may not *want* more control than what is afforded them by representative mechanisms. Within this line of thinking, citizens' major responsibility is to use votes to choose among alternatives set out by competing leaders.³ For "weak democrats" (see Barber 1984), the key metric of democratic success is not how much direct control the citizenry can assume, but whether the citizenry possesses the necessary tools to keep representatives tethered tolerably close to its preferences.

¹ E.g., Kaufman (1960, 1969), Barber (1984), Fung and Wright (2003), Fishkin (2007), Nabatchi et al. (2012, 2015).

² Partial catalogs of recent practitioner projects have been assembled by Nabatchi et al. (2012) and Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015). The participedia.net project is another useful resource. For participatory democracy theory (and the related bodies on deliberative democracy and direct democracy), the number of recent review works and programmatic treatments speaks to just how much this field is exploding: Bohman and Rehg (1997), Bohman (1998), Elster (1998), S.Freeman (2000), Gastil (2000), Chambers (2003), Delli Carpini et al. (2004), Lupia and Matsusaka (2004), Ryfe (2005), Besson and Marti (2006), D.Thompson (2008), Gr.Smith (2009), Nabatchi et al. (2012). On Americans' waxing and waning interest in deliberative and participatory democracy, see Gastil and Keith (2005) and Morone (1990).

³ For classic expressions of this position, see Schattschneider (1960, 1969) and Schumpeter (1942). A recent examples is Posner (2005).

This chapter suggests a line of rapprochement between participatory enthusiasts and critics, attending particularly to ways that citizen oversight of officers can take highly participatory forms. To reach this point, I closely reexamine the New England town meeting, which is a leading symbol of what Morone (1990) has called “the democratic wish”: the utopian longing for hands-on populist self-governance in the face of the shortcomings du jour of American representative democracy.⁴ For participatory enthusiasts, town meeting is an inspirational model; for critics, town meeting is a disparaged false hope. In either form, town meeting has assumed a predictable role in debates over American democracy: a metonym for the extreme participatory pole.⁵

This chapter empirically disputes this received understanding of town meeting, using Northmont as a case study. I use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews with Northmonters, a content analysis of meeting agendas, and a line by line speech analysis of five years’ worth of meetings. I pursue a bundle of questions: How did citizens in my field site use town meetings to self-govern? What was the nature of their deliberations? What role did they afford to their officers? How did they interact with their officers? Who--citizens vs. officers--took on what roles during the several stages of problem-framing, information-gathering, solution-developing, and decision-making? I show that the actual town meeting (as opposed to the stylized version of the American political imagination) is the spitting image of the critics’ own models: officers played outsize roles in the development and determination of municipal policy, citizens mostly just ensured that officers stayed

⁴ See especially pp. 9 and 15. See also Mathews (1994, esp. Chapter 6), Sullivan et al. (1980:26), Mansfield (1993:105-106), and Bryan (2004:54, 253).

⁵ Examples of this metonymic treatment: Clark and Teachout (2003), Fishkin (2007:78-80), Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002:40, 92, 207), Posner (2005:113, 193), Schattschneider (1960:138; 1969:59-62), Schudson (1997:301-302; 1998:5, 98), Pincock (2012:138, 152, 155), Mencken (1926:71-76).

disciplined as community stewards, and--on those occasions when citizens desired--the machinery for un-ignorable populist intervention was dusted off.

Broken out of its stereotyped image, town meeting becomes freshly useful as a conceptual tool for theorizing American democracy. If town meeting actually is primarily an institution of representative democracy, but participants simultaneously find it extremely satisfying as a participatory institution, what is going on? Rapidly dismissing the explanation that participants might be deluded, I instead argue that the town meeting case shows us that “weak democracy” and “strong democracy” are not always oppositional categories, but instead can be overlapping and interdependent. I attend especially to the participatory qualities of certain kinds of citizen engagement with representative structures. En route to these conclusions is a reassessment of participatory scales like Arnstein’s (1969) ladder and the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (2014), which enjoy widespread currency for both descriptive and normative purposes (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015, Kelty 2017:S82). The unidimensionality of such scales, I argue, makes them poor instruments for understanding citizen agency within democratic processes.

HOW NORTHMONTERS WILL DESCRIBE TOWN MEETING, IF ONE WILL LISTEN

“What is town meeting? What is it for?” Northmont’s 2014 town meeting had just broken up, and I was chasing the dispersing participants into the parking lot and down Main Street with these two questions. Here are some exemplary responses:

Jillian Kiln: An opportunity for people to make themselves heard, to express both grievances and their hopes and ideals for the community.

Ben Flanners: It's so people know where their tax money is going, basically.

Jack Helprin [This was his first town meeting]: I think it's a great opportunity for people to voice their opinions and vote. Instead of sitting around and just saying, "How come that happened, and why didn't I get a chance to say something?" Well, you want a chance to say something, show up. End of story.

Averill: Say something about what?

Jack: How the town runs. Where our money goes, our tax dollars, everything else. [...]

Regina Filippe: It's a very democratic way of doing things. I think Vermont is a lot different than a lot of other states. They still run these town meetings. [When I lived in Oregon,] I was so used to just going and voting on issues, and there wouldn't be a place where you can talk about it and express your opinions about it and have discussions with fellow residents right there in the same room.

Mike Caster: It allows me to have a process with the town. I'm able to vote on what happens in the town. So I'm directly involved. I can ask questions.

Melanie Shields: It's an opportunity for the townspeople to come together to decide the fate of their town.

Matthew Shanksley: We had the opportunity as a community to be able to take agency over decisions involving our town [...] in the experience of direct democracy.

Marie Dahl [Select Board member]: The people are involved, and they get a chance to give their own feedback, and they actually have a chance to have direct input on the outcome of what happens in their own town and their own state.

Eliza Gray [Select Board member]: The community gets together and makes decisions. [...]

Anne Evans [Select Board member]: It becomes personal, it really does. You decide what the questions are, and you participate in the answers.

Marie: You can see the connection between your opinion and the outcome.

Anne: Yeah. And you learn a lot about your neighbors too.

Arielle Chesters: I'd say it's a process that all town members are able to engage in, at whatever level they feel comfortable [...] for decision-making within the town.

Chip Sellers: True democracy, that's the way I see it. It's my duty to be here. *I* feel like it is; some people don't. A lot of people don't show up, and they don't get to participate.

Arielle: You can't complain if you don't come.

Jenn Sellers: That's what I was going to say. It's your place to be heard, if you want to be heard.

Arielle: I think it's also an opportunity to understand how the decisions are made and what they really entail. It's an opportunity to ask those questions.

Jenn: Yeah, it's really your only place to get answers to the questions a lot of people have.

Ed West: It's democracy at its purist.

Eric Shiller: Town meeting's a chance to say what you've gotta say about the way things are being run.

Mark Gregson: It's the time of the year we get together and talk about the necessary business that we would just as soon ignore at any other time of year. [...]

Averill: And what do you do?

Mark: You put in your two cents' worth. You just give your opinion on whatever the topic is.

Jeff Marcheau [Select Board member]: People in town get together and discuss and go over the budget. And we explain how we came up with the budget.

Jane Billod: I would say that it is a relatively friendly gathering of townspeople to determine issues such as Select Board... Different budgets. To discuss topics that don't necessarily get talked about on a daily basis, but it's good to have everybody come together and review those things. [...] It's a way for people to reconnect once a year with a government that they don't necessarily participate in, but it helps just bring them back to the issues and help them get a feel for what's going on.

When I heard these answers at the time, I took them to be straightforward celebrations of town meeting as a participatory institution of deliberative direct democracy. As I got deeper into this chapter's quantitative speech analyses of Northmont's town meetings, which caused me to realize how little of town meeting was devoted to direct democracy functions, I therefore thought that I had identified a severe disjuncture between ideology and practice. "Aha," I thought, "Northmonters celebrate how much direct impact they have at town meeting, but that's not what they actually do!"

But with careful review as I embarked upon subsequent drafts of this chapter, and to my chagrin as an ethnographer, I started realizing just how much I had been reading into the responses. Certainly *some* of the language suggested that respondents understood town meeting

to involve direct democratic rule--for instance, the invocation of “pure democracy” and the remark about “taking agency over decisions.” But many, many other phrases were more ambiguous: “having a say,” “voicing one’s opinion,” “having an impact,” “being directly involved,” “making oneself heard,” “the people are involved.” Phrases like these clearly indicated *some* kind of democratic agency, but I had been jumping to a conclusion that they referred to participatory legislation.

The evolution of my interpretation continued: As I digested the possibility that my initial interpretation had leaned too heavily on town meeting’s reputation, additional phrases started leaping out to me: “I can ask questions,” “an opportunity to understand how the decisions are made,” “know where the tax money is going,” “explain/learn how the Select Board and Budget Committee came up with the budget,” “give feedback,” “reconnect with town government,” “get a feel for what’s going on.” These all suggested an understanding of town meeting as providing satisfying, impactful participation that wasn’t necessarily rooted in direct legislation. Particularly important to respondents seemed to be the opportunities to come abreast with town affairs and to make officers squirm a little if necessary.

If I had been a better listener, I might not have needed to conduct the rest of this chapter’s painstaking analysis in order to reach the insight that town meeting was only partially an institution of citizen legislation. What follows is the corroboration of what Northmonters understood all along, even if they lacked an unambiguous vocabulary for expressing it.⁶

⁶ I do believe that Northmonters’ language and thinking still was partially captive to traditional concepts. Anthropologists working around the world have been attentive to the incomplete consonance between a society’s formal discourses and its practices.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS DO AT TOWN MEETING,

PART 1: AGENDA ANALYSIS

What topics were on the agenda (or “Warnings”) of a Northmont town meeting? What kind of decision-making leeway did Warning articles offer to the citizenry? How did those articles get written into the Warning in the first place?

Figure 4.1 reproduces the Warning from the 2010 meeting, as an example of an individual year. We also will be able to refer to its various articles as illustrations of the categories of activity that we’ll develop in a moment.

Looking at the nine years from 2008-2016, we can identify eleven kinds of articles that occurred every year, a twelfth kind of article that occurred nearly every year, and another two kinds of articles that occurred very frequently though not with clockwork regularity (each occurring in a total of five out of the nine years).

The eleven consistent items of business were as follows. (The highlighting coding will become relevant subsequently.)

1. elect a moderator for the meeting {2010’s Article 1}
2. receive officer reports {2010’s Article 2}
3. decide whether to appoint or elect a road commissioner {2010’s Article 3}
4. elect town officers {2010’s Article 4a-4n}
5. set funding for town departments {2010’s Articles 8a-8m}
6. set officer pay {2010’s Article 9a-9f}

**WARNING
ANNUAL TOWN MEETING - 2010**

The legal voters of the Town of [REDACTED] in the County of [REDACTED] are hereby notified and warned to meet in the Town Hall in said Town on Tuesday, the 2nd day of March, 2010 AD, at 9:00 o'clock in the forenoon to act on the following business to wit:

1. Elect a Moderator for the ensuing year.
2. Act on the reports of the Town Officers.
3. Shall the Town vote to appoint a Road Commissioner as provided in 17 V.S.A. §2651, if not, shall the Town elect a Road Commissioner as provided in 17 V.S.A. §2646(16)?
4. Elect the remaining Town Officers as required by law:
 - (a) A Selectperson for a term of two years by ballot. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (b) A Selectperson for a term of three years by ballot. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (c) A Lister for a term of three years by ballot. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (d) An Auditor for a term of three years by ballot. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (e) An Agent to prosecute and defend suits in which the Town is interested for a term of one year. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (f) A Cemetery Commissioner for the [REDACTED] Cemetery Association for a five year term expiring 2015. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (g) A Cemetery Commissioner for the [REDACTED] Cemetery Association for a five year term expiring in 2015. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (h) A Library Trustee for a term of five years. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (i) A Library Trustee for a term of five years. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (j) A Library Trustee for the remaining three years of a five year term expiring in 2013. ([REDACTED] resigned, vacant)
 - (k) A Fire Commissioner for a term of two years. ([REDACTED] - term expires)
 - (l) A First Constable for a term of one year. ([REDACTED] appointed - term expires)
 - (m) A Planning Commission member for a term of three years. ([REDACTED] - term expires)

*Figure 4.1: Northmont's town meeting warning from 2010
Source: 2010 annual town report of "Northmont," VT, pp. 15-18*

- (n) One or more Grand Jurors for a term of one year. (Selectboard – term expires)
5. Shall the Town vote to increase the portion of the \$10.00 per page recording fee from \$1.00 to \$3.00 for restoration, preservation, conservation and computerization of municipal records? (VSA Title 32, Section 1671(a)(1) and (6))
6. Shall the Town of [REDACTED] borrow an amount not to exceed Four Hundred and Seventy Five Thousand dollars (\$475,000.00), for the purpose of replacing the existing Town Highway Garage and Salt Shed with a Public Works Building and Salt Shed that would house the Highway Department work space, road salt, and vehicles; and equipment of the Water Department, to be financed over a period not to exceed 20 years? (To Be Voted By Australian Ballot. No discussion is allowed from the floor.)
7. Shall the town authorize the Selectboard to save the costs of distributing the Town Report by mailing a notice of availability, rather than the report itself, and allowing the report to be picked up at designated locations, or mailed upon request?
8. Shall the Town vote to appropriate the following sums of money to defray expenses in the ensuing year for:
- (a) Fire Department: 2009 – \$20,000; 2010 - \$20,000
 - (b) Rescue Department: 2009 – \$19,666; 2010 - \$14,580
 - (c) Summer Roads: 2009 – \$63,000; 2010 - \$70,000
 - (d) Winter Roads: 2009 – \$70,000; 2010 - \$70,000
 - (e) Machinery Replacement: 2009 – \$54,100; 2010 - \$35,000
 - (f) Bridges: 2009 – \$10,000; 2010 - \$10,000
 - (g) Library Operating Expenses & Payroll: 2009 – \$9,900; 2010 - \$10,335
 - (h) Building Capital Improvement and Maintenance Fund: 2009 – \$0; 2010 – \$20,000
 - (i) Recreation Department: 2009 – \$12,000; 2010 - \$15,000
 - (k) Reappraisal Fund: 2009 – \$0; 2010 - \$4,000
 - (l) Police Services: 2009 – \$0; 2010 - \$0
 - (m) [REDACTED] Youth Center: 2009 – \$5,000; 2010 - \$8,000
9. Shall the Town vote the following sums of money for the Town Officers as requested?
- (a) Town Clerk: 2009 – \$15,000; 2010 - \$15,000
 - (b) Town Treasurer: 2009 – \$8,000; 2010 - \$8,000

Figure 4.1, continued (2 of 4)

(c) Each Selectboard Member: 2009 – \$0; 2010 – \$1,000

(d) Listers:
2009 – 1st year members \$14.00/hour, 2nd year members \$15.00/hr plus IRS per mile allowance for mileage; 2010 – same.

(e) Auditors:
2009 – 1st yr members – \$8.00/hr, 2nd yr and on members – \$9.00/hr, plus IRS per mile allowance for mileage; 2010 – same.

(f) Board of Civil Authority:
2009 – Vermont minimum wage plus IRS per mile allowance for mileage; 2010 - same.

10. Shall the Town of [redacted] appropriate the following sums of money as requested by the specified agencies?

(a) [redacted] Agency on Aging for Meals on Wheels, Case Management, Transportation, and the toll-free Senior HelpLine: 2009 – \$1,800; 2010 - same.

(b) [redacted] Home Health Agency, Inc: 2009 – \$1,440; 2010 - same.

(c) [redacted] Industrial Development Corporation: 2009 – \$500; 2010 - same.

(d) [redacted] Association's Campership Fund: This money would be applied towards the cost of sending three or more children from [redacted] to the [redacted] Association's Summer Camp. 2009 – \$1,000; 2010 - same.

(e) Green Up Vermont: 2009 - \$0; 2010 - \$100

(f) [redacted] Resource Conservation & Development Council: 2009 - \$0; 2010 - \$75

11. Shall the Town vote to appropriate \$147,947 for Contingent Selectboard?
2009 – \$203,074; 2010 – 147,947.

12. Shall the Town vote to authorize the Selectboard and departments to receive and expend for town purposes any additional grants, gifts or other revenue in excess of those calculated in determining the proposed budget for the fiscal year beginning January 1, 2010?

13. Shall the Town vote to authorize the Selectboard to borrow in anticipation of taxes, not to exceed the sum of \$60,000.00 for the period March 2, 2010, to March 1, 2011, and execute and deliver the notes to the Town, if needed?

14. Shall the Town vote to authorize the Selectboard to borrow for the Water Department for use in case of an emergency, not to exceed the sum of \$50,000 for the period March 2, 2010, to March 1, 2011, and execute and deliver the notes to the Town, if needed?

Figure 4.1, continued (3 of 4)

15. Shall the Town vote to authorize the Selectboard to acquire by gift, or purchase, land for a municipal forest to promote reforestation, water conservation and good practices?

16. Shall the Town vote to authorize the Selectboard to enter into contract with new business or the expansion of old business to fix the municipal tax applicable to such real property at a percentage of the annual tax? (Such contracts are for the municipal tax only. Any such contracts for school taxes require approval from the State Legislature.)

17. Shall the Town vote to collect interest, as prescribed by law, on it's delinquent taxes and delinquent water bills, at a rate of 1% per month or a fraction thereof?

18. Shall the Town vote to publish names and the amounts of delinquent taxes due in the Annual Report?

19. Shall the voters of [redacted] request the VT legislature to:
a. Deny approval for the operation of Vermont Yankee after March 2012, which marks the end of its 40 year design life?
b. Require that the Entergy Corporation of Louisiana fulfill its pledge to fully fund the cleanup and decommissioning costs of closing Vermont Yankee.
c. Seek safe, renewable, regional sources of electricity combined with efficiency and conservation measures to replace the power presently provided by Vermont Yankee? (By Petition)

20. To do any other business proper to be done at said meeting.

Dated at [redacted] Vermont this 25th day of January, 2010 AD.

Selectboard

[redacted]
[redacted], Chair
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

Attest: [redacted]
Town Clerk

Date: 1/25/2010

Figure 4.1, continued (4 of 4)

7. decide whether to grant funding requests from local and regional social agencies

{2010's Articles 10a-10f}

8. set the remainder of the town budget ("contingent Select Board") {2010's Article 11}

9. reauthorize the Select Board to perform basic functions during the year (receiving and expending revenue, borrowing money in anticipation of taxes, accepting land donations, and offering tax assistance stimulus to local businesses)⁷ {2010's Articles 12-16}

10. set the interest rate on delinquent taxes {2010's Article 17}

11. decide whether to publish the names and amounts of delinquent taxes {2010's Article 18}

Another regular item of business, occurring seven out of nine years was:

12. Social Issue Resolutions (SIRs) {2010's Article 19}⁸

And the two items of business that occurred frequently but without absolute consistency (each occurring in a total of five out of the nine years) were:

13. create, adjust, or dissolve a town department's reserve fund {no article in 2010}

14. decide whether to issue a bond for vehicles or buildings⁹ {2010's Article 6}

In addition to these regular and semi-regular items, the warning of any given year would contain from zero to several ad hoc topics. An example is 2010's Article 5, which addressed whether to adjust the Town Clerk's recording fee rate.

15. ad hoc topics {2010's Articles 5, 7}

⁷ State legislation made these articles unnecessary starting in 2012.

⁸ Five out of seven years, the SIR business came up as a non-binding resolution from the floor under the final "any other business" article, rather than as a warned agenda item. See Chapter 3 for more on SIRs. SIRs included things like whether the town would advocate to the Vermont legislature that the latter deny approval for continued operation of the state's nuclear power plant, or whether the town would declare solidarity with striking Wisconsin workers.

⁹ These occurred via Australian ballot when for large amounts.

Finally, every year would have a final article:

16. “To do any other business proper” {2010’s Article 20}

In practice, this final article was a chance for announcements, straw polls, non-binding senses of the body, and commentary on any topic anyone liked. Per state statute, no binding action could be taken under this article.

We can categorize these articles even more compactly, via the following:

- green = elections
- yellow = officer-related business
- blue = budgeting
- purple = policy

At a glance, now, we can tell that representative functions (green and yellow) represented a substantial portion of the assembly’s business. Furthermore, if we use Figure 4.1 to look up examples of the blue and purple items, we can’t avoid the idea that the assembly’s budgetary and policy business tended to be either minor or heavily circumscribed. Moreover, for the very biggest budgetary questions, discussion during town meeting was expressly prohibited by state law; as the 2010 Warning specified for the Article 6 bond question, “To Be Voted By Australian Ballot. No discussion is allowed from the floor.”¹⁰

Another way that we can use the Warning to explore the relative roles of the town meeting assembly vs. its officers is to look at their respective control over spending. In 2010, the

¹⁰ This prohibition was based on the state laws against advocacy within polling places. For any ballot vote occurring within the town hall during the meeting, someone in the voting booths would be able to hear the floor discussion--a situation that could create the kind of pressure or persuasion that the anti-advocacy laws were designed to protect against. The assembly therefore either had to schedule any discussion of balloted questions for the time before polls opened, or had to forgo floor discussion entirely.

spending items for which the assembly had direct discretion were Articles 8a-8m and Articles 10a-10f. These amounted to \$282k. Meanwhile, the “contingent Select Board” budget line was \$148k. “Contingent Select Board” was the pool of money at officers’ discretion over the coming year, and town meeting had to pass it as a lump sum. The sum could be amended down or up, but no binding instruction could be put upon it. (Advisory votes were in theory possible, but were rarely exercised.) On the face of it, then, the spending discretion of town meeting vs. town officers therefore was only a ratio of 2:1--a quite large role for the latter.

Furthermore, the budget lines under the assembly’s discretion had been designed in the first place by officers in a process that preceded town meeting. Each town department and committee would submit a departmental budget to a Budget Committee that had been appointed by the Select Board. The Budget Committee vetted and synthesized these submissions into a draft town budget. This draft then was passed along to the Select Board, which conducted its own review before publishing the final version for consideration by the voters. By the time the budget had reached the town meeting assembly, it therefore had gone through multiple layers of prior shaping by officers. Amendment was within the assembly’s power, but that represented mostly the power to tinker; the floor of a deliberative democracy assembly was a difficult place to substantially redesign a budget on the fly. This inertia of the major contours of the proposed budget meant that the assembly’s options were essentially binary: ratification (with or without modest amendment) or rejection.

Analysis of the agenda therefore suggests that Northmont’s town meetings had quite much more to do with tuning up the machinery of representative democracy, and quite much less to do with putting The People in the driver’s seat, than the standard description tells us.

LIMITATIONS OF AGENDA ANALYSIS

Analysis of agendas, however, only takes us so far in understanding the nature of town meetings. Worse, it may be misleading. The Warning itself tells us nothing about how long the assembly dwelled upon each article, nor how important the assembly considered each one to be. A possible solution--one which could be executed easily--would be to tally how much floor time each article consumed, or how many speakers participated in each one. The other problem, though, is that town meeting assemblies displayed no interest in observing the kinds of topical boundaries that would make a social scientist's life easy. Some of the most important activity at Northmont's town meetings occurred in the form of spin-offs and non sequiturs. Dozens upon dozens of times throughout a meeting, participants would use an article as the launchpad for all manner of loosely or remotely connected concerns. For instance, every year Northmont's warning included a question of whether to elect the Road Commissioner or to allow the Select Board to fill the position as an appointment. It was a pro forma authorization; every year the assembly voted to appoint rather than elect, without engaging in any discussion of the two options. That did not mean, though, that there was no discussion at all; plenty of other roads-related business would be brought up under the article's heading. For instance, in 2014 a speaker initiated the idea of an upkeep policy for sidewalks. In other years, that same article led to performance assessments of the road crew's labor and of the Select Board's management. The moderators' toleration for segues like these was far more generous than what could be accommodated by any article-based counting model that we might devise. Whether a speaker's comment proved isolated in a given case, or whether the whole assembly piled on, racing into the rabbit hole for many minutes to come, the effect accumulated toward the same point: articles

were only nominally the unit by which town meeting business was organized. And the article is especially unusable for our purpose of assaying town meeting's admixture of representative to direct democracy: the setting of officer pay, for instance, could veer in and out of policy arguments, and policy articles frequently turned into discussions of officer performance.

The other problem with using the article as the unit of analysis is that doing so bakes in the officers' framing of town business. It was not uncommon for discussions of articles to include moments where the assembly deliberated the question as presented *as well as* moments where the assembly contested the question's framing. Under common tools for analyzing participation (Arnstein 1969, IAP2 2014), these activities represent meaningfully different kinds of relationships between citizens and officers. One activity would be considered closer to the pole of "officer control," and the other would be considered closer to the pole of "citizen control." If we use the article as our unit of analysis, we therefore lack the granularity for an accurate tally of which way a meeting trended, because each article could contain a mix.

Lest significant citizen governance activity be overlooked or miscategorized, we need to augment the Warning-based analysis with a moment-by-moment account of what participants were doing and saying.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS DO AT TOWN MEETING,

PART 2: SPEECH ANALYSIS

For the five meetings from 2010-2014,¹¹ I performed a line by line content analysis of participants' speech. The lines then could be aggregated by type, producing a detailed accounting of what Northmonters used their town meetings to do.

METHOD

After producing transcripts of each year's meeting from my audio recordings, I broke up the transcript into "talks" according to the function of what was being said or done. Appendix A lists the categories and umbrella categories that I used for coding. (The logic behind these categories will emerge in the next section's walkthrough of results.) Then it was a matter of tallying. I counted the number of talks in each category, and I also summed their durations. Because some talks lasted only a few seconds whereas others lasted for as much as several minutes, it was important to look at both metrics; neither could give a good picture on its own. The aggregate duration of talks spoke to what types of governance activity was occupying the assembly's attention. The number of talks spoke to the density of activity within the time used. For instance, the assembly's "due diligence" activity involved lots and lots of questions that were rapidly raised and settled, whereas debate ("settling" and "amendment" activity) involved a relatively smaller number of much wordier talks.

¹¹ 2009, 2015, and 2016 eventually can be added to the database as well, but the transcription and coding process is time-consuming. I started with 2010 rather than 2009 simply because the audio quality of the latter was slightly below that of my subsequent recordings.

Due to the nature of town meeting discussion, a number of special considerations were necessary:

- A speaker might engage in multiple functions during a single turn of speaking from the floor. Each function was broken out to a separate talk. If the speaker engaged in one function, then a second, then returned to the first--as very frequently happened--I counted the return as a “continuation” of the initial instance of the function rather than as a new instance. This “continuation” method applied to any number of times that a speaker might zigzag among functions: only the first talk contributed to the function’s act tally.

Continuations’ durations, of course, contributed fully to functions’ time tallies.

- When two or more people went back and forth with one another within a short period of time, I counted their subsequent responses as continuations of each of their first talks rather than as new instances.
- How to tally the silent time between lines--the transitions between speakers, for instance, or pauses within a speech--was done according to my best judgment given the context. Most cases were assimilated to the prior line or coded as a continuation of whatever category was preponderant in the surrounding lines. In some cases, though, they were coded as <mod> (when they seemed to be playing no role) or <due>/<setting>/etc. (when they seemed to be affording the assembly time to be thinking through the issue).

Across the board, I coded conservatively from the perspective of my argument. For instance, if a line hovered somewhere between <off> and <arg>, or <due> and <arg>, or <arg> and <init>, I always used the latter.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Types of Activity: Discussion vs. Actual Discussion vs. Local Governance

As Figure 4.4 will show, deliberation related to local governance occupied less than half of the assembly's time. Let's walk through the various other activities that consumed time.

To start, 15.6% of the aggregate meeting time from 2010-2014 was spent in non-discussion. 14.3 points were spent on election processes for local offices (<<ELECTIONS>>): nominations, speeches, balloting, counting, and announcement of results. Visits by the district's state legislator (<<REP>>) absorbed another 1.3%.

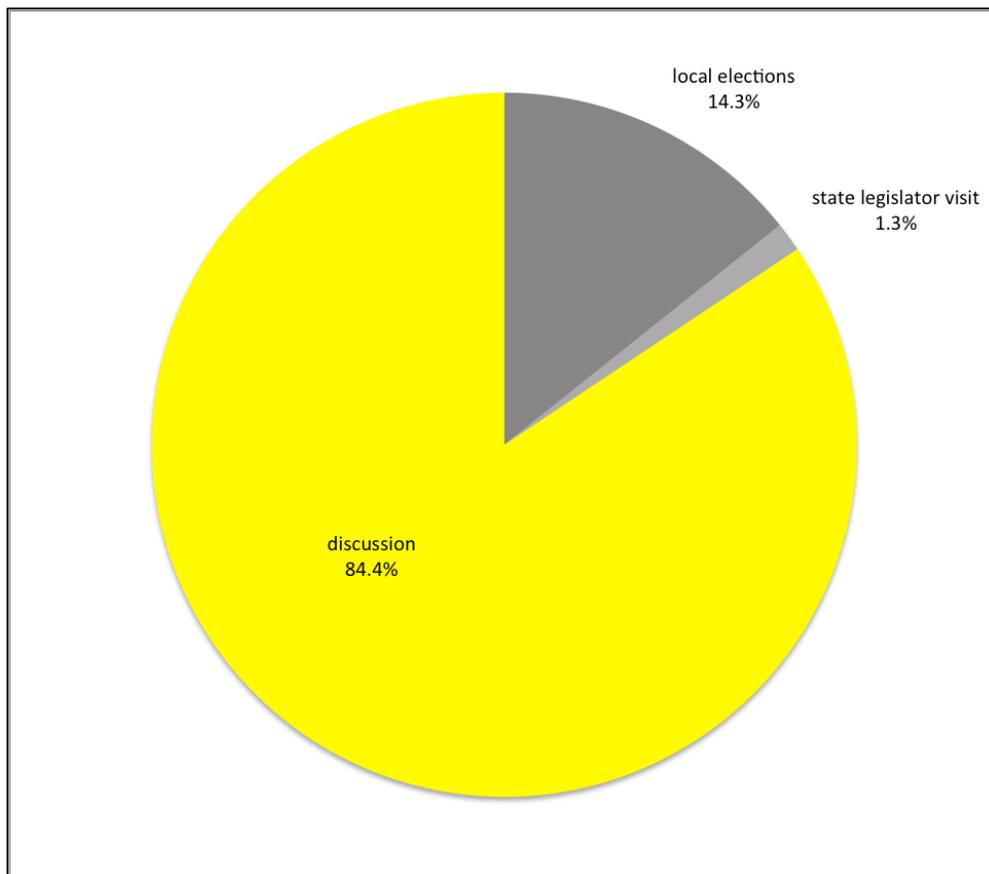


Figure 4.2: Distribution of meeting time: discussion vs. other

Within the 84.4 points of discussion time, 28.1 points went into the technical aspects of Robert's Rules and other things related to process (<<PROCEDURAL>>). This proceduralism category included motions being moved and seconded, voice voting, moderator process and facilitation, points of order, and problems with audibility and other extrinsic interruptions of the meeting (e.g., pausing the meeting to identify whose car was boxing in someone else in the parking lot).¹² Discounting proceduralisms left 56.2% of the time having been spent in actual discussion.

¹² The <<PROCEDURAL>> category unavoidably ended up absorbing pro forma ratifications of uncontested articles: an article would be moved and seconded, the moderator would solicit and then re-solicit discussion, none would occur, and then after a brief pause the voice vote would happen. In theory, the half minute or less that this took each time might be properly considered deliberative "due diligence" (<<DUE DILIGENCE>>) instead of as "process," as assembly members spent time in silent thought before ultimately indicating satisfaction. Three reasons dissuaded me from taking that tack: 1) The amount of time at issue here was insignificant anyway: a total of just a few minutes across each 2.6-4.7 hour meeting (average: 3.5 hours). 2) The point of this analysis was to identify the ratio of governance time spent on <<OFFICER>> and <<DUE DILIGENCE>> vs. <<SETTLING>> vs. <<CREATIVITY>>, and if portions of the *non*-governance time were re-categorized as <<DUE DILIGENCE>>, the ratio would move in the direction favorable to my argument anyway. 3) The prior analysis of agendas already serves as a way of considering this point.

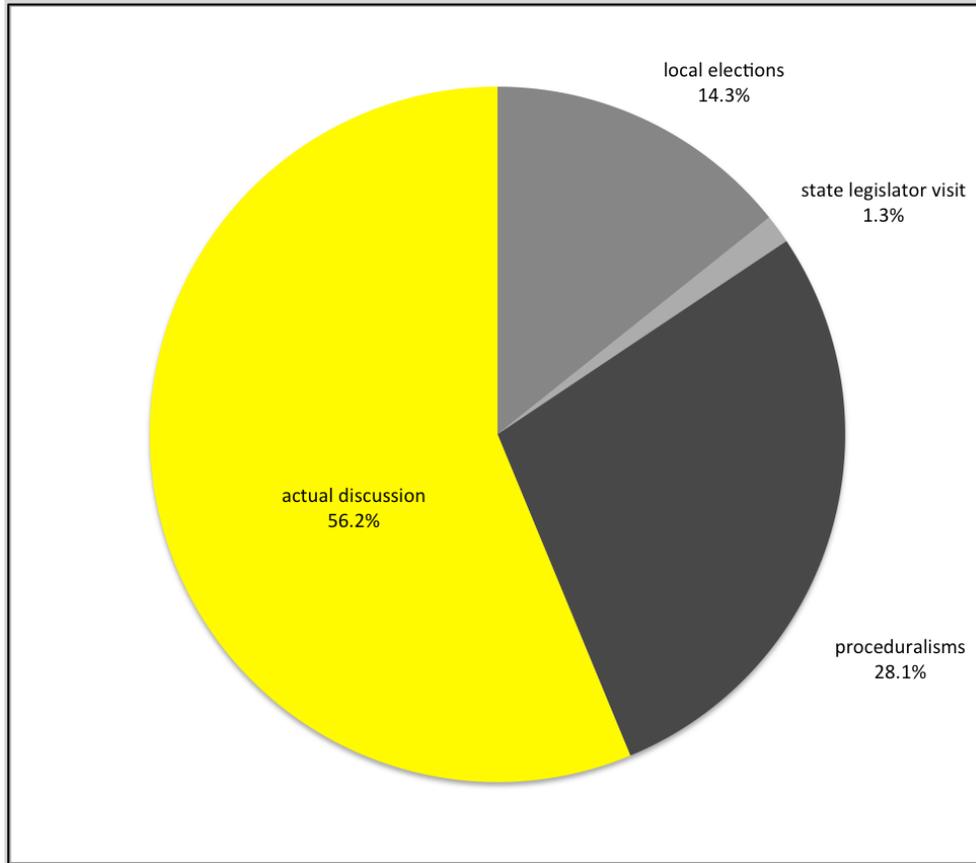


Figure 4.3: Distribution of meeting time: actual discussion vs. proceduralisms

Within the 56.2 points of actual discussion, a total of 7.7 points went into functions unrelated to local governance. 5.8 points were spent on what I’m calling “community togetherness” (<<COMM>>): time that was about the relationship of people within the room, such as community announcements, giving non-instrumental public praise,¹³ celebrating the virtues of community involvement, engaging in banter that clearly wasn’t intended to advance deliberation, and learning about community and municipal happenings. A further 1.9 points of the actual discussion time were spent on Social Issues Resolutions. If we consider only local

¹³ When public praise was being used to argue a point, I instead counted the time as <<SETTLING>>, <<DUE DILIGENCE>>, <<OFFICER>>, etc.

governance, we're therefore down to only 48.6% of the aggregate town meeting time from 2010-2014.¹⁴

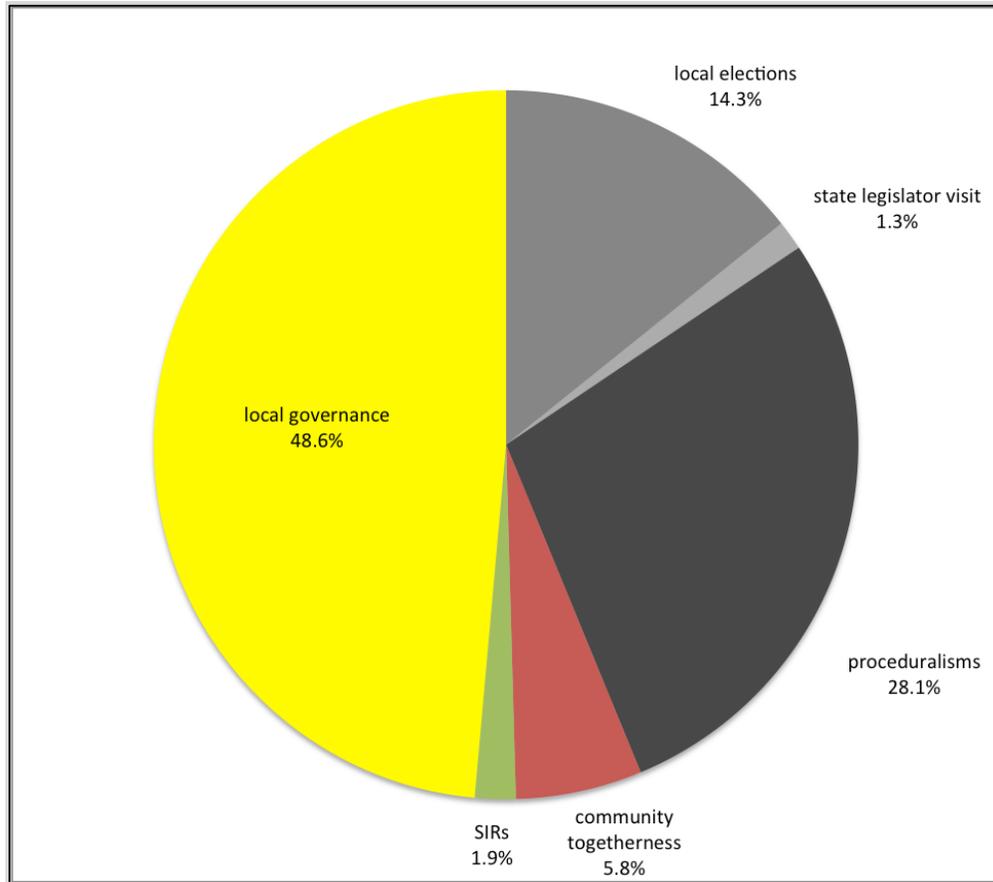


Figure 4.4: Distribution of meeting time: local governance vs. SIRs and community togetherness

As we move forward, the analysis will be easier to follow if we rescale these 48.6 percentage points of local governance to a new whole. From this point forward we also can look

¹⁴ As Chapter 3 covered, there is sharp local debate on whether SIRs do or don't qualify as "local business," and my categorization here was forced to take sides. If a reader's preference would have been to count SIRs the other way, they simply can bear in mind that SIR discussions occupied a grand total of 18 minutes and 58 seconds across the five years, and some of that total actually would have been absorbed into <<OFFICER>>, <<DUE DILIGENCE>>, <<SETTLING>>, etc. That's to say, SIRs simply don't represent a large enough volume of deliberation to throw off the analysis by very much anyway. If SIRs *are* included as "local governance," the ultimate finding of this chapter will change from 15.2% of local governance time being spent in direct democracy to something in the 16%-18% range.)

at talks as well as time. For presentation's sake I'll report the two metrics in the form, "[talks]% | [time]%."

To a casual observer, the local governance activity might appear fully in line with the romantic image of town meeting: here were citizens speaking up from the floor in a process of passing binding municipal legislation. However, a closer examination progressively reveals the enormous degree to which this deliberation was actually directed toward representative functions. In what follows I break local governance into five subtypes of governance activity:

1. <<OFFICER ENGAGEMENT>>
2. <<DUE DILIGENCE>>
3. <<SETTLING>>
4. <<AMENDMENT>>
5. <<CREATIVITY>>

#1 is straightforwardly a kind of representative democracy activity, and #5 is straightforwardly a kind of direct democracy activity. #2-#4 in the middle represent different mixtures of officer vs. citizen agency.

As we get into the weeds with these different categories, it may be helpful to hold in mind a simplified illustration of the distinctions between them. Imagine a parent making lunch with their kid. The parent asks, "How do you feel about grilled cheese sandwiches today?" The kid might respond in a variety of ways:

- 1. <<OFFICER ENGAGEMENT>>- "I hate grilled cheese! Fix it!"
- 2. <<DUE DILIGENCE>> - "It's not Swiss cheese, is it? As long as it's cheddar then I say yes."
- 3. <<SETTLING>> - "Hmm, let me think... Yes!/No!"
- 4a. modest <<AMENDMENT>> - "Let's add tomatoes!"
- 4b. strong <<AMENDMENT>> - "Let's make egg salad sandwiches instead."
- 5a. modest <<CREATIVITY>> - "I don't want a sandwich. Let's make soup."
- 5b. strong <<CREATIVITY>> - "I'm not hungry now. Let's play first and eat lunch later." / "The real question is: can we get a puppy?"

Officer Engagement: 6.9% | 9.5%

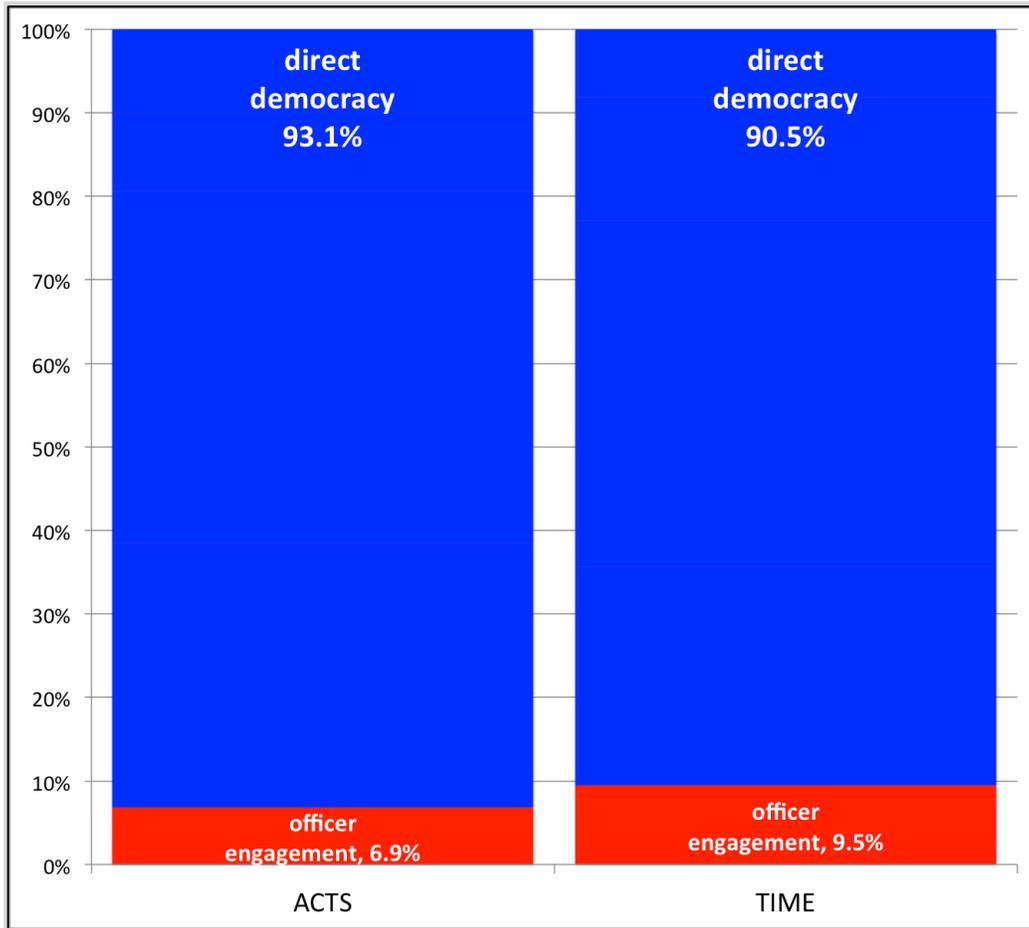


Figure 4.5: Breaking out <<OFFICER ENGAGEMENT>>

An important part of town meeting every year was citizens' ability to engage with officers about the latter's conduct, past or future. The heat that officers could expect to receive at town meeting was part of town meeting's legend. <<OFFICER ENGAGEMENT>> included citizens complaining, thanking, inquiring, requesting, suggesting, monitoring, pressuring, warning, etc. It also included the responses by the officer(s): defending, justifying, explaining, acknowledging, counter-attacking, etc. <<OFFICER ENGAGEMENT>> talk often was opportunistic: as mentioned, it could pop up at any point along the warning's trajectory, wherever a speaker could forge a connection from an article to their area of concern.

<<OFFICER ENGAGEMENT>> therefore often involved little attempt to speak to the article at hand, at least according to a strict criterion of relevance.¹⁵

Note an important distinction: while articles sometimes were used as excuses for discussing loosely related officer conduct, officer conduct also frequently was used as an idiom for discussing articles. Criticism or praise of officers could serve as potent argumentation for or against an article, or as the most sensible way of asking a question about the article. I only applied the <<OFFICER ENGAGEMENT>> category when the talk clearly was about intervening into the behavior of officers (or intervening into other citizens' perceptions of officers). If the talk had any hint of being about the article rather than (or in addition to) the officer, I counted it instead as <<DUE DILIGENCE>>, <<SETTLING>>, or <<CREATIVITY>>, as appropriate. This conservativeness means that my findings drastically understate the degree to which citizens used town meeting as an oversight tool for their officers. I estimate that a less conservative method would have yielded as much as a third of local governance being about officer conduct, instead of 6.9% | 9.5%.

¹⁵ In this respect, a recalibration is required of one part of R. Townsend's (2004, 2009) analysis of town meeting. She concludes that "speaking to the issue" is one of the foundational communicative norms of the town meeting assembly: by keeping talk relevant to the article, the assembly is able to progress through its collective business. I agree that town meeting participants share a norm concerning relevance, but the unit of that norm is not the article. Town meeting participants don't bat an eye when loosely connected side issues take over from the article proper. Making a public complaint to the Road Commissioner might be seen by most meeting participants as irrelevant if it occurred as an unabashed non sequitur during a discussion of e.g. Rec Center programs--grumbings would be heard and the moderator would tell the person to hold off until a subsequent article--but an article about purchasing a new town plow could be fair grounds for a general intervention into road crew performance, unrelated to the plow.

Due Diligence: 31.6% | 26.1%

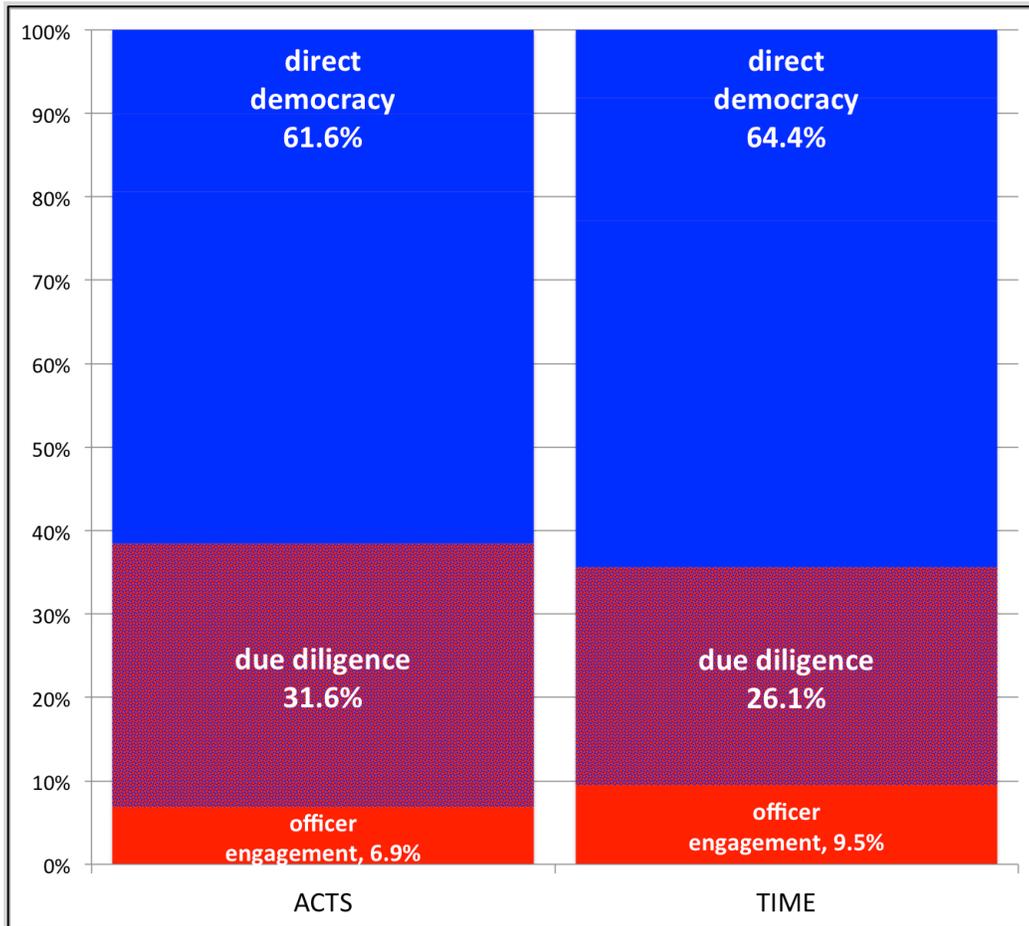


Figure 4.6: Breaking out <<DUE DILIGENCE>>

This hefty chunk of local governance consisted of basic due diligence on the way to easy ratification of courses of action previously charted by officers. This was citizens ensuring that 1) they understood the articles and 2) found them acceptable. Citizens would inquire about the background, intent, mechanics, and impact of articles. For instance, for nearly every expenditure article, someone would ask, “Why the increase/reduction from last year?” and officers duly would answer. <<DUE DILIGENCE>> talks carried no hint of controversy, concern, wariness, or argumentation. Shill questions, veiled criticism, explanation that veered into persuasion, and many other common techniques of the deliberation repertoire therefore were excluded from the

category.¹⁶ As always, I coded conservatively from the perspective of my argument, so talks that exhibited even as much as an overtone of any of those things were categorized as <<SETTLING>>, etc. Legislative fine-tuning, though, *was* included here: technical fixes and insignificant adjustments to articles, such as explicating that the compensation for an officer would be “minimum wage plus one dollar *per hour*” rather than just “plus one dollar” *for the year*.

<<DUE DILIGENCE>> therefore was representative democracy in direct democracy’s clothing. Its external form was the latter (the assembly floor consideration, the vote), but at heart it was ratification of officers’ decisions.

¹⁶ See R. Townsend (2004:232-246) for a typology that includes a distinction between informational vs. pointed questions.

Settling: 42.4% | 41.5%

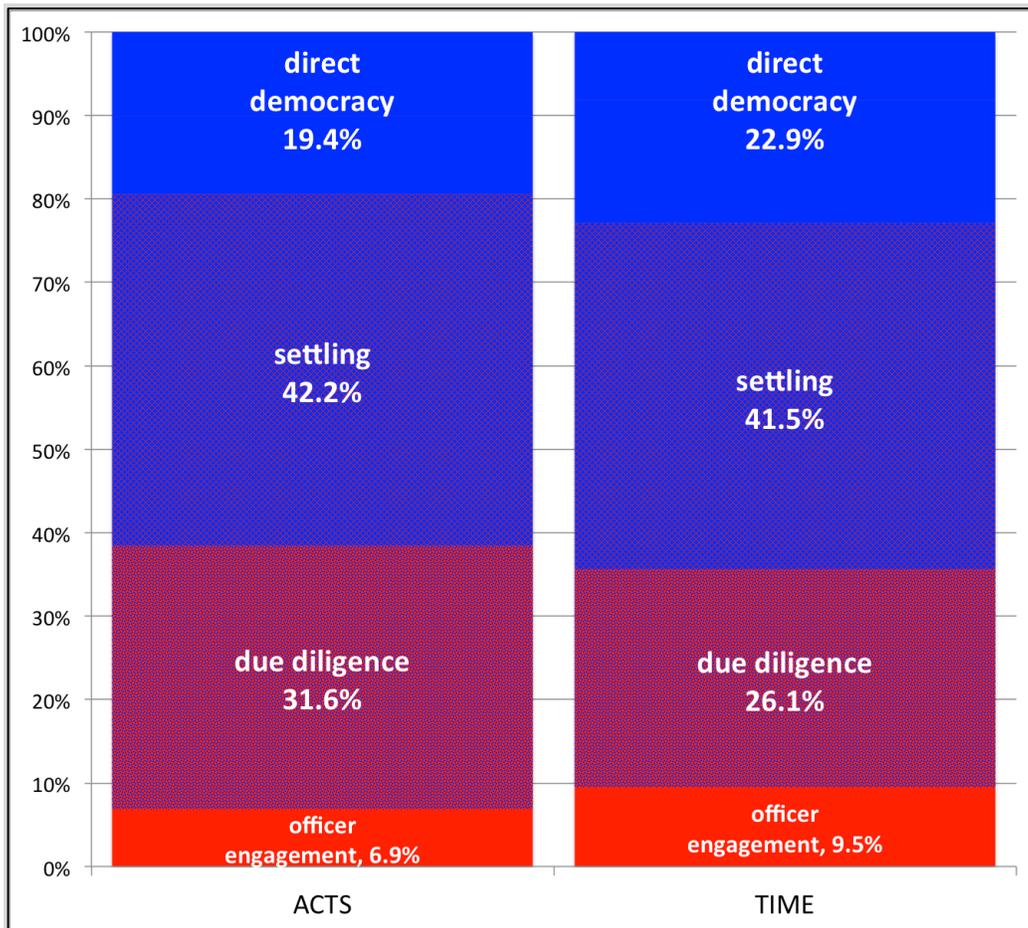


Figure 4.7: Breaking out <<SETTLING>>

<<SETTLING>> was the biggest component of local governance. <<SETTLING>> talk was directed toward settling the articles on the warning, while working within the parameters that officers had provided. Compared to <<DUE DILIGENCE>>, talks in the <<SETTLING>> category involved a high degree of activeness by citizens, and <<SETTLING>> could include serious pushback to officers' charted courses. This was the activity that town meeting is famous for: the argumentation, persuasion, and collective problem-solving.

<<SETTLING>> talk, however, stayed entirely within the parameters of the questions as posed by officers. If a talk pushed back against or tried to escape the terms or scope of debate, it

did not get coded as <<SETTLING>>; instead it would be either <<CREATIVITY>> or <<AMENDMENT>>. We might say that <<SETTLING>> consisted of a determination whether or not to let officers have their way--a function rather close to <<DUE DILIGENCE>>, as it turns out, with the difference being a greater degree of heat or uncertainty. Notably, a third of “settling” talk consisted of officers themselves explaining, justifying, or defending their thinking for having advanced an article: officers were responsible for 9.9 | 6.9 points of <<SETTLING>>, vs. 23.8 | 13.3 from citizens.

Amendments and Creativity

The final two categories of local governance were <<AMENDMENTS>> and <<CREATIVITY>>. With these, we reach activity where citizens departed from the courses set by officers.

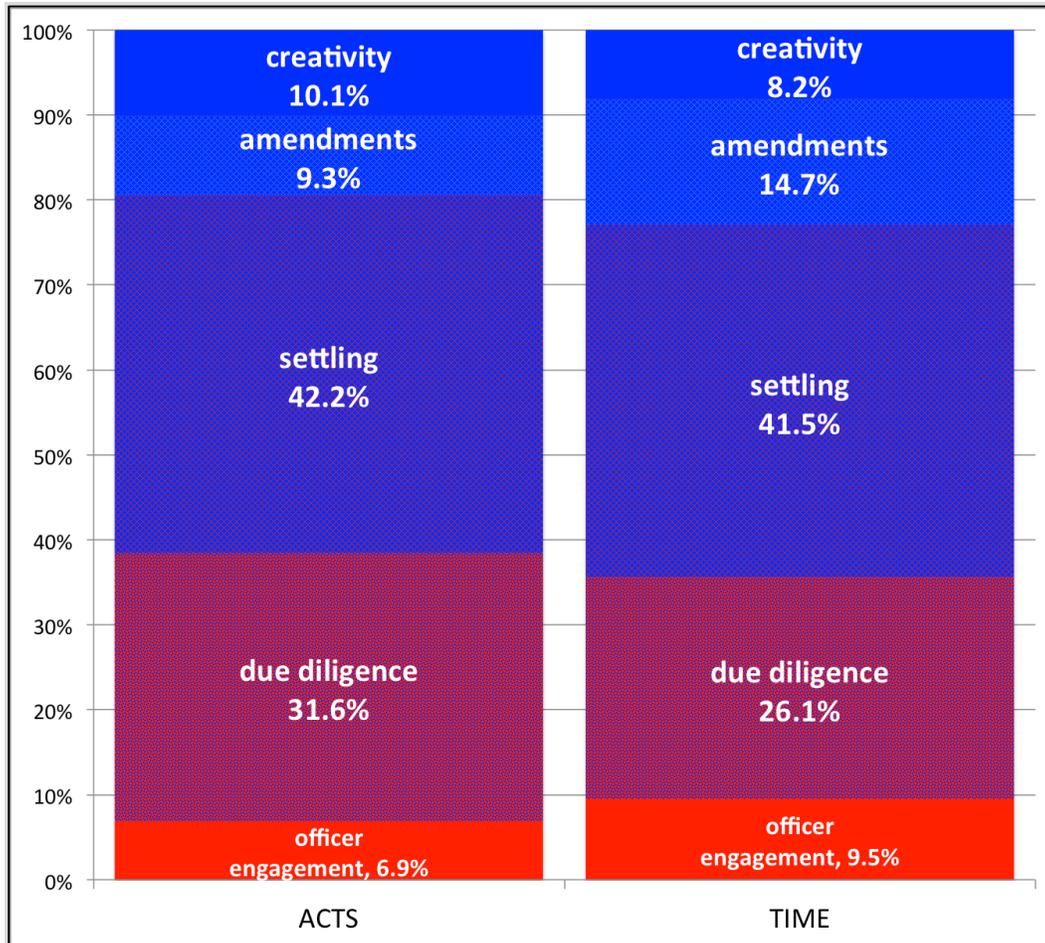


Figure 4.8: Full breakout, including <<AMENDMENTS>> and <<CREATIVITY>>

Amendments: 9.3% | 14.7%

The <<AMENDMENTS>> category included amendments themselves--that is, any time that someone proposed a substantive change to the warned article--plus the subsequent deliberation of the proposed change. Note that some motions that were amendments according to Robert’s Rules were *not* amendments according to this category, and vice versa. My interest was the underlying nature of proposed changes rather than their formal parliamentary garb, so amendment motions that merely corrected obvious errors or performed other “fine-tuning” were coded as <<DUE DILIGENCE>> rather than <<AMENDMENTS>>. In reverse, on a few

occasions I counted something as an “amendment” even though in parliamentary terms it technically was not. This occurred when a person would move an article onto the floor in the first place in a way that diverged from the warned version.¹⁷

In theory, <<AMENDMENT>> talk was fertile ground for direct democracy. In actuality, the deviation from the officers’ versions of articles was modest. Our immediate clue is simply the small ratio of <<AMENDMENT>> talk to <<DUE DILIGENCE>> + <<SETTLING>> talk: about 1:8 | 2:9. In other words, <<AMENDMENT>> activity occurred with only a fraction of articles. Across the five years, faced with 150 or so legislative articles plus 100-150 additional budget lines within the “contingent Select Board” bucket upon which advisory votes could be passed,¹⁸ the assembly raised only twelve amendments. To be clear, that is how many amendments the assembly *considered*, not how many it passed.

Furthermore, the twelve amendments were very modest. Looking through the list (Figure 4.9), we see that most merely adjusted the level of funding up or down, rather than changing anything fundamental. In fact, there were strict legal limits upon New England town meeting assemblies that enforced this modesty: according to state legislatures and the courts, assemblies *couldn't* use amendments to change the substance of what was warned, and case law established boundaries to how far a dollar amount could be altered. The regulations served an important purpose: otherwise citizens no longer could use the warning to decide whether or not to attend

¹⁷ For instance, in 2010 Article 10d as-written was for \$1,000 for a local nature camp, but a supporter jumped in before anyone else could put the article onto the floor, and she moved \$1,500 instead of \$1,000. This initiative forced a member of the Select Board to be the one to pose an amendment to restore the \$1,000 level. In my counting, the supporter’s main motion was the “amendment,” and the Select Board member’s actual amendment was part of argumentation over the amendment.

¹⁸ A similar number of budget lines were legally or practically untouchable. For instance: debt services, employee Social Security contributions, mandated insurance, etc.

town meeting. The result was that the warned versions of the articles remained highly influential even as amendments were considered.

2010

1. set the salary of the Treasurer at \$10k instead of \$8k
→ increase of \$2k (25%)
2. provide \$1.5k instead of \$1k of scholarship funding for kids to attend a local nature camp
→ increase of \$500 (50%)

2011

3. set the delinquent tax interest rate at 0.5% instead of 1.0%
→ a reduction of the median delinquent taxpayer's burden by <\$65 per year, with an annual reduction to town revenues of about \$4,500 by my projection

2012

4. set the hourly pay for Auditors at \$9.00-\$10.00 instead of \$8.46-\$9.46
→ increase of 54 cents/hour (6%). The Auditors' job is a very modest time commitment, and some don't bother to submit their hours, so this turned out to represent a <\$10 impact to the combined compensation of all three Auditors.
5. set the hourly pay for Board of Civil Authority members at \$9.00 instead of \$8.46
→ increase of 54 cents (6%). By my estimate, this represented a <\$40 impact to the combined compensation of the BCA members over the following year. (The impact would have been about \$7 in a non- Presidential election year, when the BCA's election duties are lighter.)

2013

6. fund the library with \$14,966 instead of \$11,948, against the recommendation of the Budget Committee
→ increase of \$3,018 (25%)
7. contribute \$20k instead of \$15k to the Building Capital and Maintenance Fund
→ increase of \$5k (33%)
8. contribute \$100 instead of \$1.5k to the regional bookmobile
→ reduction of \$1,400 (93%)
9. contribute \$100 instead of \$500 to the regional Humane Society
→ reduction of \$400 (80%)

2014

10. set the salary of the Treasurer at \$13k instead of \$12k
→ increase of \$1k (8%)
11. set the hourly pay of the Auditors at \$14-\$15 instead of \$9-\$10
→ increase of \$5 per hour (50%). At first this seems like a massive compensation increase, but Auditors work only a few hours a year. This was intended simply to compensate Auditors at the same rate as Listers, in order to indicate equal respect. By my estimate, this represented a \$215 impact to the combined compensation of the Auditors in the following year.
12. contribute \$500 instead of \$300 to the regional Humane Society
→ increase of \$200 (67%)

Figure 4.9: Amendments at Northmont's 2010-2014 town meetings

When it comes to the budgetary impact of the twelve amendments, “modest” may even be too forceful a description. 2010’s proposed \$2k salary increase for the town Treasurer might have been game-changing for Cindy herself, but it was a drop in the bucket of that year’s nearly million-dollar budget. Considered collectively, the twelve amendments addressed less than a third of one percent of the cumulative budget across the five years--less than \$14k out of a \$4.4 million.¹⁹ In an oft-repeated local joke, a person would exclaim with mock exasperation something along the lines of, “We spend 35 minutes arguing about a three thousand dollar increase for the library, and then pass the million dollar general budget in three minutes.”²⁰ (This was a true case from 2013.) Usually the joke was meant to imply that the assembly was maldistributing its energy. My own analysis of <<AMENDMENT>> activity intends no such disparagement. Contrary to the joke, I believe that “superficial” amendments like these actually contain significant value, from serving as expressions of community values, through keeping civic skills honed for moments of greater need, to symbolizing the assembly’s right to intervene whenever and wherever it liked. My point here is only that the <<AMENDMENT>> activity from 2010-2014 was quite confined in scope. The assembly’s M.O. was deep dives on “bizarrely specific” topics (to use one Northmonter’s phrase) while leaving all other matters to <<DUE DILIGENCE>> or <<SETTLING>>.

Given that the assembly did (and had to) stay closely tethered to the version of articles that were developed by officers, much <<AMENDMENT>> activity therefore turned out in practical terms to be not very far removed from <<SETTLING>> activity. For instance,

¹⁹ The \$4.4 million figure is for the municipal budget only, not including the school budget, which was voted at a separate meeting. Amendments to the school budget were even more marginal.

²⁰ Instances of this joke/observation in the literature: Sly (1930:150), Gould (1940:36), Banner (1953), Willard (1961), Rollins (1962), BG (1972, 1974), Gere (1984:39), Bryan (2004:248), and Rule (2012:190).

amendments #8 and #9 (funding for the bookmobile and the Humane Society in 2013) were attempts to maintain token support for the two organizations as an alternative to responding to the articles with flat “no”s. Each amendment’s sponsor said as much. In this way, amendments gave the assembly the power to escape from the confines of a purely binary decision, but in many cases the assembly still only could interpolate or extrapolate along the line that officers had set.

Let’s look at the amendments that proposed the greatest quantitative shifts or that diverged furthest from the spirit of the original warning articles in other ways. The strongest candidates are #1, #6, #3, #11, and #7. Amendments #1 and #6 turn out to have been thoroughly driven by officers, though:

- #1 (the 25% raise for the Treasurer) actually was motioned by Select Board members. Rather than being a feather in the cap for direct democracy, this amendment therefore represented the way that Town Meeting Day gave officers one final chance to adjust their proposals.
- #6 (increasing funding to the library in order to expand services) is particularly notable because it contributed nearly half of the total amount of the five years’ <<AMENDMENT>> time. It emerged from a battle between the Library Trustees on the one hand and the Budget Committee and Select Board on the other. The latter had acted together to reject the Trustee’s initial request that the higher amount be posed to the voters. The Trustees therefore brought their case to the town meeting assembly. 64% | 93% of the ensuing <<AMENDMENT>> talk on the amendment was members of the two boards and their spouses. To a large degree, this amendment therefore represented the assembly serving as an adjudicator between disputing officers, rather than as an initiative-taking party in its own right.

That leaves only three amendments--only 2.0% | 1.6% of the local governance activity. Two of these, though, #3 and #11 (halving the interest rate on delinquent taxes, and giving the Auditors a 50+% raise), were essentially symbolic. This is no knock against symbolism--it is a crucial component of political life, and it can have meaningful practical effects. But it would be a notable division of governance labor if officers steered most of the practical decision-making, and citizens had traction mostly over symbolic matters.

Was #7 (initiating a \$20k contribution instead of \$15k to the Building Capital and Maintenance Fund) therefore the greatest triumph of <<AMENDMENT>> potential at Northmont's town meetings? We can conclude that even most of the <<AMENDMENT>> activity turned out to be citizens following in officers' groove rather than exerting strong independent action.

Creativity: 10.1% | 8.2%

So far we have seen that <<DUE DILIGENCE>>, <<SETTLING>>, and even most <<AMENDMENT>> activity had officers' fingerprints all over them, even if they resembled direct citizen legislation on the surface. Only with the final category, <<CREATIVITY>> do we see citizens declaring full independence from officers.

<<CREATIVITY>> applied when citizens used town meeting to revamp or go beyond what officers had prepared. It included:

- raising a new idea, project, approach, or concern.
- using an article as a departure point to speak to a larger issue.
- re-framing the background or stakes of an article, such as connecting it to another issue that had not been included on the warning or that had been silo-ed into a different article.

- pushing back against the terms that officers had used to frame a question.
- departing from the underlying assumptions of the warning in other ways.

Sometimes a talk hovered between <<OFFICER>> and <<CREATIVITY>>. Was a point being raised as something for officers to follow through on, or for the community to consider? As always, I coded conservatively by erring toward <<CREATIVITY>>.

Disaggregation

The above discussion is based on data aggregated across the five years. Figure 4.10 shows the individual years.

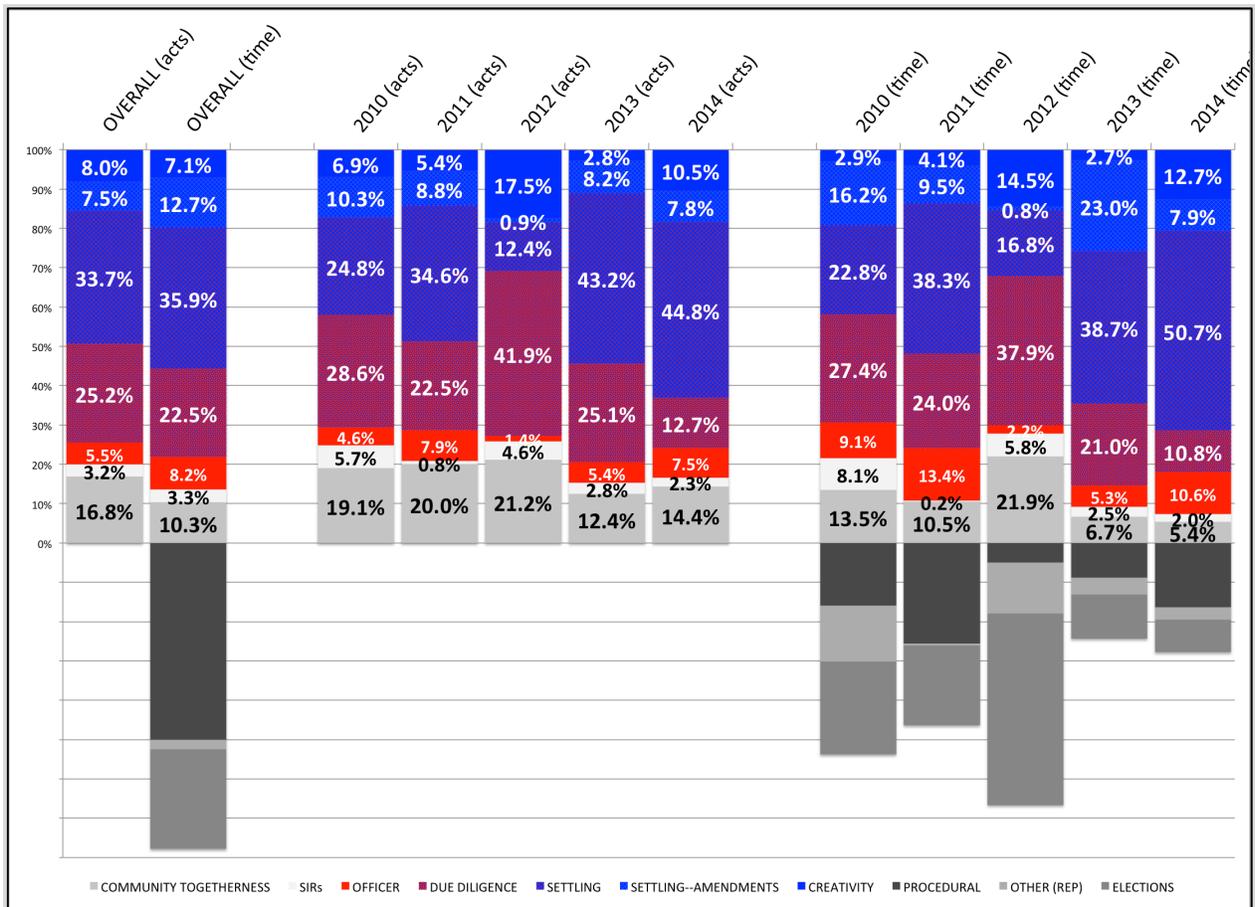


Figure 4.10: Distribution of meeting time, by year and in aggregate <<PROCEDURAL>>, <<REP>>, and <<ELECTIONS>> were not tracked for acts, only for time. Color coding is the same as the prior figures.

There is notable variation from year to year in all categories--a fact that we'll return to. However, the amount of <<CREATIVITY>> + <<AMENDMENT>> spikes only as far as 25.7% even in the extreme case: 2013's measurement of time, which was driven by the library amendment. Discounting that inter-board adjudication, the spike becomes a dull 12.5%.

Summary

Fifteen minutes in the average year: that was how much of Northmont's town meeting consisted of citizens escaping the gravity of their officers.²¹ Given an average total meeting length of 3 hours and 23 minutes, those fifteen minutes represented a mere 7.4% of the assembly's time commitment. Or, if we take the 15 minutes as a percentage only of the time spent in discussion of local government--an average of 1 hour and 39 minutes--the percentage is 15.2%.²²

We can conclude, then, that town meeting was deliberative direct democracy only in its surface form. Town meeting primarily was a chance for Northmonters to supervise and (if necessary) put checks upon their officers. The famous floor deliberation of town meeting was not so much a creative flowering of citizen input as a reactive ratification or rejection of officer

²¹ This is a sum of the <<CREATIVITY>> time with the time spent on amendments #2, #3, #7, #10, #11, and #12.

²² R. Townsend (2004:245), in a partially similar analysis of a town meeting in Massachusetts, found that the ratio during deliberation of what she categorized as "questions" to "answers" to "arguments" to "comments" was 64 : 71 : 123 : 17, or 23% : 26% : 45% : 6%. (These numbers are my summing of the individual evening tallies that Townsend provides.) Her categories only loosely can be translated into mine, but most "questions" and "answers" probably corresponded to my idea of "officer engagement" and "due diligence," whereas "arguments" and "comments" probably spanned my spectrum all the way from "officer engagement" through "creativity." That span--because she had no need to break out representative vs. direct democracy functions--explains why her tally indicates a percentage of citizen argumentation and commentary that is so much higher than mine.

choices. Much of the meeting agenda consisted of the assembly deciding whether to endorse a pathway suggested by officers, or whether to send officers back to the drawing board to develop a new proposal. Citizens also used the meeting to make inquiries and requests to officers, to give feedback on officers' conduct, and to discipline their officers. (When effective, that disciplinary effort ensured that officers would spend the entire following year measuring any of their ideas against their imagination of how the next year's assembly might react). The direct legislation aspect of town meeting paled in comparison to these functions, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

TOWN MEETING AS REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?

But if town meeting wasn't direct democracy as expected, it also diverged from representative democracy in three respects.

The first lay with the attitude of participants: participants insistently described town meeting in participatory terms. We saw this fact in the interview snippets presented earlier in the chapter and in Chapter 3. As we saw in Chapter 3, many Northmonsters used town meeting as a direct, stark contrast to representative institutions at the federal and state levels.

The second divergence takes us to structure and process. Other representative systems rely upon various kinds of indirect pressure upon representatives: regularity of elections, possibility for input and lobbying, mechanisms for removal from office, etc. Town meeting government, by contrast, retained the ultimate decision-making power for the citizenry. Year by year and topic by topic, policy might be developed via processes closer to one or the other pole

of Arnstein's (1969) or the IAP2 (2014) participatory scales, but the final say on whether or not something would become law belonged to the assembly itself. In practice, of course, it could be difficult (or illegal) for the assembly to generate new courses of action during the meeting that were entirely independent of what their officers had framed. But under nearly all circumstances, the assembly had an absolute power at least to say "no," or to send their officers back to the drawing board, or to demand that the re-attempt be conducted on some higher rung of the scale. The cost might be a year's delay in addressing a problem or pursuing an opportunity, and there might be attendant expenses and consequences, but the assembly could stymie officers at will. Even under the extremes of officer dominance, this "veto" power meant that town meeting therefore wasn't reducible to representative democracy.

The third point is closely related to the second. The citizenry at town meeting were therefore in control of which rung of the ladder they wanted to occupy at any given moment. Under most circumstances the citizenry might have been quite passive in its choice of rung, being guided by habit, tradition, or whether a given crop of officers was taking the initiative vs. leaving a gap that needed to be filled. Nonetheless, there was a meaningful ability for the assembly to start actively repositioning themselves on the ladder whenever they liked. A contrast to American Constitutionalism is instructive. There, the citizenry *in theory* has the bedrock authority to rewrite the roles of their representative structure, but the practical realities of the processes that are available to them--Constitutional amendments, targeted mass-mobilizations, etc.--are slow, cumbersome, difficult, and uncertain. In New England town meeting, the citizenry could, at the drop of a hat, pull from a well-developed (if still not perfectly satisfying) repertoire of legal and cultural tools. When a town meeting assembly *did* decide to rouse itself, it had tools

available to make its representatives “respond [...] with the utmost seriousness” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002:131).

Taking the outsize role of officers into account while still respecting these three points, how should we classify town meeting? As “representative democracy with a strong populist component or potential”? As “latent direct democracy”? As “direct democracy strongly channeled by officers”? A nice synthesis of these kinds of descriptions is to be had in the theories of “monitorial citizenship” (Schudson 1998a, 1998b) and “stealth democracy” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001b, 2002) that are described in the next section. Both theories were developed as critiques of participatory democracy in general and of town meeting specifically, but with our new understanding of town meeting we will be able to take them in a different direction.

MONITORIAL CITIZENSHIP AND STEALTH DEMOCRACY

Schudson’s (1998a, 1998b) “monitorial citizenship” and Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s (2001b, 2002) “stealth democracy” are models of American democracy where an absolute distinction between representative democracy and direct democracy is replaced with attention to the dynamically oscillating balance of power between representatives and citizenry. Neither author would put their theory in the terms I have just used, but I will stand by the characterization. Both suggest that citizen power is best structured around opportunities for on-demand but rarely-exercised citizen intervention, with trustworthy representatives conducting affairs in the background all the rest of the time. For each theorist, representation ought to

preponderate in American democracy, but representative systems also ought to be shot-through with latent direct democracy. Though to be rarely used, the structures that allow on-demand participation to occur and to have meaningful impact are indispensable.

Schudson reacts to what he refers to as the “Progressivist fallacy”: the ideal of citizenship that emerged from the Progressive Era that valorizes omni-competent, hyper-informed, continually active citizens. Schudson argues that--whether or not the ideal was appropriate even in that era--it certainly is misplaced in the present age of information overload and governmental complexity. He proposes “monitorial citizenship” as a model of Americans’ implicit practice, and he argues that that implicit practice is a perfectly sound basis for American democracy. The implicit practice, he suggests, could stand to be elevated to the level of an explicit norm. “I would propose,” he writes,

that the obligation of citizens to know enough to participate intelligently in governmental affairs be understood as a monitorial obligation. Citizens can be monitorial rather than informed. Monitorial citizens scan (rather than read) the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very wide variety of ends and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways. [...] Print journalists regularly criticize broadcast media for being only a headline service, but a headline service is what, in the first instance, citizens require. [...] Walter Lippmann was right: if democracy requires omni-competence and omniscience from its citizens, it is a lost cause. There must be some distribution across people and across issues of cognitive demands of self-government. [...] Monitorial citizens tend to be defensive rather than proactive. [...] The monitorial citizen engages in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering. Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. [...] They look inactive, but they are poised for action if action is required. The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else” (1998a:310-311).

In a compatible manner, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that pundits, politicians, and social scientists are wrong to believe that Americans are populists. They level a powerful critique

of participatory enthusiasts' claim that "people must really want to participate but are just turned off by some aspect of the political system" (2002:3, 127).

Most people have strong feelings on few if any of the issues the government needs to address and would much prefer to spend their time in nonpolitical pursuits. Rather than wanting a more active, participatory democracy, a remarkable number of people want what we call stealth democracy. [...] The people want to be able to make democracy visible and accountable on those rare occasions when they *are* motivated to be involved. They want to know that the opportunity will be there. [...] Until that time, however, most people prefer not to be involved and therefore desire unobtrusive accountability. (2)

Americans not only don't want to be responsible for governance, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue, they "do not even want to be placed in a position where they feel obligated to provide input to those who *are* making political decisions" (131). Americans "are unenthusiastic about representative, not to mention direct, democracy" (149), and "most merely equate democracy with freedom" (150). Americans mostly just want to ensure that elites don't profit from their offices (2); the great fear of the American people is "being played for suckers" (130, 235). This fear is what has led to the false impression that American citizens want more involvement: "Since the people constitute one obvious check on the ability of decision makers to be self-serving, it often appears as though the people want more political influence for themselves, when in fact they just do not want decision makers to be able to take advantage of them" (2, 87-88, 139). Given the single-axis scale used by most surveys, the only way that respondents have possessed for indicating their displeasure with representative government has been to assert the importance of a greater role for the people. When Hibbing and Theiss-Morse offered multiple axes on which to chart a preference, respondents' true preference emerged: to censure broken representative government *and* to remain uninvolved (2002:88). "The ideal form of government, in the opinion of many people, is one in which they can defer virtually all political decisions to

government officials but at the same time trust those officials to be in touch with the American people and to act in the interest of those people and not themselves” (159). A different theory of representation is therefore needed (150-151), which Hibbing and Theiss-Morse articulate like this: “What most people usually want out of their representative is not particular roll-call votes or policy outcomes [...] but a general sense that those in government understand and care what life is like for ordinary people.”²³ In sum, “people’s preference [is] for a democracy that is not particularly democratic (but can be made to be if needed) but which renders it impossible for decision makers to act on the basis of selfish motivations” (86). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse call this “stealth democracy.”

It is useful to connect Schudson’s and Hibbing/Theiss-Morse’s theories to participatory scales like Arnstein’s ladder (1969) and the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (2014). Arnstein assesses degrees of citizen participation from “non-participation” through “token” forms of participation to various kinds of “citizen control.” The IAP2 chart similarly moves from officers “informing” the public about decisions, to officers “consulting” or “involving” the public, to full “collaboration” between officers and citizens, to “empowerment” of citizens to make the final decision. Critiques of participatory democracy hold that most or all of a political community’s

²³ Schudson (1998b) makes an amusing, apt observation that piggybacks on this point from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse: Because American political vocabulary is dominated by the informational concept of citizenship, one often finds that candidates in apolitical contests (“elections of team captains, class presidents of student councils, elections in fraternities and sororities, most elections of school boards, many elections of local government, and most elections in professional associations”) nonetheless “feel obliged [...] to concoct some pseudo-policy statements [even though] only under the most unusual circumstances would any voter decide on this basis.” Chapter 2’s discussion of Northmont’s elections illustrated this phenomenon--as well as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s larger point about representational ideals--in action.

politics will (and should) occur on lower rungs of these ladders. Monitorial/stealth democracy grants that occasional climbs up the ladder are an important part of the system.

TOWN MEETING AS MONITORIAL/STEALTH DEMOCRACY: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Schudson described a democracy based on two sets of institutions: one to keep citizens shallowly exposed to political affairs, the other to enable deeper dives and meaningful intervention if and when their alarms ring. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, meanwhile, identified three characteristics of stealth democracy: “a democracy that is [1] not particularly democratic (but [2] can be made to be if needed) but [3] which renders it impossible for decision makers to act on the basis of selfish motivations” (2002:86; numbering added).

Town meeting exhibited exactly these features. Schudson and Hibbing/Theiss-Morse, though, had identified town meeting as the embodiment of what they were arguing against.²⁴ What do we learn by seeing town meeting not as the embodiment of participatory democracy but as the embodiment of monitorial/stealth democracy?

²⁴ Schudson (1998a:16-19), Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002:239, 205, 169, 40, 92-93, 95). Schudson’s attitude toward town meeting is not explicitly negative, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s is. What he does do is show how it embodies a model of citizenship (consensual, communal) that is different from the several contemporary models (informational, rights-bearing, and monitorial). Elsewhere he also expresses a general skepticism about deliberative democracy in the town meeting vein (Schudson 1997).

First, the recharacterization alone will be of interest to my New Englander and participatory democracy audiences. The recharacterization will affect how practitioners and reformers approach town meeting. It even may help provide the missing vocabulary that I mentioned previously: for locals to be able to express the simultaneously participatory and officer-centric nature of what they do implicitly. My recharacterization also should affect how the broader field of participatory democracy studies uses town meeting to think with. For some purposes, town meeting now should *not* be used as a model for participatory enterprises. For other purposes, town meeting may still be a terrific inspiration--and its actual contours as a highly complex mediation between officers and citizens, rather than its imagined contours as naked direct democracy, may in fact make it *more* useful to think with.

There is a larger way, though, that town meeting now becomes useful to think with. I suggest that “strong democracy” and “weak democracy” are not opposed after all, but are interdependent or even related. The first thing we can observe is that participatory democracy is a crucial backstop for monitorial/stealth democracy. Schudson and Hibbing/Theiss-Morse both acknowledge that some form of increased citizen participation must be available as monitorial/stealth democracy’s rarer phase.²⁵ The field of participatory democracy studies will be indispensable for developing appropriately designed and practiced institutions for this phase.

Participatory democracy scholars and practitioners, however, are unlikely to be happy at the prospect of redirecting their energies toward designing backup institutions that will be used only rarely. That redirection would be a significant demotion of impact and prestige. Fortunately for them, the town meeting findings suggest that participatory democracy has a greater role than

²⁵ Recall that even the patron saint of participatory democracy suggested that the minimal commitment of an active citizenry was to gather periodically to deliberate whether the present representative arrangement was still satisfactory (Rousseau 1762:119-120 [III.18.6-8])

that. In Northmont, the participatory component of monitorial/stealth democracy couldn't be neatly hived off as a stage. This was so in multiple regards.

First is the temporal interpenetration of the two phases--the rapidity and the fluidity with which they alternated. Citizens and officers foxtrotted in circles and zigzags across scales like Arnstein's. They did so year by year, topic by topic, speaker by speaker, and utterance by utterance. Town meeting may be exceptional in the extent to which it careened across the scale--and town meeting also is an institution where the power of the people to sweep in at higher rungs is unusually literalized in law and in structure and in practitioner culture--but I suspect that few democratic systems display *no* such fluidity. A city official's constituent forum, for instance, often passes in and out of Arnstein's rungs spanning from "manipulation" to "consultation" and "placation."

In theory, a sufficiently sensitive and granular analysis could capture an institution's moment-by-moment escalations and descents, even for an institution that yo-yos as much as town meeting. My own analysis earlier in the chapter was just such an effort. But what comes out of being able to identify the rung at any given moment? What would come from trying to boil an institution's movement down to an overall score?²⁶ Instead, what matters may be the patterns of transition among rungs. That is, something like Arnstein's ladder should be applied in *two* dimensions, with a temporal or kinetic dimension complementing the verticality. Examining a given democratic institution, our key question then would be not "which?" (strong or weak) but "which when?"

²⁶ For instance, one might develop a method to average the different rung plotments that occurred across a process. Alternatively, one could say that an institution's overall score were whatever the lowest rung is at any part of the process. Etc.

Another approach entirely is to reconsider what counts as “participation.” Something that the town meeting case illustrates particularly well is that there is a whole realm of “participatory” activity within “weakly democratic” representative institutions. (Chapter 2 showed us another version of this point.) In town meeting, the engagement of citizens with their officers was hands-on, it was time-intensive, it was impactful, and had the kinds of transformative effects upon individuals and communities that participatory democracy enthusiasts celebrate. In many key regards, therefore, this engagement with representatives resembled the participation of traditional participatory theory. How have we ended up with a theoretical lens that casts such participation as “weak”?

As participatory democracy enthusiasts and critics have argued about which rung of Arnstein’s ladder American democracy should be practiced at, I wonder if they have gotten mutually caught up in an assumption that participation is unidimensional. Such scales imply that participation is a zero-sum game: the more officers control, the less citizens do, and vice versa. Could we instead plot citizen and officer activity on separate axes? Can control be seen as a relational product rather than as a possession?

In asking these questions, I am inspired by trying to view my fieldwork through Scott’s (1990, 2012a, 2012b) discussion of “infrapolitics” (kinds of political activity that are “below the visible spectrum”), and his discussion of what I think of as a political science version of the fundamental attribution error: observers tend to attribute political outcomes to the agency of leaders rather than to sociopolitical contexts or to the accumulation of millions of subtle actions by the masses. For instance, Scott (2012:22-29) draws upon Branch (1988) to show that charismatic leadership is largely dependent upon improvisational trial and error, with the reactions of the mass guiding the behavior and positions of the leader. This influence of the

crowd, Scott argues, constitutes a special kind of collective action. The results of that collective action, though, are attributed to the agency of the leader. The action of a citizenry upon representatives is similar. At town meeting, all of the <<DUE DILIGENCE>> + <<SETTLING>> activity *appears* to be a matter of the assembly following in officers' groove, but that is to overlook what an involved task it is to oversee officers in that manner. It is to overlook the extraordinary amount of overt and subtle disciplining and steering of officers that is occurring as citizens *appear* to be trailing in representatives' wake. With just a little bit of extra attention, we can recognize the participatory potential of certain forms of "weak" democracy. A participatory democrat then can reconsider the assumption that the goal is to climb as high as possible on Arnstein's ladder. Strong, rich participatory institutions might be possible to build at many of the lower rungs as well, because the lower rungs actually can be driven by the higher.

APPENDIX A. Coding Categories

I -- NON-DISCUSSION

<<ELECTIONS>> ELECTIONS FOR LOCAL OFFICES

- <nom> nominations plus moderator facilitation of elections
- <speech> candidate speeches
- <voteE> balloting and vote counting

<<REP>> FACE-TIME WITH THE DISTRICT'S STATE LEGISLATOR

- <rep> presentation by and Q&A with the district's state legislator

II -- DISCUSSION

II.a -- NOT ACTUALLY DISCUSSION

<<PROCEDURAL>>

- <mod> moderator facilitation, voice voting, pro forma process, etc.
 - Moderator activity during elections is included under <nom> rather than here.
 - includes when an officer other than the moderator took on a facilitation role (for instance: a Select Board member or the Town Clerk)
 - includes the corrections to the town report given at the beginning of the meeting by town officers
- <help> a member of the assembly helping the moderator or otherwise acting in a facilitation or process role
 - includes genuine points of order (discussion, heat, etc. that's veiled as a point of order doesn't count!)
 - includes requests for speakers to speak up or use the microphone, or to repeat themselves
 - includes asking for clarification about "what are we discussing right now?"
 - includes helping to clarify confusing motion text through purely technical explanation (non-technical explanations are <contrib>) or amendment, when it's a purely technical problem (non-technical amendments are <fine> or <amend>)
- <tech> a purely technical question from a member of the assembly about procedure
- <voteM> balloting (or hand voting) and counting on a motion
- <priv> a point of personal privilege or another extra-meeting announcement

II.b -- ACTUAL DISCUSSION

II.b(1) -- DISCUSSION THAT WASN'T LOCAL GOVERNANCE

<<COMM>> COMMUNITY TOGETHERNESS

- <ann> announcements of meetings, recruiting, news, etc.
- <info> an assembly member pursuing curiosity about the community or about town happenings (including town government), learning about them. Doesn't advance deliberation and isn't intended to.
- <infoo> explanatory response by an officer to <info>
- <wag> waggish call-outs. Purely humorous; not intended to advance deliberation.
- <recog> public recognition or praise
 - Also includes valorizing public service or the community.
- <volun> volunteering for something or offering some sort of assistance to the town

<<SIR>> Social Issues Resolutions (SIRs)

- <sir> discussion of a SIR
 - Includes all SIRs, regardless of whether raised from the floor or petitioned onto the warning
- <sir-***> *** of a SIR (e.g., <sir-arg>, <sir-call>, <sir-amend>)

II.b(2) -- DISCUSSION THAT WAS LOCAL GOVERNANCE

<<OFFICER>> engagement between citizens and officers regarding officer conduct

- <off> assembly members speaking to officers: complaining, thanking, inquiring, monitoring, pressuring, warning...
 - Sometimes <off> talk veers toward <init>, and is tagged as the latter.
- <offo> responses by officers to <off>: defending, justifying, explaining, acknowledging...

<<DUE DILIGENCE>> due diligence before ratification of a motion

- <due> becoming informed, learning about the background/intent/impact of the motion
 - Does not include questions about procedural technics, which are <tech>.
 - Carries no hint of controversy, concern, wariness, or veiled argument or criticism. Questions that do carry such an overtone are tagged <contrib> or <arg> instead.
- <dueo> explanatory response to <due> by, or explanations that are offered preemptively
 - Explanations that veer into argumentation or persuasion are coded as <argo> instead.
- <fine> fine-tuning a motion: making technical fixes or minor adjustments (whether through formal amendment or informal expression).
 - E.g., a clarification that an experienced Lister should receive “plus one dollar *per hour*” rather than “plus one dollar” *for the year*.
- <fineo> explanatory response by officer to <fine>

<<SETTLING>> settling the questions on the warning, working within the terms and framework of the question as given.

- <<SETTLING>> is when the assembly solves its own way through the problem or resolves what officers have laid out; <<DUE DILIGENCE>> is when they just check the officers' math.
- <arg> argumentation, persuasion
- <arg> participation by officer in <arg>
- <contrib> contributions to collective problem-solving
- <contribo> contribution to collective problem-solving by officer, including response to a <contrib> question
- <call> call the question / table / pass over / postpone indefinitely

<<AMENDMENT>> proposal and discussion of substantive modifications to articles

- <amend> amendment
 - Superficial and technical amendments (cleanup, mechanical correction) instead are <fine> or <help>.
 - When a main motion is initially moved in a way that deviates from what's in the warning, I counted this as an amendment even though within Robert's Rules it is technically not one. Substantively and practically, it is identical to an amendment. See the further discussion in the main text.
 - When someone else amended the deviated main motion in order to restore it to the warning version, that was *not* considered an amendment.
- <amend-***> *** of an amendment (e.g., <amend-arg>, <amend-contrib>)

<<CREATIVITY>>

- <init> initiation of a new action/topic/request/concern/etc. (SIRs excluded)
- <inito> response by officer to <init>
- <init-***> *** of an initiated thing (e.g., <init-arg>, <init-contrib>)
- <larger> speak to a larger issue
- <larger-***> *** of a <larger> (e.g., <larger-arg>)
- <link> link the current issue to something else that the warning hadn't foreseen or had structurally discouraged. Could be a prior issue from the warning or an external issue.
- <pet> item petitioned onto the warning (other than SIRs)
 - There were no instances of this in my 2009-2016 sample.
- <pet-***> *** of a petitioned issue (e.g., <pet-arg>)
 - There were no instances of this in my 2009-2016 sample.

APPENDIX B. The Current Golden Age

APPENDIX SUMMARY

If Chapter 4 is convincing, the New England town meeting of the 21st century emerges as a tremendously successful implementation of participatory democracy, but--counter to expectation--participatory democracy in a representative mode. The temptation of many readers will be to assume that this represents a deterioration from an earlier golden age of direct democracy. This appendix is meant to quash this "golden age"-ism. Through a close analysis of Northmont's town meeting warnings and annual town reports I show that, from 1895 (when the town archive of the necessary records begins) through the present, the balance of power between town officers and town meeting assemblies has shifted steadily toward the latter. Together, Chapter 4 and this appendix therefore present a double portrait of town meeting in the 21st century. On the one hand, town meeting has gained rather than lost ground as an instrument of direct democracy. On the other hand, even with that gain, town meeting's mechanics are best analyzed within the framework of representative democracy.

Introduction

If Chapter 4 is convincing, the New England town meeting of the 21st century emerges as a tremendously successful implementation of participatory democracy, but--counter to expectation--participatory democracy in a representative mode. The temptation of many readers will be to assume--given the reputation of *Town Meeting* discussed in Chapter 1--that this

represents a deterioration from an earlier state of direct democracy. After all, according to conventional wisdom both in and outside New England, the town meeting is a dying institution.²⁷ I fear that this pessimistic “golden age”-ism will color--or even invert--readers’ interpretation of Chapter 4.

The present chapter is meant to quash this “golden age”-ism and thereby give Chapter 4’s heterodox portrait room to breathe. Through a close analysis of Northmont’s town meeting warnings and annual town reports I show that, from 1895 (when the town archive of the necessary records begins) through the present, the balance of power between town officers and town meeting assemblies has shifted steadily toward the latter. In the fin de siècle town meeting, the citizenry pulled from a far, far smaller repertoire in managing the conduct of their officers. They had few tools for--and apparently limited interest in--proactively shaping the future conduct of their officers, as opposed to retrospectively assessing officer performance. (Obviously punishment or reward of past deeds will have disciplinary effects upon future behavior, but I am speaking of the absence of additional institutional tools.) Essentially, each year the town meeting considered merely whether either to censure or celebrate its officers and whether to say “yes” or “no” to questions prepared by those officers. As the century wore on, the repertoire expanded, with town meetings issuing increasingly detailed, increasingly proactive direction to their officers. That’s to say, the town meeting has been legislating at an increasingly greater level of detail. Over the past 120+ years, then, the best contender for town meeting’s golden age, at least when it comes to viewing town meeting as an instantiation of direct democracy, is... right now.

²⁷ E.g., Kelley (2017), Clark and Bryan (2005:15), McCarthy (2004), Nichols (2000), Rimer (1993), Shribman (1986), Sale (1980b:497), B.Taylor (1973), NCR (1965), Frankel (1962:40-41, 195-196, 222 index entry), Millard (1940), Hormell (1932:15-16), Sly (1930:162-164, 213; 1933:426), Dealey (1928), Sedgwick (1897), Hart (1893:343), Brackett (1892:577).

To be fair, I have followed Northmont's records back only to 1895. The possibility remains that some period from the 19th, 18th, or 17th century is "golden-er" than the current decade. In fact, work by historians on successive periods of the long 18th century suggests that the New England town meeting has gone through multiple cycles between empowered Select Boards paired with passive citizenries, and closely tethered Select Boards paired with hands-on citizenries.²⁸ One of those upswings certainly has the potential to rival or exceed the degree of direct democracy in the current decade.

Fair enough, bluff called: my chapter title is polemical. The point is not to insist that the 21st century is *superlatively* golden, but to shock readers into abandoning the premise of golden age-ism. Whether the contemporary town meeting is experiencing its superlative iteration, or whether it merely is on an upswing (one of many in its history), town meeting is *not diminishing*.

Together, Chapter 4 and this appendix therefore present a double portrait of town meeting in the 21st century. On the one hand, town meeting has gained rather than lost ground as an instrument of direct democracy. On the other hand, even with that gain, town meeting's mechanics are best analyzed within the framework of representative democracy

Four Developments

There are four key ways that fin de siècle town meetings differed from the meetings of recent years.

First, neither the warning nor the information in the town report provided any framework for proactive action by the citizenry. In the present, the report information provides no more than

²⁸ Lockridge (1970:48-49, 119-126), Lockridge and Kreider (1966), Cook (1976:42), Ferraro (1991).

a modest framework, but modest is greater than negligible.

Second, fin de siècle officers had nearly perfect discretion over municipal expenditures. On Town Meeting Day their spending habits were subject to review but not advanced channeling, because the citizenry set bucket tax *rates* but did no *budgeting*. In the present, an array of itemized budgets are presented for discussion and possible amendment.²⁹

Third, accounting in the annual town reports was organized according to the person who approved each expense, thus enabling an immediate picture of which officers should be blamed or appreciated. The present method of listing or summarizing expenses by *type* somewhat reduces the possibilities for assessing individual officers but in exchange facilitates holistic thinking and planning by the citizenry.

Fourth, fin de siècle officers' annual reports were oriented toward defending their records, and they offered almost no additional editorializing on the state of the town or its future, as contemporary officers do. This suggests that they anticipated scrutiny of their record at town meetings... and no other activity, especially not planning.

The Warning and The Town Report

The most straightforward possible evidence for the kinds of decisions that the Northmont citizenry made is the warning, which literally set out the questions to be answered. Although the last article on every warning was some variation of, "To do any other proper business," binding action could be taken only on those questions that were warned, and a strong body of case law

²⁹ Note that in legal terms the majority of these lines serve merely as advisory guidance to the Select Board. Woe to any board, however, that tries to rely solely on this legal fact as a justification for deviation.

developed in the 1820s-1840s (J.F.Dillon 1872:238-239) detailed just how slightly an assembly could stray from the parameters of the original article. The warnings therefore establish an upper limit of how extensive the self-governance might have been at earlier town meetings: if an activity or function wasn't visible on the warrant, the citizenry couldn't have been engaging in it.

Later we will attempt to identify where the lower limit was.

Figure 4.11 reproduces the warning for the 1895 town meeting. What business do we see here? A number of articles concern the election, duties, and compensation of officers: Articles 1 and 9 enable the assembly to elect officers; Article 3 enables the assembly to set officers' salaries; Article 4 enables the duties of the Constable to be adjusted within certain state-established parameters. Another set of articles concern taxes: Articles 5, 6, and 10 enable money to be raised for the town's general, highway, and school expenses, respectively, and then Articles 7 and 8 enable the assembly to determine the specific methods by which those taxes will be collected. These latter articles would have been pro forma decisions, decided the same way every year. Articles 11, 12, and 13 enable the assembly to make specific policy decisions (build a new school, establish a library), with Articles 11 and 13 having the additional function, along with Article 14, of enabling the assembly to direct its officers to make certain expenditure. Article 2 enables a reaction to the accomplishments, misdeeds, or non-accomplishments of various officers during the prior year.

TOWN MEETING.

THE INHABITANTS of the Town of [REDACTED], who are
Legal Voters in Town Meeting, are hereby warned to meet at the
Nelson. Hall & Co's Hall, (known as the Stiles Hall) at [REDACTED] at the
Center, on Tuesday, the 5th day of March, next, at 10 o'clock a. m.
for the following purpose :

1. To choose necessary Officers for the year ensuing.
2. To act on the several reports submitted.
3. To make proper allowance for services.
4. To see if the Town will vote to extend the Constable's Jurisdiction over the State.
5. To raise money and provide for current expenses for the year ensuing.
6. To see if the Town will vote to raise any money for repairing Highways in addition to what the law requires.
7. To see what action the Town will take for collecting Highway and other Taxes.
8. To see if the Town will vote to accept the provisions of Sections 382 to 388 inclusive, of the Revised Laws, as amended, relating to the collection of Taxes by the Town Treasurer, under Act of 1830.
9. To elect County, Grand and Petit Jurors.
10. To see if the Town will vote to raise any money additional for the support of Schools.
11. To see if the Town will vote to build a School House at or near Hectorville.
12. To see if the Town will elect a board of Library Trustees and instruct such board to make an application to the State Board of Library Commissioners, under Act No. 37, Acts of 1894.
13. To see what sum, if any, the Town will appropriate for the maintainance of a Free Public Library.
14. To see if the Town will vote any appropriation for Decoration Day.
15. To do any other business proper to be done when met.

S. G. JEWETT,
W. G. MANSFIELD, } SELECTMEN.
H. H. CLAPP,

Figure 4.11: Northmont's town meeting warning from 1895
Source: 1895 annual town report of "Northmont," VT, p. 2

The majority of articles prompted specific if not stereotyped action from the assembly:
"yes"/"no" decisions reactive to the question as posed by officers, or formulaic actions within

limited choice menus. We also need to consider, though, the relationship between assembly and officers during deliberations, especially with regard to the specifics of budgeting. Did the town meeting assembly primarily review its officers' actions of the prior year, leaving the next year's officers the leeway to make decisions according to their own best judgment (perhaps with their predecessors' recent disciplining in mind and almost certainly with cognizance that they would face similar scrutiny twelve months hence)? Or did it devise and assert relatively extensive mandates to be observed by its next batch of officers, after strictly evaluating the prior officers' observance of the prior year's mandates? With regard to budgeting specifically, how much earmarking (either legally binding or informal) did the citizenry do?

For these questions, the warning offers no insight, and we must turn to other sources. Northmont's minutes, like those of most towns of the period, offer little detail on the assembly's deliberations en route to the final decision that was reached. They do not indicate even how much time was spent on each article. Thus, as far as the minutes are concerned, a pro forma or lightly discussed vote looks identical to a heavily debated one. Likewise, the minutes offer little that could distinguish a discussion in which speakers might have announced expectations for how officers should implement a decision in the coming year vs. a discussion where speakers offered no such direction. Even when amendments proposed from the floor are visible in the record, we rarely can know how to interpret them. Unless the margins of the amendment vote were recorded--and they often were not--an amendment supported by a couple of cranks in the assembly is indistinguishable from an amendment that represented a mass attempt to intervene into officer conduct. In some cases amendments even would have been proposed by the officers themselves, having realized an error or having changed their minds during the long lag after the warning's publication.

Since the direct record of events is not helpful, we can turn instead to a source of indirect evidence: the annual town report. The town report, contrary to its name, is not merely a retrospective of the prior year, although that certainly is one of its crucial functions. As the document that contains the most easily accessible copy of the warning, and as something that citizens literally have in their hands as the meeting proceeds, it also very much shapes how the meeting unfolds. In the present, I've witnessed the report be cited numerous times in every meeting by both assembly members and officers. Since the report is published in advance of the meetings, it also provides the primary framework for community members' pre-meeting discourse too--the gossip, commentary, planning, and posturing that occurs within and between everyone's social networks. Historical accounts (e.g., MacDonald 1895:197; Hart 1903:173; Gould 1940) indicate that the reports functioned no differently during the prior 120 or more years.

The key methodological point for us is this: the report is/was a reference book of whatever information is/was crucial to a year's deliberations. If we assume that a reference work will be designed to facilitate the purposes for which it's meant to serve as a reference, the structure and contents of the report therefore can be used as a clue to what kind of debate occurred at town meeting, what kind of decisions were made, and what the boundaries and interplay was between the year-long activities of elected officers and the annual assembly of citizens in town meeting. Year by year going back, we can trace the changing nature of the town report as a proxy for the changing nature of town meetings.

Unfortunately, records from the first full century of Northmont's settlement are not

available, but we can pick up the story from the first extant town report, 1895.³⁰ That year's booklet stands as a fair representative of those for the following five to ten years (and thus possibly for some number of prior years as well, since the annual report's early 20th century evolution exhibit a "punctuated equilibrium": periods of stability in format and structure tended to last for ten to twenty years). The exact order of officer reports goes through minor permutations, and different report sections come in or out,³¹ but the essence is reflected in 1895.

³⁰ A note on the dating system of town reports: The March town meeting always discusses the prior fiscal year's affairs, and town report booklets are titled according to the year in which the last day of the fiscal calendar fell. Prior to 1947, Northmont's fiscal year ended in January or February of the same year as the town meeting. Thus, the "1920" town report, covering the period from Feb. 2nd, 1919 to Feb. 6th, 1920, was discussed at the town meeting held in March of 1920; its title belies the fact that most of the material it covers is from 1919. When Northmont in 1947 made its fiscal year coincide with the calendar year, the March meeting therefore started occurring in the "plus one" year to the year being discussed. For instance, the "2009" town report, covering the period Jan. 1st, 2009 to Dec. 31st, 2009, was discussed at the town meeting held in March of 2010. (An especially attentive reader will have realized that the transition year of 1947 produced a unique result: two years in a row of town reports titled "1947": first the one that covered the 12 month period from Feb. 1st, 1946 through Jan. 31st, 1947, and then the one that covered the 11 month period from Feb. 1st, 1947 through Dec. 31st, 1947, which was required to get the town onto the normal January through December period starting with the "1948" report.)

The post-1947 titling system is more precise at identifying the business year being discussed, but it can be confusing in its own way: if someone refers to the "2009 meeting," depending on context they might be referring either to the *meeting* that was held in 2009 (during which the affairs of 2008 were discussed), or they might be referring to the meeting held in 2010 during which *the affairs* of 2009 were discussed. Since my sources in this chapter are the town report booklets, all years referred to are the year of the booklet title. The minor consistency achieved by calling e.g. the 1940 business year "1940" instead of its booklet title of "1941" are more than offset I think by the disadvantages from bibliographic confusion.

³¹ E.g., a town library was founded in 1896 and a library report was thus contained for the first time in the 1897 booklet; as an example of the reverse, the Liquor Agency was missing for a year in 1899.

The Absence of Year-ahead Budgeting

What does the town report look like in 1895? No table of contents was provided--that device didn't appear until 1934--but Figure 4.12 shows what it would have looked like if we assemble all the titles of sections and subsections.

[Title page]	1
[Warning]	2
“Selectmen’s Report”	3
“Orders drawn for current year”	3
“Road Commissioner’s Report”	6
[Work authorized by the legacy commissioner]	6
[Work authorized by the incoming commissioner]	6
“Overseer of Poor and Sup’t Poor-House Association”	8
“Liquor Agency Report”	9
“Dog License Fund”	10
“Trustee U.S. Surplus Fund Report”	10
“Treasurer’s Report”	11
“Ministerial Fund”	11
“Town School Fund”	11
“Highway Fund”	11
“Contingent Fund”	12
“Assets and Liabilities”	13
“School Director’s Report”	13
“Orders drawn for the year ending Feb. 9, 1895”	13
“Expenses of Schools”	16
“Auditor’s Report”	16

Figure 4.12: Simulated table of contents for the 1895 Town Report

Diving into the pages, what can we surmise about the functions to which the booklet was put? A resident familiar with reports from the 2010s finds something glaringly absent: budgets. Year-prior accounting abounds, but one looks in vain for year-ahead figures. This was because elected officers were delegated enormous financial responsibility by the citizenry. The latter set

only the raw tax rate, without distributing the resulting revenue via earmarks or line items. The minimal guidance the citizens provided came in two forms.

First, they actually set *three* tax rates, not just one: one to fund roads, one to fund schools, and one for a general fund (“contingent Select Board”).³² This mechanism allowed for only the roughest degree of fund allocation. Furthermore, while in theory the town meeting assembly had complete jurisdiction over the tax rates, in practice it was rare for them not to ratify the rates recommended by their officers.

Second, the warrant occasionally included articles proposing allocations of funds toward specific ends--whether to raise a certain amount for e.g. the library or a Memorial Day celebration or a new school facility. This too was a blunt instrument, and in any case it 1) drove only a fraction of town expenditures, and 2) was exercised irregularly.

The officers themselves did not develop a budget in order to produce their tax rate recommendations. They simply used the prior year’s expenses as a baseline, then applied a crude sense of what might be changing in the new year. Here are the 1895 town Auditors making their recommendation for the tax rates:

We find the financial condition of affairs in a better condition than last year; but, in view of the fact, that under the new law the Towns furnish school books for the next season, it would seem, if there is no unusual call upon the Treasury for the year ensuing, that about the same amount, viz: 60 cents on the Grand List, would be a conservative estimate for contingent expenses.

³² In some decades the number of tax rates proliferated into additional buckets: highway was subdivided into “winter roads” vs. “permanent/summer roads,” and at times was subdivided further into “resurfacing” and/or “highways”; capital expenses were covered by a sporadic “special” bucket or by named rates such as “maintenance” or “library”; indebtedness repayment sometimes became a devoted category for which new taxes were raised, as opposed to being a residual effect of whether Select Board parsimony created a surplus that could be put toward debt; certain department budgets like the fire department in different years split from and merged back into the general fund; etc.

The pools of money that resulted from each of the three tax rates were channeled by the relevant town officers with complete discretion, ad hoc over the course of the year. Moreover, when push came to shove the officers weren't limited even by the size of the pool. It wasn't unusual for their ad hoc expenses to sum to more, and they simply took the town into debt that had to be paid back down by raising a future year's tax rate.³³ The real power of the citizenry lay only in the ability to retrospectively pass judgment on whether increased indebtedness was merited. The tax rate buckets established by the citizenry therefore should be seen much less as a proactive stricture upon officers' activity than as an initial stab at defraying possible expenses in advance.

An exception that proves the rule occurred in 1910. In that year's report, the Auditors castigated the Select Board and Town Treasurer for paying a debt in a different manner than ordered by town meeting: "The Selectmen or Town Treasurer seems to have deliberately disregarded the wish of the voters in that respect[...] We think that when the voters vote a sum of money, that those that have it in charge should be in duty bound to use it for the purpose voted and none other." In other words, on those occasions when the citizenry *did* engage in earmarking, its rarity made it serious.

There is no doubt that informal social control was a major dynamic of the early 20th century town meeting. The assembly's ability to put officers publicly in a hot seat and to exert various other kinds of moral and social pressure caused officers to self-discipline throughout the year. No doubt some members of the assembly, and the assembly as a whole, also exerted verbal and moral pressure upon officers during meetings to do X or Y or Z specific things during the

³³ If overages ran several years in a row, sometimes the board would propose that a special tax rate for "indebtedness" be set for a few years, on top of the tax rates for roads, schools, and contingent Select Board.

coming year. But the story we are telling here is how social control, which has been a constant across town meeting's history, was augmented as the 20th century progressed by additional technologies of officer control.

One of the most powerful such technologies was the year-ahead budget. Northmont's first year-ahead budgets appeared in the 1920s, pioneered by the school. (We will see the school's precociousness emerge as a pattern.) Decades later, in 1959, the town followed suit, printing a table of estimated revenue followed by estimated itemized expenses. With this development, town meeting finally had a framework in place for commentary upon and amendment of officers' *future* activity. Minor officers and individual town departments, though, continued to escape such direction for additional decades: the Rec Committee, for instance, didn't supplement its prior-year accounting with a year-ahead budget until the early 1980s, the town Constable not until 1997, and the Fire and Rescue departments not until 1997.

Thus, where once town officers had possessed all but perfect discretion over expenditures, during the second half of the 20th century the balance of influence shifted significantly toward the citizenry. Social control continued to be exerted upon officers, but in addition to this, the meeting also produced a new product: a detailed prescriptive budget.

Attributional vs. Typological Thinking

The timeline of decreasing officer discretion over expenditure was mirrored by the rise of a new bookkeeping technology: typological thinking, as opposed to attributional. In 1895 each

department's expenses were listed in the simple chronological order of their occurrence.³⁴ There was no attempt whatsoever to provide tallies for things like how much it had cost the town to pay all of its officers, or what the aggregate cost of labor vs. materials had been on the highways, or of bridge repair vs. highway planks. (The exception again is the school, which summed the costs for each of the town's 10 districts into four categories: "incidentals," "repairs," "wood," and "teachers".) That kind of categorization occurred only crudely and incidentally, insofar as the different boards and offices had different jurisdictions. Yet even in that regard there was overlap, with numerous road and liquor expenses landing under the Select Board.

The organizing principle of the 1895 report, then, was *attribution of responsibility*. It was designed to let citizens understand whom to blame if they were unhappy about something. As is visible in the 1895 table of contents that we constructed earlier, the reports even went so far as to distinguish specific individuals *within* an office for cases of mid-year turnover such as the incoming vs. legacy Road Commissioner.

The first year that any town department--the school--supplemented its itemizations with even a crude summation of expense areas was 1916. The year 1934 finally saw--again in the school report--the replacement of date-organized itemization with categorized headings, and with some expenses being consolidated into a single lumped line (e.g., "cleaning") instead of listing each laborer and each outlay for materials. The school was uniquely precocious, however; as we see in Figure 4.13, the other departments not only continued the date organization, they made it

³⁴ Sometimes types of expenses *were* grouped together, but only by the accident that similar expenses sometimes *happened* right in a row. One example: the Select Board held all of its hearings in a single session for incidents from across the year of dog-caused livestock damage. The payouts for successful grievances thus all were issued at once. Similarly, for convenience and efficiency, the treasurer may have liked making similar disbursements all at once, thus layering a coincidental element of typologizing onto an underlying chronological method.

explicit, introducing month by month headings in 1921 and showing the “order number”³⁵ of each expense, which of course counted up neatly in increments of one.

SELECTMEN'S REPORT.		
January		
29.	1.	E. E. Cook, work on snow roller, \$2.25
31.	2.	██████████ Savings Bank & Trust Co., money hired, \$1500 school, \$500 winter work, 2,000.00
February		
16.	3.	Wm. Moffatt, plank as per bill, 10.95
16.	4.	E. E. Touchette, services as per bill, 65.57
March		
	5.	██████████ Savings Bank & Trust Co., money hired contingent expenses, 2,000.00
	6.	Lawrence Rossier, auditing, postage and telephone, 15.65
10.	7.	E. J. Martin, services ballot clerk year 1919-1920, 6.00
22.	8.	L. D. Garrett, services ballot clerk year 1919-1920, 6.00
22.	9.	Free Press Printing Co., printing town reports, 66.14
28.	10.	Chas. Purrier, 4 days' work auditing town account, 12.00
April		
17.	11.	██████████ Savings Bank & Trust Co., money hired for school and highway expenses, 2,000.00
17.	12.	E. S. Wright, overseer's orders, Feb. 2d to March 5th, 42.91
21.	13.	O. N. Kelton, probate beer Belle Lampher, 7.00
22.	14.	J. R. Smith, 4 days' auditing, 12.00
22.	15.	Geo. Fuller, part payment on listing, 25.00
May		
4.	16.	Mary Lambert, interest on \$1,000 due May 3, 1920, 40.00
5.	17.	Eugene Shorer, taxes paid, 1918, while in U. S. army, 5.34
6.	18.	Edward Meunier, taxes paid, 1918, while in U. S. army, 4.90

Figure 4.13: Date-ordered expenditure recording
Source: 1921 annual town report of "Northmont," VT, p. 3

³⁵ An “order”--in the sense of “directive” rather than “sequence”--is a bill that the town pays. The Select Board “signs the orders” at some point every meeting, which is to say, they direct that each bill be paid. In the date-organized system of the old reports, *both* senses of the word “order” are apt.

Not until the late date of 1945 did the Select Board start providing a rough summary similar to the school's of 1916. It was a tentative effort, though, disappearing for a year in 1948 before roaring back to life in 1949 when chronology finally was replaced outright with categorization. Every single expense still was listed, though, and only over the next half century years did the level of detail gradually get reduced. As late as 2001, the annual report still was printing sections like the one shown in Figure 4.14.

TOWN OFFICE BUILDING EXPENSE	
Blouin Bros., fuel oil	\$ 1,537.50
Citizens Util., electricity	1,298.64
Palmer Bros., rug rental	220.99
██████████, cleaning	1,020.00
██████████, rubbish removal yr 2000&1st qtr 2001	240.00
██████████, snow shoveling	275.00
██████████, removing ice from roof	270.00
Office Qtr., calcium chloride	34.10
██████████ Water Dept.	165.00
City Feed & Lumber, snow shovel	15.95
G&J Extinguishers, refill & service	96.10
██████████ Auto, ½ snowplowing & sand	215.50
██████████ Plumbing, toilet & faucets repair	296.85
██████████, flower bed care	176.53
██████████, repair & insulate attic	557.73
██████████ Nursery, xmas wreath	25.00
██████████, ballast & labor	31.40
St. of Vt. Dept. of Labor & Industry, boiler inspection	35.00
██████████, reimbursement of air conditioner & supplies	349.49
Sticks & Stuff, insulation & basement door	639.50
██████████, snow shoveling	50.00
	\$ 7,550.28

Figure 4.14: The persistence of detailed reporting (an example from 2001)
 Source: 2001 annual town report of "Northmont," VT, p. 25

It was in 2002, after a concerted effort by the Budget Committee and Town Clerk/Treasurer to redesign the annual report's financial reporting to be more "understandable and useful" (as they put it), that categorized reporting triumphed completely: the last vestiges of detailed itemization

disappeared in favor of categories like “maintenance” and “equipment.”

Systemic thinking was likewise muted in the older town reports, though the evolution there occurred more quickly. In 1899, the Auditors first provided a summation of the three tax rates to indicate a total town tax rate; the innovation came in and out of use in subsequent years. In 1933 a “summary of surplus and overdrafts of the several town accounts” preceded the treasurer’s report, displaying for the first time a serious cross-departmental conceptualization of the town as a unit, as opposed to the focus on individually culpable departments and officers.

Absence of Narrative Text

To a 21st century Northmonter reading the 1895 town report, even more glaring than the absence of year-ahead budgets might be the absence of narrative text. Aside from the warning and the Auditor’s report (discussed shortly), the booklet consists solely of expense accounting and fund balances. Entries like “Chas. Campbell, repairs and work on cemeteries, 7.75,” “Jerome Farnsworth, breaking roads, 10.00,” go on for pages. The one moment of novelty occurs in the Overseer of the Poor report, in which the financial tallies briefly give way to enumeration of a different sort: a sentence--with terminal punctuation and everything!--reporting on the population of the poor-farm. Other than that, and aside from the signatures by the officers responsible for each section, there is hardly a line that’s not a financial operation--an expense, a revenue, a transfer, a balance, or a tally.

Only two moments run counter to this presentation of raw accounting data. First, the Treasurer provided an unelaborated comparison of the current year’s level of indebtedness to the prior year’s. (“Leaving the indebtedness of the Town, \$705.10 [Line break.] As against \$1211.02 the previous year.”) At a glance, therefore, a reader would have acquired an initial sense of

whether the town officers had been effective stewards. If the answer were negative, the different officers' separate report sections then could be used to identify the proper placement of blame.

The second moment is the half-page Auditor's report, the booklet's only narrative section. At the time, and until late in the 20th century, the Auditors were responsible for compiling the booklet and verifying the information supplied by other officers. At minimum the Auditors merely had to attest to the accuracy of the information provided, but they customarily exercised two other roles as well: offering a dram of synthesizing judgment, and recommending a tax rate to the voters.³⁶ Auditors in Northmont occasionally passed up the chance for the last two, but 1895's report exhibits all three:

We the undersigned have examined the accounts of the several Town Officers and feel satisfied of their correctness and reliability, [...]

This much is a formula that reappears with variation to the present day. It satisfied the Auditors' minimum statutory responsibility.

[...] and it would seem the affairs of the Town have been generally very well and judiciously managed. [...]

Here we have an assessment of town officers' conduct, in very general terms. Then comes the passage already quoted above, the estimate of the contingent Select Board tax rate (Warning article #5):

[...] We find the financial condition of affairs in a better condition than last year; but, in view of the fact, that under the new law the Towns furnish school books for the next season, it would seem, if there is no unusual call upon the Treasury for the year ensuing, that about the same amount, viz: 60c. on the Grand List, would be a conservative estimate for contingent expenses. [...]

³⁶ In 1954 (with a short-lived precedent in 1936), a newly created Budget Committee took over the roles of tax rate recommendations and general commentary, leaving the Auditors only the role of making bookkeeping recommendations. The Select Board later assumed from the Auditors the responsibility for publishing the town report, thus shrinking the Auditors' responsibility to merely double checking the integrity of the books kept by the town Treasurer and other departments. To this day, however, the interior title page of the town report announces the "Auditors' Annual Report."

In closing, the Auditors direct readers' attention to the other two tax rates that would need to be set (Warning articles #6 and #10).

[...] As to highways and schools, those matters are of course considered separately under another head.

Given such limited analysis and editorializing, to whatever degree the Select Board members, Road Commissioners, Overseer of the Poor, Liquor Agent, Town Clerk/Treasurer, Surplus Fund Trustee, School Directors, and Auditors may have tried to set the terms of the conversation on town meeting day, they must have done it either verbally during the meeting itself or informally through social networks in advance of the meeting. In either case, officers hardly would have been different from, and hardly would have had an edge over, regular citizens, who no doubt were doing the very same things.

Can we reconstruct any aspect of the in-meeting conversations? The meeting minutes are not helpful; as we noted, they report only the vote results, not the course of deliberation. A clue is to be had in the town reports from the rare occasions when the Select Board or Road Commissioner did provide textual notes to accompany their financial accounts. In every one of these rare occasions, the reason was a preemptive defensiveness. When the Select Board included text in its report in 1919 (the first and last time for decades), it was to say, "In submitting this report to the voters we wish to add a few words in defense of our yearly increasing indebtedness in as much as our own account is concerned." (Note that, like with the 1895 Auditors' report quoted above, the Selectmen here are careful to point out the extent of their own jurisdiction, shouldering off responsibility for anything else onto the relevant other departments.) They also give a mea culpa: "One thing we have fallen down on miserably is our failure to collect our back taxes." A similar logic was at play in the one time in a century that the Tax Collector offered any text (it was 1943, and the next instance would be 1992):

The taxpayers may wonder why more real estate taxes were not collected during the past year. I have not had sufficient gas to travel around and no gas is allotted for such collections. Corresponding with delinquent payers has been tried several times and does not seem to work. All gas that I could spare has been used in collecting delinquent poll taxes which has been to a fair degree successful.

Or take the arch prickliness of the 1918 Road Commissioner in explaining back-road labor expenditures that he himself clearly thought were unreasonable: “The necessity of the amount used,” he wrote, “can be determined best by those who earned the amounts set opposite their respective names and by those living on our hill roads, not by those living on our main road leading through our villages.” The higher than usual spending on winter roads, he further maintained, were the result of the public demand for additional routes being maintained.

A handful of additional instances could be offered; each exhibits similar preemptive defensiveness, almost always about expenditures. We can conclude that officers anticipated scrutiny of their record... and no other activity, especially not planning or holistic thinking.

The rise of extended narrative text in officer reports occurred slowly. Once again, the school was the leader. On the town side, adoption occurred slowly. First came more frequent, somewhat more lengthy commentary by first the Auditors and then their institutional successors on the Budget Committee. A few additional sentences of analysis and opinion evolved into an occasional paragraph, then a half page. The half-decade starting in 1909 saw one peak of activity; 1949 marked another. The Budget Committee’s permanent establishment in 1954 marked an even more vigorous habit of textual commentary on expenditure and policy, and by 1958 their report contained not just the bare recommendations themselves but also extensive supporting explanation and argumentation. However, the Budget Committee became dramatically less active for much of the 1960s--I cannot explain why³⁷--and it took the

³⁷ Personnel on the committee did not change in any significant regard through this period.

committee most of the 1970s to recover to the same level of activity as the late 1950s. The 1970s, and through the 1980s and 1990s saw other officers' reports feature narrative text with greater and greater frequency, though still on and off. The clear culmination of the trend was reached in 2004, when the Select Board absorbed the Budget Committee's commentary role and started clockwork publication of a "state of the town" report, giving the section pride of place by printing it immediately after the warning. By the time I arrived for fieldwork five years later, every department was submitting an extensive narrative report. Preemptive defensiveness still abounds on specific points of performance, but that function now shares the stage with holistic thinking, future goals, and visionary planning. Figure 4.15 is an example of a 21st century narrative report.

What is the importance of this forward march of narrative text? The sheer increase does not matter as much as the simultaneous change in *content*. The old report format--the line by line record of officers' expenditures--invited citizens to scrutinize and discipline. Citizens could say: "Last year you did X; we the people dislike that you did, and we will replace you if you do not reform." The new format, in articulating goals and visions, invites counter-articulations: "You say you think you need to do X in the coming year, but we the people say the priority instead is to do Y."

Town Of

State of the Town 2015

1. The "State of the Town" is strong. We remain financially sound and continue to effectively manage our accounts and debt, while providing effective services and investing for future needs.

2. As proposed in the 2015 budget, the Municipal Tax Rate will increase about 4.3 cents. It is an ambitious plan that will no doubt raise some eyebrows. The Selectboard and Town departments believe the time is ripe to change some of the ways we do business, and to invest in new facilities, equipment, and people, all of which will position us to better meet future needs of our citizens. Some of the factors to consider include:

- [REDACTED]'s population has increased by over 20% in each of the last three U.S. censuses. In the most recent census our growth exceeded estimates and made [REDACTED] the 15th fastest growing town in Vermont.
- The Town-wide reappraisal is complete and more accurately reflects fair market value and tax burden fairness.
- Interest rates remain at historic lows. While never thrilled about taking on debt, if it's needed to benefit the Town, now is good time to act.

3. The 2014 annual report from the Vermont Dept. of Taxes shows we remain well below the median tax rates compared to other Vermont towns. Our 2014 Effective Municipal Tax Rate (.4008), which is an "apples to apples" comparison to other Vermont towns, ranked us the 84th lowest of 262 Cities/Villages/Towns and Gores in Vermont. Using the same measure, [REDACTED] had the 6th lowest Municipal rate, out of the [REDACTED] towns and villages in [REDACTED] County. If all things remained the same, our ranks using the projected 2015 rates would be about 96th and 7th, well below the State median and just below the County median. (The municipal effective tax rate is calculated by dividing the municipal taxes assessed by the equalized municipal grand list.)

4. The Selectboard and Water Commission met about 35 times in Regular and Special Meetings since Town Meeting 2014 to carry out the Town's business. In addition, members of the Board attended numerous other meetings representing the Town. We would like to review some of the developments and accomplishments of the past year, as well as highlight some of the additional challenges we see facing us all.

A. Proposed 2015 Budget

1. Summary: The proposed 2015 Municipal Budget is \$1,017,695. Approximately \$694,222 will need to be raised by taxes, an increase over the 2014 budget of \$69,087, about 10%.

Figure 4.15: 2015 "State of the Town" report by the Northmont Select Board
Source: 2015 annual town report of "Northmont," VT, pp. 25-29

a. Revenue: Non-Tax Budget Revenues increased by about \$47,000, due largely to more unreserved funds available, more Delinquent Tax collection, and reprogramming of the Teen Center Reserve funds, if approved.

b. Expenses: New or major expenses for 2015 include.

1) Increased wages and benefits reflecting the addition of one full time Public Works (Roads & Bridges and Buildings & Grounds) employee.

2) Increased expense of about \$3,500 for the Ambulance service provided by [REDACTED].

3) Continuation (level funding) of last year's \$8,000 increase in the Fire Department's appropriation.

4) A nearly \$4,000 increase for the Library.

5) An anticipated bond payment of \$40,000 for the proposed Town Office project.

6) \$6,340 to permanently install a Town-owned, emergency generator at the primary emergency shelter site, [REDACTED] Elementary School.

7) \$11,261 as the Town match for a grant for a Feasibility Study to move and restore the [REDACTED] Bridge at the Center recreation field.

c. Offsets: The Budget Committee notes several significant offsets in the proposed budget that somewhat mitigate the projected expenses. They include the reduction of the Health Care premium for the Town Clerk / Treasurer due to an Individual Plan versus the Family Plan, the application of part time road wages/benefits to the new full time position, and the reprogramming of Youth Center reserve funds discussed previously.

d. Format: The Board made several format changes to the budget to make it easier to understand and make comparisons.

B. Audit of the 2013 Accounts: An independent audit was completed by Angolano and Co. in September of 2014 and found no discrepancies or causes for concern. A copy of their September 2014 letter is included in this report. A copy of the full report is available by request at the Town Office. Our outgoing Treasurer continued to provide strong financial management and oversight and should be applauded for this effort. The new Treasurer will be encouraged to follow the same practices. Town Boards, Commissions and Officers also deserve credit for supporting our accounting and control procedures. We continue to put funds aside for periodic independent audits.

C. Fire Department: The Fire Department has added several new members to their roster and continues the training and other necessary work to be certified. Their first increment of new individual protective equipment was purchased at the end of 2014, but more is needed, including breathing apparatus, and this is reflected in their budget request (and will likely continue for the next few years as they build out their equipment inventory). They are looking at grant sources to help defray the cost but need to plan to be able to pay the full amount if those grants don't come through. They deserve kudos for raising nearly \$10,000 via fundraisers in 2014.

D. Ambulance Coverage: We will continue to contract with [REDACTED] for daytime (6:00am to 6:00pm) coverage which has increased in price as noted above. Our Ambulance service is still in need of EMTs and drivers. Please contact [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] if you can help out. Unless we see an increase in staff we may need to mothball or sell our vehicle and contract with a nearby town for fulltime ambulance coverage. We will maintain a minimum balance in the reserve fund to contract for additional coverage should circumstances require.

E. Public Works:

1. New Employees and Position:

a. The departure of [REDACTED] in September led to an extensive hiring effort to find a replacement. We wish [REDACTED] the best and we welcome [REDACTED] who, along with [REDACTED] will provide the bulk of the Town's road maintenance. The Board wants to thank [REDACTED] for his extraordinary help over the last few years, especially during the most recent ice storm and flooding, and the [REDACTED] project.

b. After years of discussion the Selectboard decided to act to create a third full time position, the Director of Public Works. This position will be responsible for Roads and Bridges and Buildings and Grounds. The position will augment the Roads and Bridges crew as needed for plowing and road maintenance, in lieu of relying on part-time employees and some leased services, and provide management for the department. It will be the focal point for Building and Grounds maintenance of the Town Office, Public Safety Building, Public Works Building, Village Green, Community Garden property, and Water System sites. It will not cover the Rec Dept. facilities, cemeteries, or school facilities without additional coordination and approval of their governing bodies.

c. The goal of this change is to have three fully qualified individuals for Roads and Bridges maintenance who are essentially interchangeable and to add management capability that is currently not being done or being done by the Selectboard. This includes State and FEMA disaster paperwork and grant writing. We will also now have a proverbial single bellybutton for Buildings and Grounds (which has been suggested by the voters before) rather than the elected Selectmen who come and go from office and are frequently pressed for time to devote to these projects and activities. In short, we feel the Town is best served by "regularizing" the way we do this business.

d. [REDACTED] was hired for this position and began work in January. He was born in Burke, VT and has family in N. Troy. He has most recently worked for an environmental remediation company at a site in Syracuse, NY. We welcome him, [REDACTED], and [REDACTED] to our community.

2. Emergency/Disaster Responses:

a. December 2013 Ice Storm: The Town received reimbursements for 85% of its expenses with the final payment received in November. Our thanks to our crew and, all the extra hires, for a great response to quickly open, and keep open, our road network. Special thanks again to [REDACTED] for loaning us a truck while one of ours was out of service.

b. April 2014 Flooding: [REDACTED] was one of the towns hardest hit by flash flooding in April. Estimated damages topped \$120,000 and we are yet again completing the paperwork for reimbursement of funds. This will be even more difficult as both the State and Federal

governments have changed the process and paperwork required. We will likely be hiring additional help to get us through the process.

3. State Aid: This year's transportation "elephant in the room" is the lack of certainty regarding State aid funding. While we have not been given any indication of reduced aid, the State's fiscal problems may roll downhill. State Aid is normally about \$80,000 but has been reduced or delayed in the past tough financial times.

G. Library: The Library Board feels they can no longer use their Reserve funds (carryover, fundraisers, and donations) to supplement their wages and benefits expenses and their request (above) reflects that. They used their reserve funds in 2014 to add air conditioning to the Library and intend to reconfigure their space to create a small office for the Director/Librarian this year. Kudos for raising almost \$14,000 in donations and fundraisers in 2014.

H. The Town Web Site:

1. The Selectboard very reluctantly decided to remove the Town web site last July, upon the advice of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT), in the wake of new State law requiring agendas and minutes of all public bodies to be posted on line and to meet specified time deadlines if the Town has a web site. We were concerned about breaking the law and while other towns and entities still fail to comply, we feel it is a bad practice to knowingly break the law. As VLCT lawyers advise, simply putting a disclaimer on the home page doesn't make it legal or provide grounds to avoid required corrective actions or penalties.

2. The Board met with most of the Town's bodies in late July to get the word out and began a trial run to gauge compliance. It was clear from this several month in-house trial period that we would not meet the law's requirements and failing to do so ran the risk of invalidating otherwise legal actions, and potentially creating troublesome legal consequences.

3. From that point the Selectboard considered the site's reinstatement at every meeting. We also provided input to VLCT and our legislative delegation to repeal or amend the law in this year's session. VLCT is pressing for the legislature to reduce the number of bodies required to comply on the web site and to expand the deadlines. We hope they do and plan to have our site back online as soon as they act.

4. In the meantime we will also be contacting a variety of commercial web site designers and content management services to eventually transition the site away from volunteer management. We expect to have to budget for those services in 2016.

I. New Town Office: As indicated in last year's Town Report, the Selectboard completed a study of the feasibility and cost of a new Town Office in 2014 which formed the basis for the bond vote. A more detailed summary is included in this report. No decisions have been made and we welcome your ideas and input.

J. Water Commission: The Selectboard also serves as the Water Commission. The Municipal Water System continues to perform well and we remain on target for operating revenues and savings for capital improvements. Our current rates, which were set in 2010, will likely remain unchanged for 2015. We will be replacing our meter reader equipment, computers and software as our current versions are no longer supported and spare parts are no longer available. We estimate this will cost between \$10,000 and \$15,000, which will come from the System's reserve fund. We will also probably be purchasing spare pumps for the remote location and main well.

4. As a reminder, all of the Town's meetings are subject to Vermont's Open Meeting laws and are open to the public. The Town Report includes a listing of the principal groups and when/where their Regular meetings are held for your reference. The [REDACTED] is the official newspaper when notice is required to be made in a local newspaper. Warnings, Agendas, Minutes and other Town information are available at the Town Office. These documents are also normally posted at the Village Post Office and Public Safety Building/Library lobby. When brought back online they will also be back on the Town website ([REDACTED]). Annual appointments will be made by the Selectboard at our Regular meetings in March and April. Please consider serving your community in one of these elected or appointed positions. If you don't, who will?

5. Lastly, the Selectboard wants to thank our departing Town Clerk and Treasurer, [REDACTED]. She has worked tirelessly to make our Town better and the Board's job easier. Our Town has been blessed with good government thanks in large part to her teamwork and dedication to serving our citizens. We know she will be here as an Assistant Clerk to ease the transition and keep us on track, and we look forward to a new phase of work together.

Respectfully,

The [REDACTED] Selectboard and Water Commission:



Figure 4.15, continued (5 of 5)

Conclusion

All told, these changes--the depersonalization of accounting, the increase in typological and systemic thinking, the introduction of year-ahead line-item budgets, and the expansion of narrative reporting--indicate a substantial increase of the forward-looking directiveness of the town meeting assembly. Slowly over the long 20th century, the town meeting increased its ratio of direct legislation to officer regulation. In the present the citizenry would find it anti-democratic--unimaginably and unacceptably so--to restore to officers the previous broad discretion for budgeting and planning.

I have followed this evolution within a single town, but--acknowledging variation in the decade-by-decade progression of different places--the overall pattern elsewhere in Vermont and in the other New England states is the same. No direct analysis in the same vein as this chapter has been performed of any other places, but the story is visible incidentally in analyses of governmental modernization in the New England states (Ferraro 1991:523-533; Lockard 1959; Bryan 1974, 1981; Sherman 1999; Hand 1999:3; Sherman, Sessions, and Potash 2004), and in the exhortations of centralized agencies about how to improve town reports (e.g., Flint 1931:326; Nuquist 1964:xi, 70).

The deterioration theory therefore does not hold. In the current golden age, the town meeting's direct legislation of town affairs is relatively more expansive than at any point in 120-plus years, having been on a steady upswing the whole time. If--per Chapter 4--town meeting is best described as a representative institution, there is no basis for treating that fact as a sign of loss. Town meeting is a predominantly representative institution not because the proportion of direct democracy has diminished, but because the representative qualities are so strongly developed that the amount of direct democracy is dwarfed regardless.

CHAPTER 5. Town Meeting’s “Abysmal” Attendance: A Cautionary Tale For Empirical Assessment of Participatory and Deliberative Institutions

CHAPTER SUMMARY

One of the most serious criticisms of institutions of participatory democracy (“PD”) stems from their low participation rates relative to ballot democracy. Even among PD supporters, a “quality for quantity” trade-off is almost universally acknowledged. Reviewing the turnout literature, and applying Northmont as a case study, this chapter identifies multiple errors and neglectful assumptions regarding measurement and benchmarking that have led to a serious exaggeration of the “low turnout” trope, including: 1) widespread sloppiness in benchmarking, 2) shortcomings in prior measurement techniques for PD institutions, and 3) failure to account for participant “churn” in PD. Controlling for these, including by applying novel methods of measurement, I find that town meeting’s “abysmal” turnout is only narrowly (rather than massively) lower than ballot turnout—reaching a level where one might no longer need to be a PD enthusiast to find the gap acceptable. I propose that PD researchers should—in addition to double-checking basic turnout data for errors of commensuration and initial measurement, and ensuring that analytic comparisons are soundly framed—give new, close attention to the topic of

churn and how it might require us to rethink the nature of participation more generally. In the course of supplying these empirical correctives, the chapter meditates on the role of empiricism in questions like these, suggesting that empiricism and the scientific method are just as capable of reinforcing as challenging assumptions about participation.

Introduction: The Participatory Shortfall?

From presidential primary caucuses to participatory budgeting to the New England town meeting and Swiss Landsgemeinde, institutions of participatory democracy (“PD”), including deliberative versions, come under fire for their low participation rates relative to ballot democracy. Even among supporters, a “quality for quantity” trade-off is apologetically acknowledged.¹

This chapter shows that “low turnout” may be overstated, at least for some PD institutions. Taking the “abysmal” turnout of New England town meetings as a case study, I pursue three correctives. The first involves conceptual and mathematical errors in how town meeting turnout has been benchmarked against ballot elections. The second and third involve methodological shortcomings in previous ways of counting town meeting turnout. Specifically, I show that existing head count methods have systematically undercounted attendance, and I use fresh methods to capture a dynamic that even perfectly executed head count method have missed: the amount of participant “churn” during meetings as some leave early and others arrive late. With these three correctives, town meeting turnout turns out to be only narrowly (rather

¹ For instance, the debate in Laidler (2015).

than massively) lower than ballot turnout, reaching a level where one might no longer need to be a town meeting booster or a PD enthusiast to find it excusable.

Attention to mismeasurement and churn therefore leads us to at least a partial reassessment of the putative quality/quantity trade-off of PD institutions. Three consequences follow from this reassessment. First, municipalities and other corporate bodies may find PD more attractive. Second, a reprioritization of reform energies within existing PD institutions will be in order: if turnout is not in fact failing the benchmarks, then other problem areas can use the attention. These other areas include demographic imbalances in who *does* attend, participation problems *within* meetings, and mismatches between meetings' structure vs. citizens' needs and interests. Third, if churn has such significant quantitative effects, then its qualitative effects will merit attention as well. I will be making the case that any PD institution that exhibits churn cannot be understood in the absence of a comprehensive understanding of the mechanics and impact of that churn. In fact, churn requires us to think more closely about a number of our spatial and temporal assumptions about participation.

In the course of making these points, I intend the chapter to serve as a saying-by-doing meditation upon method in the social sciences. The chapter is simultaneously an ode to traditional scientific method--insofar as it attempts to ever more rigorously and precisely account for factors that are relevant to turnout analysis--and a suggestion that the drive toward rigor and precision partially misses the point--insofar as value systems and emotional needs are ultimately responsible for how social reality is framed into the categories and priorities that are empirically measured and analyzed. That's to say, science simultaneously is viciously unsentimental and consummately sentimental. A successful social science, rather than try to purge the latter, needs to be able to tack self-reflexive between both (cf. D.Rutherford 2012).

Town Meeting's "Low Turnout"

The "low turnout" critique has dogged town meeting for most of the 20th century (see Appendix A). Whether as a denunciation or with despairing sympathy, turnout is routinely described with words like "abysmal," "sad," "embarrassing," "pathetic," and "appalling."² A recent government textbook is illustrative:

While the town meeting has been celebrated by many political philosophers as 'pure democracy,' the reality is much less than full participatory democracy. Attendance at town meetings is usually less than 10 percent of the town's voters. In larger towns, the participation rate may be only 1 or 2 percent of the voters. The idealized town meeting democracy is really governance by a very small group of political activists. (Dye and MacManus 2015:307)³

Or as an important mid-century broadside against town meetings noted, "In [these towns] only scores attend the town meetings, whereas over 90 per cent of all the registered voters went to the national election last November" (Alexander and Berger 1949:151).

For a participatory institution, this apparent shortfall of participation has been an anti-democratic embarrassment, and beginning in the 1950s, critics have loudly and frequently cited turnout as grounds for abandoning the town meeting in favor of ballot-based or representative systems of municipal governance. These alternatives have included the SB2 ballot alternative in New Hampshire, Australian balloting for Vermont towns, and the representative town meeting in multiple states.⁴

² Endless examples of this vocabulary can be pulled from the opinion pages and meeting reportage of New England's local newspapers (e.g., S. Bigelow 2015, Grotke 2013, LT 2016, ME 2014, Weiss-Tisman 2017, Wells 2016, WL 2016, Zind 2017). People from outside New England possess less reason to spend time thinking about town meeting turnout, but negative treatment is their reaction too when they do discuss it (see Bryan 2004:280).

³ Appendix A identifies several problems with this passage's citation of evidence.

⁴ Discussions of these other institutions may be found in Love (1994), Fahey (2010), Cousineau (2013), Rule (2012:269-288), Zimmerman (1999:139-162), Kramer (2014), and Weiss-Tisman (2017).

These turnout critiques have achieved substantial traction, and have been among the causes of town meeting's reduced prevalence.⁵ In 1931, town meeting was practiced by 93% of New England municipalities (Sly 1933:418-419), whereas in the 2010s, the figure has fallen to 82% (see Figure 0.2 from the Introduction). That 82%, though, also includes a far, far greater percentage of "watered down" versions of town meeting compared to the 93% from 1931. The number of towns practicing representative town meetings has tripled (from 15 to 46). 70 towns in New Hampshire have started practicing the SB2 alternative. Rhode Island has transitioned fully to the financial town meeting. And the number of hybrid meetings (where only some questions are deliberated at a traditional floor meeting, with the rest being voted via ballot) has increased by an undocumented but clearly large number.

Town meeting's defenders have scrambled to find a convincing response and to stem the bleeding. Appendix B performs an "ethnography of a debate" (Aguilar 1981), examining the various defenses in detail. The takeaway is that--with a few exceptions--defenders have attempted to sidestep rather than dispute the "low turnout" charge. Tacks have included arguing 1) that low turnout doesn't necessarily make town meeting anti-democratic, 2) that low turnout is compensated by town meeting's other virtues, and 3) that a laundry list of measures would be able to improve turnout if adopted.

The defenses in the #3 category have not been especially convincing, because few people believe that these measures, even if combined, could bring town meeting turnout within range of ballot turnout--especially considering that ballot elections *also* have available a number of under-utilized best practices that would increase their lead again. That's to say, we cannot compare the

⁵ I say "among." Other important causes have included governmental centralization to the state level and the increased complexity and professionalization of local government.

best possible version of town meetings to the *average* version of ballot elections. As for defenses in the #1 and #2 categories, the most compelling of them simply abandon town meeting's claims to being an institution of participatory direct democracy. Instead, they substitute a legitimacy rooted in "good governance" or in deliberative principles (Bryan 2001).

These alternative legitimacies can be debated on their own merits, but the point of this chapter is to make them optional. Through a careful reanalysis of the evidence, we will see that wholesale concessions such as these are unnecessary.

Raw Turnout Figures for Town Meetings

Appendix C performs a full review of data on voter turnout at New England town meetings, including a novel analysis by myself of records from the Vermont Secretary of State. Bryan's (2004) findings are far more accurate and precise than those from any other study, including by being relatively less subject to the "undercounting" problem that will be discussed later. His findings therefore are the ones that I will use in the comparison to ballot turnout, with the other studies applied merely as corroboration. Serendipitously, Bryan's sample also comes from the same state as my own case study, a fact that will come in handy when we use Northmont's churn data to speculate about the extent of churn more broadly. Having a same-state consistency will reduce--though not by any means eliminate--the risk of generalization fallacies.

Bryan's findings in a soundbite are that the average Vermont town meeting from 1970-1998 had 20.5% of registered voters present at the approximate moment of peak attendance

(64).⁶ Individual meetings, though, ranged from single digits to percentages in the seventies.⁷

Important sources of variation are as follows:

- The single most important source of variation was a town's population size: smaller towns have greater turnout. If looking only at towns with fewer than 500 registered voters, average peak attendance leaps to 30% and more.⁸
- Different meeting arrangements have a large impact on turnout. To cite just the two most powerful variables, if a town has a pure floor meeting (no use of Australian ballots) and holds its school district meeting concurrently, its predicted turnout is about 33% higher than if both of those variables are flipped (Bryan 2004:99, 102). Towns that use the ideal configuration enjoy turnout up to 1.13 times greater than the average (Bryan 2004:99).
- The contents of the agenda matter greatly. "Hot issues" attract drastically higher turnout than that seen during "quiet years," when absence serves as a vote of confidence in the status quo.⁹

⁶ This ballpark is corroborated by Zimmerman (1984, 1999) and Leslie (n.d.), and--in a more remote time period--by MLRC (1961:33-34, 1971:153-157).

⁷ This variability is corroborated by Zimmerman (1984:103), Mehlman (1973), MLRC (1971:156; 1961:34), and Leslie (n.d.).

⁸ This size dependency is corroborated by Zimmerman (1984:103; 1986:20-21; 1999:68, 93, 110), Mehlman (1973:9-10 [1974:45]), MLRC (1961:34; 1971:156), and Leslie (n.d.). The point previously had been advanced anecdotally by, among others, James (1921:260, 275), Lockard (1963:328n3), Stitely (1964:40), Von der Muhll (1970:886n20), and Sale (1980a:496-497). A similar correlation has been identified for the local direct democracy of Swiss cantons (Schaub 2012:321; Funk 2005). However, another researcher of the Swiss case argues that this size correlation may in fact be ultimately dependent upon the underlying socioeconomic composition of the communities, which is correlated with size, rather than upon size directly (Baglioni 2007:105).

⁹ This "hot issue" effect has been exhibited since the 18th if not 17th century (R.Brown 1955:51; Daniels 1983:98; McKinley 1905:356-357).

- The 20.5% figure is an average from across the 30 years, but there has been a secular decline in turnout across that period (Bryan 2004:135). From 1976 to 1998 the decline was 2 percentage points (controlling for the increase in town populations over that period).¹⁰ As descriptions of more recent years, the 20.5% and 17.4% turnout figures therefore are inflated.

Raw Turnout Figures for Ballot Elections

How do these findings for town meeting turnout compare to elections using ballots?

The first challenge is to pick an appropriate benchmark. This seemingly simple matter, though, has been routinely malpracticed, even by political scientists. Critiques of town meeting turnout often have been presented either without the context of any benchmark, or with the inappropriate benchmark of presidential and state elections.¹¹ The appropriate comparison, however, is to *municipal* elections. Moreover, of those instances when the apples-to-apples comparison *has* been made, not once have I seen systematic data on municipal elections be used; instead the point has been made anecdotally. The rarity of scientifically sound comparison is perhaps understandable given that few empirical studies of municipal turnout had been published until recently. Fortunately, a raft of studies emerged in the 2000s, so we can put hard numbers to a municipal-level comparison.

¹⁰ Failing to control for increasing populations, one would mistakenly find an 8.3 point decrease. Zimmerman (1999:46-47, 94, 111) found a much more serious decline across time, but his finding wasn't controlled for population growth.

¹¹ Examples: Alexander and Berger (1949:151), Fenton (1962), Engel (1985:238), Elliot and Ali (1988:224), Menzies (1998), Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001a:247, 2002:204), Williamson and Fung (2005:22-23), Porto (2005:37), Kennicott (2009), D.Robinson (2011:214-216). Defenders of town meeting have fallen into the same error, e.g., Clark and Bryan (2015:6).

Figure 5.1 lists the findings from various studies.¹²

<u>STUDY</u>	<u>FINDING: TURNOUT AVERAGE*</u>	<u>ELECTION TYPE</u>	<u>MUNICIPALITY TYPE</u>	<u>STUDY PERIOD</u>
Alford & Lee (1968:802-3)	31.2% T[RV] when non-concurrent with general elections 43.5% T[RV] when concurrent	general municipal	nationwide cities with populations >25k	1961-1962
Caren (2007:39)	25% T[cVAP]	mayoral elections	cities nationwide with populations >500k	1979-2003
Hajnal & Lewis (2003:655)	28% T[VAP] / 44% T[RV] for mayoral elections 32% T[VAP] / 48% T[RV] for council elections	mayoral elections city council elections	California municipalities	mostly 1998-2000
Holbrook & Weinschenk (2013:46)	25.8% T[cVAP]	mayoral elections	large cities nationwide (Kansas city at 144k was the smallest)	1996-2011
Kelleher & Lowery (2004:745)	24.387% T[VAP]	legislative elections (councils, boards, alderpersons)	small to mid-sized metropolitan areas	1999-2002
C.Wood (2002:223)	34.28% T[RV]	mayoral and city council elections	nationwide cities with populations 25k - 1 million	1993-2000

*Just as with town meetings, ballot democracies exhibit tremendous variation in their turnout, both year-to-year and municipality-to-municipality. Like with town meetings, some of the variation is causally identifiable from the particular structure, timing, etc. of a municipality's election, and some of it is ad hoc--dependent on the given elections and on other chance factors.

Figure 5.1: Studies of turnout in ballot municipalities

¹² This chapter will use the following unit abbreviations:

T[RV] = turnout of registered voters

T[VAP] = turnout of voting age population (everyone of age to vote, regardless of whether they are registered, and regardless of actual eligibility to vote)

T[cVAP] = turnout of voting age population, citizens only (VAP minus non-citizens, who are ineligible to vote)

T[VEP] = turnout of eligible voters (cVAP minus citizens barred from voting due to felony convictions, etc.). See McDonald (2015).

This initial benchmarking does not look good for town meeting. Before we can be certain, though, we need to ensure that these are apples-to-apples comparisons.

Proper Commensuration

Obviously, common units are required before we can make any comparison. Bryan's figure was given in T[RV], whereas many of the benchmarks are in T[VAP] or T[cVAP]. But commensurating units will be only the first steps. Even same-unit comparisons can be misleading, thanks to geographical variability. Data on town meeting turnout necessarily comes from New England, whereas the samples from our benchmarks are national or (in one case) Californian.¹³ Vermont and New England at large have peculiarities on a number of fronts: voter registration rates, the size of municipalities, and demographics concerning age, race, class, education, and citizenship.

Vermont and New England have much, much higher rates of voter registration than the national average. Over the past four decades (1980-2014), Vermont's RV:VEP ratio has averaged 21 percentage points superior to the nation's, 89% to 68%, with the gap in individual years ranging from 17 to 28 percentage points. This means that Bryan's T[RV] figure look artificially low compared to a T[RV] figure from a national sample. Converting all figures to

¹³ A rudimentary attempt to control for geography can be found in Mansbridge (1980:48). There also have been attempts to measure the improved turnout in towns that have abandoned town meeting. For instance, in the first year after some New Hampshire towns switched to the SB2 system, preliminary data suggested that turnout rose from 17% to 28% (Bayles 1998). The problem with this latter approach is that it does not follow the long-term impact, and some portion of the immediate increase may be due to novelty. Bryan (2004) has observed a similar short-term increase vs. long-term fade when Vermont towns move their meetings from Tuesday mornings to evenings or weekends.

T[VAP] will solve this problem, but doing so leaves a new problem: T[VAP] doesn't control for voter eligibility based on citizenship or criminal conviction,¹⁴ and Vermont has demographic and legal peculiarities in these two areas as well: there is a much smaller percentage of non-citizens,¹⁵ and no penal restriction of suffrage. We therefore must convert to T[cVAP] and T[VEP], respectively (McDonald 2015).

As an example of how much of a difference the inferior units can make, let's compare Bryan's findings for Vermont town meetings to Wood's (2002) findings for ballot municipalities. Figure 5.2 pulls forward the relevant data from Figure 5.5b. Both researchers presented their findings in terms of T[RV] (the grey column). In these initial T[RV] units, town meeting turnout appears to reach only 60% of the benchmark. Once the turnout denominators are converted from T[RV] to T[VAP] (thus controlling for voter registration rates), town meeting's turnout has closed more than half of that gap, jumping to 81% of the benchmark. Controlling for citizenship demographics sets that gain back by a few points, though, to only 78%. Subsequently controlling for disenfranchisement from felony convictions knocks off another couple points, to a final result of 76% of the benchmark. 76% vs. 60% is a tremendous discrepancy stemming from an unreliable initial unit.

¹⁴ Many states have restrictions on suffrage based on felony convictions. Different states have different laws, and different municipalities have different incidences of affected individuals within their populations. Nationwide, by 1990 the percentage of disenfranchised citizens had exceeded 1.0% of cVAP, and in more recent years it has held at around 1.5%. This is not an enormous effect, but it is certainly significant, and the effects are even more strongly concentrated in certain states (e.g., Georgia, where the cVAP:VEP ratio has reached almost 105%) and in certain municipalities within any given state. In Vermont, meanwhile, there is a smaller percentage of citizens with felony convictions than the national average, and there are no conviction-related restrictions on suffrage anyway.

¹⁵ Less than 2% of VAP across the past 35 years, compared to 3.5%-8.6% nationwide.

	<u>T[RV]</u>	<u>T[VAP]</u>	<u>T[cVAP]</u>	<u>T[VEP]</u>
town meetings, per Bryan (2004)	20.5 %	17.4%	17.8%	17.8%
ballot municipality benchmark, per Wood (2002)	34.28%	21.4%	23.0%	23.3%
absolute difference	13.8	4.0	5.2	5.5
relative difference (town meeting turnout as a percentage of the benchmark)	60%	81%	78%	76%

*Figure 5.2: Illustration of how different units impact benchmarking
Data pulled from Figure 5.5b.*

Unfortunately, even using T[VEP] does not solve all of our problems. At least two important variables remain uncontrolled: age and population size. Both have a causal impact upon turnout, and neither stays steady across the samples we’re attempting to compare; the populations of Bryan’s sample skew older and smaller. At this point, though, we reach the limit of what can be sensibly baked into the units of analysis. Our analysis therefore will proceed with achieving T[VEP] comparisons, and we subsequently can consider complications like age and population size. At that point we also will consider variables of institutional design, and the difference between referenda vs. officer elections.

To convert Bryan’s and all of the Figure 5.1 figures into T[VEP], we can look up the relevant voter and demographic data at the state and national levels. In the course of doing these T[VEP] conversions, there will be utility in preserving the intermediate conversions (from T[RV] to T[VAP] and then to T[cVAP]), and also in back-converting T[VEP], T[cVAP], and T[VAP] figures to the lower-precision figures as well. This utility stems from two sources:

1. Presenting figures in all units will allow comparisons to other studies not included here. In some cases, this will be a matter of convenience--enabling a quick-and-dirty comparison prior to engaging in any conversions of the new figures. In other

cases, conversions simply will not be possible--criminal conviction data is often not available at the municipal level, for instance--so comparison will need to occur in the inferior units of T[cVAP] or T[VAP].

2. Each step of conversion introduces potential errors. Having the rawer figures available makes them usable by anyone who is suspicious of any subsequent conversion step.

The greatest of these potential errors in #2 is the ecological fallacy: I'm using statewide and nationwide averages to make adjustments to samplings of municipalities that may or may not resemble on average the aggregate figures. The problem may be more or less pronounced for each of the different studies, depending on how much their samples deviate from the nationwide/statewide average that I applied for them. I take partial reassurance from the ability to use Hajnal and Lewis as a crude check, since they offer their findings in both T[RV] and T[VAP]. My conversion method in their case would have suggested using a multiple of 0.628 to get from T[RV] to T[VAP]; the actual multiple visible in their dual-denominator findings was 0.636 for their mayoral finding and 0.667 for their city council finding. These discrepancies would have caused my calculated turnouts to have been off by 0.4 percentage points and <2 percentage points, respectively. I therefore believe we can consider my conversion method to be "serviceable despite points of crudeness."

Figures 5.7 through 5.9 perform our conversions.

Figures 5.3a, 5.3b, and 5.3c assemble data from multiple sources to calculate the six permutations of ratios among RV, VAP, cVAP, and VEP, for each place and each year relevant to the Figure 5.1 studies.

Figure 5.4 uses the Figure 5.7 data to produce conversion multiples tailored to each of the Figure 5.1 studies. For instance, Kelleher and Lowery (2004) used a nationwide sample covering 1999-2002, and they performed their analysis in terms of T[VAP]. To produce the multiple for T[VAP] to T[RV] (for example), I took an average from 1998-2002 in Figure 5.3a of the annual VAP:RV ratios. Note that the necessary cVAP and VEP data were unavailable for the period of Alford and Lee's study.

Figure 5.5a then applies the various multiples from Figure 5.4 to the original figures from Figure 5.1, producing commensurated figures that may be compared.

Looking at Figure 5.5a, Hajnal and Lewis (2003) now emerge as an outlier. One source of this variation is that their study covers only three years out of an American four-year election cycle: a presidential election year (2000), a midterm election year (1998), and *one* of the two inbetween years (1999 but not 1997 or 2001). Given that local elections enjoy higher turnout when they are scheduled concurrently with state or national elections, the inclusion of only one of the two non-concurrent years can be assumed to have buoyed the resulting figure by some amount. I have tried to reverse-engineer their sample to estimate how much their high finding would have been diluted had 1997 or 2001 been included. They report (p. 656) that municipal elections concurrent with state and national elections exhibited better turnout by 36% (presidential elections), 26% (midterm elections), and 25% (presidential primaries). In combination with the description of their municipality sample (p. 663), I was able to project that the turnout they report would have been only 0.87x as high if 1997 or 2001 had been included. Adjusted, their turnout findings thus would be $\approx 30\%$ T[VEP] for mayoral elections and $\approx 33\%$ T[VEP] for council elections, instead of 35% and 38%. Figure 5.5b makes this adjustment.

With the T[VEP] column in Figure 5.5b, we finally have figures that pass muster for use in comparison. Figure 5.6 performs that comparison, first presenting the absolute percentage points by which town meeting turnout falls short of the ballot municipality benchmarks, and then indicating the percentage of the ballot municipality turnout that was matched by town meetings.

year	POPULATION NUMBERS				CONVERSION MULTIPLIERS					
	RV	VAP	cVAP	VEP	T[RV] to T[VAP]	T[RV] to T[cVAP]	T[RV] to T[VEP]	T[VAP] to T[cVAP]	T[VAP] to T[VEP]	T[cVAP] to T[VEP]
1970		287,745								
1972		303,424								
1974	266,649	319,102			83.6%					
1976	284,294	334,781			84.9%					
1978	286,275	350,459			81.7%					
1980	311,919	369,147	363,143	363,143	84.5%	85.9%	85.9%	101.7%	101.7%	100.0%
1982	315,767	379,067	372,982	372,982	83.3%	84.7%	84.7%	101.6%	101.6%	100.0%
1984	333,778	387,620	381,479	381,479	86.1%	87.5%	87.5%	101.6%	101.6%	100.0%
1986	328,466	396,034	389,843	389,843	82.9%	84.3%	84.3%	101.6%	101.6%	100.0%
1988	348,312	411,136	404,795	404,795	84.7%	86.0%	86.0%	101.6%	101.6%	100.0%
1990	350,349	422,130	415,564	415,564	83.0%	84.3%	84.3%	101.6%	101.6%	100.0%
1992	383,371	426,860	419,810	419,810	89.8%	91.3%	91.3%	101.7%	101.7%	100.0%
1994	373,442	434,549	426,953	426,953	85.9%	87.5%	87.5%	101.8%	101.8%	100.0%
1996	385,328	443,874	435,687	435,687	86.8%	88.4%	88.4%	101.9%	101.9%	100.0%
1998	400,221	453,574	444,772	444,772	88.2%	90.0%	90.0%	102.0%	102.0%	100.0%
2000	427,354	463,503	459,174	459,174	92.2%	93.1%	93.1%	100.9%	100.9%	100.0%
2002	418,718	472,402	471,403	471,403	88.6%	88.8%	88.8%	100.2%	100.2%	100.0%
2004	444,077	480,053	470,754	470,754	92.5%	94.3%	94.3%	102.0%	102.0%	100.0%
2006	433,576	487,141	478,247	478,247	89.0%	90.7%	90.7%	101.9%	101.9%	100.0%
2008	454,466	492,610	482,677	482,677	92.3%	94.2%	94.2%	102.1%	102.1%	100.0%
2010	453,181	498,254	488,942	488,942	91.0%	92.7%	92.7%	101.9%	101.9%	100.0%
2012	461,237	502,242	493,355	493,355	91.8%	93.5%	93.5%	101.8%	101.8%	100.0%
2014	439,782	507,304	497,388	497,388	86.7%	88.4%	88.4%	102.0%	102.0%	100.0%
2016										

Figure 5.3a: RV vs. VAP vs. cVAP vs. VEP population, Vermont
Sources: Raw data is from VTSoS (2015) and McDonald (2015).

	POPULATION NUMBERS				CONVERSION MULTIPLIERS					
	RV	VAP	cVAP	VEP	T[RV] to T[VAP]	T[RV] to T[cVAP]	T[RV] to T[VEP]	T[VAP] to T[cVAP]	T[VAP] to T[VEP]	T[cVAP] to T[VEP]
1998	14,969,185	23,980,067	19,534,884	19,264,556	62.4%	76.6%	77.7%	122.8%	124.5%	101.4%
2000	15,707,307	24,867,252	19,965,906	19,685,258	63.2%	78.7%	79.8%	124.5%	126.3%	101.4%

Figure 5.3b: RV vs. VAP vs. cVAP vs. VEP population, California
Sources: Raw data is from CASoS (2000) and McDonald (2015).

	POPULATION NUMBERS				CONVERSION MULTIPLIERS					
	RV	VAP	cVAP	VEP	T[RV] to T[VAP]	T[RV] to T[cVAP]	T[RV] to T[VEP]	T[VAP] to T[cVAP]	T[VAP] to T[VEP]	T[cVAP] to T[VEP]
1960	70,529,801	109,159,000	n/a	n/a	64.6%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1962	72,638,736	112,423,000	n/a	n/a	64.6%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1964										
1966	79,295,000	112,800,000			70.3%					
1968	86,574,000	116,535,000			74.3%					
1970	82,181,000	120,701,000			68.1%					
1972	98,480,000	136,203,000			72.3%					
1974	87,889,000	141,299,000			62.2%					
1976	97,761,000	146,548,000			66.7%					
1978	94,883,000	151,646,000			62.6%					
1980	105,035,000	164,445,475	158,634,058	157,832,081	63.9%	66.2%	66.5%	103.7%	104.2%	100.5%
1982	105,996,000	166,027,633	159,444,661	158,485,024	63.8%	66.5%	66.9%	104.1%	104.8%	100.6%
1984	116,106,000	173,994,610	166,506,283	165,341,037	66.7%	69.7%	70.2%	104.5%	105.2%	100.7%
1986	111,726,000	177,922,330	169,547,093	168,179,976	62.8%	65.9%	66.4%	104.9%	105.8%	100.8%
1988	118,589,000	181,955,484	172,645,887	171,051,911	65.2%	68.7%	69.3%	105.4%	106.4%	100.9%
1990	113,248,000	186,158,841	175,871,050	173,969,804	60.8%	64.4%	65.1%	105.8%	107.0%	101.1%
1992	126,578,000	190,777,923	179,421,060	177,237,875	66.3%	70.5%	71.4%	106.3%	107.6%	101.2%
1994	118,916,875	195,258,350	182,835,774	180,394,834	60.9%	65.0%	65.9%	106.8%	108.2%	101.4%
1996	127,661,000	200,015,917	186,434,201	183,847,788	63.8%	68.5%	69.4%	107.3%	108.8%	101.4%
1998	123,104,000	205,313,182	190,402,451	187,482,570	60.0%	64.7%	65.7%	107.8%	109.5%	101.6%
2000	129,549,000	210,623,408	194,477,182	191,394,436	61.5%	66.6%	67.7%	108.3%	110.0%	101.6%
2002	128,154,000	215,461,549	198,241,857	195,073,794	59.5%	64.6%	65.7%	108.7%	110.5%	101.6%
2004	142,070,000	220,336,019	202,779,062	199,620,619	64.5%	70.1%	71.2%	108.7%	110.4%	101.6%
2006	135,847,000	225,485,399	206,589,185	203,226,067	60.2%	65.8%	66.8%	109.1%	111.0%	101.7%
2008	146,311,000	230,872,030	211,486,122	208,341,291	63.4%	69.2%	70.2%	109.2%	110.8%	101.5%
2010	137,263,000	236,022,989	215,918,864	212,674,829	58.2%	63.6%	64.5%	109.3%	111.0%	101.5%
2012	153,157,000	240,957,993	220,699,084	217,253,850	63.6%	69.4%	70.5%	109.2%	110.9%	101.6%
2014	142,166,000	245,712,915	225,270,830	221,878,520	57.9%	63.1%	64.1%	109.1%	110.7%	101.5%
2016										

Figure 5.3c: RV vs. VAP vs. cVAP vs. VEP population, United States

Sources: Raw data is from McDonald (2015), US Census Bureau (2015), and Federal Election Commission (2015).

study	T[RV] to T[VAP]	T[RV] to T[cVAP]	T[RV] to T[VEP]	T[VAP] to T[cVAP]	T[VAP] to T[VEP]	T[cVAP] to T[VEP]
Alford and Lee (1968)	64.6%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
"	64.6%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Caren (2007:39)	63.0%	67.0%	67.8%	106.3%	107.6%	101.2%
Hajnal and Lewis (2003:655)	62.8%	77.6%	78.7%	123.7%	125.4%	101.4%
"	62.8%	77.6%	78.7%	123.7%	125.4%	101.4%
Holbrook and Weinschenk (2013:46)	61.6%	66.9%	68.0%	108.6%	110.3%	101.6%
Kelleher and Lowery (2004:745)	60.3%	65.3%	66.3%	108.3%	110.0%	101.6%
Wood (2002:223)	62.5%	67.1%	68.0%	107.3%	108.8%	101.4%
Bryan (2004)	85.0%	87.0%	87.0%	101.7%	101.7%	100.0%

Figure 5.4: Conversion multiples for the Figure 5.1 studies

study	T[RV]	T[VAP]	T[cVAP]	T[VEP]
Alford and Lee (1968)	31.2%	20%	n/a	n/a
"	43.5%	28%	n/a	n/a
Caren (2007:39)	37%	24%	25%	25%
Hajnal and Lewis (2003:655)	44%	28%	34%	35%
"	48%	32%	37%	38%
Holbrook and Weinschenk (2013:46)	39%	24%	25.8%	26%
Kelleher and Lowery (2004:745)	40%	24.387%	26%	27%
Wood (2002:223)	34.28%	21%	23%	23%
Bryan (2004)	20.5%	17%	18%	18%

Figure 5.5a: Converted turnout figures (no adjustment to Hajnal and Lewis)
Shading identifies each study's original unconverted figure.

study	T[RV]	T[VAP]	T[cVAP]	T[VEP]
Alford and Lee (1968)	31.2%	20%	n/a	n/a
"	43.5%	28%	n/a	n/a
Caren (2007:39)	37%	24%	25%	25%
Hajnal and Lewis (2003:655), ADJUSTED	38%	24%	30%	30%
"	42%	28%	33%	33%
Holbrook and Weinschenk (2013:46)	39%	24%	25.8%	26%
Kelleher and Lowery (2004:745)	40%	24.387%	26%	27%
Wood (2002:223)	34.28%	21%	23%	23%
Bryan (2004)	20.5%	17%	18%	18%

Figure 5.5b: Converted turnout figures, with adjusted figure for Hajnal and Lewis
Shading identifies each study's original unconverted and unadjusted figure.

study	percentage point shortfall vs. benchmark				as a % of benchmark			
	T[RV]	T[VAP]	T[cVAP]	T[VEP]	T[RV]	T[VAP]	T[cVAP]	T[VEP]
Alford and Lee (1968)	10.7	2.7	n/a	n/a	66%	86%	n/a	n/a
"	23.0	10.7	n/a	n/a	47%	62%	n/a	n/a
Caren (2007:39)	16.8	6.1	7.2	7.5	55%	74%	71%	71%
Hajnal and Lewis (2003:655), ADJUSTED	17.9	7.0	12.0	12.4	53%	71%	60%	59%
"	21.4	10.5	14.7	15.1	49%	62%	55%	54%
Holbrook and Weinschenk (2013:46)	18.0	6.3	8.0	8.4	53%	73%	69%	68%
Kelleher and Lowery (2004:745)	19.9	7.0	8.6	9.0	51%	71%	68%	66%
Wood (2002:223)	13.8	4.0	5.2	5.5	60%	81%	78%	76%

Figure 5.6: Town meeting peak turnout as a percentage of each benchmark

What conclusion arises from Figure 5.6? Put simply, as much as 40% of the apparent gap between town meeting turnout and each benchmark has disappeared, now that we have used T[VEP] to factor out spurious factors.

To repeat, this benchmarking does not yet account for variability in age and population size. It also does not yet address variability in institutional design. (That is, we are working with averages of municipalities that do and don't use the various best practices for their respective form of government, but for the purpose of normative theory, we might be more interested in a comparison based on the *optimal* version of each form.) We will return to these issues after addressing two further ways that town meeting's apparent turnout has been previously understated.

Correcting for Undercounting

Recall that Bryan--as well as the other studies of turnout reviewed in Appendix C, including Zimmerman (1999) and the Vermont Secretary of State--bases his turnout figures on the moment of peak attendance during a meeting.¹⁶ Each of their methods, though, is vulnerable to imprecision in identifying the actual moment of peak. Bryan suffers from this to a lesser degree than the other two, but even so the result is a systematic undercounting of town meeting attendance.

Bryan had his team take counts at defined intervals throughout a meeting, and he then used the highest of those counts (Bryan 2004:16). Our key question is therefore: how frequently

¹⁶ See Bryan (2004:64) for a justification of using the moment of peak attendance rather than the average attendance across the meeting. The discussion of "churn" below contains further justification.

did a meeting's actual peak attendance fall *between* scheduled counts, rather than *on* one of them, and how many attendees were missed as a result? To establish a rough answer, I mimicked Bryan's methods during meetings in my own fieldsite during the years 2010-2017,¹⁷ while also taking counts at more frequent intervals. Seeking even finer resolution, in 2014-2016 I conducted real-time tracking of people entering and exiting the hall, ensuring that I could identify the exact peak moment. Across the seven meetings, the highest count produced by Bryan's intervals ranged from 85% to 100% of the peak attendance according to my finer-resolution methods, averaging 92.1%. (See Figure 5.7.) If Northmont is representative of other Vermont towns in this regard, then Bryan's finding of 20.5% implies an actual figure of 22.3%. Whether or not Northmont indeed is representative, though, is unknowable without latitudinal investigation. My finding here therefore simply demonstrates that Bryan's method has undercounted actual turnout by *some* amount, and that his widely cited finding of 20.5% average turnout is only a floor threshold.

Zimmerman's and the Vermont Secretary of State's surveys of town clerks, meanwhile, were vulnerable to a different kind of under-measurement. Their surveys asked town clerk's to report a best estimate of a meeting's peak attendance. Clerks, however, often are too busy during meetings to be able to take head counts, and after meetings they often have higher priorities than developing good retrospective estimates. Some clerks therefore understandably take the shortcut of simply reporting the highest tally from any hand or ballot votes that occurred during the meeting--it is an easily available hard number. The VTSoS in fact explicitly invites clerks to do this. There is great variability as to when such votes occur during the meeting, though, and plenty of abstentions occur during many votes, so vote tallies have a very unreliable relationship

¹⁷ In 2009 I had not yet started including head counts at Bryan's intervals.

to the actual peak attendance of a meeting. For instance, Northmont's clerk responded to the 2014 VTSoS survey by reporting the number from the single vote that had occurred that year, a hand count of 45 from late in the meeting. My own face count at that exact moment was 57 eligible voters. Fully a quarter of the attendees therefore had abstained from voting.¹⁸ But even if abstentions *had* been tracked, the resulting report of "57" still would have been significantly short of the meeting's 66-person peak attendance from an hour previously.

From 2009-2016, Northmont's meetings averaged a highest vote tally that ranged only from 68% to 100% (on only one occasion) of the actual peak attendance. The average was 82.6%. (See Figure 5.7.) Once again, I currently have no sense of how generalizable this finding may be to other towns. A small number of clerks in the VTSoS dataset explicitly flagged when they were using a vote tally, but clearly most did not. As with Bryan's results a moment ago, we therefore have to treat Zimmerman's findings and the Vermont Secretary of State data as floor thresholds.

Figure 5.7 offers a visual accounting of the differences made by undercounting in these prior studies. Once again, then, we are pointed in the direction that town meeting's turnout is better than previously believed.

¹⁸ In my observation of Northmont, hand counts frequently yielded far more abstentions than ballot votes, but even the latter could feature a surprising number.

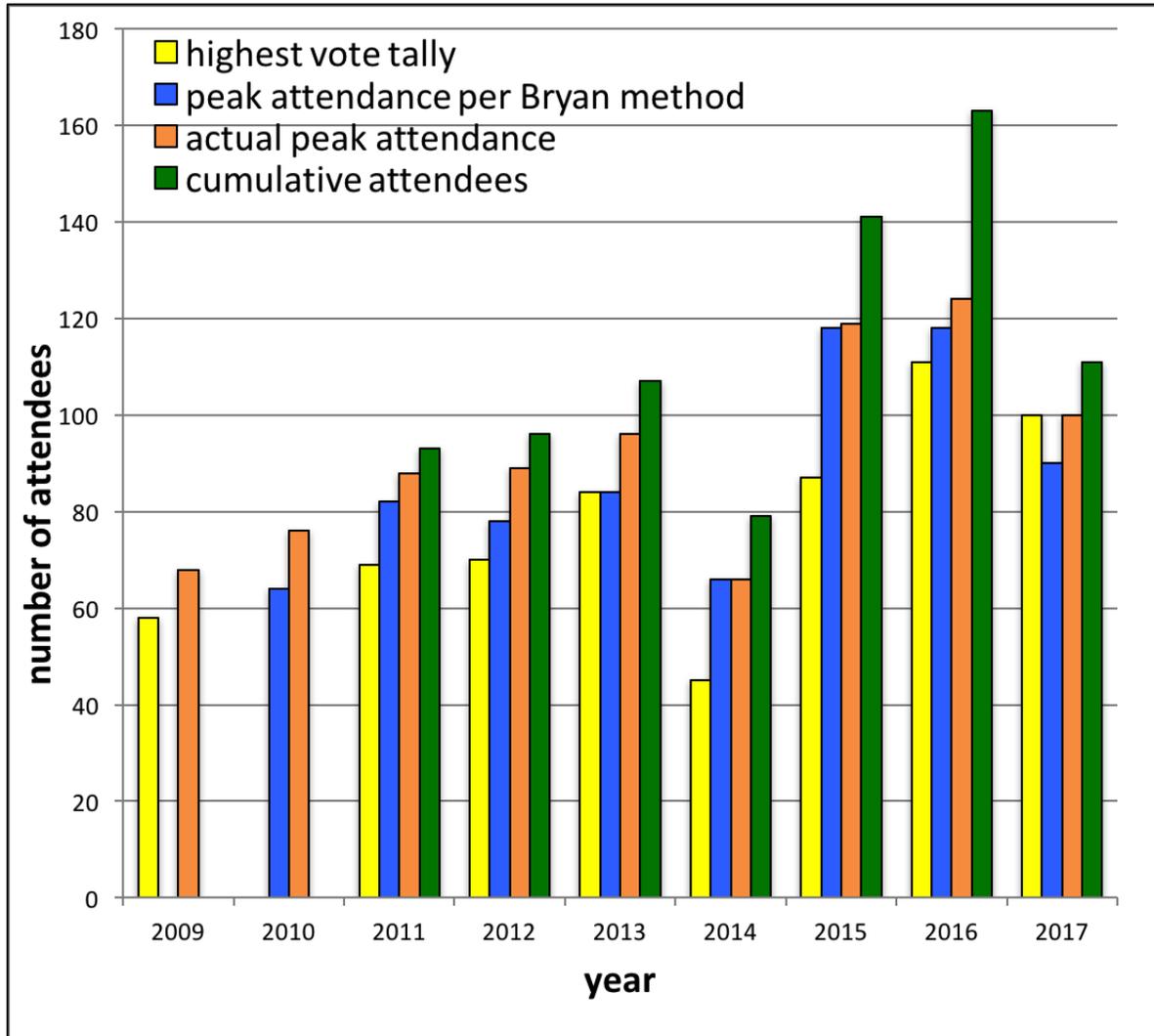


Figure 5.7: Comparison of different methods of measuring attendance¹⁹
 The “cumulative” data (churn) is less reliable for 2011-2013.

Capturing Churn

Municipal ballots are notorious for being left partially or even mostly blank. In most cases, the high profile items (e.g., presidential, gubernatorial, and mayoral races) receive responses, but pages’ worth of lesser offices, judgeships, and referenda may go unfilled. For

¹⁹ I didn’t take a Bryan-interval count for 2009, and it was not possible to reconstruct one from my notes. In 2010, there were no ballot votes.

instance, in 2015, Burlington’s (VT) Ward 1 saw overall turnout of 18.2% in its ballot election.

Looking race by race, though, the turnout varied considerably:

	<u>turnout</u>	<u>percentage of ballots with responses</u>
total ballots cast	18.2%	100.0%
mayor	17.8%	97.8%
council member	14.8%	81.5%
school comm.	13.3%	73.2%
clerk	14.1%	77.5%
insp 1	14.3%	78.8%
insp 2	14.3%	78.5%
insp 3	13.2%	72.5%
referendum 1	16.9%	93.1%
referendum 2	16.5%	90.6%
referendum 3	17.2%	94.5%
referendum 4	16.2%	88.9%
referendum 5	17.2%	94.7%
referendum 6	17.7%	97.4%
referendum 7	16.6%	91.4%
referendum 8	17.0%	93.5%
<i>referenda average</i>	<i>16.9%</i>	<i>93.0%</i>

*Figure 5.8: Incomplete ballots in Ward 1 in Burlington’s 2015 election
Source: Raw data is from the Burlington, VT City Clerk’s office.*

As Bryan (2004:64) notes, a ballot is counted toward turnout even when it hasn’t been entirely filled, but the analogous method hasn’t been used with town meetings: peak attendance misses

everyone who comes and goes before or after the peak. This “churn” has been speculated to be significant (Bryan 2007a, Zimmerman 1999:68,94, Jager and Jager 1977:412), but to date no one has attempted a measurement. Capturing *cumulative* turnout by accounting for churn would require data collectors to achieve face-level familiarity with virtually everyone in a community, or, alternatively, to deploy an expensive system of photographic or video equipment, and/or research assistants.

For an anthropologist like myself, excellent data on churn emerges as the happy side-effect of immersive observational method. The downside is that I have data from only a single town. As with the prior point on undercounting, what I therefore can offer is 1) a demonstration that prior tallies of town meeting turnout are only a floor figure, and 2) a speculative calculation of what churn-inclusive turnout might be at town meetings in general, assuming that Northmont is perfectly representative.

I tracked attendance at the 2009-2017 meetings using the following methods. Ultimately, the data from the five years 2011-2017 proved to be usable.

- In 2014-2016: I stationed myself by the entrances to perform real-time tracking of participants’ entrances and exits. On those occasions when I didn’t recognize someone, I tried to find a third party who could perform an immediate identification (“Psst! Who’s that who just walked in?”), or I snapped a photograph that could be used to the same effect after the meeting. I also periodically went to the front of the room to take photographs of everyone present; at my later leisure I was able to pore through to find any faces I had missed. In a second retrospective approach, I checked the meeting minutes, my audio recordings, and the checklists from all ballot votes that had occurred during the meeting, seeking any additional names that had escaped my real-time visual

methods. Through these combined methods, I believe I was able to capture all but perhaps a handful of participants each year.²⁰ In the years with concurrent presidential primaries or other ballots, I then crossed off from my list anyone who entered, cast a ballot, and then immediately left. I also removed from the list anyone who wasn't a resident.

- In 2017 I did the same thing, but without the minute-by-minute tracking--only the face tracking.
- From 2011-2013, I hadn't kept quite as careful attention upon attendees' entrances, and my photographic documentation was somewhat less comprehensive. I therefore may have missed a greater portion of the cumulative attendees than in 2014-2017. This drop-off is particularly the case for 2011. Although I therefore was tempted to exclude 2011 from my sample, I have kept it out of conservative abundance.
- For 2009 and 2010, my notes and photography were insufficiently comprehensive to reconstruct the churn. These two years therefore are not included in my churn analysis

How much churn did I find? Figures 5.9a and 5.9b, as examples based on the data from 2015 and 2016, provide an immediate visual impression of the high incidence of churn in some

²⁰ This method also ensures that only eligible voters of the town are counted, which was a problem (albeit one with only a small practical effect) with head count methods like Bryan's. Non-eligible attendees can include town employees who live in other towns, state legislators, state bureaucrats, representatives from regional planning associations or regional business associations, representatives from corporations or service agencies hoping to do business with the town, representatives from regional charities hoping to receive funds from the town, political activists hoping to sway the town on a social issue resolution, curious winter tourists, out-of-towners visiting and tagging along with friends, members of the media, and mature-looking teenagers. For T[RV] as opposed to T[VEP/cVAP/VAP] units, head counts also will mistakenly capture residents who attend despite not having registered. All of these combined, however, usually add only a small number of attendees and therefore don't inflate the turnout rates by much.

years. Each chart visualizes the ebb and flow of attendance at a single meeting. The horizontal axis is time, from the start of each meeting to its adjournment. Each horizontal line stacked on the vertical axis is a single participant; red indicates absence, black indicates presence. Grey instead of black indicates either a non-resident or someone who entered only in order to cast a ballot for a concurrent election or referendum and then left. The blue vertical line or box marks the moment or period of peak attendance (2016 had two separate equal peaks). On either side of the blue-marked peak, we can see substantial exit and entrance activity. Any person whose horizontal line isn't intersected by the vertical blue line is someone who went "uncounted" by the peak measurement.

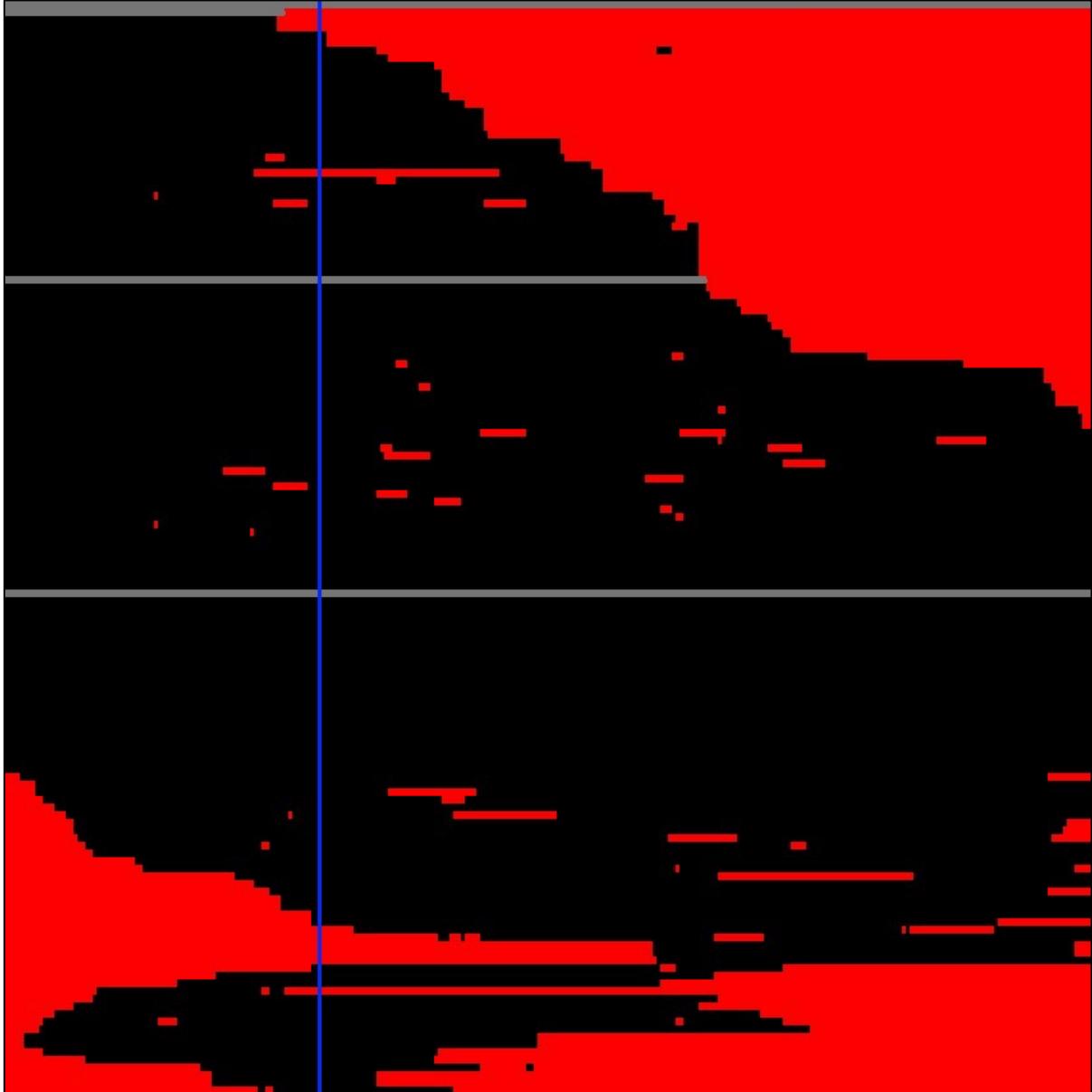
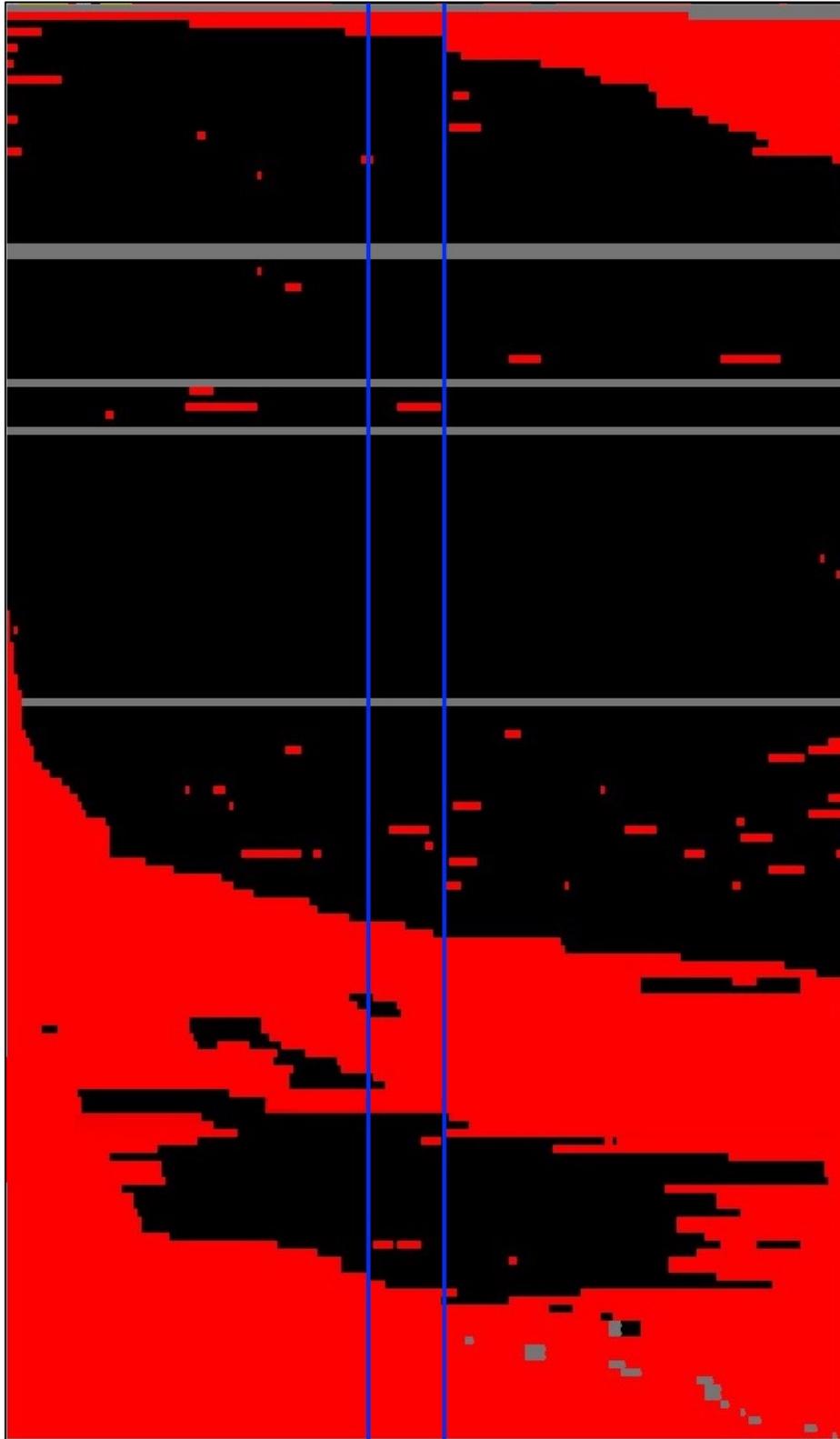


Figure 5.9a: Attendee churn at Northmont's 2015 meeting



*Figure 5.9b: Attendee churn at Northmont's 2016 meeting
Note: The horizontal time scale in Figure 5.9a and 5.9b is not equivalent.*

Figure 5.10 now boils down these complex visual impressions into key numbers, including also the data from the other years. There is a quite large gap between the total number of participants across the day vs. the number who were simultaneously present at the peak moment: the former averaged only 87.3% of the latter. The gap is even larger against Bryan's method of identifying the peak, which on average captured only 81.2% of the cumulative participants.

year	attendance			cVAP	turnout (T[cVAP])			peak and Bryan's method as a percentage of cumulative	
	cumulative	actual peak	peak per Bryan's method		cumulative	actual peak	peak per Bryan's method	actual peak	peak per Bryan's method
2011	93	88	82	911	10.2%	9.7%	9.0%	94.6%	88.2%
2012	96	89	78	925	10.4%	9.6%	8.4%	92.7%	81.3%
2013	107	96	84	939	11.4%	10.2%	8.9%	89.7%	78.5%
2014	79	66	66	953	8.3%	6.9%	6.9%	83.5%	83.5%
2015	141	119	118	966	14.6%	12.3%	12.2%	84.4%	83.7%
2016	163	124	118	980	16.6%	12.7%	12.0%	76.1%	72.4%
2017	111	100	90	994	11.2%	10.1%	9.1%	90.1%	81.1%
AVERAGE	113	97	91	953	11.8%	10.2%	9.6%	87.3%	81.2%
RANGE								76.1% - 94.6%	72.4% - 88.2%

Figure 5.10: Cumulative vs. peak attendance in Northmont meetings, 2011-2016

Northmont may or may not be representative of Vermont towns when it comes to churn. For the sake of speculation, though, let's nonetheless extrapolate: we'll assume that an 81.2% average capture rate applies to all of the meetings in Bryan's sample. (Note that this multiple bakes in correction for the undercounting problems too. Regardless of whether someone was present for the actual peak vs. the pseudo peak vs. the meeting's rump, they'll be present in the

cumulative count.) We then apply a multiple of $(1 \div 0.812)$, or 1.23, to all of the Bryan figures from Figure 5.5b, getting the numbers in Figure 5.11 instead:

study	T[RV]	T[VAP]	T[cVAP]	T[VEP]
Bryan (2004)	20.5%	17.4%	17.8%	17.8%
Bryan (2004), adjusted for cumulative	25.2%	21.5%	21.9%	21.9%

Figure 5.11: Bryan’s town meeting turnout finding, adjusted for churn

These figures now can be used to produce Figure 5.12 as an updated version of Figure 5.6:

study	percentage point shortfall vs. benchmark				as a % of benchmark			
	T[RV]	T[VAP]	T[cVAP]	T[VEP]	T[RV]	T[VAP]	T[cVAP]	T[VEP]
Alford and Lee (1968)	6.0	-1.3	n/a	n/a	81%	106%	n/a	n/a
"	18.3	6.7	n/a	n/a	58%	76%	n/a	n/a
Caren (2007:39)	12.1	2.1	3.1	3.3	68%	91%	88%	87%
Hajnal and Lewis (2003:655), ADJUSTED	13.2	3.0	7.9	8.3	66%	88%	74%	73%
"	16.7	6.5	10.6	11.0	60%	77%	67%	67%
Holbrook and Weinschenk (2013:46)	13.3	2.3	3.9	4.3	65%	90%	85%	84%
Kelleher and Lowery (2004:745)	15.2	2.9	4.5	4.9	62%	88%	83%	82%
Wood (2002:223)	9.1	0.0	1.0	1.4	74%	100%	95%	94%

Figure 5.12: Town meeting turnout, accounting for participant churn, as a percentage of each benchmark

To be clear, this is a wobbly extrapolation on several levels. As noted, there is no way of knowing whether Northmont from 2011-2016 is more, less, or exactly representative of other Vermont or New England towns when it comes to the amount of attendee churn. For instance, I hypothesize that the amount of churn may be size dependent--specifically that larger towns will exhibit more. Northmont is at the 51st percentile for population size out of Vermont towns that practice town meetings, so if that hypothesis is correct, then Northmont’s churn should be right at the median level. I also hypothesize that churn will increase as controversy increases. In this regard, the Northmont-based estimation of churn may be low, since the warnings from the meetings in my sample contained no ragingly controversial items. Having gone more than a decade without a blow-up issue that would drive turnout, Northmont is “overdue.” This absence in the sample likely means we are using an understated churn multiple. Finally, I hypothesize

that higher attendance within a meeting (from whatever cause, not just controversy) also will be correlated with greater churn. In this regard, too, Northmont may be on the low side for churn within Bryan's sample, since Northmont's average turnout during those years was less than half of the statewide average that Bryan found (9.6% T[cVAP], per Bryan's interval counts, vs. 21.9% T[cVAP]).

Other immediately identifiable ways that Northmont differs from the average Vermont town include the fact that Northmont's population has been growing much more quickly than the state average over the past twenty years, and that Northmont is significantly more Liberal. However, the political leanings of a town have been found to have no impact upon turnout (Bryan 2004:132-133), and the culture shock of growth has been found to have only a trivial impact (Bryan 2004:124. I therefore hypothesize that these variables do not have an impact upon churn either. A third way that Northmont differs from the "average town" is that its school district meeting is not held concurrently with its town meeting. If churn indeed correlates with overall turnout, and since a separated school meeting results in a significant loss of turnout (about 15%) (Bryan 2004:102), this is a still further way that Northmont's churn figures are likely to be understated compared to the statewide average.

Most of these factors therefore suggest that the Northmont churn findings may be *less* than the statewide average, meaning that the extrapolation baked into Figures 5.11 and 5.12 may be *conservative*.

The next question is whether this churn data from Vermont can tell us anything about churn in other states. Much as Northmont may not be generalizable to all of Vermont, Vermont may not be generalizable to all of New England. This is the case for at least two reasons. First, from Zimmerman's comparative data, Vermont's turnout rates appear to be among the highest in

New England. If I am correct in my hypothesis that higher turnout correlates with higher churn, then the data from Vermont may cause us to overstate the amount of churn in other states.

Second, as we saw in the Introductory Chapter, Vermont has peculiar demographic and settlement characteristics even compared to the rest of New England. I currently do not have any hypotheses about how these characteristics may affect churn.

Given these several points, the differences between Figure 5.6 and Figure 5.12 should be taken as *suggestive*: a preliminary indication of the degree to which actual town meeting turnout might be greater than the floor established by Bryan's study.

Should Churn Be Counted?

Having shown that town meeting turnout rises impressively *if* churn is counted, we now need to ask: *should* churn be counted? I previously cited Bryan's comparison to voters who leave ballots partially blank. Formal parallelism isn't a sufficient argument, however, because the dynamics of partial participation within a PD context might be very different than within a ballot context. Something that is tolerable within the latter might be highly problematic within the former. We therefore need to explore carefully the question: is churning participation an indicator of overlooked democratic health, or of disease?

An answer in blanket terms isn't possible, because churn might have different valence for different kinds of PD institutions. For instance, churn might be perfectly fine or even virtuous within town meetings but not within electoral caucuses--or vice versa. The ensuing discussion applies specifically to New England town meetings. Similar explorations ought to be made of other participatory institutions.

Let's first assess churn from the standpoint of interest-based liberal pluralism, and then from a communitarian standpoint. For the former, churn falls somewhere between acceptable and laudable: citizens can turn out to influence what matters for them. Zimmerman's (1999) idea of town meeting as a "de facto representative assembly"²¹ becomes useful in a new way here. Although Zimmerman developed his argument to account for *non*-attendees, it is directly applicable to *partial*-attendees too. If a voter generally feel themselves to be adequately spoken for by their friends, relatives, and neighbors, they needn't worry about attending every minute of a meeting, or they might feel a need only to drop in briefly to ensure that the assembly's mood hasn't taking an unexpected turn.²²

From a communitarian standpoint, there likewise is an interpretation in which churn is perfectly healthful. Mansbridge (1980: see esp. 95-96) has discussed at length how small New England towns regularly conduct politics in the mode of Aristotelian "friends": unity rather than agonism is their default orientation (see also Leslie 2013 and Zuckerman 1970). From this perspective, participants' partial vs. complete presence doesn't change the fundamental nature of the assembly, it just makes the assembly bigger.²³ Being *physically* present or absent at any given moment doesn't make a citizen any more or less *functionally* present. This point holds not just because those present are serving as informal representatives for those absent (Fung 2004:106), but because those present are in full solidarity with those absent. When fundamental

²¹ See Defense #2D in Appendix B. In brief, Zimmerman's argument is that voters who do not attend town meeting are casting a de facto vote to be represented by those who do attend.

²² The spreading availability of cell phone service in Vermont's rural communities likely will impact both churn and turnout in general: making it even more possible for someone to approach the meeting on a "standby" basis, waiting for a present friend to text them if something comes up that they want to join the meeting for. (Northmont currently has spotty coverage throughout town, with the town hall being in one of the dead zones.)

²³ Mansbridge's description of unitary democracy has always struck me as having some overlap with Durkheim's (1893) "mechanical solidarity" societies.

interests are aligned, as among friends or family, the search for the common good doesn't depend on the vigilant omnipresence of each person.

One of Mansbridge's (1980:66) points in passing is especially relevant for thinking about churn from a communitarian perspectives: some of the small ways that community members chip into the work of governance are meaningful, even when those ways seem at first to be less significant than more overt types of participation. Mansbridge gives the example of assembly participants being part of the chorus of "second"s for a motion, or nodding their head in approval at a speaker's point. Town meeting die-hards might consider these kinds of actions trivial compared to proposing an amendment or delivering a speech, but those "trivialities" nonetheless can be quite meaningful to other personality types. Something similar applies with churn: attending for the entire meeting vs. for just a few minutes might be meaningful or not depending on exactly who is doing it, and what their reasons are.

In other ways, though, churn should be alarming to both pluralists and communitarians. For instance, if one subscribes to the Political Education Hypothesis,²⁴ partial participation may constitute partial pupillage.

Perhaps most concerning is the specter of special interests. Berry (2009:180) has found that as municipal referenda become silo-ed into separately scheduled distinct topical areas,

²⁴ This is the idea that participatory democracy has valuable educative effects upon participants' civic skills, understanding of issues, critical thinking, and relationship with other community members. The idea grows out of Mill (1861:226, 228, 238-9, 244, 254-6, 328-329, 344, 412-3, 426) and Tocqueville (1835:61, 115, 119, 280, 285). For more recent discussion, see Mansbridge (1999), Gannett (2003), and Montambeault (2016). For discussion of the PEH specifically regarding town meetings, see Kotler (1974), Hixson (1971), Bryan (1995, 2004 passim, 2007b), Knickrehm (1979), Mansbridge (1980 passim), Zimmerman (1999 passim), Von der Muhll (1970:911). For historical descriptions of the PEH in town meetings, see J.Adams (1775), Dwight (1821:249, 251), Tocqueville (1835:61), Hale (1873), Winthrop (1873:38), E.Scott (1882:178-180), Fiske (1892[1890]:31ff), Giddings (1922:64).

special interests come increasingly to dominate each one.²⁵ Something similar could be happening temporally across a town meeting's various articles. Exactly this case against what I'm now calling churn was made by Roscoe Martin (1957:60-61) in his manifesto against grass roots democracy:

Were the [...] casual droppers-by participants in town affairs in any real sense? They were instead special pleaders who came in to vote on a single issue; their concern was a particular, fragmental one, and it may be argued with some logic that the cause of town government would have been better served and a consensus of citizen opinion more accurately recorded had [they] remained at home with their special interests and left the decisions to those who came and stayed through the day.

The idea of special interests packing town meetings during specific articles is a long-standing one.²⁶ An "employee bloc" or "the school supporters" are among the most frequently cited examples. Beyond the anecdotal, however, only one study has offered evidence to support the idea (Fahy 1998), and its focus on towns with populations >6,000 leaves us without an understanding of whether the same dynamics apply to small towns where town meeting is most practicable anyway.²⁷ For instance, the dynamics of unions and public employee coalitions (which Fahy discusses on pp. 435-436) are manifestly irrelevant to a place like Northmont with only a handful of FTE employees. Meanwhile, better evidence suggests that the emotional resonance of the "packing" scenario may be making it more salient than merited by its actual rate

²⁵ See also Sullivan et al. (1980:36-37), and Clark and Bryan (2005:45).

²⁶ E.g., Childs (1922:138), Manny (1930:37), Banning (1935:154), Whitaker (1936:6), Dudley (1942), J.Harris (1949), BG (1961), Tilden (1962:171-172), Banfield and Wilson (1963:210), Stitely (1964:41), Mehlman (1973:16-18 / 1974:49), Henry (1978:1), Gere (1984:38), Bellah et al. (1985:173), Preer (1986), Dye (1988:266, 2009:365), Palmer et al. (1992:160, 2009:199), Fahy (1998:435-436). For discussion, see Von Der Muhll (1970:347-348) and Zimmerman (1967:41-42, 1999).

²⁷ Bryan (2004:272) observes that many critiques of town meeting are based on observation from "company towns" with larger populations and heavier industry. Given the demographic, sociological, and economic differences, findings from these sites cannot be extended to smaller towns. Three examples of critiques that commit this offense are Coleman, Goldstein, and Howell (2009:668, 767n27), Alexander and Berger (1949:145, 149), and NEF (1878).

of occurrence in small towns (Zimmerman 1967:41-42, 1984:104, 1999:187). Furthermore, instances of “packing” may have more to do with skewed expectation than with actual demographic imbalance: as Mansbridge (1980:112-114) points out, when parent blocs are accused of packing a meeting, they’re actually only achieving their proportional level of representation, thanks to their routine *under*-representation during most other meetings.

Ultimately, additional investigation is needed into *why* people leave early or enter late, and *what* they do while present. These specifics will matter very much for how we judge churn. For instance, do churners exhibit different speaking behaviors than full-meeting participants? Does churning behavior correlate with other kinds of political behavior or identity? Are there different types of churners that can be identified? With a full understanding of why and how churn happens, we may even decide that some types of churners should be counted and others not, even within a single meeting.

While we await answers to questions like these, my gut sense and my preliminary observation both support Bryan’s and Zimmerman’s belief that churn, when town meetings are concerned, is democratically positive or at least neutral rather than negative. The applicability of Meiklejohn’s and Jones’ point from Appendix B’s Defense #2C is very persuasive to me: as long as a critical mass of participants is present, the assembly will be able to succeed with its work, regardless of whether the mass was achieved through churners or completists.²⁸ And if churners are contributing to the success of the meeting, it would be odd to discount them as participants.

²⁸ From a pluralist standpoint, “critical mass” will mean having no missing voices, as well as a mini critical mass for each minority (James 2008, Fishkin 2009:38). From a communitarian standpoint, “critical mass” will mean having enough collective wisdom, experience, and brainpower to solve shared problems.

Recap and Conclusions: Withdrawing the Guilty Plea

After having properly commensurated the turnout units and having produced an estimate of cumulative vs. peak attendees, town meeting now matches 82-94% of all but one of the benchmarks. The outlier from Hajnal and Lewis still only drags the lower range down to 67%-94%. Phrased in reverse, the ballot municipality turnout is now only 6-22% greater (6%-70% including Hajnal and Lewis).

As I've repeatedly emphasized, these results need to be taken as suggestive rather than precise, due to the several uncertainties in the conversions and extrapolations that produced them. There also are three significant factors that have not yet been accounted for, and to which we now ought to turn.

The differentiation of Hajnal and Lewis (even after our earlier correction for their partial sample of a four-year election cycle) speaks to the massive importance of *population size*. Out of all the benchmarks, Hajnal and Lewis is the only one whose sample includes small municipalities.²⁹ The Vermont towns rarely exceed populations of 5,000, whereas the samples of all the benchmarks other than Hajnal and Lewis range upward from 25,000 to millions. As we saw previously, town meeting turnout is strongly correlated with population size; the same correlation has been established for ballot elections too (Funk 2005, Oliver 2000, Kelleher and Lowery 2004, Larsen 2002). Controlling for municipality size therefore would grow the turnout gap again, possibly by a very large amount. However, Hajnal and Lewis also are the only state-specific study in the sample, so any peculiarities of California must be identified and controlled.

²⁹ Kelleher and Lowery *include* smaller municipalities, but their sample still has a bias toward larger ones, given their use of municipalities in a select 12 urban counties. Hajnal and Lewis, meanwhile, sample comprehensively across a whole state.

All of this points once again to the need to do a careful size-controlled comparison of town meeting vs. ballot turnout.

The second outstanding factor is *age*. Vermont’s population skews older (Wong 2008:3-6; Woolf 2015, 2016), and older people participate at greater rates in both ballot elections (R.Putnam 2001:283-284) and town meetings (Figure 5.13). Controlling for population age therefore would grow the turnout gap by an additional degree.³⁰

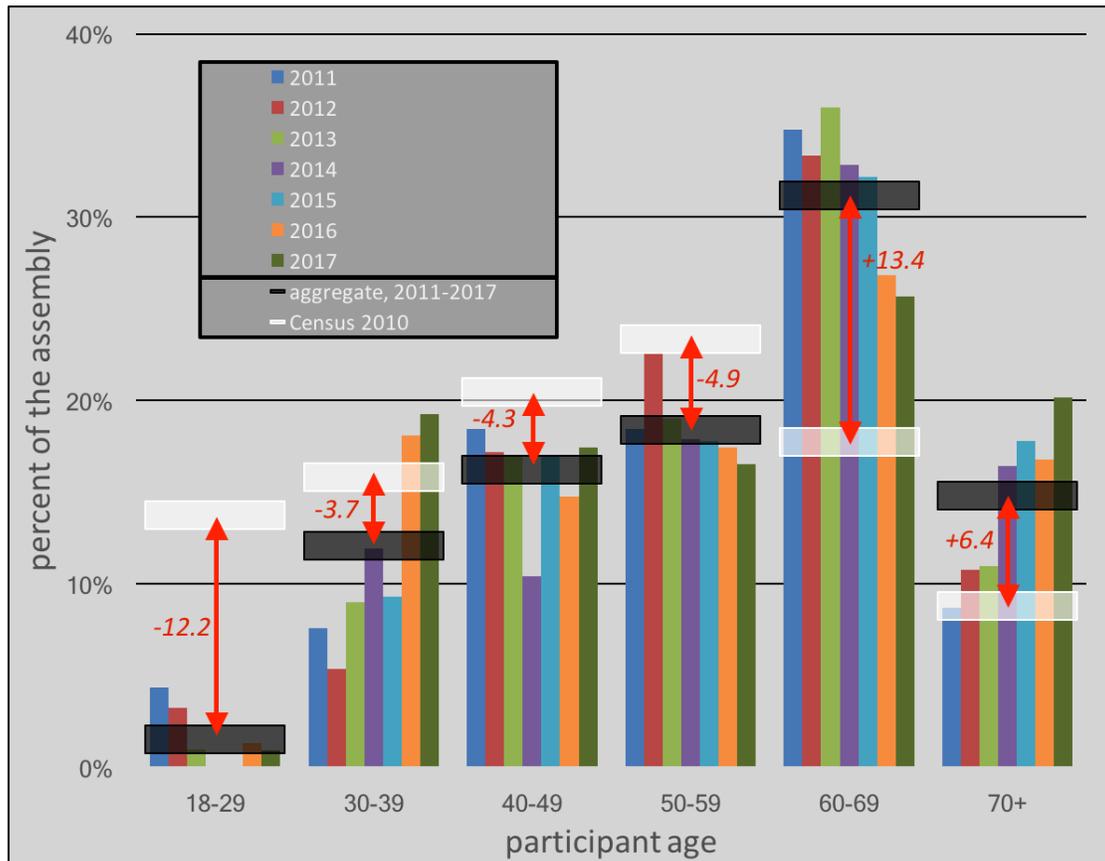


Figure 5.13: Age breakdown of Northmont’s town meeting participants vs. age breakdown of Northmont’s population

Unidentified meeting participants are not included.

Sources: Population data is from the 2010 Census. Northmonters’ individual ages are based on birth dates from VT Secretary of State voter rolls and other public records.

³⁰ Woolf explains that Vermont’s relative age skew may post-date 1990. This means that most of Bryan’s data predates the skew. Woolf explains, however, that Vermont’s median age has essentially stayed steady since 1990 while other states have gotten younger. This in turn means that pre-1990 Vermont was older than the post-1990 United States, and these are the two periods of our respective samples for town meeting turnout and ballot turnout.

If age and size threaten to grow town meeting's embarrassment, a third factor offers movement in the other direction: there may be important intrinsic *differences in turnout between referenda vs. officer elections*. Town meeting involves both types of voter activity. Some ballot municipalities likewise pose large numbers of issue votes to their citizens, but others direct few or none, leaving the questions to be settled by the officers who are being elected. A proper benchmark for town meeting turnout therefore would include only those ballot municipalities that include both elections and referenda on their ballots. Unfortunately for our comparison, all of the Figure 5.1 benchmarks include many purely electoral municipalities in their samples.

Elections typically inspire greater turnout than referenda, so failure to distinguish between the two likely has artificially depressed town meeting's apparent performance against the benchmark. For instance, Illinois' 2016 general election achieved a 69.4% T[RV] response rate in Chicago for the presidential race, but only 55.1% for a referendum on a transportation funding amendment to the Illinois Constitution (CBEC 2017). Moreover, the achievement of 55.1% on the latter probably was achieved only thanks to concurrence with the former. For illustration, let's do a quick analysis of referendum turnout during the period 2010-2015 in Burlington, VT, which has a population of >40,000 and uses balloting rather than town meeting. Turnout for referenda that were piggybacked on officer elections achieved an average response rate of 23.1% T[RV] (range: 12.7% to 34.9%).³¹ In contrast, the two specially scheduled referenda achieved turnout of 8.6% and 21.6% T[RV] respectively (average: 15.1%) (BOCT 2017). This of course is only a single point of data, but I doubt that the overall point is

³¹ The accompanying elections achieved overall turnout ranging from 13.0% to 38.3%.

controversial. Thus, the intrinsic difference in turnout between referenda vs. elections may account for a significant portion of the benchmarking gap.³²

To summarize, there are multiple asterisks that we need to append to my finding that town meeting turnout is only modestly (rather than abysmally) worse than ballot election turnout:

- We need better accounting of the age and population size variables. *This point will heavily further sink town meeting's apparent performance against the benchmark.*
- We need an accounting of the referenda vs. elections variable. *This point will significantly buoy town meeting's apparent performance against the benchmark.*
- We must remember the disclaimers about generalizing from the Northmont data. *This point has unknown valence, but my best speculation was that it will buoy town meeting's performance against the benchmark.*
- We must remember that the more recent years from Bryan's sample--the decade that coincides with the sampling periods of most of the benchmark studies--exhibited slightly lower turnout than his overall average finding, which is what we used. *This point further sinks town meeting's apparent performance against the benchmark.*

³² With appropriate controls for town size, and with cognizance of a temporal non-overlap of 5-10 years, the VTSoS Australian ballot data will be able to be used as a benchmark against the most recent years of Bryan's database. The section below on "Undercounting" explains why internal comparison of the VTSoS floor meeting vs. Australian ballot data is unreliable. Within the existing literature, only Mansbridge (1980:64) has offered anything resembling a proper comparison, in the form of a spot check of her case study town against a few demographically and economically similar New York towns.

It is hard to estimate the overall effect of these four outstanding factors. My best speculation is that town meeting will lose some amount of ground, though maybe not much. Even in a worst case outcome, though, we have exited the ballpark where town meeting's putative "abysmal" turnout in the single-digits or low-tens is stacked against the (relatively) high turnouts of federal elections, or against the greatly exaggerated turnout of municipal ballot elections. Town meeting no longer needs to preemptively seek a plea deal in the face of overwhelming evidence of guilt; instead town meeting can take its chances in court.

At this point we can return to the defenses enumerated in Appendix B. In the old ballpark, the ability of those defenses to compensate was dubious. Now, however, we are talking about a significantly smaller gap. Are the defenses now adequate to refute the charge that town meeting is an anti-democratic wolf in participatory clothing? An answer to that question remains a qualitative judgment, but the likelihood of affirmative responses is now much greater. Previously the gap was large enough to be considered an instant deal-breaker by many analysts, policy makers, and New England citizens. One had to be a raging enthusiast for participatory democracy or for New England tradition in order to look past the turnout gap. Now, however, the gap will strike many normal, reasonable people as being small enough to be treated as merely one more factor among all of the other pros and cons in an assessment of town meeting as an instrument of governance. Plenty of people may still decide that on balance they prefer balloting, but I suspect that this new finding will goose town meeting's odds of acceptance by at least a bit.

One final dimension that we have not addressed at all yet is institutional design. In our initial review of Bryan's findings, we saw that town meeting turnout can improve upon the average by 13% if it employs the optimal configuration of best practices. Institutional design also has enormous impact in ballot elections. Major factors include concurrency or non-concurrency

with state or federal elections, whether the elections are partisan, and what kind of governance structure the municipality employs (mayor-council, etc.). The comparison in this chapter has been based on the current real-world averages of town meeting vs. ballot elections, but it also would be useful to know how the optimal versions of both institutions stack up. We also would want to know the relative ease of optimizing each institution. Changing the dates of ballot elections, for instance, is often harder than one might think. This is not due solely to inertia or prejudice for tradition, but is also rooted in logistical difficulties related to things like budgeting cycles that can depend on a complex web of interlocking deadlines from various community, state, federal, private, and NGO entities. Low hanging fruit for ballot democracies includes things like offering easy absentee ballot options, and arranging for appropriately staffed and located polling sites. For town meetings, low hanging fruit includes providing childcare during the meeting, holding the school district meeting concurrently, making tactical rather than blanket use of Australian ballots, and the rest of the factors that Bryan identifies.³³

As we think about optimization, we also can ask whether any of the insights from the ballot literature might be applicable to town meeting too. For instance, I am not aware of anyone ever having suggested that town meetings be moved from March to November in order to be concurrent with quadrennial presidential elections and biennial³⁴ gubernatorial elections. Such a move would involve numerous logistical considerations, not to mention that it would disturb a key aspect of a highly valued local tradition. Hurdles notwithstanding, a quick and dirty analysis of the VTSoS data set (see Appendix C), suggests that November town meetings could be a

³³ Note that rescheduling meetings from Tuesday mornings to evenings or weekends is *not* included within this list of easy measures, because it does not produce a durable improvement in turnout (Bryan 2004).

³⁴ Uniquely among U.S. states, Vermont and New Hampshire have two-year terms for governors.

game changer for turnout. The best available clue about what might happen is to look at the effect of presidential and gubernatorial primaries, which are concurrent with Vermont's current March town meetings. My analysis of the VTSoS data for three four-year election cycles, 2001-2012, indicates that town meetings during gubernatorial primary years have more than 8% higher T[VAP] turnout than during non-primary years (more than 10% higher T[RV] turnout). The boost during presidential primary years is slightly higher, at 9% T[VAP] (12% T[RV]). The ballot literature has established that concurrency with general elections produces a much larger boost than concurrency with primaries (Hajnal and Lewis 2003:656). Assuming that that effect extends to town meeting, holding meetings in November instead of March might produce a greater boost than all other possible adjustments combined. On the other hand, the concurrency might increase the partisanship of town meeting, which might be undesirable. Once again, then, we realize how many facets of town meeting are in need of scientifically rigorous investigation.

In addition to offering evidence that town meeting's "low turnout" has been overstated, this chapter therefore also points to prospects for exciting further research into town meeting turnout. Geographically- and size- controlled comparisons need to be developed; existing and novel optimization measures need to be investigated; and the interplay between turnout and other aspects of the meeting needs to be established. Previously, the topic of turnout has been marshalled to close the conversation about town meeting; now turnout emerges as a new launching point.

Significance for New England Municipalities--and Beyond

How should these findings be acted upon?

Most obviously, when New England municipalities weigh up the many factors that bear upon whether to retain, replace, or re-adopt town meeting (e.g., Stowe 2016), they can reduce the negative weight they assign to turnout. Similarly when non-New England states periodically look for alternative models of municipal governance,³⁵ they will be able to take town meeting as a more serious possibility; the fear that participation rates will crater can be moderated or set aside. Non-municipal organizations too--corporations, clubs, agencies, professional associations, activist groups, etc.--may wish to give town meeting style processes a second look, depending on whether they anticipate churn being relevant under their own circumstance (and depending on whether their own circumstances would make churn a positive, neutral, or negative thing).

Along a second front, if turnout is not as dire as believed, then intellectual and reform energies within New England (e.g., Charlotte 2014) can be redirected toward other problem-areas of town meeting governance. Other PD institutions that exhibit churn may be ripe for analogous reprioritizations. In town meeting's case, the overwhelming attention to turnout has left insufficient oxygen for at least three other issues: 1) the demographic imbalance of the people who *do* attend, 2) participation problems *within* the meeting, and 3) meeting structures

³⁵ For instance, Montana in the mid-1970s. See Lopach and McKinsey (1975) and ACIR (1975:12)

that are at odds with how participants actually try to use the meeting. Let's take a look at each of these.

1) Demographic imbalance of existing attendees

In the discussion of Appendix B's Defense #2F, we see that town meeting assemblies are not representative of the larger community when it comes to age and socioeconomic status. Even when turnout spikes during controversies, the imbalances often persist (Mansbridge 1980:111). Turnout boosting efforts that are targeted toward underrepresented groups may therefore pay many more democratic dividends than efforts to boost turnout overall. As Kadlec and Friedman (2007:12) write concerning participatory democracy generally, "If public forums are to be truly inclusive and representative, much more active and targeted forms of outreach and invitation must be pursued." They advocate "recruitment strategies that have more in common with community organizing."

Achieving proportionate participation would help address one of the most serious issues with town meetings: the skewing of which issues get identified as topics for municipal attention.³⁶ The case studies by Mansbridge (1980: see especially 121), Kotler (1974), and Von Der Muhll (1970) illustrate these problems in detail. Kotler (1974:210) observes,

The contemporary town meeting is largely a middle class arena in the way it conceives important issues, sets priorities, and allocates resources. The issue of reducing property taxes, restricting land development through zoning ordinances, and environmental protection override the issues of providing more and better recreational facilities, sewage facilities, and compensatory school programs (all of which have a greater impact on the

³⁶ Salvino et al. (2012) argue that the non-representativeness of town meeting assemblies does not affect the decisions that they make, at least on the taxation questions that were studied. Here I am talking about which questions are raised in the first place, not how they are answered once raised.

poor than the middle class), upgrading public housing, and increasing employment opportunities.

Having mapped the areas of municipal action in these ways, Select Boards and Budget/Finance Committees then also design tax policy within each area in a thoroughly middle class way: by pursuing as much frugality as possible (Kotler 1974:220, 236-237, 241). This “protection of the taxpayer” trope, Kotler reminds us, is essentially protection from the non-propertied. What I observed in Northmont’s Budget Committee and Select Board meetings, and in Select Board meetings in an additional 13 towns in northern Vermont, fully aligns with Kotler’s point: they were continually looking for ways to keep costs down, often citing the backlash that they otherwise anticipated on Town Meeting Day. Board members were uniformly middle class themselves (though of considerable range within that broad category). The annual token salary of \$1,000 surely did little to encourage potential service by anyone in tighter economic circumstances, and there also are social and cultural factors that drive board service toward middle class participants (e.g., orientations toward volunteering). As Kotler very smartly remarks, town committees, between their membership and their orientation toward thrift, therefore embody the interests of a special interest that has achieved the holy grail of politics: having its interests be broadly accepted as commonsense and a common good (see also Mansbridge 2003:183, and Menzies 1984).

Policy makers therefore should be more concerned to rectify demographic imbalances among attendees, not just to increase turnout in an absolute way (Mansbridge 1973:12). Addressing the imbalances of board members might be most impactful of all: redesigning board service so that it is more accessible to low-SES members, or finding ways to bring the voices of low-SES constituents more powerfully into the board rooms even if they are not serving directly.

2) Participation problems *within* the meeting

As with PD in general, once people are *in* the meeting, their participation is not at all equal, along multiple dimensions.³⁷ Mansbridge (1973/1976, 1980) has made this point thoroughly with regard to town meetings, but a recap of three points is in order.

First, the majority of the meeting's talking is done by a fraction of the attendees. Only 44% of attendees will say anything at all, and an even smaller group of participants do a disproportionate amount of the talking.³⁸ Bryan (2004:180-183, 186) argues that SES is only very lightly patterned with vocal participation, but he is looking at town-level data and is thus vulnerable to ecological fallacy. Meanwhile, Mansbridge (1973/1976, 1980) has illustrated significant SES disparity in participation, and she has shown the serious consequences for the quality of deliberation.³⁹

Second, the psychic costs of participation are very different for different participants. For some people, town meeting is an affirming exercise in community participation, civic duty, and public exhibition. For others, the public speaking and the need to process conflict in real-time in public can be stressful, anxious, fear-inducing, and upsetting.⁴⁰ As we noted in the prior

³⁷ On PD in general: I.Young (1990), L.Sanders (1997), Kadlec and Friedman (2007), Schudson (1997), M.James (2008), Chambers (2003), Karpowitz et al. (2012, 2014), J.Freeman (1972).

³⁸ Bryan (2004:150-151), Bryan (1995:41), Knickrehm (1979:82). This pattern has been durable across at least a century and a quarter (Hart 1893:344; MacDonald 1895:197). See, however, Mansbridge's (1980:60, 286) discussion of how attendees provide communicative input within meetings in ways that wouldn't be included by Bryan's or Knickrehm's methods: seconding motions (see Bryan 2004:284n13), nodding or shaking heads, grumbling, catcalling witticisms, etc.

³⁹ See Mansbridge's (1980:121) discussion of the absence of the topic of low-cost housing during an otherwise wide-ranging, careful, earnest deliberation of zoning.

⁴⁰ Mansbridge (1980:60-71, 116, 274). See also Kotler (1974:205). The people who are most prominent in organizing and participating in town meetings--the same people who often are highly concerned over turnout--often discount this other side of the town meeting experience even when they give it lip service. See e.g. Kotler's (1974:283) interviewee, or compare Rule's (2012) remarks on pp. 29-30 vs. p. 291.

paragraph, if the latter kind of person *doesn't* soldier through their discomfort in order to make their perspectives heard, the quality of the community's deliberation can suffer, and their own interests can be lost. But if they *do* soldier through, they can leave the meeting emotionally exhausted, and physically unsettled from the adrenaline. This unevenness--the fact that having an impact pays rewards to some participants and charges a fee from others--is worthy of reflection and rectification. Rousseau (1762:113) surely would be frightened for a political community's long-term health if only some citizens *fly* to the assemblies while other citizens have to drag themselves there in dread.

Third, different participants have very different levels of ability to impact the meeting. There is ongoing debate about whether the educated middle class enjoys an advantage or not within municipal deliberation thanks to their administrative experience, civic skills, budgetary and legal experience, etc.⁴¹ Leaving that debate aside, there is a deeper issue that feminist scholars of PD have been attentive to. As Mansbridge (1980:73) notes, "The townspeople do not distribute their empathy equally." Credibility is likewise distributed unevenly, and things like passion, anger, "straight talkin'," quietness, loudness, humor, etc. all are received differently depending upon who is talking, with class, gender, race, and duration of residency all having an impact.⁴²

At the intersection of the second and third points is a serious problem that has been discussed by Kotler (1974:271). Merely pushing for greater inclusion of marginalized

⁴¹ On the "no advantage" side: Bryan (2004:). On the "definite advantage" side: Von Der Muhll (1970:231-232), Mansbridge (1980).

⁴² Marder (1987), I.Young (1990), L.Sanders (1997), Chambers (2003). Town meeting appears not to exhibit a perfectly linear correlation between class and credibility the way that some institutions do. Certain forms of blue collar expertise are highly respected, whereas "newcomers" and others with "fancy" degrees, social status, economic clout, and cosmopolitanism discover that these qualities sometimes can be a liability.

participants is not sufficient. Their concerns and modes of participation won't be able to be absorbed into town meeting's structure and culture unless the participants who *are* currently active are willing to undergo change themselves. "The middle class," Kotler writes, "would also have to extend their perspective, and deepen their understanding, of the particular needs and aspirations of non-middle class groups within the community."

Developing ways to address these serious in-meeting issues--and developing the political will in the first place--is at least as pressing as bringing additional people to the meeting. Even setting aside any questions of equality or justice, this point may be worth pursuing simply for the sake of good process: there is survey evidence that many Vermonters (both those who do and don't attend town meetings) simply want town meetings to "work better" when it comes to officers facilitating participation, communication, and information-distribution during the meeting (Bryan 1972:350).

3) Scheduling issues

The fact that attendance varies across the meeting should be taken seriously. Does the typical pattern--a rapidly achieved peak, then a steady trail-off until adjournment⁴³--coincide constructively with the order of the warning? Let us look to Northmont for some answers.

Northmont's traditional article order was typical of many towns:

1. election of the moderator
2. officer reports
3. elections
4. ad hoc articles--first batch
5. departmental appropriations

⁴³ Bryan (2004). This pattern too is at least a century old (Fairlee and Kneier 1930; Brooks 1976:168). In a competing perspective, Zimmerman (1984:103) says that attendance is smaller early in the meeting. He may have been referring to the very first period following the call to order, during which people are trickling in.

6. officer compensation
7. funding requests from non-municipal agencies
8. ad hoc articles--second batch
9. pro forma articles (e.g., re-entrusting the Select Board with necessary powers)
10. ad hoc articles--third batch
11. Social Issues Resolutions
12. "any other business"

This order resulted in the thickest attendance usually landing during the third through sixth items: elections, the first batch of ad hoc articles, departmental appropriations, and officer compensation. Then again, the causality may be that items #3-6 (particularly elections) were *drawing* the high turnout, not that the "early bulge" pattern is intrinsic. This is a question that requires research. *Is* the early bulge intrinsic? If so, are topics #3-6 indeed the ones on which high attendance is best spent? If not, what other articles might be most crucial to tuck into elections' halo? In general, does the existing warning order facilitate maximal participation on the issues that residents care about?

Even without any further investigation, I advocate that Select Boards:

1. push back the discussion of officer salaries,⁴⁴
2. that they give careful consideration to which ad hoc items (if any) to include in the first round of ad hoc items,
3. that they keep elections and departmental appropriations in their current place.

My recommendations, though, are less valuable than if Select Boards solicit citizen input from their own specific communities, to determine preferences for the warning's order on a community by community basis.

⁴⁴ In Northmont, like in many towns, the officer compensation articles usually either were pro forma affairs or involved low stakes amounts, or both. Aside from the Town Clerk/Treasurer's salary and the Listers' wage, these articles addressed token compensation for volunteers. (Note that the town's main personnel costs were not addressed here but instead were embedded within the general budget.)

There are various additional ideas that could be developed for how to let citizens target their participation in the ways that are meaningful to them. For instance, consider the time that Northmonter Gina Marphlin tried to come out to support a cause that mattered to her. Gina was deeply involved in Northmont's community affairs, but she only occasionally attended town meetings. One year she did stop by. "Did they vote on the youth center yet?" she asked me. (I had happened to be positioned right by the door when she came in.) I answered in the negative; we still were quite some distance removed from that article. She took a seat by the door to wait, remaining bundled up in her heavy jacket, enormous scarf, and earmuffs--she needed to be able to make a quick exit again as soon as the youth center was settled. A half hour later, we still hadn't reached her article, so she gave up and left; it was taking too long and she had other things she wanted to fit into her day. When we did reach the article, it passed with no controversy or discussion, but Gina had not been able to be part of the chorus of "ayes."

Citizens like Gina therefore might appreciate if town meeting warnings were pegged at least partially to a schedule, instead of flowing freely from start to finish with each article being considered in order at whatever point it was reached (or at whatever point someone motions to suspend the rules and consider items out of order). Pegging key topics to specific times is how some boards organize their agendas, and they have devised a series of ways to prevent wasteful dead time between fixed items. For town meetings, scheduling *every* article would be unwise, but an appropriate balance could be identified within two or three years of experimentation.

An interview project with townspeople--both those who do and don't attend meetings--would turn up numerous ways that town meeting's format could be productively matched to the needs and interests of participants and potential participants. Concern over turnout thus may be the result of asking the wrong question. Instead of, "How do we get more people to participate?"

we could ask, “How do we take better advantage of the participation that we already are achieving?”

Summary

Attendance at town meetings is important, but obsession with it is interfering with each of these other three areas. Imagine the renaissance of town meeting if attendance were encouraged as a norm for young adults and renters, if women and minority citizens felt confident that they would have peers’ support, if meetings weren’t so emotionally exhausting for certain identities and personality types, and if citizens felt that they could participate in ways that were meaningful to them instead of having to contort themselves to match the meeting’s requirements. And in fact, these outcomes surely would have the additional side effect of circling back to boost turnout--probably by a greater degree than from measures designed to address turnout directly.

Significance for Political Theory

At the theoretical level, we can draw three points from the material we’ve covered in this chapter. The first involves putting churn onto the agenda for political theorists and political scientists. The second and third return to the theme of benchmarking apples-to-apples, with regard respectively to conceptual and technical issues.

The Importance (Sometimes) of Churn for PD Institutions

Churn is a crucial dynamic of many PD institutions, not just town meeting, but its magnitude and effects (which almost certainly differ from institution to institution) are little examined. In some cases, attention to churn may rescue participation rates from misplaced

disparagement. In others, understanding the dynamics of churn is a matter of understanding the internal mechanics of the institution. For either or both reasons, churn ought to be brought to the front burner of PD studies and submitted to both empirical and theoretical investigation. For instance, caucuses in U.S. presidential primaries also are criticized for low turnout compared to states that use ballots. But how many churners (if any) are missed in the participation counts from caucuses' final votes? How meaningful (if at all) was the input of the churners? These questions have to be answered before we can make a final judgment about either the numerical participation or the qualitative efficacy of caucuses.

My own study of town meetings has gotten only to the point of establishing that churn exists, without investigating its *effects*. There are many questions to ask about churn for both town meetings and other PD institutions. We already saw a number in the section above on "Should Churn Be Counted?", and we can continue with many more: In any given PD institution, is there any patterning to who is a churner and who is a start-to-finish participant? A thought experiment: how would the proceedings be different if churners didn't exist--if the only participants were those who were present from start to finish? How do churners directly impact deliberation? What are the effects of some participants missing some parts of the deliberation? How does churners' presence impact the mood or atmosphere of the room? Is there any effect just from the sheer movement of bodies in and out of the meeting space? For instance, I wonder if that movement helps contribute to the characteristic energetic buzz of town meetings; without churners, would the meeting be a static affair, both literally and figuratively?

For the sake of understanding PD institutions in their own right, as well as for being able to compare them accurately to ballot and representative institutions, churn needs detailed theoretical and empirical investigation.

And ultimately, attention to churn also pulls our attention to a larger matter: what assumptions are baked into thinking of participation in spatial and temporal terms? In what ways is and isn't participation necessarily anchored to co-presence? How extensive in time does participation have to be in order to count? What are the different possible temporalities of participation?

Two Different Axes of Comparison: Direct vs. Representative Democracy, and Strong vs. Weak Participation

I suggest that there has been widespread jumbling of two different questions:

#1: How do participation rates compare between institutions of direct democracy (where the people pass laws directly) vs. institutions of representative democracy (where the people elect representatives to pass laws for them)?

#2: How do participation rates compare when the people use ballot elections vs. participatory/deliberative methods for whichever role they have from #1? That is, how do participation rates compare when participation is "weak" vs. "strong" (Barber 1984)?

These are independent axes (Figure 5.14). Either method can be used with either type of democracy. Direct democracy can be exercised via referendum votes (zone #1 in the figure) *or* via intensive face to face methods like town meeting or participatory budgeting (zone #3). Representative democracy, meanwhile, can consist of simple periodic elections combined with sporadic popular pressure upon representatives' conduct (a weak form--zone #2), *or* it can involve heavy levels of hands-on attention by the people (zone #4) both during elections (e.g., caucuses) and between them (e.g., what was illustrated in Chapter 2).

	people pass laws themselves	people elect representatives to pass laws for them
weak participation	1 referenda by ballot	2 typical ballot elections: held periodically, and with sporadic popular pressure between elections
strong participation	3 town meetings, participatory budgeting	4 heavy hands-on attention/pressure/intervention by the people during and between elections (Chapter Two illustrates an example; some forms of caucuses represent another)

Figure 5.14: Direct vs. representative democracy and strong vs. weak participation: two separate axes

Depending on whether one is trying to say something about the choice between representative vs. direct democracy, or whether one is trying to say something about the ballot vs. PD method, then town meeting needs different benchmarks. When New Englanders are assessing town meeting turnout, they typically are concerned with the latter: they are wondering whether balloting would be a superior way of achieving direct democracy, but they are not further entertaining an expansion of the role of officers. The problem with how town meeting turnout has been benchmarked is that the comparison is being drawn from zone #3 to zone #2--a move both vertical *and* horizontal. If one is trying to make a case for the superiority of representative democracy, then it's fine to benchmark town meeting against elections for mayors and councilpersons (zone #2). But if one is trying to make the case for the superior turnout of ballots vs. PD methods, then town meeting turnout has to be benchmarked specifically against municipal referenda turnout (zone #1).

This is not just a matter of ensuring that New Englanders make fruitful comparisons in a locally relevant matter. In the current moment, interest in PD is on the upswing, and sharp debate

over its merits is occurring in academic journals and practitioner forums, not to mention among citizens at a range of scales across the globe. An accurate, productive debate will depend on heeding distinctions such as this. Appropriate comparison is the backbone of the project of comparative political institutions.

Re-Checking Basic Facts

Finally, we have the succinct point that PD researchers ought to double-check basic data about PD institutions for errors of measurement and commensuration, in addition to arguing points at higher philosophical levels (cf. Brandt 1997).

APPENDIX A. Kinky Empiricism in the Growth of the Turnout Trope

This appendix traces the historical development of the “low turnout” trope from its origins in the 1920s, with additional attention to some 19th century precedents. The goal is twofold. First is history for its own sake: the documentation of how we reached the present moment. Second is a complement to the main chapter’s head-on challenge to the “low turnout” charge. This appendix contributes a second way that we should refuse to yield the factual high ground: although self-avowedly “unsentimental” and “fact-based,” the “low turnout” critique in fact has been animated to a remarkable degree by anti-empirical reasoning, from its origins through the present. That is, despite its insistence on using data to displace tradition, emotion, and symbolic attachment, the critique has been driven by strong symbolic attachments of its own. In this appendix, I illustrate how these attachments have manifested in a series of scientific sins, from anecdotalism and sloppy citation of evidence, through inadequate or absent benchmarking, to letting conclusions determine the selection of evidence rather than vice versa.

I suggest that the town meeting case reveals something about the general processes by which empirical measurements of PD institution get (mis)produced, (mis)understood, (mis)applied in public and scholarly discourse, and used to (mis)inform public policy. The errors and oversights in how town meeting turnout has been measured are not adventitious. Instead, PD studies is vulnerable to three special dangers that the town meeting case illustrates: 1) the “kinky” empiricism that governs discussion of PD topics, 2) the “assumption overflow” from

political science's far more developed study of ballot democracy, and 3) an "empirical death ratchet" that makes negative findings about PD institutions stickier than positive ones.

Town Meeting's "Low Turnout": Kinky Empiricism in the Growth of a Critique

The Present vs. The Past

Once enjoying near-universal celebration as the form of American PD par excellence (see Chapter 1), the New England town meeting was submitted to a withering series of critiques over the course of the 20th century. Perhaps most devastating among these was the attention drawn to abysmal participation rates. A 1965 staff editorial from the *National Civic Review* illustrates the mature form of the critique. Town meeting, the NCR wrote,

still lingers on as an instrument of control by small groups of self-seekers and without participation by 90 per cent of the eligible voters. It is gratifying to note that there is a steady and inevitable drift away from this precious but outdated and outgrown memory of the past. (NCR 1965:522)

A 1960s government textbook similarly explained to students that,

The urbanization of many towns has been accompanied by a sharp decrease in attendance at town meetings and a consequent decline in the democratic effectiveness of this form of government. In fact, even in rural towns, attendance is often poor. (Adrian 1960:218)⁴⁵

As a nugget of language and attitude, the point has carried into the present virtually unchanged. We can find the continuity illustrated in a literal way if we look at the static revision history of another textbook, which has been reprinting the following accusatory summary across ten editions, from 1988 through the present:

⁴⁵ See also Adrian (1955:207, 1963:103), as well as the subsequent editions of each book.

While the town meeting has been celebrated by many political philosophers as ‘pure democracy,’ the reality is much less than full participatory democracy. Attendance at town meetings is usually less than 10 percent of the town’s voters. In larger towns, the participation rate may be only 1 or 2 percent of the voters. The idealized town meeting democracy is really governance by a very small group of political activists. (Dye 1988:266 / Dye and MacManus 2015:307)

We’ll see later in this appendix that all of these confidently presented statistics are erroneous--an example of how the *expectation* of low numbers has encouraged the *perception and reproduction* of low numbers. Dye’s textbook also illustrates the way that understandings of turnout could be reproduced again and again without critical reexamination.

The real numbers on town meeting turnout aren’t terribly less dismal, however. Even in the states where town meeting is most vigorously practiced, statewide average turnout is only in the 15-25% range (Zimmerman 1999, Bryan 2004). That makes town meeting look bad even by the low standards of U.S. municipal elections, which typically achieve twice or thrice that (see Figure 5.1).

It is instructive to trace the historical emergence of the “low turnout” trope. Doing so will achieve two ends. First, it will show the multiple negative connotations that have been baked into the idea--including not just about *why* low turnout is bad, but also the baseline idea that low turnout *is* bad. Second, the historical attention leads us to a curious fact: from birth, through maturity, and into ascendance as factual canon, the turnout critique’s seemingly hard-nosed empiricism has in fact been selectively scientific. Despite its insistence on using data to displace tradition, emotion, and symbolic attachment, the critique has been driven by strong symbolic attachments of its own. In other words, to a degree (only to a degree--it would be easy to get carried away with this point) the citation of numbers has been not the cause but the *result* of the belief in town meeting’s low turnout.

The modern version of the “low turnout” trope didn’t truly take off until the 1920s. Most descriptions of town meeting prior to then simply didn’t mention attendance problems at all, even in cases where they cataloged other shortcomings.⁴⁶ Or, when they did discuss attendance, they had positive things to say,⁴⁷ or they evinced concerns that were measurably distinct from the modern ones.

A good example of the distinction of these concerns is an 1897 editorial on “The Decay of Town Government” (Sedgwick 1897:181). Although unattributed, its author has been identified as Arthur George Sedgwick (Daniell 2012:77). Sedgwick decried low turnout, but not as a feature intrinsic to town meeting, and not according to the modern participatory concept wherein decisions are democratic only to the degree that the citizenry turns out. Instead, as a Progressive,⁴⁸ Sedgwick was focused upon corrupt town officers and upon the “indifference” of the mass of property owners “who stay home and let them do it.” Sedgwick believed that electoral reforms would handily rectify the problem without any further adjustment to the deliberative parts of town meeting, and he didn’t care about whether greater numbers of people

⁴⁶ A.Young (1848:37,59-66,247-248; 858:72-74), C.W.Elliott (1857:182-184), Palfrey (1860:7-15), Ripley and Dana (1862:562), Lackland (1867:151-160), Hopkins (1872:52-53), G.Martin (1875:204), Nordhoff (1875:45-46), C.Townsend (1875:258), Morrill (1900:127-134), Young and Clark (1880:56; 1900:56), W.Ford (1882:58-60), Pidgeon (1884:91-96), True and Dickinson (1888:44), Fiske (1890:19-32), Mowry (1890), Hinsdale (1891:394), Peterman (1891:41), Hale (1892), Hart (1893), Macy (1894:43-53; 1898:12; 1904:140-144), Thorpe (1894a:51; 1984b:47-48), C.B.Elliott (1898:15), Forman (1898:75-78; 1905:205-209; 1908:93-98; 1920:196-202), Wilson (1898:511), James and Sanford (1901:2-4), Ashley (1902:51-52, 390-392; 1903:43-45), Clark (1902:135-136), MacDonald (1902:55-56), Robinson (1902), Barron (1903), Lansing and Jones (1903:72-81), Boynton (1904:288-289), W.Sherman (1905:30-32), Moses (1906:6-9, 308-311), Colby and Sandeman (1907:131), Beard (1909:556-559), Garner (1911:7-11), Guitteau (1911:18-25), Bates (1912), MacGregor (1913:908-922), Cleveland (1913:187-191), Hart (1914:542-543), Lapp and Kettleborough (1916:357-358), Ashley (1917:206-208), Magruder (1917:316-325), O’Shea and Foster (1918), M.White (1920:18-22), Colegrove (1921:256-257), Ames and Eldred (1921:245-247), NIE (1922).

⁴⁷ MacDonald (1895:198), Dunn (1907:193), Beard (1910:650). Nelson (1891:117, 119) used attendance in New England towns as a positive contrast to attendance in incorporated *villages*, especially those outside of New England. Neutral discussions of attendance also existed (e.g., Hart 1893:343, Chandler 1893:788).

⁴⁸ See Sedgwick (1912).

would exercise their suffrage, as long as those who did--however few or many they might be--were vigilant to corruption.

Levermore (1886:290-291) similarly was concerned that “The actual governing force of the town is [...] an oligarchy in the bosom of a slumbering democracy.” As his metaphor foreshadowed, though, he was not alarmed in the slightest that the situation might be anti-democratic. He straightaway continued, “But the town is well governed.” His confidence was based upon the ease with which the citizenry could “awaken” whenever it liked in order to overturn “the [merely] apparent oligarchy.”⁴⁹

C. N. Hall (1900:51-52) presents us with a related strand of concern. He complained that citizens no longer “felt obliged to live up to” their duty to attend. The problem as he saw it, though, was flagging public spirit in general. It wasn’t that too few people were attending, but that selfishness and short-sightedness were winning the day: the masses were being goaded by pandering, sinecure-seeking politicians, and by unsustainable financing incentives from the state (52). It wasn’t that a minority was ruling in the majority’s name, it was that the majority itself had succumbed to the temptation of needlessly grand buildings and roads. Low turnout was thus just another symptom of the same underlying disease, and when Hall advocated for “a revival of public spirit and patriotism,” and for “increased attention to the duties of citizenship,” he therefore was talking about civic virtue, not the modern participatory concept that ideally 100% of voters ought to be attending. (See also Arlington 1919:28.)

⁴⁹ See also WSJ (1905a): “In actual operation, however, it is an oligarchy--that is to say, a few citizens, more active than the others, ‘run things.’ Perhaps this statement should be amended, so as to read that the town is governed both by an oligarchy of citizens and by a town meeting; for while ordinarily the former are permitted to ‘run things’ as they please, the machinery exists for a quick and effective expression of public opinion, and at times the whole body of voters avail themselves of this machinery.”

Other writers and townspeople of the period worried about attendance only insofar as there was *too much* of it. To their eyes, unwelcome immigrants were “flooding” assemblies,⁵⁰ and--more generally and with less overt ethnocentrism--swelling populations were creating “unwieldy” meetings or meetings where interest outstripped the physical capacity of town halls, which they saw as conditions favorable to “bossism.”⁵¹ Consider the 1919 final report of the Watertown, MA Committee to Consider a Change in the Form of Town Government, as it successfully urged the adoption of a representative town meeting:

The chief defect in our present form of government is to be found in the legislative function as exercised in the Town Meeting. The number of those who are entitled to vote is 3300, but on account of the limited seating capacity of our town hall, only about ten per cent. of the voters can actually exercise that right, with the possibility that a policy or action of the entire town can be determined by a small minority of those entitled to vote; which minority may be, and sometimes is, actuated by purely personal or sectional interest. This might be remedied in some degree by the erection of a larger hall, but we would then be confronted with the fact that when the number of those entitled to speak and vote in Town Meeting becomes too great, as in our own case, then the open Town Meeting becomes unwieldy and the best results cannot be accomplished[...]
Accordingly, we recommend that a form of representative Town Meeting[...] should be adopted by our Town. (Watertown 1919:166-167)

Similarly, a 1917 article in the *National Municipal Review* (Cottrell 1917:66) suggested that the inadequacy of meeting spaces created a situation where “a small percentage of the population might easily control the deliberations of the annual meeting.” A final illustration comes from Brown University professor James Quayle Dealey (1928:35-36, 60-62), who wrote a series of columns for the *Providence Journal* in the 1920s that furiously attacked Rhode Island’s town

⁵⁰ E.g., Wilson (1898:510), Ashley (1902:391), MacGregor (1913:918). This idea continued into later decades even as the modern turnout concern gained traction. E.g., Manny (1930:37), W. West (1938:428).

⁵¹ Hart (1903:178), Garland (1906), Chandler (1908:12, 37; 1919:89, 97), MacGregor (1913:917-918), Munro and Ozanne (1922:176), Sly (1926a), Fairlee and Kneier (1930:433), DBG (1932), Bullard (1933), Lyons (1933), Wright (1933). The success of the women’s suffrage movement was an additional subtext in the concern over newly overcrowded halls. For instance, Lord (1919:72-73), Fassett (1922:26), and Dealey (1928:35).

meetings as outdated and incompetent. Turnout was not among the problems he enumerated. What *was* a problem from his perspective, was that “towns have become too populous for town meetings” and that “even a small town of 5,000 inhabitants would have approximately 2,000 voters.” The corollary that would be “obvious” to a modern observer--that only a fraction of the 2,000 ever would turn out--did not rise to his attention. Instead: “In consequence, an inner circle develops,” and “local ‘bosses’ in behalf of their party organization control the expenditures and political decisions of the towns.” For Brown, Cottrell, and Watertown, the emphasis was upon the potential for political mischief rather than upon turnout as the sine qua non of democraticness; it didn’t matter how many citizens turned out, as long as organized factions weren’t packing the hall to block political rivals.

These several concerns about urbanization, bossism, profligate assemblies, overcrowding, and ethnic otherness thus shared very little with the modern equation that “low turnout = non-democratic.” They suggest, in fact, that discussion of quantity is merely an idiom for underlying concerns about participation--a technical vocabulary motivated by emotional drives.

Onset of the Modern Version

As far as I have been able to tell, the modern version of the turnout critique arose during the first twenty years of the 20th century, in the efforts of a group of reformers in Brookline, MA. A precedent can be found, though, in the debate over Boston’s incorporation at the turn of the 19th century, so let us turn first to that.

The Debate Over Boston's Incorporation

From the late 1700s into the early 1800s, Boston, at the forefront of New England's urbanization, was experiencing massive population growth and the accompanying strain on its existing municipal institutions. A strikingly modern critique of turnout appeared during the debates over whether to replace town meeting governance with urban incorporation.

According to the report of the Boston Committee of 1815,

If all the inhabitants of such town assemble, it is obvious that business cannot be well transacted by so numerous a body, liable as it always must be, to be swayed by local views, party feelings, or of the interests of designing men: If the meeting be, as it most frequently will be, but thinly attended, those present must act as the representatives of the whole; and it is very seldom that men of the best intelligence and most capable of conducting publick business will leave their important private concerns to attend to affairs in which they have only a general interest; It therefore unavoidably happens that the affairs of a large town are conducted by a very small number of persons, who represent and act for the whole, but who are not chosen by them, who do not possess their confidence and act under no, or a very slight responsibility. The necessity of a responsible representative system to the well-management of the interests of all great bodies of men, is now so well understood and so universally acknowledged, that your Committee forbear to dilate on them.” (RDCB 1906:43).

Several years later, the Committee of 1821 similarly argued,

The form of our town government has, through the increase of its inhabitants, become an actual fiction. The principle of the government being a pure and simple democracy supposes that all the citizens should be assembled to discuss all questions relating to it; without this being done, a small minority may, as in fact they now generally do, decide on all measures for the general good. No quorum is fixed by law[...] Sometimes fifteen or twenty, seldom more than two or three hundred, persons, accidentally collected, do all the business of a Town that contains near seven thousand voters. (NEG 1821)⁵²

⁵² It continued, though, with a turn to the concern over too much attendance: “Yet even this irregularity is better, than if every citizen did his duty in attending, for there is no building which could contain the assembly: deliberation in that event would be utterly impracticable.”

And Josiah Quincy, who would become Boston's second mayor, and who during the incorporation debates had been reluctant to replace town meeting, nonetheless retrospectively acknowledged in the 1850s that,

When the subject was not generally exciting, town meetings were usually composed of the selectmen, the town officers, and thirty or forty inhabitants. Those who thus came were, for the most part, drawn to it from some official duty or private interest, which, when performed or attained, they generally troubled themselves but little, or not at all, about the other business of the meeting. In assemblies thus composed, by-laws were passed; taxes, to the amount of one hundred or one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, voted, on statements often general in their nature, and on reports, as it respects the majority of voters present, taken upon trust, and which no one had carefully considered except perhaps the chairman (Quincy 1852:28).

Once Boston had accomplished its city charter, though, the perspective on turnout appears to have receded entirely. I have been able to find no instances whatsoever between the Boston incorporation debates and the Brookline reform debates, to which we'll now turn. The intervening century is a blank as far as the point goes, with turnout discourse appearing only in the alternative forms that we saw in the prior section.⁵³

Boston Re-Echoed: Brookline's Innovation of the Representative Town Meeting

For the hundred years following Boston's incorporation, many other New England municipalities began experiencing the same urbanization pressures. (Refer to Chapter 1's appendix.) Brookline, MA at the turn of the 20th century was one of these, and it was here

⁵³ Well, Brackett's (1892:581) portrait of a town meeting in *Harper's* includes the sentence, "There are 500 voters in the town, and that there are only 306 votes shows that the result of the election is not a matter of vital importance to them, and that to many the crops are much more interesting than politics." Brackett gave no further clue of how she wanted the reader to interpret the remark, so I am unsure whether her meaning more closely aligns with Sedgwick's and Levermore's, or with the subsequent Brookliners.

starting in 1907 that a group of reformers revived the idea that low turnout was an intrinsic indicator of broken democracy.⁵⁴

These reformers eventually succeeded, in 1915, of instituting the nation's first fully realized representative town meeting,⁵⁵ but they were not yet there at the point that concerns us. Previously Brookline had instituted using referenda to ratify decisions made at any town meeting where voters had been crowded out of the town hall, but there remained no check, though, upon decisions coming from *empty* town halls.⁵⁶ In an article for a national government magazine aimed at a popular audience, a prominent citizen therefore complained about the danger of “a small assemblage made up of self-appointed legislators” (Spencer 1907:252). “Brookline town meetings,” he continued, “are not usually attended by more than two hundred voters, and frequently by not more than sixty or seventy. [...] [S]uch a body [...] cannot be supposed to give accurate expression to public opinion” (252; see also 256). He added, “Citizens must be protected against that kind of a town meeting which in reality is not a town meeting at all, but an irresponsible or unscrupulous minority” (253). His proposed remedy was to expand the use of referenda as a complement to floor meetings. His fellow Brookliner, Alfred Chandler, who frequently is called “the father of the representative town meeting,” made a similar case the next year:

Already about 80 per cent of the whole number of voters of Brookline are unavoidably cut off from their statute right of deliberation at town meetings. It will soon be 90 per cent. The average number of absentees at town meetings for deliberation is now about 95 per cent of the whole number of voters. The Town Hall seats about 800. At town meetings for deliberation the average attendance is about 200. There are about 4,500

⁵⁴ Well educated in law and legal history, these Brookline reformers drew upon and indeed cited the arguments from Boston's transition to city government a hundred years previously (Chandler 1908:36-40, Lord 1919:66).

⁵⁵ For Newport, RI as a precedent, see BDG (1906), Nation (1906), and Chandler (1908).

⁵⁶ Brookline did not adopt the Representative Town Meeting until 1915.

registered voters. A capital of about \$100,000,000 is at stake” (Chandler 1908:27-28)

Here is the modern conception of the turnout critique, fully expressed.

These Brookliners reapplied the point a decade later when they developed their case for the representative town meeting. The larger the town, Chandler (1919:85-86) argued, the more “illusive and visionary,” “impracticable,” and “fantastic” was the idea of full participation.

Typical attendance at open town meetings, a colleague piled on, was less than what would be provided by a representative town meeting anyway:

The town meeting system has endured to the present time because the great majority of the qualified voters did not care to assemble[...] It is rarely, I suppose, in most towns that the average attendance at all the town meetings in a year is as large as the number of voters who under the proposed act would have constituted the limited town meeting. Some years ago I had occasion to investigate the number of qualified voters who attended and voted at town meetings in a town now of over twelve thousand people, and the diligence of the town clerk failed to bring to my attention any recorded vote where the total vote of all persons voting exceed two hundred and fifty. The permanence of the town meeting then which won the admiration and approval of Jefferson and De Tocqueville[...] would today be practically impossible in a town of twelve thousand or more voters, if it were not for the indifference and neglect of their duties as citizens by three-fourths of the qualified voters. (Lord 1919:71)

Ascent of the Critical Notion

Into the 1920s, the idea began appearing in government textbooks. At first, unlike with the Brookliners, it was more observational than critical. The first of these textbooks (Munro 1919:562) embedded the following observation within a description of town meeting’s powers and structure: “Every voter of the town is entitled to attend[...] As a rule, however, not more than half of them do attend, and the percentage is frequently much smaller.” “Only in theory, therefore,” he added in a later work, “is every voter a member of the town meeting” (Munro 1924:138). H.James (1921:260) used almost identical wording (see also Kimball 1922:335).

The tone rapidly took a turn for the negative, especially in the hands of municipal government analysts and reformers. Adequate turnout was being drawn clearly now as a criterion of sound democratic process. “Town meetings composed of less than one per cent of the voting list are common,” Childs (1922:138) wrote, “It is accordingly no longer democratic in practice.” Fassett (1922:26-27) complained, “The Town Clerk of a New England city of 15,000 population makes the statement that while the town hall will seat eight hundred people, articles in the warrant are decided in town meeting by a total vote seldom exceeding two hundred in number. This can only mean that one hundred and one votes can determine the governmental policy and elect officials for 8,000 citizens, and this is certainly not democracy.”

At this stage, the critique had achieved only a toehold in the discourse. We saw that H. James (1921) noted turnout as low, but elsewhere in the same work he also complimented it in a contrast against rates in Midwestern townships (274-275).⁵⁷ As for Munro, he omitted turnout in another of his textbooks, stopping after the laudatory point that “Every citizen has the right to a voice and vote” (Munro and Ozanne 1922:176). Also worth mentioning here is Harvard professor of government John Fairfield Sly, who produced the first modern scholarship on town meeting (1926a, 1926b, 1930, 1933). A careful documenter of town meeting as an historical and contemporary political institution, Sly was especially attentive to town meeting’s struggle against modern conditions. Nonetheless, concern about turnout was submerged (1930:148, 162) or absent (1926a, 1933) among his concerns, and in any case he only mentioned it regarding “the

⁵⁷ See also Garner (1911:9), Garner and Capen (1930:33-34), and Kinneman, Browne, and Ellwood (1936:94).

larger urban areas”]; for the small rural towns, turnout apparently still was not something to think about.⁵⁸

Soon enough the turnout critique was applied to town meeting as an institution, not just to towns that had “outgrown” it. Across the 1920s and 1930s, the criticism permeated civics journals, textbooks, and media portraits, and by the 1940s, “low turnout” had settled as the mainstream characterization.⁵⁹ Sometimes the point was couched sympathetically or nostalgically, other times critically, but either way, a note about poor attendance had become a seemingly mandatory part of descriptions in textbooks and other portraits. Now it had become a rarity to find a work that did *not* mention attendance problems. The extent of the shift is revealed in one textbook’s attempt to push against the booming portrait: “Surprisingly enough,” it wrote

⁵⁸ Sly’s greatest attention to turnout came in discussions of how Massachusetts’ largest towns were “outgrowing” town meetings by virtue of population and complexity (1930:162-163, 169-170, 174, 176; 1926b:682). Notably, of the four instances where he offered his own direct reflections upon turnout, two are suggestions that reform options--the town manager plan (1930:203) and the representative town meeting (1926b:683)--had a negative or mixed impact upon turnout compared to the traditional floor meeting. In the two instances where he discussed turnout in traditional town meeting, he remarked only that, “In large communities, the voters gather in the most spacious hall available. They do not all attend. It would, in most cases, be physically impossible” (1930:148), and “It is plain that in the larger urban areas it can no longer function under even a semblance of its early procedure. [...] Political problems in congested areas demand a closer and more constant supervision than a primary assembly--potentially of several thousand voters but actually of several hundred and often of a few dozen--can possibly give” (1930:162).

⁵⁹ Sly (1926b:682, see also 683), Hypes (1927:86, 99), Garner and Capen (1930:51-52) [about an Illinois meeting; see also 33-34], Banning (1935:153-154), E.B.White (1939:668), McGuire (1940:233), Zink (1942:1,054), Shoup (1946:683), Ferguson and McHenry (1947:828), Nuquist (1947:11, 39), MacCorkle (1948:192), Alexander and Berger (1949:144, 145, 151), Homans (1950:351), Adrian (1955:207 / 1977:179, 1960:218 / 1967:215, 1963:103), Snider (1957:198), Babcock (1957:96), Hathorn, Penniman, and Zink (1961:766), Maddox and Fuquay (1962:530; 1966:530), Bowdoin College Bureau for Research in Municipal Government in Fenton (1962), Lockard (1963:327-328), Blair (1964:231), Newsweek (1966:34), Wierzynski (1970), Haag (1970:26), Connery (1972:139, 147), Mansbridge (1973:6, 9), Bell (1977:18), J.Putnam (1977), Merry (1980), Sullivan et al. (1980:34), Menzies (1982), Pierson (1982:28), Gere (1984:38, 42-43), Bellah et al. (1985:11), UPI (1985), Milne (1985), Preer (1986), Shribman (1986:24), Janda, Berry, and Goldman (1987:38), Elliot and Ali (1988:224), Libov (1990), Smith and Klemanski (1990:519), Connolly (1992:7-8), WPC (1993:594), Sokolow (1997:313), Menzies (1997), Fiorina (1999:415), Gastil (2000:230n42), Becker and Slayton (2000:82), Martinez-Brawley (2000:163), Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001a:247, 2002:204), Bowman and Kearney (2002:257), O’Sullivan (2003:1,396), Watts (2003:301, 2006:198, 2010:296), Schmidt et al. (2007:590, 2017:4), Hodgkin (2008:33, 42-45), Coleman, Goldstein, and Howell (2009:667), Sgarlata (2010), Newcombe (2010), Welch et al. (2010:17), Bradley (2018).

in an attempted counteraction of what it took to be its young readers' likely assumption, "many town meetings are well attended" (Young, Manning, and Arnold 1940:280). Textbooks that previously had not mentioned attendance now included the new observation in their updated editions.⁶⁰

By the 1950s critics, municipal consultants, and research bureaus were calling directly and fiercely for the abandonment of town meeting on turnout grounds.⁶¹ The idea of citizen "apathy" became an increasingly common part of the town meeting story too.⁶² Moreover, political theory at the broadest level started developing "depth vs. breadth" as an analytic framing for democratic participation, yielding a theoretical and pragmatic justification for the necessity of representative structures. The result was an intellectual climate in which it seemed commonsensical that *of course* town meeting wouldn't be able to attract the same level of participation as less time-intensive forms of democracy.

Fast-forwarding to the present, turnout at town meetings now is regularly described--sometimes in denunciation, sometimes with despairing sympathy--with words like "abysmal," "sad," "embarrassing," "pathetic," and "appalling."⁶³

⁶⁰ E.g., Charles A. Beard's sixth edition (1931:795) dropped the first edition's (1910:65) sentence that the town meeting "seem to be attended by a considerable proportion of the voters." (He did not tip into an active critique of turnout, though.)

⁶¹ E.g., Banning (1935), Alexander and Berger (1949), Cunningham (1959), Booz Allen in Parke (1959), Bowdoin Municipal Research Bureau in Fenton (1962) and Newsweek (1962), Stitely (1964). More recently: Gouveia (2015).

⁶² Fassett (1922:26), Sly (1926b:681), Hypes (1927:86, 99), W. West (1938:428), Alexander and Berger (1949:144, 145), Stitely (1963:40), Grant and Nixon (1963:306), Kerr (1964:4), LaPlante (1958:97), Fesler (1967:518), Haag (1970:26), MLRC (1971:155), Cummings and Wise (1971:658), B. Taylor (1973), Henry (1978:1), Burnham (1983:579), Lorch (1983:271-272), Engel (1985:238), Libov (1990), P. Scott (2017). The Brookline reformers had been precocious with this apathy idea (Spencer 1907:253; Chandler 1908:39, 54).

⁶³ Endless examples of this vocabulary can be pulled from the opinion pages and meeting reportage of New England's local newspapers (e.g., S. Bigelow 2015, Grotke 2013, LT 2016, ME 2014, Weiss-Tisman 2017, Wells 2016, WL 2016, Zind 2017). People from outside New England possess less reason to spend time thinking about town meetings, but harsh treatment is their reaction too when they do discuss it (see Bryan 2004:280).

Attitude vs. Actuality

This dramatic shift in coloring had only a limited amount to do with any actual drop in civic commitment. There are three ways of observing this point.

First, the supposed bygone eras of community-wide turnout are a demonstrated myth. Historical investigations into 18th and 19th century town meetings reveal turnout levels only modestly better than during the period in the 20th century when “low turnout” became a fixation anew.⁶⁴ Town records going back to virtually the moment of town meeting’s birth feature complaints about attendance and descriptions of having to perform mid-meeting attendee rustle-ups. Later, in the glorified days of the late 18th century, when town meeting supposedly was the vigorous heartbeat of the new nation’s Revolutionary republican spirit, low turnout at town meetings seems to have been one of the few things that bitterly feuding Federalists and Democratic-Republicans could agree upon. At Massachusetts’ 1788 convention to ratify the US Constitution, the Federalist Caleb Strong used low turnout at town meetings as evidence for why localized decision making would always be an inferior option to a centralized legislature (MC 1808:49). We might be tempted to believe that Mr. Strong was exaggerating for political effect, except for the fact that the rival Democratic-Republicans were voicing the same concerns (though to opposite effect). For instance, Vermont’s Congressional Representative Matthew Lyon felt compelled in 1794 to deliver a populist exhortation to his constituents, warning that

⁶⁴ R. Brown (1955:51), Daniels (1983:96-8), Ferraro (1991:118-119), Fischer (1989:198), Lockridge (1970[1985]:111-112), McKinley (1905:356-357), Formisano (1983:33), Hodgkin (2008:43-44) Mansbridge (1980:130-132), Zimmerman (1967:77), Syrett (1964:355-356), Sly (1930:31), Morison (1952:149), Clark and Bryan (2004:27), Brooks (1976:168). In a mid-18th century instance, John Adams complains in an April 8, 1759 diary entry that “an Advantage had been meanly taken of the thinness of the Meeting to get a Change of Town officers [...] when 3/4 of the Town were detained at Home by the storm.”

town meeting had to be the bulwark against political takeover by elites, and pleading with the masses not to let commercial ventures displace their dedication to it (Shalhope 1996:202-203, Mentor 1794).

Second, while town meeting turnout *has* dropped in absolute terms, the underlying story is about New England's increasing population rather than anything intrinsic to town meeting as an institution (Bryan 2004:133-135). Bryan observed an eight point decline in turnout between 1976 and the 1990s, but once controlled for population increases in each town, the decline was only two points. Early versions of the turnout critique were often highly cognizant of the underlying size issue. Take a 1922 textbook as an example: "Formerly attendance at the town meetings was large[...] More recently, as many of the towns have increased in population, the proportion of the voters attending the meeting has declined" (Kimball 1922:335; see also Chandler 1908:36). With time, however, the proportionality piece dropped out of the story, and low turnout was treated as an absolute fact.⁶⁵ In fact, the pessimistic common sense about town meeting is so strong that even analytically sophisticated, sympathetic commenters have taken Bryan's data to mean exactly what he disavowed: that there has been a massive secular decline (e.g., R.Putnam 2001:247, 483n1; Zimmerman 2005:190, 1999:94-96).

Third, we can find examples of observers of "olden-days" town meetings being completely unbothered by turnout levels that today yield the descriptions of "embarrassing" and "abysmal." Fairlee and Kneier (1930:430-431), for instance, listed several meetings with single digit floor turnouts, and one with 20-24% turnout, as illustrations that "an active interest is maintained" by citizens. They characterized the attendees as being "a fair number." Hart

⁶⁵ A contemporary example, Preer (1986), is discussed by Bryan (1999:101n125). Libov (1990) is an example of a contemporary article that is careful to attribute the decline to the proportionality effect.

(1893:343) characterized Barnstable, RI as “a virile little commonwealth” populated by “wide-awake, intelligent, and canny folk,” and in the same breath he noted--in passing and without alarm--that (only) 200 to 250 attended the 1893 town meeting, out of a population that he previously described as being 4,000. Considering the pre-19th Amendment date, and assuming conservatively that a third to half of the population was under age 21, Hart would have been staring at a turnout of 15% to 25% T[VAP]--the same range as today. In the same year, Chandler (1893:788) observed that Brookline’s “attendance during debates is now at times 500 or 600, though the ordinary number is from 150 to 250”--this out of a population of 13,000 (778). He next noted that the 1892 general election had yielded 2,119 ballots. His only normative statement, though, was an expression of satisfaction that Brookline had prevented overcrowding despite its growing population.⁶⁶

“Low turnout” discourse is thus identifiable as a matter of attitude--of interpretation and coloring--rather than of decline. The dominant voices of the 19th century found in town meeting something to celebrate as quintessentially democratic. The dominant voices of the 20th century instead found in town meeting a foil for its modernist, Progressive, and participatory

⁶⁶ “The town hall is not far from the city line of Boston; across the line are many saloons. It was at one time found that when large appropriations were under discussion, especially for labor, strangers from over the line, as well as local non-voters, would attend the town meetings, and would influence the votes. To correct this, the town now adopts the plan of having several policemen, with a checklist of voters, at the entrance door[...] The immediate effect of this rule was a diminution in attendance, but with a higher appreciation among those admitted of the privilege of voting at such meetings. The growth of the town has since made this precaution absolutely necessary, as the legitimate attendance during debates is now at times 500 or 600, though the ordinary number is from 150 to 250, and the amounts appropriated will foot up hundreds of thousands of dollars in a single meeting. The number of votes cast at the general election in November, 1892, was 2,119, between 6.45 A. M. and 5.10 P. M.” (Chandler 1893:788). He then turned without pause to a discussion of financial advisory committees. Chandler of course would go on to a vocal critique of turnout, as we saw in the section on Brookline.

preoccupations.⁶⁷ For critics, turnout embodied their sense of modern crisis, and it offered an unimpeachable way to prosecute their new concerns about efficient, rational governance in the modern age. For boosters, the idea of low turnout was distressing but also morosely satisfying insofar as it lined up with a Rousseauian romantic pessimism: town meeting was hard work--likely *too* hard for the majority of humans--but it was the unavoidable cost of true democracy.⁶⁸ Falling turnout did not motivate calls for new approaches to government; new conceptions of government led to fixation on turnout, and to self-reinforcing perceptions of the facts of the matter.

It is important to understand the impressionism, anecdotalism, and lack of empirical contextualization that built the critique, and that have sustained it. The biggest clue is that the “low turnout” trope took off decades prior to the earliest efforts by scholars and state officials (e.g., Cunningham 1959, MLRC 1961) to conduct systematic collection and analysis of town meeting turnout data. Endless examples of meetings with low turnout could be pointed to while conveniently ignoring other towns or other years from the same town that had exhibited higher turnout. In other cases, lack of context could lead to wrong reads even of single meetings. Bryan (2004:45) discusses an instance where an urban textbook editor, unfamiliar with the small size of Vermont towns, printed a photograph of a nearly empty town hall in order to disparage turnout, unaware that the town’s population comprised only 29 registered voters.⁶⁹ In all of these cases, in the absence of consideration of the larger pattern, the “hard numbers” were meaningless.

⁶⁷ See Bryan (2004:43-46).

⁶⁸ For instance, a 1942 column in the *Boston Daily Globe* offered the following rejoinder to the twin issues of low attendance and of meetings being packed by interest groups: “Such blots upon the town meeting system are possible because eternal vigilance is the price of liberty in town meeting just as everywhere else” (Dudley 1942).

⁶⁹ Bryan gives Weissberg (1980:46) as the citation, but this appears to be a bibliographic error; Weissberg’s book does not discuss town meeting.

Unfortunately, even political scientists, even in recent years when better evidence can be easily located, often have used anecdotes or single-cases.⁷⁰

In still other cases, patterns rather than instances were advanced, but with supporting data that was suspect or lacking. The passages quoted at the beginning of this section, from the National Civic Review and Dye's 1988-2015 textbook, are good examples. The NCR's figure was an uncited impression. Dye, meanwhile, *did* provide citations in each edition--always to Zimmerman (1984). By the mid- to late-1990s, though, that source had been supplanted by better studies with higher turnout findings. Dye's reading of the 1984 article was faulty in any case. Perhaps he still was under the spell of Zimmerman's 1967 "10%" sentence and did not read the 1984 findings closely enough. Perhaps he was including Zimmerman's 1984 data on special meetings--an equally faulty error, given the difference between special and regular meetings. Regardless, Zimmerman's data table, which I've represented in Figure 5.15, indicated something quite different than "usually less than 10%": the average turnout was 12.7%, the median was 11.8%, and almost half the sample had turnout of 14.6% or more. Dye's statement about the larger towns likewise was either an exaggeration, a misreading, or a mistaken inclusion of special meetings.

⁷⁰ For instance, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001a:247, 2002:204).

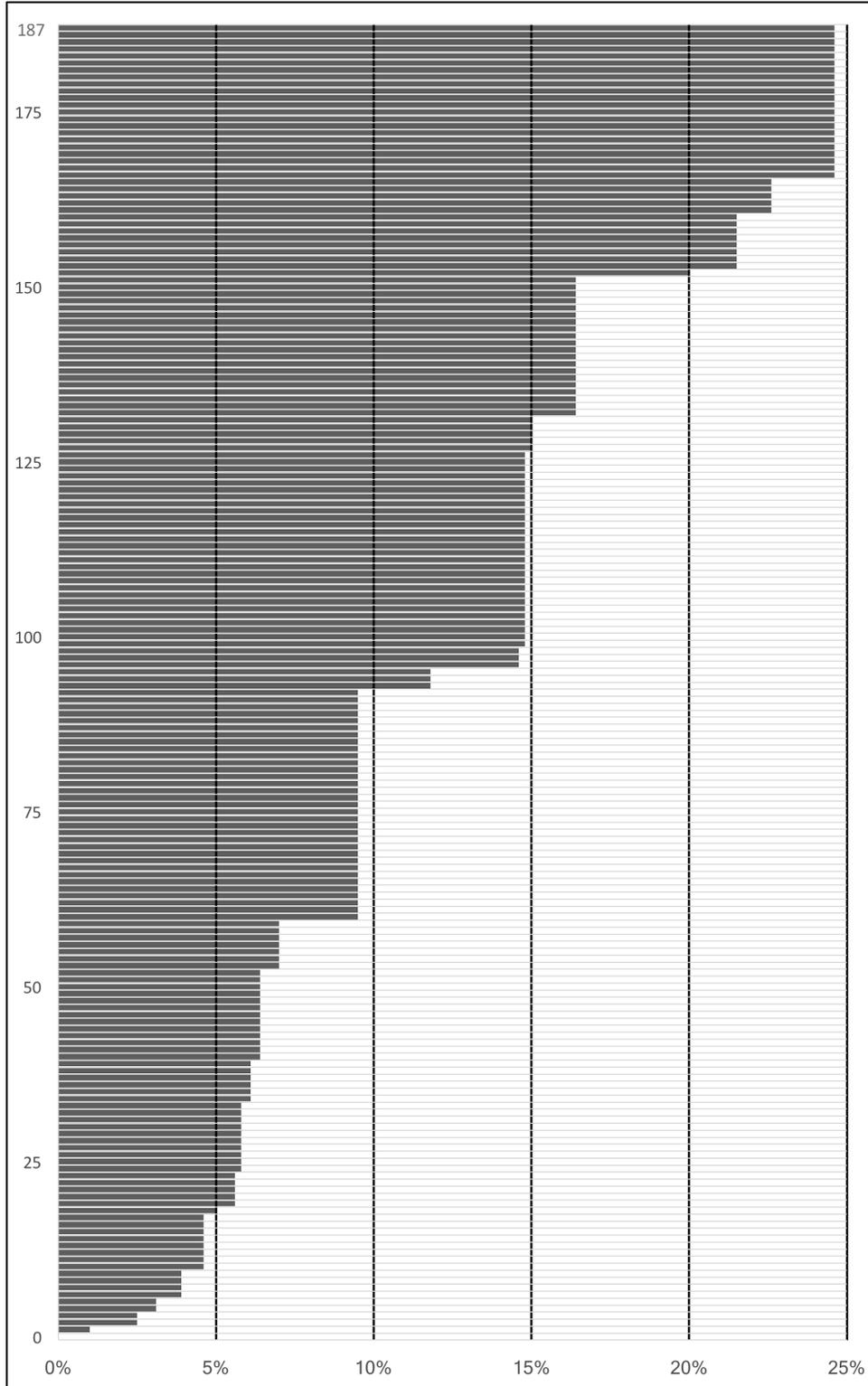


Figure 5.15: Zimmerman's (1984) data on 1982 town meetings across New England. Each bar is a single data point from the 1982 sample (one town's turnout that year). N = 187. Source: Raw data is from Zimmerman (1984).

Zimmerman's 1984 article in fact seems to have inspired a cottage industry of erroneous interpretation (e.g., Sokolow 1997:313). No explanation for this fact is immediately obvious. Was there some particular feature of Zimmerman's phrasing or presentation that made it particularly amenable to misreading? Were they updating their citation of Zimmerman (1967) without noticing that the more recent source contained different, better information? Were readers primed to mis-read as a result of their background assumptions or of having seen prior misrepresentations of Zimmerman's findings? Was one person's initial misreading being cited and re-cited without being double-checked? Regardless of causation, this strangely widespread misreading is one of the contributors to town meeting's poor reputation.⁷¹

Finally, when critiques *did* use sound supporting data, the figures very frequently were presented without the context of any benchmark⁷² or used the inappropriate benchmark of presidential and state elections.⁷³ This tendency has continued into the present, including among political scientists.⁷⁴ Only, however, when the comparison is made to other forms of *municipal* government does town meeting turnout become meaningful. Zimmerman, Bryan, and others have made this point on a number of occasions, but they have not offered adequate benchmarking data themselves, only anecdotal cases and vague ballparks.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Similarly, Jane Mansbridge's (1980) analysis of town meeting has, with bizarre frequency, been misunderstood or selectively cited for the negative sides of its mixed portrayal (e.g., Clark and Teachout 2012:180; Ryfe 2005:59; R.Townsend 2004:34n11, 61, 310; Berger 2011:164n78; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001a:246-247, 2002:203; Ackerman and Fishkin 2004:150; see Bryan 2004:43n64). Was it because her earlier publication (1973, reprinted 1976) was somewhat more critical, and people updated their citations to her monograph without reading it carefully enough to realize that she had moderated her tone? Is there something about town meeting that inspires misreading?

⁷² For instance: Fenton (1962), Engel (1985:238), Elliot and Ali (1988:224).

⁷³ For instance: Alexander and Berger (1949:151), Menzies (1998).

⁷⁴ For instance: Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001a:247, 2002:204), Williamson and Fung (2005:22-23), Porto (2005:37), Kennicott (2009), Robinson (2011:214-216).

⁷⁵ Zimmerman (1966:16, 1967:79, 1999:186), Mehlman (1973:14), Bryan (2004:140), Clark and Bryan (2005:30), Robbins (1947:35).

The main chapter hopefully has been an antidote, but there is a larger issue that remains. In the final part of this appendix, I suggest that PD studies may possess certain intrinsic vulnerabilities to anti-empirical reasoning.

Empiricism and the Study of PD Institutions: Town Meeting as a Cautionary Tale

In Arnold S. Kaufman's 1960 essay on participatory democracy, one of the field's foundational pieces, he noted that the empirical case for participatory democracy "has never really been done adequately" (1960:281). Six decades later, a booming subfield of political science is on its way to filling many of the gaps. Nonetheless, empirical study of PD remains a partial thing. As the preceding discussion of town meeting turnout has illustrated, this partialness goes beyond the fact of being a relatively youthful field that therefore has many more areas to explore, many points to corroborate, and many assumptions and errors to correct.⁷⁶ Beyond these normal challenges of an emerging field, there are three special difficulties for PD studies that we can draw out from the town meeting case.

First is a "**kinky empiricism**" in discussions of PD institutions. I have lifted this term from D.Rutherford (2012), but I mean it as a description of something quite different. Where she poses it with positive valence as a path forward for anthropology as a social science, I mean it as a critique. This kinky empiricism has to do with the difference between empiricism as an *epistemological method* vs. empiricism as an *idiom*. On the one hand, citizens, politicians,

⁷⁶ In a possible case of eternal return, PD scholars decade after decade note the (still) infant development of the field (e.g. Mansbridge 2003:178).

activists, lobbyists, practitioners, and scholars exhibit strong commitment to evidence-based, outcome-oriented reasoning when discussing the merits of PD institutions. (E.g., statements like, “Town meetings should be replaced by ballot referenda because turnout will be so much better.”) On the other hand, PD is a value-laden, emotional topic bedeviled by folk theories. Empirical reasoning is unavoidably informed by a host of aspirations, fears, disappointments, symbolic commitments, “common sense” beliefs, and so on. We saw both of these dynamics in the town meeting case, with discussion vacillating between facts being used to advance conclusions, and conclusions being used to accept facts. Even during the latter, though, the empiricist language was unceasing.

What I’m calling “kinky” empiricism is therefore an unwavering commitment to the principles and performance of empiricism, but an imperfect adherence to purely fact-based, context-sensitive scientific exploration. This kinky empiricism isn’t unique to PD, but PD’s location at the intersection of multiple hot-button macro topics--democracy, community, personal responsibility, civic education, public performance, etc.--make it an intense instance of the phenomenon.

Second is the “**assumption overflow**” resulting from the underdevelopment of the field of PD studies vs. the enormously developed field of ballot studies. Because ballot democracy is so well studied, its concepts and methods creep in as baseline assumptions for the less mature field. In many cases, this provides a useful jump-start. In other cases, though, it can be obscuring or even misleading. The risk is heightened by the conceptual and methodological complexity of defining and measuring the goals, mechanisms, and success metrics of PD institutions: before one has a chance to notice some particular subtlety, a ready-made tool from ballot studies may already have carried one past any pause for reflection. In the town meeting case, peak head

counts were the analogous method to counting ballots. Zimmerman and Bryan were perfectly well aware of the need to capture churn, and they simply were limited by practical and financial constraints. None of the reviews and citations of Bryan and Zimmerman, though, have considered those works' (brief) references to churn. Certainly Bryan and Zimmerman could have discussed churn more prominently, but it's also notable that no one within fifty years of secondary literature has emphasized the point themselves.

Third is an **“empirical death ratchet.”** This risk can be described in two propositions. First proposition: The greater the level of resources required to study a democratic innovation, the more quickly further study will be abandoned if initial findings are discrediting (e.g., the institution lacks efficacy, has significant downsides, inspires weak participation) or even just inconclusive.⁷⁷ When many lower hanging fruits are available to study, why expend additional resources on the off chance that the initial findings were erroneous? Second proposition: Defining and accurately measuring “participation” within various PD institutions often require considerably greater amounts of effort, time, conceptual sophistication, and funding than is required for ballot democracy. Taken together, these two propositions suggest that negative initial findings about a PD institution can get “locked in”--that is, a lack of further study can preclude the emergence of what in some cases would be vindicating data. In those cases, the initial findings will continue to govern policy makers', citizenries', and scholars' thinking about that institution. Meanwhile, the ratchet wheel spins easily in the other direction: positive initial

⁷⁷ And unfortunately inconclusive findings are common in PD studies. Some of PD's key premises--such as the “Political Education Hypothesis” that participatory institutions improves citizenship--have doggedly resisted either proof or falsification (Pincock 2012, Mansbridge 1999, Bryan 1995).

findings will invite follow-up attention, which in some cases will produce an overturning of that initial positivity.

This ratchet dynamic isn't uncommon in any science, but what makes it unusually pernicious for PD is that the alternative democratic institutions against which PD competes do not have the same vulnerability: ballot voting and representative institutions have wheels that spin smoothly in both directions, thanks to the much greater ease and cheapness of performing corroborating investigations. The death ratchet effect also can be intensified by the kinky empiricism in any cases where a discrediting initial finding lines up with popular beliefs.

None of these three issues, individually or in concert, is enough to *break* the iterative scientific process when it comes to PD studies. Errors and omissions in earlier studies will continue to be discovered and corrected by later studies. But these three issues certainly can *stall* progress for more than ordinary lengths of time. And during the lapse, as we saw with town meeting, there can be serious consequences: cementing of negative tropes, misplacement of energies, and people tipping toward different governance choices than they might have made if in possession of non-faulty information.

APPENDIX B. Ethnography of a Debate:

Defenses of Town Meeting's Turnout

Defenders of town meeting have mounted a series of responses to the charges of abysmal attendance, some more plausible than others. This section provides an “ethnography of a debate” (Aguilar 1981), reviewing the published literature as well as giving voice to points that have not been advanced in an explicit or formal form but that have hovered in the discourse. The defenses may be usefully thought of as falling into three categories:

1. disputing the fact itself
2. accepting the fact but disputing that it matters
3. accepting the fact but identifying mitigating or counterbalancing factors

1. DISPUTING THE FACT ITSELF

A small number of lines of argumentation have tried to dispute the fact itself. These, however, either are not in alignment with the facts (1A, 1B, the particular claim of 1C) or have been speculative in the unavailability of supporting data (1D, the general claim of 1C).

1A. “Criticism of town meeting turnout often has been impressionistic.”

1B. “When criticism has been empirically grounded in turnout figures, it often has lacked a benchmark, or has used an inappropriate benchmark.”

These two points, which we’ve already covered in Appendix A, address the sloppy or absent empiricism in many critiques. As we’ve seen from Figure 5.1, however, town meeting turnout falls short even when grounded in data and even when more appropriately benchmarked.

1C. “Voter checklists in New England are inflated, thus diluting turnout.”

To date, no comparative analysis of turnout has controlled for geographical region. The turnout figures for town meeting have come from samples of New England municipalities (because that’s where town meetings are), whereas the turnout findings for ballot municipalities for the most part have been based on nationally distributed samples. This geographical mismatch creates the possibility that the apparent *institutional* shortcoming of town meeting’s T[RV] relative to ballot T[RV] is actually a *regional* shortcoming of New England T[RV] to T[RV] in other regions. In support of this possibility, Zimmerman (1999:47,69,94,111,165) has advanced three arguments:

1. Some of the New England states have exceptionally strict rules governing checklist purges, resulting in former residents lingering on the checklist for several election cycles.
2. Automotive insurance in New England is cheaper than in many other states, and some of the New England states tax non-primary residences at a higher rate. Non-New Englanders who own vacation properties in New England therefore have an incentive to falsify residency at their vacation properties.

3. Thanks to hard winters, a significant number of New Englanders (particularly elderly residents) decamp to warmer states for portions of the winter--often including the months when town meetings occurs.

Each of these factors swells the registration counts of towns (the denominator of turnout figures) with people who aren't truly eligible or who aren't able to participate at town meetings.

The logic is sounder for the first two points than the one about seasonal residency. Unless so-called "snowbirds" have taken the step of changing their residency, they are and ought to be eligible to participate in town governance. The inability to accommodate their participation is precisely one of the turnout-related reasons why ballot democracy might be a better option for a town than PD: seasonal residents then would have the option of casting absentee ballots. The inability of seasonal residents to participate in town meeting therefore is a direct consequence of the structure of town meeting, and factoring out this dynamic is akin to giving one team a handicap in a sporting match under the justification that "otherwise the other team will score more points."

The points about checklist purging and insurance or tax benefits do need to be taken seriously as possible dilutions of turnout. Zimmerman offers only anecdotal support for these points, but we can verify them using our VTSoS and Northmont data sets:

In The VTSoS data, 15.5% of the 3,163 data points from 2001-2013⁷⁸ were towns with Town Meeting Day checklists that--impossibly--were larger than their VAP for that year.⁷⁹ Three of the most extreme cases underscore the point: the RV numbers reported by Goshen, Killington, and Victory reached as much as 135% of their VAP, with checklists containing more entries in

⁷⁸ Quality VAP data for later years is not yet available from the Census.

⁷⁹ Presumably the figure would jump up by a few more points if we could use VEP instead of VAP.

many years than their *total* populations, children included.⁸⁰ An additional number of data points from other towns have RV:VAP ratios that suspiciously approach 100%:

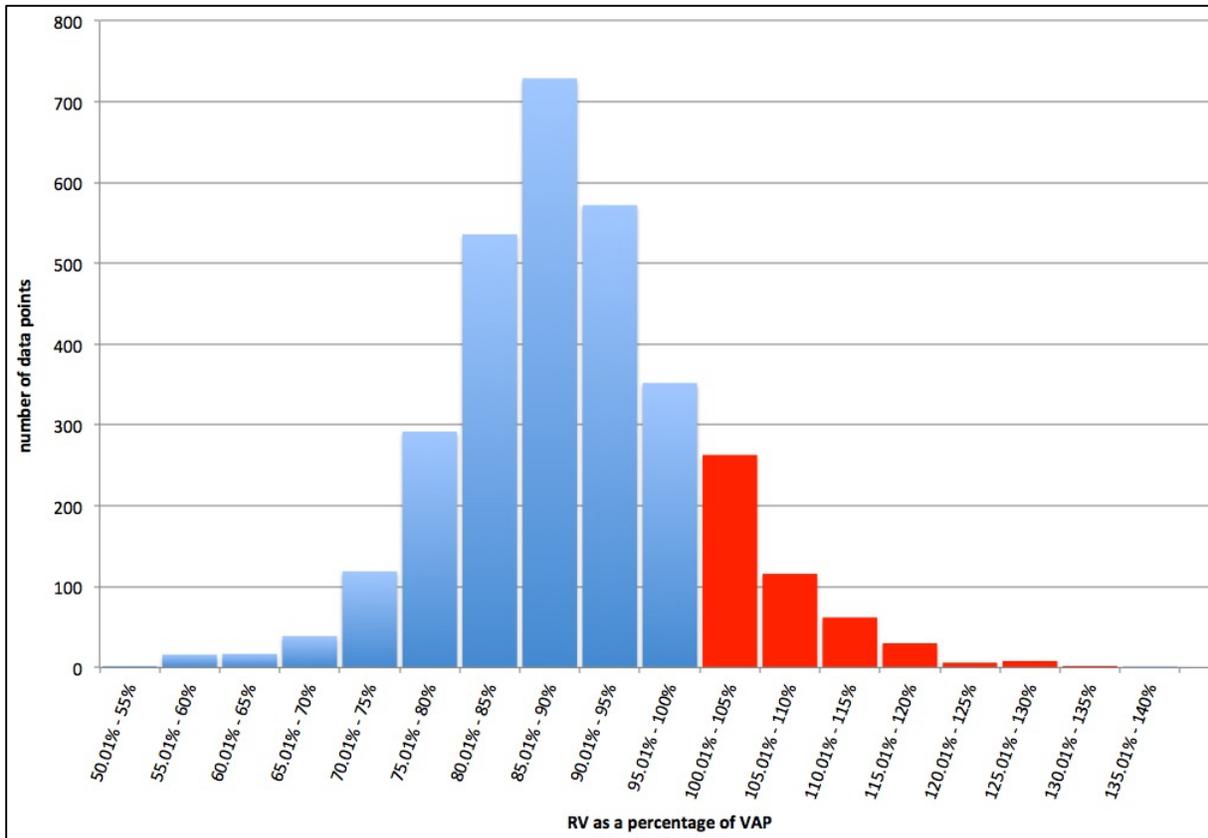


Figure 5.16: Distribution of RV:VAP ratios for the data points in the 2001-2013 Vermont Secretary of State data set
 The existence of the columns in red is supportive of Zimmerman’s hypothesis.
 Source: Raw data is from the VT Secretary of State.

For a second proof, I used my Northmont data. I analyzed the 2010-2016 Town Meeting Day checklists, subtracting the registrants who had not taken their Voter’s Oath, had not followed up with required documentation after their initial registration, or had had their eligibility challenged. Each of these statuses indicated a possibility that the voter had moved

⁸⁰ Victory had been identified by Bryan as having one of the best turnout records in his sample, but in light of this wildly inflated RV:VAP ratio, its turnout should be seen as even more superlative. Perhaps Victory even ought to displace Newark as the best of the best in Bryan’s sample (2004:66), since Newark’s RV:VAP ratio (per 2010 figures) was 79.9% of VAP, compared to Victory’s ratio of 133.3%.

away or had never been a true resident in the first place.⁸¹ What I found was that these kinds of entries ranged from 5.3% to 9.8% of the checklist. If T[RV] were measured according to the fully scrubbed checklist instead of the face-value checklist, Northmont's average turnout across those years would rise by almost a tenth, from 10.3% to 11.2%.

Zimmerman's hypothesis is thus confirmed: problems with the T[RV] unit do cause an artificial lowering of town meeting turnout figures. It remains to be seen, though, whether the other half of Zimmerman's claim is true: that this effect is greater for New England municipalities than municipalities in general. But before we address this benchmarking question, there is a problem with Defense #1C that needs to be brought out:

If we're serious with the logic of Defense #1C, then we are compelled to take an additional step that will have a harmful rather than helpful effect upon town meeting's absolute turnout figure. If we're going to subtract non-resident "over-registrants" from the T[RV] denominator, it's only fair to add back in what we might call "*under-registrants*": the residents who are eligible to register but haven't. In other words, we ought to abandon T[RV] entirely in favor of T[VAP]. Referring back to Figure 5.16 lets us see the impact of this unit switch: if we compare the number of data points with <100% ratios to those with >100% ratios (that is, the volume of the blue bars to the volume of the red bars), we instantly realize that under-registration is a far, far more powerful factor than over-registration.

But wait! Using T[VAP] still leaves important factors uncontrolled. Vermont's population has a quite small percentage of non-citizens compared to the national average, and Vermont is unusual in placing no criminal conviction restrictions upon voting rights. Turnout

⁸¹ This method requires two disclaimers. First, not everyone would be captured by this method, so it establishes only a floor figure. Second, some (small) number of real residents would be mistakenly flagged.

comparison between Bryan’s town meeting finding and the ballot benchmarks thus ultimately requires that we use T[VEP]. In cases where data is unavailable on a given municipality’s incidence of criminal conviction disenfranchisement, T[cVAP] is the next best option. (For Vermont municipalities, T[cVAP] and T[VEP] are equivalent, thanks to the suffrage laws.)

For the sake of concrete illustration, Figure 5.17 is how Northmont’s averaged turnout from 2010-2016 varies depending on what factors are controlled for in the denominator. The logic of Defense #1C therefore ultimately results in the *falling* of turnout figures.

<u>Unadjusted unit</u>	
T[RV].....	10.3%
<u>Accounting for “over-registration” (per Zimmerman’s argument)</u>	
T[scrubbed RV].....	11.2%
<u>Accounting for “over-” and “under-registration (per extension of the logic)</u>	
T[VAP].....	9.0%
T[cVAP] or T[VEP].....	9.2%

Figure 5.17: Northmont’s average town meeting turnout, 2010-2016, in different units
Bryan’s head count interval method is used for the turnout numerators.

This unintended result, combined with the pending need for looking at benchmarked rather than absolute numbers, points to the issue with Defense #1C: the defense makes good sense insofar as it implies that regionally varying turnout factors have to be controlled for, and insofar as it furthermore illustrates that T[RV] is a particularly unreliable unit for the purpose of comparison. Having embarked upon this promising route, however, the defense then takes a wrong turn by fixating on over-registration specifically. The defense’s larger point ultimately requires using a unit, T[VEP], that makes the defense’s specific point (the concern over over-registration) irrelevant.⁸²

⁸² There is a different context in which Defense #1C’s specific point remains useful. Turnout is dependent on participants having cleared a double hurdle: first registering to vote in general, and then turning out for any given election/meeting. If an analyst, under the understanding that different dynamics are involved in each step, is concerned with a question like what causes an

Defense #1C needs to be taken for its larger point alone. That larger point also needs to be fully quantified. The main chapter serves as just such a restatement and quantification of Defense #1C.

1D. “Cumulative attendance, not peak, is the proper measure of town meeting turnout.”

This is the point about churn that the main chapter makes. Churn previously had been a subject of speculation as something that might partially rescue town meeting’s turnout figures (Bryan 2007a, 2004:64; Zimmerman 1999:68,94; Jager and Jager 1977:412), but no measurement had been attempted. Like #1C, then, #1D required quantification before it could be persuasive.

1E. “Turnout averages lump together different kinds of town meetings.”

Many towns across New England have adopted hybrid forms of town meeting that are not relevant if we are discussing the classical sovereign floor meeting. For instance, New Hampshire towns that conduct “SB2” town meetings use the floor meeting to discuss and amend resolutions (within a narrow band of possible changes), and the resulting resolution language is then voted by a ballot later in the month. In Rhode Island, all “town meetings” are actually financial town meetings, a more limited institution. In Vermont, some towns’ “town meeting” is essentially just an informational session, with all decisions made by ballot the next day. Other Vermont towns use their floor meeting to decide only *some* questions, with the remainder occurring by ballot.

already-registered voter to convert into an actual participant, then Defense #1C’s concern with over-registration would be valid and useful (Alford and Lee 1968:802). For the purposes, however, of questions like, *Does town meeting pass muster as an institution of participatory democracy?*, both steps require consideration.

Each of these hybrid forms has lower turnout than “pure” town meetings (Bryan 2004:92-99). A further hit to turnout occurs when school district meetings are held on a different date than the town meeting, instead of combined as was traditional (Bryan 2004:99-103). Taking the school meeting and Australian ballot variables together, a town can lose as much as a quarter of the turnout it otherwise would be predicted to achieve (Bryan 2004:102).⁸³

Unfortunately, statewide turnout figures almost always aggregate across all types. Zimmerman’s study and the raw VTSoS data do,⁸⁴ and while Bryan *does* offer a breakout (2004:99), his commonly cited “20.5%” overall figure includes all types.

The turnout figures that are deployed against “town meetings” therefore are not in all cases a true reflection of the institution. Then again, as we noted above, the ballot democracy benchmarks *also* include many sub-optimally configured municipalities in their samples. Given the likelihood that optimization of ballot democracies is likely to produce great gains in turnout, relative to the turnout gains from optimization of town meetings,⁸⁵ Defense #1E is probably not a direction that town meeting boosters actually want to go.

⁸³ This multiple is controlled for the effect of population size, since there also is a relationship between size and the turn to hybrid forms

⁸⁴ My analysis of the VTSoS data in Appendix C includes only pure floor meetings.

⁸⁵ That’s to say, the following ratio probably will be greater than 1.0: {(optimized ballot democracy) / (currently practiced ballot democracy)} : {(optimized town meeting) / (currently practiced town meeting)}.

2. ACCEPTING THE FACT BUT CHALLENGING THAT IT MATTERS

Given the difficulty in challenging the fact head-on, defenders instead have spent most of their energy in other lines of argument. (My extended discussion of defenses #1C, #1D, and #1E was motivated by their intellectual importance, not by their prominence.) One of these other approaches involves various claims that turnout deficiency doesn't necessarily mean that town meeting is a failed institution when it comes to either good governance or democratic/participatory/populist values.

2A. "Low turnout may signify contentment rather than apathy or alienation."

2B. "Turnout rises dramatically when it matters."

These two arguments go hand in hand. Towns experience a large degree of year to year fluctuation in their turnout, with the content of the warning being a crucial determinant of attendance.⁸⁶ Some warnings are routine, others contain "hot issues." The idea here is that town governments coast along with minimal input until moments of controversy, at which point citizens *do* turn out in higher number.⁸⁷ In other words, there is targeted participation for the "hot issues," and the rest of the time low participation is a signal of contentment rather than

⁸⁶ Bryan (2004:68,84-85), Mehlman (1973:10-11), Sly (1930:148). See also NEMC (1981:4). This pattern has characterized town meetings from the beginning (R.Brown 1955:51; Daniels 1983:98; McKinley 1905:356-357).

⁸⁷ Fischer (1989:198-199), Zimmerman (1967:77, 1999:69), Bryan (2004:244-5), Von der Muhll (1970:886-887), Bryan and McClaughry (1989:108), Mehlman (1973:11-12). As Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002:159) write of the general American case, "The more the public trusts elected officials to make unbiased decisions, the less the public participates in politics."

democratic anemia. Under this view, looking at an average turnout (whether of one town across multiple years or of multiple towns in a single year) is the wrong thing to look at. Instead, attention should go to whether spikes are occurring when (and only when) needed.

A problem with these two defenses is that ballot municipalities also exhibit large volatility related to “hot issues.”⁸⁸ Thus, although valid, these two points will not necessarily help town meeting gain any ground upon ballot systems. If we are going to discount the sleepy years of town meetings, then we’ll need to do the same with ballot systems.

2C. “The quantity of the turnout should be overshadowed by the quality of the deliberation.”

This quality vs. quantity argument holds that town meeting deliberations improve the quality of decision-making compared to solitary voting: through interaction, members of the assembly become more informed, more aware of one another’s needs and concerns, and possibly more concerned for the public good.⁸⁹ As Zimmerman (1999:189) puts it, the “preoccupation with the supposed evil of low voter participation results in the failure to explore the quality of town meeting decisions and determine whether they are *pro bono publico* ones.” The boldest versions of this argument implies (and sometimes states outright) that higher turnout is not necessarily a good thing. In taking this bold tack, the argument aligns with the literature arguing that impulsive and low-preparation voters make decisions based on dangerously superficial factors.⁹⁰ In a town meeting, unlike with a ballot vote, everyone (or essentially everyone) who is present to vote also has been present to hear the argumentation for and against the proposal. To

⁸⁸ Hajnal and Lewis (2003:655), Caren (2007:31, 39), Holbrook and Weinschenk (2013:46).

⁸⁹ Bryan (2004:280), Zimmerman (1999:especially 173, 184), VCD (1994:10), Mehlman (1973:14-15), Von der Muhll (1970:327-328, 865-866).

⁹⁰ E.g., Olivola and Todorov (2010), Somin (2013), Brennan (2016).

quote Zimmerman (1999:184) again, “Voters who neglected their town meeting responsibilities probably will be no more conscientious in studying the records and views of candidates for election to a town council.”

A Meiklejohnian tint might be productively applied to this argument. “What is essential is not that everyone shall speak”, the influential free speech theorist Alexander Meiklejohn (1948:25) wrote about deliberative democracy, “but that everything worth saying shall be said.” He gives the example of members of a faction each insisting on re-delivering the same party platform to an assembly. If town meeting is taken solely as a tool for good governance rather than for participatory involvement, then additional turnout beyond a certain critical mass and diversity of attendees will not help improve outcomes any further. As W. H. Morris Jones (1954:35) argued in his challenge to the idea that high voter turnout was particularly important for healthy democracy, “All that is imperative for the health of parliamentary democracy is that the right to vote should be exercised to the extent necessary to ensure that the play of ideas and clash of interests can take place. If a symphony is scored for fifty instruments, there is little to be gained by trebling the number.” A similar point has been made about the unimportance of increasing ballot turnout beyond a certain critical mass at which representativeness is demonstrated to be achieved (Fiorina 1999:414-415). Subsequent to Meiklejohn’s own explanation of his point, I have not seen anyone directly apply this argument as a defense of town meetings, but it often has hovered as an implication (e.g., Sunstein 2006:185; 2009:139; Von der Muhll 1970:886n20).

This defense focuses on governmental efficacy rather than participation, however. The logic may be perfectly valid, but only at the expense of sacrificing any sense of town meeting as

an institution of *direct* democracy.⁹¹ Likewise, this defense takes town meeting as an effective *deliberative* institution, at the expense of considering it a weak *participatory* institution.

2D. “Even if attendees aren’t demographically representative of the larger community, non-attendees must feel comfortable with the balance; town meeting is a *de facto* representative assembly.”

As Fung (2004:106) writes of community policing in Chicago,

the democratic qualities of community-policing and school-governance groups depend not just upon the quantity and quality of participation inside the groups, but also upon connections between direct participants and other individuals. If direct participants roughly represent the interests and perspectives that exist outside of their groups, if groups are generally open to new participants who wish to join, and if participants are connected through networks of friendship or association to those who do not participate directly, then these bodies may generate fair decisions despite the relatively small number of direct participants.

For town meeting, this kind of argument has been advanced most powerfully by Zimmerman

(1966:15, 1967:77, 1986:31, 1999; see also Mansbridge 2003:193). He notes that light turnout does not

automatically mean that private interests are being substituted for public goods, and that citizens’

absence “may be interpreted as a vote of confidence in a *de facto* representative town meeting”

(1966:15, 1999:184).⁹² Citizens may also have registered their input via the “cracker barrel” style

gossip and debate over the warrant in the weeks leading up to the meeting (Robbins 1947:35).

Considering the density of community ties in a place like Northmont, these factors--social

networks, advance input, and informal representation--can be particularly powerful. The key idea

⁹¹ This categorization sacrifice may be perfectly sensible, given Chapter 4’s argument that town meeting is direct democracy only at its edges anyway.

⁹² For disapproving versions of this point about “*de facto* representative assemblies,” see Alexander and Berger (1949:147-148, 150), and also Tilden (1962:168-9) and his citation of Chandler (1919).

behind these points is that other citizens really will listen when a concern is brought up to them, and that even a single representative potentially will be able to bring a concern to the group's attention.⁹³ This again exhibits the Meiklejohnian understanding of deliberation.

Taking defense #2C and #2D together, we have a fine example of the fact that the dynamics of ballot voting are not always applicable to PD institutions, and that turnout is therefore important in a different way. In a balloting situation, especially if there has been limited public discussion of an issue, it may be crucial for every last holder of a position to cast their vote, as a way of having their concern be registered within the political process. In PD institutions, that function instead can be filled by the opportunity to express concerns during or before the meeting. Assuming other voters will be at least moderately receptive, the turnout obsession imported from ballot democracy is misplaced.

These points are on the money as defenses of the efficacy and legitimacy of town meeting as a democratic political institution. But recasting town meeting as a representative institution, or as an institution that is more deliberative than participatory, completely cedes the idea of town meeting as an exemplar of direct democracy.⁹⁴

2E. "Attendance at town meeting is not the only way that citizens can directly participate in town meeting decisions."

This point is an extension of the prior one. Bryan argues that, "In a Vermont town a comparatively large percentage of the townspeople serve the town as extra-good citizens

⁹³ There is, however, frequently a need for a "critical mass" of minority participants within a meeting before their concerns can be effectively conveyed and taken seriously (M.James 2008, Fishkin 2009:38).

⁹⁴ See Bryan's (2001) critical review of Zimmerman (1999).

throughout the year (on rescue squads, as volunteer firepersons, on planning boards), donating huge chunks of their time” (2007a). Having “participated extensively in the town’s policy-making business prior to town meeting,” they “see no need to be present at the floor session” (2014:14). This idea is counter-intuitive to an interest-based understandings of politics. Why would someone, who cares enough about a proposal to have invested dozens of hours of their time planning it, then pass on their ability to directly influence its passage? This dynamic, though, is something that I witnessed every year in my fieldwork--with Northmont’s Recreation Committee, for instance. At the Rec meetings leading up to town meeting, board members coordinated to make sure that at least one or two of them would be present to respond to questions and to explain their case. They felt no need to attend en masse, though, to pack the deliberation or vote. To deny the label “participant” to everyone except the one or two envoys is to be blind to just how much they contributed. The non-attending Rec Committee members were doing more than just passing off representative and deliberative duties to informal representatives per defenses #2D and #2C. They also were taking on the responsibility to make sure that the board developed sound, sensitive proposals, such that the town meeting assembly wouldn’t *need* to turn into an adversarial vote that would require packing the hall with supporters. If the non-attenders did their job during the formulation of their proposals, their input would pass straight to and through the assembly. The Rec board’s behavior thus illustrates again how the numerical logic of ballot turnout can be misleading when imported to a PD institution.

2F. "Town meeting attendees are representative of the community."

Numerous arguments have been mounted that attendees are not significantly demographically different than the larger community.⁹⁵ If this is true, additional turnout is non-essential. Particularly frequent have been attempts to establish the assembly's representativeness when it comes to socioeconomic characteristics. Nearly all of these attempts have suffered badly from the ecological fallacy, however,⁹⁶ and they have been disputed by case studies.⁹⁷

SES is not the only dimension along which the assembly is non-representative of the full community. The absence of younger voters is another, more immediately apparent disparity.⁹⁸ Northmont offers a powerful illustration, as we saw in Figure 5.13.

Longevity vs. transience of residence is another area where I suspect that town meeting assemblies are not representative of the community at large. This would be reflected in the ratio of homeowners to renters, as well as in long-term renters vs. short-term renters. I have not performed any numerical analysis of this; for now it is only an observational impression. But if

⁹⁵ Zimmerman (1999:170, Bryan (2004:114-121, see also 180-183 and 186), Bryan (1978:525), Von der Muhll (1970:865-866), Hixson (1971:107), Bracco and Frasier (1997; cited in Fiorina 1999:415n47). For a related argument in American ballot democracy, see Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980).

⁹⁶ See Bryan (2004:119, 183). Bracco and Frasier's (1997) unpublished study of Concord (cited in Fiorina 1999:415n47) may be an exception; I have not been able to get hold of it to see. Ossoff and Kuehne (2006:11) may be the most reliable effort along these lines. They conclude: "The only significant predictors of participation [in town government generally, not just in the town meeting] are knowledge, and interest in the political process. The variables of number of years in Bedford, commuting time, income, education, time spent at home, alienation, efficacy, or concern about local or national politics had no significant effect." (They subsequently clarify that knowledge of and interest in the political process resolves into the factor of having a home and/or family in town (18).) Unfortunately, their data tables are not published within the article and no longer are posted in the web location.

⁹⁷ Mansbridge (1976, 1980:108), Kotler (1974:275), Von der Muhll (1970:888).

⁹⁸ Mansbridge (1980:104; see also 310), Zimmerman (1999:170), Bracco and Frasier (1997) (cited in Fiorina 1999:415n47). This absence of youth and of young parents is a longstanding feature of town meetings. Hart (1893:344) attests to its existence in the late 19th century. Photography from the first half of the 20th century show the same--e.g., Hastings and Hastings (1992:109-110) from 1940.

renters and other transient community members *did* turn out to be participating to an equal degree, it would make town meeting municipalities into a notable anomaly, given the political municipal participation patterns found in other areas of the country (Fischel 2005, Oliver et al. 2012:55-56).

The one area where the assembly's representativeness has been definitively established is gender (Bryan 2004). On the other hand, women have caught up to (and exceeded) men's turnout rates for ballot voting too (CAWP 2017). This fact brings us once again to the idea that what ultimately matters is the comparison to the benchmark: are town meeting attendees more representative of their communities than ballot voters are of theirs? If the answer is yes, we've achieved only another "quality vs. quantity" argument, leaving the same problem from defense #2C. And if the answer is no, then defense #2F does not help at all.

(See Defense #3F for further consideration of the relative representativeness of town meeting assemblies.)

2G. "Regardless of whether the assembly is representative of the larger community, its decisions reflect the interests of the latter."

In a study of spending patterns, Salvino et al. (2012) have found no deviation between the decisions made by town meeting assemblies and the decisions predicted by median voter theory. Their finding suggests that town meetings may be achieving democratic results, even if by incompletely democratic means.

This is valuable reassurance. On the other hand, it once again cedes the idea of town meeting as either participatory/direct democracy.

2H. “An assembly of citizens, even if small, is a more potent check upon representatives than a larger number of voters.”

As R.Clark (1985) argues,

It seems to me that the population as a whole is better off when 100 souls peer into local affairs than when it’s left to a handful of politicians. One bit of evidence may be that people at our meetings are wary of elaborate presentations with professionally made charts and slides. In Sudbury, the more you spend to prove your point, the less likely you are to do so. This is in direct contrast to Boston politics.

Here again, though, we are losing the participatory drift, in favor of a “good governance” argument.

3. IDENTIFYING MITIGATING OR COUNTERBALANCING FACTORS

The final kind of defense accepts both that turnout is low and that low turnout represents a problem. These defenses therefore attempt to look on the upside of town meeting’s low turnout, or to the prospects for fixing turnout, or to a larger picture in which low turnout can be forgiven.

3A. “Town meetings are resource non-intensive.”

Compared to national and state elections, town meetings involve almost no expenditures on campaigns and require very little election infrastructure.⁹⁹ The per-participant cost is thus very low and may justify some amount of lost turnout.

⁹⁹ Clark and Bryan (2005:30), Bryan (2004:282; 2007a).

It seems very likely, though, that the lack of expenditure has more to do with scale than with the structure of town meeting. Campaign expenditures in Northmont may have summed to \$0 during the entire decade covered by my research, but \$0 is also what was spent in neighboring Pickfield where the Australian ballot is used. And if we're talking expense, the argument actually may cut in the other direction: the opportunity cost--the hundreds of person-hours of foregone productive employment--makes town meeting massively expensive from the point of view of the larger economy.¹⁰⁰

3B. "Town meeting achieves impressive turnout in the absence of campaign drama."

Holbrook and Weinschenk (2013) find that vigorously contested campaigns have a major effect in increasing turnout for ballot elections. It's remarkable, then, that town meetings, in the nearly complete absence of campaigning (see Chapter 2), are able to achieve anywhere close to the same level of attendance (Bryan 2007a; Clark and Bryan 2005:30).

The question arises: could institution of campaigning be an effective way of raising town meeting turnout? Locals probably would not think the possibly acrimony worth it, and many Americans find campaigns annoying with or without the presence of acrimony. Some townspeople even may consider the tradeoff attractive: a partial drop-off in participation in exchange for not having to endure a campaign season!

¹⁰⁰ Gere (1984:38), though, argues that subsequently plebiscites may start losing their financial edge, due to the tendency for them to lead to an increase in paid staff to handle the ballot infrastructure.

3C. “Town meeting’s participation rates are impressive, considering the high opportunity cost.”

Town meetings take hours, are often physically uncomfortable, and for many participants exact significant psychic costs.¹⁰¹ Considering these obstacles, attendance by a fifth of registered voters is remarkable.

This point is not so much a defense as a recalibration of expectation, however. For anyone who is not already a town meeting booster, the more sensible approach would be to eliminate barriers rather than to treat them as a scoring handicap.

3D. “Critics have been overzealous.”

Defenders have noted that town meeting has been romanticized for so long that low turnout is judged with excessive harshness.¹⁰² This too is not so much a defense as a recalibration of expectation--a plea for town meeting’s admittedly low turnout to receive the criticism it deserves, but not more beyond that.

3E. “Several easy reforms would increase turnout.”

As discussed within Defense #1E and within the main chapter, many towns have town meeting configurations with one or more aspects that depress turnout. Additional measures, like providing child/elder-care and transportation, and enhancing the social aspects of the meeting, also potentially could improve turnout somewhat further.¹⁰³ Raffles, tax credits, and other

¹⁰¹ Mansbridge (1980:60-71), Bryan (2004:282-283), Clark and Bryan (2005:30-31).

¹⁰² Sly (1930:147), Fisher (1953:425), Zimmerman (1966:14; 1967:76-77), Bryan (1976:31; 1988:5; 2004:280-281), Hixson (1971:76-77), Mansfield (1993:84, 90). The pedigree for this defense goes back at least to Emerson (1835:17).

¹⁰³ Zind (2015), Clark and Bryan (2005:55-64), Zimmerman (1966:15, 1967:78, 1999:167-168, 175).

remuneration schemes also have been suggested to incentivize attendance,¹⁰⁴ and phone-based turnout pushes have shown success.¹⁰⁵ These easily and cheaply implemented reforms are reason to believe that turnout is not hopeless. (Note that the very frequently suggested option of changing the meeting time from morning to evening does not in fact help, and may even hurt (Bryan 2004:90-92, 98)).

However, these reforms are unlikely to be enough for town meeting's turnout to catch up to the benchmark. Furthermore, ballot democracy has its own cheap, easy improvements available, which are likely to restore and even widen its lead.

3F. "Town meeting dodges some of the influence gaps related to gender and wealth that are prevalent in ballot systems."

Elections and referenda by ballot carry their own shortcomings, some of which town meeting dodges. We saw in Defense #2F above that both ballot elections and town meetings feature gender parity of participants, but there is a remaining gender problem that only ballot elections exhibit: gender parity of ballot *voters* has not translated into gender parity of the *representatives* whom those voters elect. That is, legislators and other elected officials at federal, state, and local levels remain highly disproportionately male. With the town meeting system, in contrast, the legislators *are* the voters, so there is no such issue (Levenson 1969:485, Zimmerman 1999:187, Bryan 2004:189). In the contemporary United States, increasing attention is being paid to the way that disproportionately male legislatures do a poor job of reflecting and respecting women's

¹⁰⁴ Sgarlata (2010), Menzies (1976), Mansbridge (1973:12).

¹⁰⁵ BG (1962).

priorities and experiences (e.g., Kliff 2017, Kurtzleben 2018). Town meeting therefore may offer a much better model, by cutting out the step where women's presence falls off.

Town meeting also may be more effective than ballot democracy with regard to not amplifying at least one aspect of the political influence that class privilege typically brings. This is counter-intuitive given the unresolved SES questions that we reviewed in Defense #2F, especially concerning whether laboring people can afford to take a day off, but consider the new perspective into which Porto (2005:5n29) puts that common objection:

Financial barriers to attending town meeting are greatest for low and moderate income hourly wage earners, especially if their towns meet during the daytime. [...] But the financial barriers to attending town meeting are not nearly as high as the financial barriers to making campaign contributions.

A valid point! And Porto isn't finished, either. He continues by observing that town meeting's high opportunity cost actually creates a leveling effect that is unachievable with money-driven ballot elections/referenda:

Many self-employed professionals are as unlikely as hourly employees (or self-employed nonprofessionals) to attend town meetings held during working hours, even though these professionals may enjoy considerably higher incomes than hourly employees or self-employed nonprofessionals.

Notwithstanding the strength of these two points about gender and class, both once again bring us firmly into quality-over-quantity territory.

3G. "Town meeting has other virtues that counterbalance the turnout drawback."

Town meeting boosters frequently respond to turnout criticism by pointing to various virtues of the institution that potentially counterbalance the drawback: the Political Education Hypothesis, for instance, or the correlation between town meeting and above-average measures

of communal and individual civic strength (social capital, sense of civic efficacy, etc.).¹⁰⁶ The important thing to note about this tack is that it is a defense of *town meeting* rather than of town meeting *turnout*: it cedes the ground of turnout immediately, in order to invite a wider consideration of town meeting's comparative merits as a political institution. This defense thus cleverly transforms low turnout from an instant disqualifier of town meeting as a democratic institution into just a single entry in town meeting's ledger of virtues and vices, which have to be compared in their totality to the likewise mixed record of ballot institutions.

This seems an intellectually justifiable tack to me. But I would add that--per the main chapter's demonstration--turnout furthermore can be moved from the "mortal" to "venial" column in town meeting's ledger.

¹⁰⁶ Bryan (2004:282-283); Clark and Bryan (2005:30-31); Bryan (2007b; 1995:40); Zimmerman (1999:173,188), Mansbridge (1980:60-71), Mehlman (1973:14-15), Von der Muhll (1970:327-328, 865-866, 885-886), Kotler (1974), Hixson (1971), Knickrehm (1979:118-119, 144-145); Dwight (1821:249, 251), Tocqueville (1835:61,280,285), Hale (1873), Fiske (1892[1890]:31).

APPENDIX C. Literature Review: Prior Research on Town Meeting Turnout

This appendix compiles prior research on town meeting turnout, with a focus upon methods and findings. My motivation is twofold. First is the simple fact that a literature review like this has been a missing reference resource for researchers. Second, insofar as this chapter was a critical reflection upon empirical methods for tracking turnout, I feel obligated to offer a more systematic account of the technical aspects of prior methods.

The first--and last--properly scientific forays into measuring town meeting turnout were studies by Frank Bryan and Joseph Zimmerman.¹⁰⁷ Both research projects began in the late 1960s, submitting a stream of findings until being published in their capstone form at the turn of the millennium (Zimmerman 1999, Bryan 2004).¹⁰⁸ As their data emerged, it rapidly was taken up as definitive by scholars and by New Englanders. No other serious investigation has been undertaken since they began.

This appendix reviews their methods and findings, and also those of earlier efforts to quantify town meeting turnout. I also present a novel analysis of turnout data from the Vermont Secretary of State.

¹⁰⁷ I'm discounting reports from unpublished or local-circulation sources: Cunningham (1959), MLRC (1961, 1971), Mehlman (1973/1974), DeSantis and Renner (1997) [see DeSantis and Hill (2004:167)], Bolduc and Kessel (2008:chart14-2). Of these, only Mehlman and the Massachusetts Legislative Research reports pass scientific muster.

¹⁰⁸ Portions of Bryan's data saw earlier publication in Bryan (1978:525-526), Mansbridge (1973:13n8, 1976:157n8, 1980:346n1), Bryan (1995), Dahl (1998:110-111), Zimmerman (1999:93-96), and R.Putnam (2001:438n1). Zimmerman's effort saw earlier publication in Zimmerman (1984). Both authors also regularly gave presentations at academic conferences and in civic venues.

Bryan (1995, 2004): Team-Observation of Vermont Meetings

The gold standard of town meeting turnout studies is by former University of Vermont political science professor Frank Bryan, who accumulated observational data for nearly 1,435 Vermont town meetings from 1970-1998.¹⁰⁹ Each year he had students from his undergraduate courses observe town meetings across the state. Vermont has 251 municipalities (some of which don't practice town meeting), so on average each year Bryan's teams were able to attend better than a fifth of the state's town meetings. The towns to be observed were selected randomly, with additional towns chosen purposefully in order to ensure that a continuous data series would be available for at least some towns. Observers took head counts at defined intervals through the meeting,¹¹⁰ allowing both a peak and an average attendance figure to be generated. Turnout percentages were calculated using the number of registered voters (T[RV]) at the time of the meeting (2004:65n16, 75n45).

Across the entire 1970-1998 sample, Bryan found that peak attendance averaged 20.5% T[RV] (2004:64).¹¹¹ This 20.5% figure has become almost talismanic, being cited repeatedly by scholars and practitioners, but Bryan was careful to note that the figure obscures enormous variability from town to town and from year to year (see also Zimmerman 1984:103). Individual meetings ranged from single digits to percentages in the seventies. Several patterns are particularly noteworthy:

¹⁰⁹ Post-1998 data has been collected but not fully published. Fragments are available in Bryan (2007a, 2008a).

¹¹⁰ The intervals were half an hour into the meeting, half an hour before lunch recess, half an hour into the reconvened meeting, and at the penultimate item on the warning (Bryan 2004:16).

¹¹¹ *Average* attendance across a meeting's full length averaged 17.4% T[RV] (2004:68n24). Defense #1D from Appendix B explains why the peak figure is more appropriate to use than the average figure as a measurement of participation. Bryan's own explanation is on p. 64.

First, town size is a tremendously powerful predictor of a meeting's turnout: small equals more. If looking only at towns with fewer than 500 registered voters, average peak attendance leaps to 30% and more (see the two charts below). This size effect within town meetings had been noted anecdotally by prior observers, and some studies had been able to establish it tentatively,¹¹² but Bryan (along with Zimmerman 1999) provided definitive evidence.¹¹³

Second, different meeting arrangements have an impact on turnout. To cite just the two most powerful variables, if a town has a pure floor meeting (no use of Australian ballots) and holds its school district meeting concurrently, its predicted turnout is about 33% higher than if both of those variables are flipped (Bryan 2004:99, 102). Towns that use the ideal configuration enjoy turnout up to 1.13 times greater than the average (2004:99). (See Figure 5.1 previously)

Third, the 20.5% figure is an average from across the 30 years, but there has been a secular decline in turnout across that period (2004:135). From 1976 to 1998 the decline was 2 percentage points (controlling for the increase in town populations over that period).¹¹⁴ As descriptions of more recent years, the 20.5% turnout figure therefore is inflated.

¹¹² James (1921:260, 275), MLRC (1961:34), Lockard (1963:328n3), Stitely (1964:40), Von der Muhll (1970:886n20), Mehlman (1973:9-10 [1974:45]), Sale (1980b:496-497). Zimmerman had been contributing increasingly strong data on this point too (1984:103; 1986:20-21; 1999:68, 93, 110).

¹¹³ A similar correlation has been identified for the local direct democracy of Swiss cantons (Schaub 2012:321), although another researcher of the Swiss case argues that this size correlation may in fact be dependent upon the socioeconomic composition of the communities, which is correlated with size, rather than upon size absolutely (Baglioni 2007:105). Representative democracy elections in Euro-American countries also display the size/turnout correlation (Funk 2005, Larsen 2002, Oliver 2000, Kelleher and Lowery 2004).

¹¹⁴ Failing to control for increasing populations, one would mistakenly find an 8.3 point decrease. Zimmerman (1999:46-47, 94, 111) found a much more serious decline across time, but his finding wasn't controlled for population growth.

Zimmerman (1984, 1999): Town Officer Surveys Across New England

Former SUNY political science professor Joseph Zimmerman also has performed a series of investigations into town meeting turnout.¹¹⁵ Zimmerman's methods were more subject to error than Bryan's (see the main chapter's section on "undercounting"), and there are small inconsistencies in some of his data tables,¹¹⁶ but his scope extends to all six New England states, thus providing valuable comparative data.

Zimmerman's research consisted of a 1996 survey sent to all the towns in New England that practiced any form of town meeting. About 37% of towns answered the question about attendance (449 of \approx 1,213).¹¹⁷ The state by state findings are reproduced in Figures 5.18 and 5.19.

Note that 1996 was a presidential primary year. Vermont and Massachusetts both hold their primaries concurrently with town meeting, and this concurrency reliably boosts turnout compared to meetings in the three off-primary years of the four-year cycle. This likely

¹¹⁵ Turnout was only one component of his research. His turnout data can be found on page 103 of the 1984 study, and pages 46-47, 67-71, 93-97, 110-111, 123-124, 133-134, and 164-169 of the 1999 study.

¹¹⁶ There may be calculation errors as well. I was unable to reproduce some of Zimmerman's figures when I performed cross-checks, regardless of which permutations of the inconsistent data tables I used. The differences ranged from 1.2 to 5.3 points in the different states' final turnout figures.

¹¹⁷ Individual states' response rates were as follows:

- CT: 35% (37 of 106 towns) (pp. 118, 123)
- MA: 53% (138 of 262 towns) (pp. 27, 46)
- ME: 29% (121 of \approx 416 towns) (pp. 104, 110, 114)
- NH: 33% (60 of 181 towns) (pp. 60, 67)
- RI: 65% (13 of 20 towns) (pp. 130-131, 133)
- VT: 35% (80 of 228 towns) towns (pp. 84-85, 93, 99)

Additional towns returned the survey as a whole but left the attendance question blank or indicated that they didn't keep data. These included 28 in CT, 32 in MA, 33 in ME, 36 in NH, 3 in RI, and either (the presentation is unclear) 19 or 27 in VT.

CT: 8.8%, with individual meetings ranging from	0.006% - 40.0%
MA: 13.72%*	1.0% - 60.0%
ME: 16.32%	1.0% - 90.0%
NH: 20.00%	2.0% - 60.0%
RI: 6.54%	1.0% - 20.1%
VT: 24.5% or 21.7%**	1.0% - 80.0%
New England, aggregated: 17.4%***	0.006%-90.0%

* In an unpublished analysis, DeSantis and Renner instead found 7.6% T[RV] for 1996 MA town meetings (referenced in DeSantis and Hill 2004:167). DeSantis did not respond to inquiries about their methodology.

** The figure is reported inconsistently on p. 165 vs. p. 94.

*** To achieve this figure, I aggregated Zimmerman's (1999) state-segregated data points.

Figure 5.18: Findings from Zimmerman (1999), table
All figures T[RV].
Source: Raw data is from Zimmerman (1999).

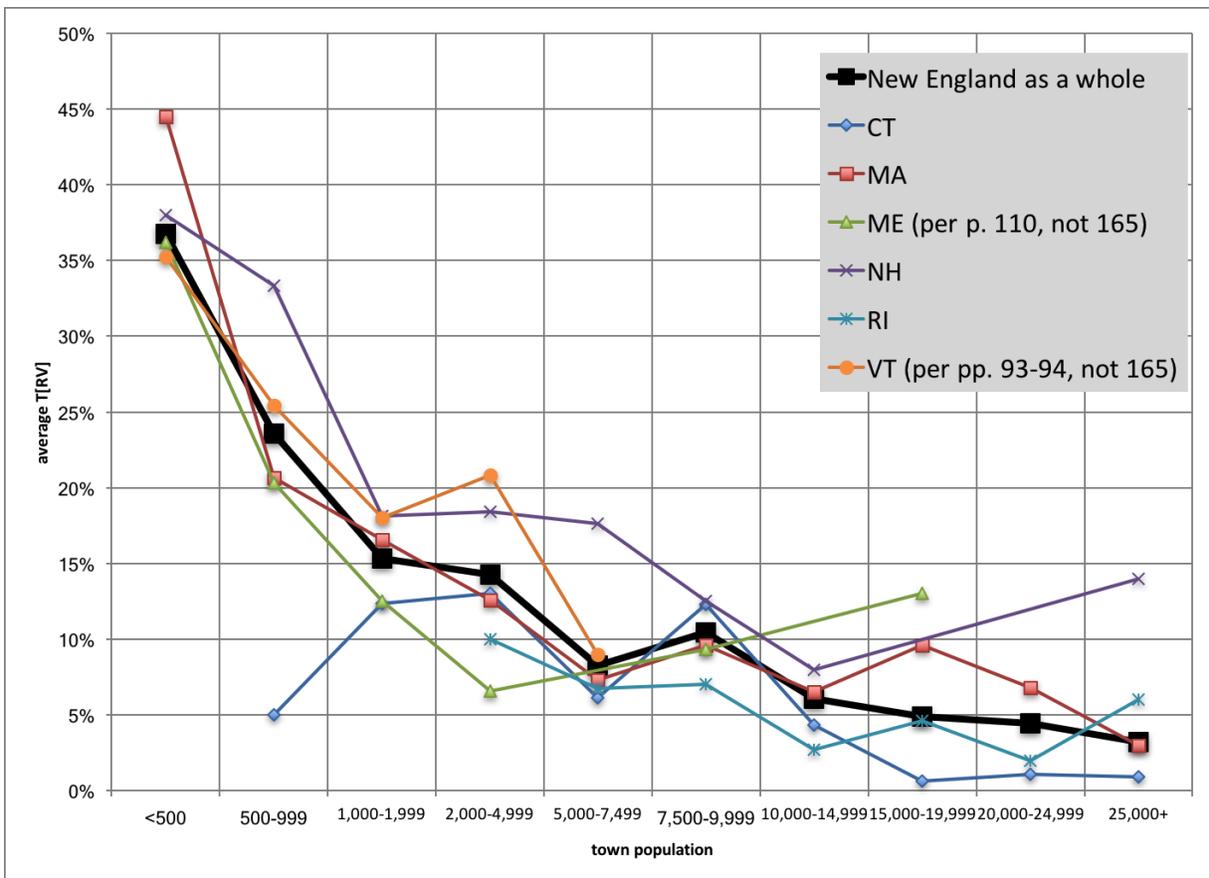


Figure 5.19: Findings from Zimmerman (1999), chart
All figures T[RV].
Source: Raw data is from Zimmerman (1999).

contributes to why Zimmerman’s findings for Vermont are higher than Bryan’s, which are based on an average that spans the full four-year cycle.

Note that 1996 was a presidential primary year. Vermont and Massachusetts both hold their primaries concurrently with town meeting, and this concurrency reliably boosts turnout compared to meetings in the three off-primary years of the four-year cycle. This likely contributes to why Zimmerman’s findings for Vermont are higher than Bryan’s, which are based on an average that spans the full four-year cycle.

OTHER SOURCES

I am aware of four other sources that provide useful information on town meeting turnout: the Secretary of State offices of Vermont and Rhode Island, Mehlman’s (1973/1974) study of Rhode Island, and reports by the Massachusetts Legislative Research Council (MLRC 1961, 1971). It is important to note that these sources have received little to no citation in subsequent discussions of town meeting, so they have not been part of the story of how the “low turnout” trope developed.

Vermont Secretary of State Records

The Vermont Secretary of State (VTSoS) has been maintaining centralized records on town meeting turnout since 2001. It is one of only two states to do so, the other being Rhode Island. In Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, and New Hampshire, record-keeping related to town meetings is purely the province of individual municipalities.

To date, the trove of data from the VTSoS has not received more than casual analysis from anyone, and it has been cited only insofar as journalists occasionally have quoted the

Secretary of State on a specific year's statewide turnout average.¹¹⁸ These yearly figures have ranged from 12% to 16%.

As discussed in the “undercounting” section of the main chapter, the VTSoS method results in a significant undercounting of town meeting participants. This is one reason why the numbers are so much lower than Bryan's and Zimmerman's. (The second reason is the secular decline in turnout discussed by Bryan.) The data is nonetheless valuable for corroborating the ballpark of Bryan's and Zimmerman's findings. Furthermore, the ongoing nature of the VTSoS data collection also offers a useful extension into the present.¹¹⁹

Each year, the VTSoS actively surveys town clerks immediately following Town Meeting Day, requesting 1) the number of registered voters on the checklist, and 2) the clerk's best estimate of the number of voters who attended. Starting in 2014, the second question was modified to a request for the meeting's highest vote count. Because the VTSoS has pushed towns to complete their reporting, and because town clerks already are habituated to reporting data to the VTSoS for general elections, the response rate from towns is very high: from 2001-2015 it averaged 95.1%, with a median of 98.4%. During only three years has the response rate been below 90%. Meanwhile, it has reached 100% six times. This nearly comprehensive sampling makes it especially useful for confirming the representativeness of Bryan's and Zimmerman's smaller samples.

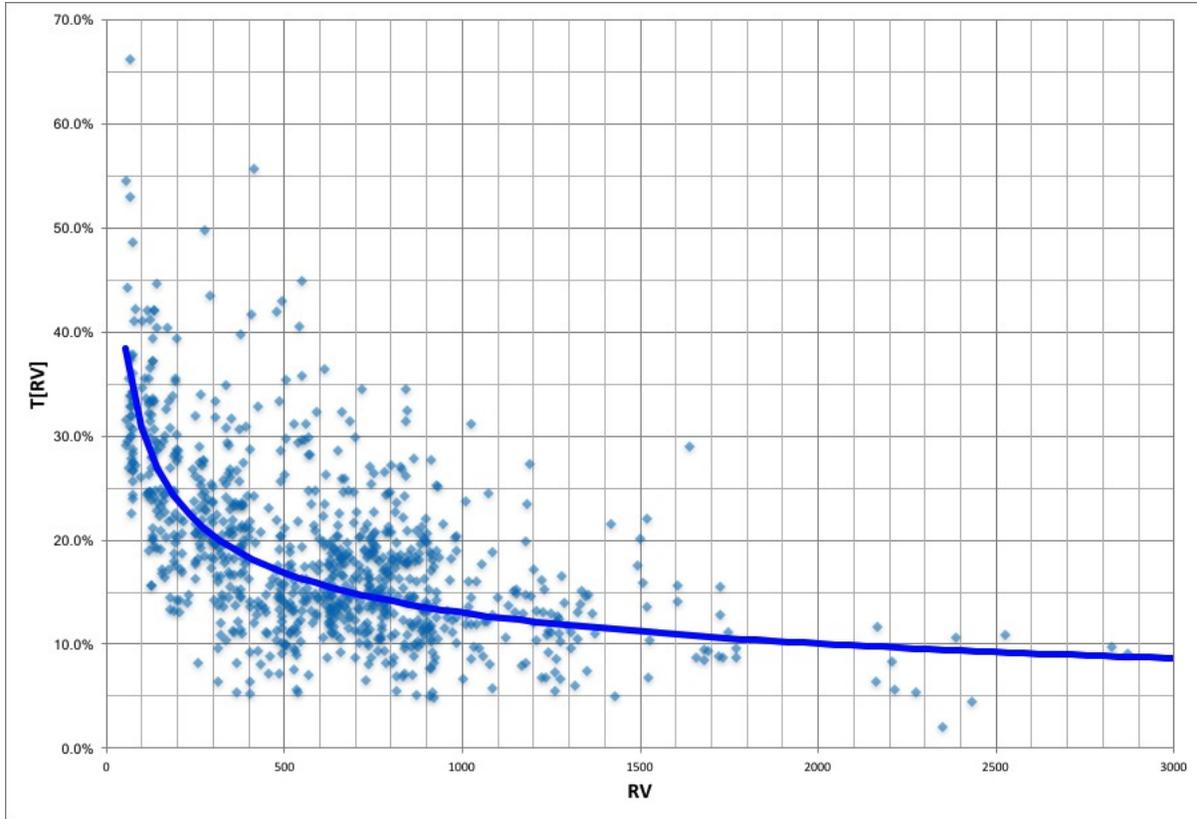
¹¹⁸ For instance: Daley (1989:1), Stephenson (1999:1), Newcombe (2010), Vaccaro (2015). The VTSoS data also has appeared in a passing exhibit in a 2008 report by the Vermont Council on Rural Development's Council on the Future of Vermont (Bolduc and Kessel 2008: Appendix 14, page 3, chart 14-2).

¹¹⁹ Bryan's study continued past 1998, but that data has been published only fragmentally (Bryan 2007a, 2008a).

I took the VTSoS data from 2001-2015, looking solely at towns with *only* a floor meeting. That is, I excluded towns employing a combination of a floor meeting and Australian ballot. I also excluded the municipality of Brattleboro, which practices a representative town meeting (it is the only town to do so in Vermont). The raw VTSoS data contained a modest number of clear data entry errors, most coming from town clerks' original input, so I made corrections where both the existence of an error and the intended value were absolutely clear (e.g., an identifiable keystroke error). In other cases I removed the questionable values from the data set. Each year just a handful of data points were unusable due to errors. For the turnout denominator, in addition to using the RV data supplied by the VTSoS, I also applied annual VAP figures based on data from the 2000 and 2010 Censuses and from the Vermont Department of Health 2000-2013 intercensal calculations (VDH 2013), plus my own additional interpolations and (for 2014 and 2015) extrapolations.

The overall average that emerged from the data was 18.8% T[RV], or 15.6% T[VAP],¹²⁰ with town population emerging once again as a clear correlation.

¹²⁰ This “18.8%” figure is higher than what one gets if doing an immediate crude average of *all* town meetings in the data set (the sort of thing done by e.g., Daley 1989:1, Stephenson 1999:1, Bolduc and Kessel 2008, Vaccaro 2015). If hybrid meetings are not excluded, the turnout is 14.1% T[RV]. This figure is still slightly different than what the raw VTSoS data indicates, for two reasons. First, the latter has not been scrubbed for input and reporting errors. Second, I've applied more accurate annual population data than the census figures that are built into the VTSoS dataset.



*Figure 5.20: Vermont town meeting turnout, 2009-2015, per VT Secretary of State data
 Each point represents a single meeting (one town in a particular year).
 Source: Raw data is from the VT Secretary of State.*

Rhode Island Secretary of State Records

Rhode Island’s Secretary of State also maintains records on town meeting turnout. Unlike Vermont, though, Rhode Island doesn’t actively collect the data, it merely allows towns optionally to use the state’s general election checklist database in order to manage their municipal elections as well. This data, which to date has not seen any use, is ripe for analysis. It’s important to note, though, that Rhode Island practices a variant of town meeting called the “financial town meeting,” which has a narrower scope than town meeting in the other New England states. For this reason (as well as for the degree to which Rhode Island towns have become an integrated suburban mass crossing town lines (Dealey 1928:75, Carroll 1932:1,194), findings from Rhode Island may not have much applicability to town meetings elsewhere.

Mehlman (1973)¹²¹

Mehlman, performing work for Yale Legislative Services as a first-year student at Yale's law school, analyzed Rhode Island municipalities from 1968-1972. His study suffers from a number of modest flaws in method and analysis, and the onset of the 26th Amendment partway through the study period introduces further uncertainty to how to interpret the results.¹²² The study is useful in at least three ways, however: 1) it establishes ballpark historical turnout rates, 2) it offers a thicker data set than Zimmerman's on Rhode Island, and 3) it adds still further weight to the correlation between turnout and population size.

Mehlman's calculations of averages upon averages produce slightly misleading results, so I've re-analyzed his raw data. The overall turnout figure from his sample emerges as 10.0% T[RV], with a typical range for individual meetings of 1.9% to 19.7% T[RV] (with a single "high" instance of 43.0% T[RV]). Using 1970 US Census populations, the data points also can be converted into approximate VAP statistics, resulting in a finding of 6.1% T[VAP], with individual meetings ranging from 1.1% to 16.4% T[VAP].

¹²¹ The original 1973 piece was re-published in the relatively more accessible Mehlman (1974), but the re-publication omits the data tables.

¹²² At the same time, though, Mehlman's data tables therefore offer a fascinating glimpse to what happens when the voting age is adjusted.

CONCLUSION. Stereotypes, Participatory Democracy, and Participant Observation: A Reflection on Method

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Conclusion brings together the dissertation's major claim (that stereotyped notions of participation actively constrain the possibilities for democratic politics) with the dissertation's methodological fixations. I detail the consonance between participatory democracy and participant observation, identifying both as methods for transcending stereotypes.

A number of anthropologists recently have recommitted to the idea that ethnography and participant observation possess special promise to challenge the exhausted idioms and stereotyped interpretive frameworks of the 21st century. "The historical conditions in which we find ourselves," one of them writes (Fortun 2012:459), are "characterized by massive violence, marginalization, and injustice; by environmental devastation and industrial recklessness; by stunning hubris and shrill ignorance." These are conditions "for which there is no available idiom, no way of thinking that can grasp what is at hand. Discursive risks"--Fortun's term for the way that we are trapped by habits of thought into unhelpful or counter-productive ways of

analyzing the world--“emerge because of tendency to rely on established idioms and ways of thinking nonetheless” (452). She cites Bond’s (2011) work on the BP oil spill, on how the catastrophe has been unintelligible within our habitual idioms--an unintelligibility that has directly affected the effectiveness of public responses. The dominant knowledge paradigms of Euro-American societies are almost willfully rigid; the “historical conditions in which we find ourselves,” Fortun says, “cultivate a will not to know, not to engage, not to experiment” (459). We are stuck in, and encounter structural conditions that encourage us to desire to be stuck in, our habits for how we analyze the world.

Ethnography is generative of surprise, and it therefore is capable of creativity (Fortun 2012, Shah 2017:47-48). It is able, Fortun (2012:453) writes, “to provoke new idioms, new ways of thinking.” Shah (2017) writes:

Participant observation is potentially revolutionary because it forces one to question one’s theoretical presuppositions about the world by an intimate long-term engagement with, and participation in, the lives of strangers. It makes us recognize that our theoretical conceptions of the world come from a particular historical, social, and spatial location. (49)

Participant observation [...] enables us to challenge received wisdoms and produce knowledge that previously had no space in the world, was confined to its margins, was silenced. Engaging in participant observation is thus a profoundly political act, one that can enable us to challenge hegemonic conceptions of the world. (56)

John Comaroff (2010:253) argues to similar effect for anthropology’s special potential:

For the most part, [other disciplines] are not given to critical estrangement or the deconstruction of their ur-concepts. Political scientists, by and large, study political institutions and processes, conventionally understood, just as economists study economic institutions and processes. They rarely ask what politics or economics actually are. Anthropologists do, repeatedly. Unlike political scientists, we also spend a great deal of time trying to discern what taken-for-granted terms like democracy or the rule of law might mean for ‘natives,’ both as signifiers and as species of practice, which often turns out to be anything but obvious.

And here is Park (1997:10-11) on anthropological participatory action research:

In participatory research citizens acquire reflective knowledge by raising questions that lie behind the concrete problems that present themselves for solutions, such as violence and drug dealing. In the process of seeking solutions to these problems, citizens who are engaged in participatory research pose larger questions, such as what social, political, and economic factors are related to violence and drug dealing, how else the intractable problem might be dealt with besides resorting to conventional remedies, such as more police surveillance and more prisons. [...] Participants go deeper to look into the efficacy of conventional remedies, asking what makes them work and, if they do not work, why there are continued in the face of evident failure. Such a line of inquiry, if allowed to continue, leads to an examination of the basic societal assumptions underlying the way the problems are socially constructed and dealt with.

This dissertation has been motivated by the same set of concerns and methodological potentials. Certainly I don't mean that a Vermont town like Northmont is suffering to the same degree as other places in the world from chemical toxicities, violent extractions, impoverishing inequalities, armed conflict, environmental destruction, criminalization of racialized bodies, precarity of employment, and so on. But I have found town government in Vermont to be a very productive site for thinking about the operation of exhausted idioms and how participant observation offers a way out of them.

Two decades ago, Greenhouse and Greenwood (1998:3) described "ethnography as an active form of democratic participation." The two things, they suggested, are "corollary forms of social knowledge and political agency." More recently, Shah (2017:47) has suggested that participant observation is "inherently democratic." This is "not only because of its pedagogy of a two-way process of exchange between educator and educated but also because it ensures that we explore all aspects of the lives of the people we are working with, recogniz[ing] their interconnections" (Shah 2017:47). Participant action research has been long founded on these kinds of ideas too (Park 1997).

I remember reading Greenhouse and Greenwood's chapter for my qualifying exams nearly a decade ago, in the spring of 2009, and being utterly unimpressed with the idea that ethnography had any special relationship to democracy. The claim seemed both pretentious and flimsy. Now I am a convert. I think that fieldwork in such an intensely self-consciously democratic space as Vermont helped prime me, and then the connection clicked when I began during my post-field period to read participatory and deliberative democracy theory. Doing so, I noticed a remarkable similarity of language between A) descriptions of participant observation as a method knowledge production through self-transformation, and B) descriptions of participatory and deliberative democracy as modes of collective empowerment through collective self-discovery and creativity.

Here, for instance, is Fortun on the purpose of ethnography:

The goal is not to give everyone a chance to speak, as a matter of fairness. The model is not the town hall meeting¹ or the talk show. But it is about being open to intervention and foreigners, about hospitality, and solicitude. The goal is to come together [...] to articulate something that could not be said, could not be brought together before. (453)

The goal is not to give everyone a chance to voice his or her perspective, rearticulating what they think and see. The goal is [to] create a space of creativity, where something surprising, something new to all emerges. (454)

And here is Meiklejohn (1948:25), an important early deliberative theorist: "What is essential is not that everyone shall speak, but that everything worth saying shall be said." Kadlec and Friedman (2007:16-17) draw upon John Dewey's concept of "social intelligence" to say that participants in participatory deliberation

¹ Even anthropologists use town meeting to think with! But to be clear, the way Fortun invokes town hall meetings here is not the way that deliberative theorists think of them. Meiklejohn (1948:25), in fact, relied upon the patent absurdity of a town meeting at which one after another person stood up to repeat the same arguments, to make his point that deliberative democracy (and non-absurd town meetings) were not about that.

evaluate the shared consequences of our choices not just by how well they seem to address our common problems but also, and critically, by the way in which they act back upon and impact our individual and collective capacities for continuing democratic inquiry. From this standpoint, free inquiry is not only a matter of seeking information and generating thoughtful attitudes about issues, it is a matter as well of appreciating and harnessing the democratic potential of attitudes *about* our attitudes (i.e. ‘second order attitudes’), which themselves are only generated through communication. In other words, the free communication across boundaries that is the very heart of public deliberation teaches and enables us to critically reflect on our own views, attitudes, interests and commitments. That we can do so means that citizens need not be viewed as passive receivers of information or inevitable pawns of hegemonic forces. Rather, under proper democratic conditions, we can be dynamic inter-actors, generating a form of intrinsically communicative intelligence that, in turn, is critical to any proper concept of democratic change. Well-designed processes of public deliberation can thus have many beneficial outcomes and effects apart from concrete institutional and policy change.

Successful participatory and participatory-deliberative democracy, I would say, occurs when individuals bring themselves and their perspectives into a mutual encounter in order to create a new collective understanding that is more than just the sum of the individual contributes, but was generated out of the encounter, with the result that each individual is transformed too.

That transformation of knowing subjects is a key consonance of participatory democracy and participant observation. Recall the earlier quotations from Fortun, Shah, Comaroff, and Park. Now look at participatory theory. One of participatory democracy’s early programmatic texts (Kaufman 1960:272) fights to clarify that participatory democracy is as much about transforming participants as about solving any particular problem--transforming them to know differently and better, to *want* to know differently and better, and to have the *habits* to exercise that will. Kaufman refers--much like the above discussions of participant observation--to how participatory governance creates the learning environment where “social imagination breaks through its parochial barriers” (278). Clark and Teachout (2012:82-104) provide a chapter-length argument that “slow democracy”--their term for localized participatory/deliberative democracy--

interrupts what they call cognitive shortcuts (and what I have called stereotypes).² And here is Ryfe (2005:56) using terms that could appear on the facing page of any of the earlier quotes from Fortun, Shah, etc.:

Deliberation represents a disturbance of everyday reasoning habits. People prefer to rely on routine scripts to navigate through their social world. Being jolted out of their scripts is, generally speaking, a disconcerting experience. [...] It is unsettling to have one's cognitive scripts disrupted, and it is even more frustrating to recognize that no new script is forthcoming, since decisions about public issues are necessarily complex and admit no easy answers. [...] When we say that individuals succeed in deliberating, we mean that they have been motivated to overcome historical, structural, and psychological impediments to intentional reflection.

Under the best conditions, then, participatory-deliberation “can change the habits of a lifetime” (Fishkin 2009:122).³

Fortun (2012:459) therefore could be speaking just as easily for participatory democrats as for anthropologists when she suggests that the ultimate positive effect of ethnography (of participation/deliberation) is not the generation of knowledge or theories (solutions to problems), but to have engineered “something beyond understanding: a subject with a will to know, differently.”

None of this is to say that that ethnography or participant observation should be taken naively as pure, valorous, or unproblematic things. Clifford and Marcus (1986) taught us that

² Their discussion is one-sided. Other reviews emphasize that deliberative/participatory democracy's interruption of cognitive shortcuts is the *aspiration* but has not necessarily been demonstrated empirically, and that deliberative and participatory contexts also have the potential for perverse effects like *solidifying* epistemological commitments and *polarizing* groups (e.g. Chambers 2003:318-320, Ryfe 2005, Thompson 2008, Delli Carpini et al. 2004, L.Sanders 1997, Sunstein 2000, 2002). For present purposes, though, we are concerned precisely with the aspiration. Whether either participatory democracy or participant observation live up to our hopes for them is a question for another time.

³ For catalogs of the various effects that effective participatory/deliberative democracy can have upon participants, see Delli Carpini et al. (2004:319-320), Fishkin (2009:134-149).

ethnography too channels attention, interpretation, and empathy, and that the conditions under which ethnographic understandings are produced therefore need to be subjected to continual critical examination. Participatory democracy also has its dangers. Early rounds of participatory and participatory-deliberative theory and practice were critiqued for the shortcomings in their hospitality to diverse communicative styles and participant backgrounds (e.g., Young 1990, Sanders 1997, Schudson 1997). More recent rounds have learned from these critiques, developing reflexive methods to try to take less for granted about communication (Kadlec and Friedman 2007, Mansbridge et al. 2006, Chambers 2000:321-322, Karpowitz et al. 2009, Siu and Stanisevski).

The utility and necessity of reflexivity in these methods is why I said in the Introduction that I would be resisting the assumption that the goal of studying political participation is to produce a “sunder” new theory of participation. A “subject with a will to know, differently” (to adopt Fortun’s phrase) is different than a “subject with a will to know differently.” (Cf. the joke about the panda who eats, shoots and leaves!) The latter knowing subject realizes that they need to transcend the content of their current knowledge. The former knowing subject recognizes that the desire for epistemological finality is the thing that needs to be transcended. Participant observation helps us understand that any new idiom we produce will have particular motivations and effects. The only goal can be to understand the utilities and gaps of whatever idioms we are using at any given moment, using them to make headway where we can, and working collectively with friends and strangers to stay alert to when and where they are limiting rather than expanding our understanding or empathy. That is, theories of participation can be illuminating but can’t be comprehensive. The trick--which is less tricky when performed through interactive methods like participant observation and participatory governance--is to recognize when our vision has actually deteriorated from staring too long into the light of any one framing.

When Tocqueville (1835:316) helped launch the *Town Meeting* tradition in the early 19th century, he wrote, “I am tempted to burn my books in order to apply none but novel ideas to so novel a condition of society.” Now, *Democracy in America* is the book in need of burning, in order that participant observation and participatory democracy may generate new self-understandings for the present.

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