

Burlington Free Press

Published: Sunday, March 4, 2007

Town Meeting: The People's Congress

By Frank Bryan
For the Free Press

What is a town meeting, anyway?

One thing is for sure. It is not what most Americans (and many Vermonters) think it is.

For decades our representatives in Washington have come home to hold "town meetings" on this or that public issue, often, shameless testimonies to their own heroic efforts on our behalf. Meantime, national politicians and media label staged campaign events as "town meetings."

Both practices are fakery.

As a teacher of national politics at the University of Vermont, I now find the great majority of references to town meeting not in the democracy section of textbooks but in chapters on the media.

Indeed, it has come to this: After decades of stripping town meeting of its ability to make important decisions, politicians are now absconding with its very name.

In doing so they are demeaning America's oldest, proudest and most fundamentally democratic institution.

Definition

A town meeting is not a public hearing. It is not a campaign gimmick. It is not, as many elites suppose, a springtime get-together that brings the natives out of the hills to meet their neighbors after a long winter and harangue their town officers on matters that would seem trivial to most people.

It is not, as a popular modern history of Vermont contends (in the only reference to town meetings in its 250 pages), a place "to exercise an old-fashioned ritual of democracy, New England style, spew some rhetoric, and in some instances, applaud jingoism wrapped up in often blurry history epitomized by the mythical individualism of Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys."

No.

Town meeting is a legislative session: a legally warned meeting of the town's lawmakers, which

happen to be all of its registered voters.

Town meeting is deliberation followed by decision -- binding legal decisions fashioned under strict rules of procedure that have been preserved over centuries of practice.

Before there was an America there were town meetings. The very Constitution under which the nation lives was fashioned partly in fear of the strength and purpose of town meeting. For Jefferson it was the best form of government "ever conceived" and its actions were capable of "shaking the very foundations of the Republic." For Henry David Thoreau, town meeting was the "true Congress." He understood (as did other political thinkers of the time) that representatives to distant assemblies were becoming less and less bound to the common good and more and more bound to the numerical majorities that elected them and the special interests they represented.

In a Vermont town this cannot happen. For the townspeople do not elect others to represent them. The town is the Congress. Its citizens are the lawmakers.

Congress in Washington does most of its work off the floor of the House and Senate in its various committees. A Vermont town does the same outside town meeting: in zoning boards, planning commissions, budget committees.

In Washington, congressional policy is often prepared in the offices of the president. In a town this is done in the Selectboard.

In Congress nearly all the "politics" takes place off the floor in the watering holes, meeting places and social clubs of Capitol Hill. For a town it happens in the general store, the rescue squad, historical society or local diner.

And get this: The "turnout" at the "deliberative" sessions in Congress, the "debate" on the floor of the House and Senate, is generally more contrived, more poorly attended and less deliberative than what occurs on the floor of a town meeting. Both the speaker of the House or the majority leader in Washington are by definition directed more by partisanship than by a commitment to honest deliberation.

Precisely the opposite is the case for the "speaker of the House" at a Vermont town meeting, the town moderator. Sure, not all moderators are perfect, but the huge majority is profoundly committed to the conduct of open, honest, face-to-face debate and discussion. And they are very good at ruling over it.

Important issues, deliberation and decision; these are the oxygen of town meeting democracy. Take any of them away and town meeting will suffocate and die.

All the other things town meetings do (passing advisory opinions on national matters, honoring residents, hearing the reports of politicians holding lower offices, such as state legislators or even the governor) owe their significance to the fact that they happen at a session of the town's congress.

Fifty years of tough sledding

Town meeting has taken some tough hits since the end of World War II.

Important issues: In her book "Beyond Adversary Democracy," (published in 1981), which contains the most thorough analysis of a single town meeting democracy ever published, Harvard's Jane Mansbridge reinforced what town meeting-goers have always known. Important issues increase participation (indeed, as they do in Vermont's Legislature and in Congress). She was surprised that attendance had stood up as well as it had under the assaults of bigger governments.

G. Ross Stephens' base-line study of "local decision-making authority," developed in the 1970s, placed Vermont near the bottom of the list of 50 states.

Unfortunately, town meeting has been relieved of still more of its policy-making authority since these studies were published.

Deliberation and decision: Town meetings face a continuing struggle to preserve the right to talk and decide. More and more decisions have been relegated to Montpelier or the local polling booth. If the polling booth is in the town hall no debate on the issue may be held.

Worse, the most important issue of all to localities -- education -- is being de-democratized. Citizens may discuss school budgets at town meetings. They may vote them up or down. But the state has decreed they may not be amended from the floor. Plus, many towns have separated their school meetings from their town meetings completely -- holding them at another time or on a different day.

These are huge blows to deliberative democracy.

Use of the Australian ballot is the biggest problem of all. Votes on the election of town offices, zoning ordinances, school budgets and even the entire warning itself are being shipped off to the polling booth.

In short, the flow of oxygen is being reduced to a whisper.

Attendance down? Depends

Despite all this, town meeting, when matched against other legislative institutions, seems to be as resilient as the hardscrabble hills in which it resides.

Deliberation: Everything's relevant. How much talk is enough? Deliberation takes listeners as well as talkers. And there is a limit on the time available. Speaking in public is documented as one of our greatest fears. It compares with snakes, heights, close places and spiders. When

compared to other deliberative groups, however, town meeting compares well.

Participation rates in 2006 approximated my base-line study of 1,435 town meetings conducted between 1970 and 1998. In Ripton, Isle La Motte, Dover and Peacham about 38 percent of the citizens in attendance spoke out at least once at town meeting, matching the statewide average. This is more than my students speak out in class at UVM (despite my best efforts) and more than speak at the typical meeting of the faculty senate.

Small towns have more verbal participation than the big towns. In Victory, deep in the wilds of the Kingdom, 73 percent of those in attendance spoke out at town meeting. In St. George, hard on the edge of Vermont's only nationally recognized urban place, 68 percent did. The 208 registered voters in Belvidere in Lamoille County produced a town meeting in which 58 percent participated verbally. On the other end of the scale towns like Underhill, Burke and North Hero fell to under 20 percent.

Smaller towns produce smaller meetings and the percentage of talkers rises. But of the three lower participatory towns, two were small (Burke and North Hero) and their participation was much lower than their size predicted. Both used the Australian ballot.

Attendance: Showing up, Woody Allen once said, is 80 percent of success. On this measure, town meeting is hardly successful. But is the measure fair?

Hardly.

Consider the national elections in America held once every four years when we choose the person who, the moment he or she is elected, will become the most powerful person the world has ever known. In that election we also vote for congresspersons and senators, governors and state legislators, and in many states, local officers and/or referenda items.

Still, even after months of campaigning, public service announcements urging us to vote and a bazillion dollars spent, America has to grunt to achieve 55 percent turnout. Almost half the voting age population passes.

Now, suppose Americans were asked to vote every year. Instead of a half-hour, it took three or four hours and you had to sit in some of the most uncomfortable chairs on the planet, in rooms where public facilities are often, well, problematic. (In the Town Hall in Strafford there are none at all.)

Most important, suppose it cost a large percentage of the voters a day's pay or a "vacation day" from work to participate. What would the national turnout be then?

In 2006 at least 15 percent of the registered voters of the 50 towns we studied made the effort to go to town meeting -- down from the 20 percent that turned out between 1970 and 1998.

Measured against political participation in general in America, town meeting attendance is not bad at all.

Especially when we consider other factors:

These percentages include attendance at towns that have adopted the Australian ballot for all major issues -- have in effect given up town meeting by substituting voting only for deliberation and voting. They drag the overall percentage down dramatically.

In a Vermont town a comparatively large percentage of the townspeople serve the town as extra-good citizens throughout the year (on rescue squads, as volunteer firepersons, on planning boards), donating huge chunks of their time. Many of these people may not attend the town meeting under the perfectly justifiable reason that they have done their part and will leave the legislative work to others.

Over a four-year period many more than 15 percent of a town's potential legislators go to town meeting. For instance, many citizens who did not attend town meeting in 2006 will attend in 2007.

Potential

For a sense of what attendance at town meeting might be if we empowered citizens to make more decisions at the community level we need only look at the town meeting in Sheffield in 2006. Based on a very accurate formula developed over the past 35 years, Sheffield's size predicts its town meeting should have had about 18 percent of its 400 registered voters at town meeting. But Sheffield had the highest attendance of any of the 50 towns studied in 2006, 42 percent. When its small size was taken into account, Sheffield's meeting still led the list -- it had over twice its predicted attendance based on its size.

Why?

Wind towers.

For a sense of what attendance might be if we got rid of the Australian ballot, we need only look at the town of North Hero. In my study of 1,435 town meetings held between 1970 and 1998, the 1994 meeting in North Hero had the best attendance of the lot, even after its small size was taken into account. When judged on verbal participation, the participation of women and the length of the meeting -- as well as attendance -- this single meeting was the most democratic I have ever studied.

Moreover, it was not a fluke. Before the meeting of 1994 North Hero was a consistent leader in my "good town meeting index." Based on five town meetings held since that study was completed, North Hero easily outdistanced its size-predicted attendance, averaging 26 percent attendance. In 2005 it had 28 percent.

That was the year it adopted Australian balloting for town and school warnings.

The result: Last year, attendance was cut in half. It fell to 14 percent, the lowest on record and the first time North Hero was below its size prediction.

It gets worse. In the five town meetings in our sample held prior to the switch to the Australian ballot, the citizens of North Hero deliberated on the town's business (on average) for more than four hours. The first year of the Australian ballot they deliberated for about an hour and a half. After 1998 and prior to the adoption of the Australian ballot the number of citizens that participated verbally in their town meetings in North Hero averaged 50. In the first (and so far only) town meeting to be held since the adoption of the Australian ballot, this number fell to 18.

A final word

National politics in America is a cesspool of deceit, incivility and flat-out damn foolishness.

What America needs most at this point is citizens. Citizens are reared at home. And Vermont is America's homeland of the heart. Town meeting is our most important and enduring cause for and manifestation of what scholars throughout the country credit as one of America's very best (and perhaps the best) civil society.

A direct and powerful link exists between face-to-face, human-scale transactions and civility. This is what Jefferson and de Tocqueville meant when referring to town meeting as a schoolhouse for citizenship.

To save the American Republic we are required to come together again. We are required to see and feel, up close and face-to-face, what happens to each other when we treat each other badly. We are required to allow ourselves no escape from our common humanity. We are required to mark together the renderings of our common actions -- the joy and satisfaction when we find the common good, the pain in each other's eyes when we ignore, as we will often do, what Lincoln called "the better angels of our natures."

Town meeting is America's most hopeful model for those who wish to resuscitate the citizen base so necessary for a successful representative and continental republic.

We must keep it. We must strengthen it. This is our challenge as Vermonters. This is our duty as Americans.

Frank Bryan is a professor of political science at the University of Vermont. His book on town meeting, "Real Democracy," was published in 2004 by The University of Chicago Press.