
All Those in Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community

By Susan Clark and Frank Bryan (Montpelier: RavenMark, 2005, pp. 87, paper \$9.95)

The duo of Frank Bryan and Susan Clark has created an unabashed paean to town meeting. Don't expect to find any criticisms of local direct democracy or praise for the Australian ballot here!

Focusing entirely on Vermont, the book moves from a short history of this uniquely New England institution, with quotes from some of its strongest supporters, to a brief list of its attributes and benefits (for example, of all legislative bodies, town meeting best reflects relative proportions of gender in the population), and finally to some suggestions for its improvement. Without question the last is the volume's principal contribution to literature on town meeting. In tone, the book reads like a speech intended to motivate, encourage, and convince.

For a mechanism so central to New England's (and Vermont's) social psyche, town meeting has received little analysis from political scientists. Frank Bryan's recent *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works* (University of Chicago Press, 2004; reviewed in *Vermont History*, 73 [Winter/Spring 2005]: 97-99) has done a lot to fill that void. In comparison, *All Those in Favor* is like the frosting without the cake, and one sometimes wishes for a bit more support between the front and back covers. Saying that "every additional hour of television viewing per day means about a 10 percent reduction in civic engagement" (p. 83) without a footnote to the sources is, well, surprising from

two academics (Bryan teaches political science at the University of Vermont and Clark is an adjunct professor at Woodbury College).

Nonetheless, let's recognize for whom *All Those in Favor* was written: town clerks, moderators, selectboards, high school students, legislators—anyone who believes in town meeting and wants to see it prosper. Involving young people in town meeting, encouraging businesses to give employees the day off, holding town and school meetings the same day, and requiring “democracy impact statements” whenever a new law is proposed are among a host of steps the authors believe are being or could be taken to strengthen the institution.

As Clark and Bryan realize, the threats to town meeting are many: population growth; two-income families; sprawl; dwindling town authority; and the “worse than deadly” (p. 36) Australian ballot. All these reduce civic involvement and town meeting attendance. In fact, the authors recommend that any town with more than 5,000 population consider or adopt representative town meeting, in which neighborhoods would elect representatives to attend town meeting as proxies. As for the Australian ballot, the authors recommend it, if at all, only for election of officers; any other use destroys the voters' legislative authority and is, they say, like using a sledgehammer rather than a chisel to carve an ice sculpture (p. 36). The greatest asset of town meeting, they suggest, is the ability to amend resolutions from the floor.

Despite its suburban growth, Vermont is still an agricultural state, and Vermonters know that crops must be cultivated to survive. Clark and Bryan remind us that the same is true for town meeting, and they just want to see that happen.

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