

2019

Collective Interview on the History of Town Meetings

Frank Bryan

University of Vermont, frank.bryan@uvm.edu

William Keith

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, wmkeith@uwm.edu

James Kloppenberg

Harvard University, jkloppen@fas.harvard.edu

Jane Mansbridge

Harvard University, jane_mansbridge@harvard.edu

Michael Morrell

University of Connecticut, michael.morrell@uconn.edu

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd>

Recommended Citation

Bryan, Frank; Keith, William; Kloppenberg, James; Mansbridge, Jane; Morrell, Michael; and Smith, Graham (2019) "Collective Interview on the History of Town Meetings," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol15/iss2/art8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Public Deliberation. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Public Deliberation by an authorized editor of Public Deliberation.

Collective Interview on the History of Town Meetings

Abstract

As illustrated in the introduction, the special issue ends with a 'collective interview' to some distinguished scholars that have given an important contribution to the study of New England Town Meetings. The collective interview has been realized by submitting three questions to our interviewees, who responded individually in written. The text of the answers has not been edited, if not minimally. However, the editors have broken up longer individual answers in shorter parts. These have been subsequently rearranged in an effort to provide, as much as possible, a fluid structure and a degree of interaction among the different perspectives provided by our interviewees on similar issues. The final version of this interview has been edited and approved by all interviewees.

Authors

Frank Bryan, William Keith, James Kloppenberg, Jane Mansbridge, Michael Morrell, and Graham Smith

Answers of William Keith (W. K.), Graham Smith (G. S.), Jane Mansbridge (J. M.), Frank Bryan (F.B.), James Kloppenberg (J. K.), Michael Morrell (M. M.)

1) Generations of historians, sociologists and scholars of politics have investigated New England Town Meetings. Over time the variety of approaches adopted to research Town Meetings has increased greatly allowing for a better understanding of the virtues and flaws of these bodies. Is it still beneficial today to refer to these old models of participation? Have these bodies exhausted their significance as objects of study or can they still help us in our quest for more deliberative and participatory democracy? In light of the contemporary challenges which aspects of New England Town Meetings, if any, may be particularly interesting to explore?

G.S.: My sense (which may be mistaken) is that given the historical significance of New England Town Meetings, there is a surprising lack of systematic treatment in contemporary political theory and science and there is still much to learn about their democratic dynamics. The work of Frank Bryan, Jane Mansbridge and Joseph Zimmerman (for example) are exceptions. For a form of government that often finds itself on the list of exemplars of democratic practice, alongside the likes of ancient Athens, the Paris Commune and workers' cooperatives, it rarely receives the same sustained treatment. Perhaps the rural location of many of the towns still using this method of governance is part of the explanation, overlooked by the urban gaze of researchers?

J. M.: Although in every generation a few historians, sociologists, and scholars of politics have investigated New England Town Meetings, for me the surprise is how few have done so. In this I agree with Graham.

F.B.: This question begins with what seems to me a profound error: "Generations of historians, sociologists, and scholars of politics have investigated New England Town Meetings." It may be true that all these folks have "investigated" town meetings. But fewer than five ever published scholarly works on them. Worse, those who did pay some minimal attention to them were critical (often hyper-critical), based on assumptions generated in the "progressive" era in American politics. This period featured a fairly universal rejection of small town life and values overall, even though town meeting remained romanticized in some quarters – for example in the iconic "Four Freedoms" cover sketch by Norman Rockwell on the *Saturday Evening Post*. Still it was not until 1980 that town meeting was given a complete and balanced accounting by a serious scholar and a political scientist, Jane Mansbridge in *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. Even the question posed by *Participations* exhibits this historical bias: "Is it still beneficial today to *refer* to these *old* (my italics) models of participation?" Why not employ the verb "use"? And what's

with the word “old”? Hundreds of town meetings are still held every year in New England.

G. S.: The New England Town Meeting remains firmly part of our democratic imaginary as the epitome of community self-government: open to all residents, with legislative power, members of the community come together each year to debate and decide on issues such as the level and distribution of local taxation and to select and hold local officials (elected or appointed) to account. Even though their governing autonomy has been much eroded as powers have transferred to state and federal level, still the decisions of Town Meetings can have a significant impact on the lives of residents and stand in striking contrast to the tendency to concentrate power at higher levels of governance.

M. M.: The New England Town Meeting still provides an opportunity for scholars interested in questions of democratic participation and deliberation. One reason for this is that they continue to evolve. For example, the town of Salem, Connecticut, has developed a Virtual Town Meeting through which eligible voters not only can watch meetings online, they can ask questions and vote via email. I have even heard of some people who would like to develop an app that would allow voters to participate more fully in their town meeting, although this would certainly face legal and technical hurdles. While these represent ways in which some towns are moving toward more interactive participation, many towns are moving toward a less deliberative model of “Town Meeting.” These towns still hold an annual meeting to discuss important issues such as the town budget, which they often call the Town Meeting, but citizens actually vote in an all-day referendum just as they do when they elect representatives. This is still a form of direct democracy, but it also has less formal deliberation.

F.B.: “Have these bodies exhausted their usefulness as objects of study?” Of course not. But their usefulness has been weakened as objects of study in direct proportion to their usefulness as policy-making institutions. I am often asked: “Why does town meeting attendance continue to decline?” Why attend if the meeting no longer makes important decisions? In my home state of Vermont the legislature has slowly removed decision-making options from the towns for well over half a century. Recently it decreed that schoolboard members should be elected not by and for the town in their town meetings but by and for artificial conglomerates of towns. The legislature’s reasons for doing so may seem legitimate to them including saving money. But we should not be surprised when subsequently town meeting attendance drops.¹ As a final note, it is often pointed out that town meeting attendance is consistently lower than voting in national and statewide elections. Indeed it is. Turnout in national elections

¹ See Susan Clark and Woden Teachout's *Slow Democracy* (2012) for an excellent critique of these phenomena.)

might also be lower if participation lasted from two to four hours (and often used up a whole day, as town meeting does when it includes a lunch break and starts up again in the afternoon) instead of thirty minutes at the polls, and one had to sit in public in hard, straight-backed chairs throughout.

G.S: The very simple idea of citizens of small towns controlling their own affairs has an obvious appeal in democratic theory and practice. For some it is the only true expression of democracy: as Frank Bryan who has spent a great deal of his intellectual life studying town meetings argues: ‘For real democracy small not only is beautiful, it is essential’ (Bryan, 2010: 136). In *Real Democracy* (Bryan, 2004), Bryan undertakes an impressive large-scale cross-case analysis of a staggering 1,435 Town Meetings that provides strong statistical support for his ‘small is beautiful’ claim.

But Jane Mansbridge’s earlier study of ‘Selby’ in the much-quoted *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (1983) is a salutary reminder that below these impressive statistical relationships, the actual practice of Town Meetings is not always one of free and equal engagement; rather it can be a site of domination. Hers is a story of a town in which the desire to realize unanimity suppresses conflict, undermining political equality. Informal practices of self-governance that have evolved over time – ‘the friendly joking and informality, the attempts to cover up embarrassing incidents, and the unanimous votes’ (Mansbridge 1983: 68) – marginalize new comers who are not party to such shared understandings. The poorest and less well educated often decide not to exercise their political rights because of the financial costs and anxieties associated with attendance. The selection of officials by the Meeting continually reinforces established norms and practices. While Mansbridge’s findings relate to the practices of a single town, others have exposed similar patterns of domination in small-scale assemblies (not just Town Meetings), raising important challenges for the ‘small is beautiful’ perspective.

J.M.: In *Beyond Adversary Democracy* I revealed the aversion to conflict of many citizens who did not attend the meeting, the fear of ridicule particularly among the poorest citizens, and the way that informal supports intended to sooth feelings among in-groups inadvertently marginalized out-groups even further. Yet I did not mean to suggest that these dynamics were unique to town meetings. To the contrary, I meant to alert my readers to the possibility, even the likelihood, that these dynamics could be present even in the most progressive and participatory democracies. The main lesson was intended to be that the open door is not enough. For meaningful democracy, direct face-to-face forums require conscious efforts at inclusion. Nicole Doerr, for example, finds that in the European Social Forums the translators have themselves organized to insist that the dominant groups hear not only the words but also the meaning and the intensity of the more marginal groups in the forum; they also help those groups organize to discuss and get responses to their interests.

New England town meetings today have a structure that has evolved slightly from the eighteenth century, but they do not employ any of the institutional mechanisms for inclusion that have been developed since then. Break-out groups of no more than 12, trained facilitators, real time simultaneous comments by smartphone on several visible screens, and the several new technologies for facilitating deliberation have, to my knowledge, never been used in town meetings, where the townspeople make important local decisions. If some progressive small town were willing to adopt such technologies on an experimental basis, that too would make a helpful study, both to study how deliberation differs with and without an important binding outcome and to study reactions to these technologies by class, gender, and insider-outsider status.

F.B.: Can town meetings help us in our quest for more deliberative and participatory democracy? You bet. But only if they retain their capacity to make important decisions that affect the life of the town and its citizens. Lacking that, town meetings become nothing more than public hearings. The citizens of the town will know this and will begin to withdraw. Real democrats can hardly blame them.

G.S.: What are the conditions that have enabled some localities to remain resilient and continue the practice of Town Meetings (or even (re)adopt the practice), where others have resorted to ballot meetings, representative town meetings or town councils? In the face of growing social and political complexity, this democratic counter-tendency means that Town Meetings continue to be a worthy object of study.

It is critical to the research agenda of participatory and deliberative democracy that we better understand how the design and practice of different institutional forms affects the nature of democratic engagement. As such, analysis of Town Meetings, with its particular organization and membership, can provide vital insights.

J.M.: In the light of the considerable suspicion of representative democracy in many of the advanced democracies today, with the Pirates Party in Germany, the 15 M movement in Spain, and the Five Star movement in Italy all denouncing current models of electoral representation, the dream of direct democracy is still strong. For most, direct democracy means referenda or some form of internet interaction. Yet the « old » model of direct face-to-face democracy is still an ideal among, for example, those in Latin America who espouse « horizontalism. » In future generations it is almost certain that some citizens will want to decentralize at least some decisions to a level at which the citizens can make for themselves, in face-to-face interaction, the laws that govern them.

One relatively uninvestigated question has to do with size. Towns move from town meetings (where all adult citizen residents are members of the legislature)

to representative town meetings (where citizens elect representatives by precinct to represent them in a meeting that operates by and large by town meeting rules) when they get so large (e.g., 6000 residents or more) that the in-person town meeting becomes unwieldy and few have a chance to speak. But I have not yet seen any study of what citizens say for and against when such changes are proposed, or any study, with the appropriate controls, of what happens to citizen efficacy, citizen apathy or cynicism, inequality in process, inequality of outcome, or other outcomes, when a town moves from one mode of self-governing to the other.

Another unstudied but important question concerns the informal deliberations before and after the meeting. The town meeting itself is not well-suited to extended discussion. But on some important issues, groups of citizens discuss matters informally before and after the meeting. Interviews before and after the meeting could help us understand these informal processes, without which we could not estimate well the overall quality of deliberation, the processes of inclusion and marginalization, and the effects on the citizens. Because the quality of deliberation was not a live topic in the late 1970s when I did my research, my interviews did not cover this issue.

M. M.: One interesting question we can ask is what factors influence towns to move away from a more interactive town meeting. What arguments do citizens and officials offer to one another regarding this change? We also have the opportunity to compare and study different combinations of participatory and deliberative democracy. In the state of Connecticut, with which I am most familiar, some towns retain the traditional, face-to-face New England Town Meeting, which is both participatory and deliberative. Those that have moved to the referendum approach I just described are participatory, and there may be deliberation in the informal sphere, but there is no formal site at which citizens meet with one another to discuss their town's needs. Some towns utilize a Representative Town Meeting that functions like a small parliament; these are arenas of deliberation, but participation is limited to those whom voters elect into this office. Finally, the largest towns and cities have eliminated the Town Meeting altogether. There are thus various combinations of participatory and deliberative democracy which we might compare to one another, and all in settings in which citizens have real power.

W. K.: The original New England Town Meetings were very much of their moment, and of their communities. Small, religiously homogeneous communities managed their affairs deliberatively because they really did have something that approximated the ancient Athenian context: People bound by ethnicity, common culture and religious beliefs. Today we expect organized deliberation to manage diversity, not presume it doesn't exist.

J.K : Homogeneity and acceptance of a certain degree of hierarchy were among the reasons why early New England settlements could establish town meetings in the first place. The Puritans' confidence that gathering congregations of the regenerate made it possible for them to trust one another was a precondition of these experiments in democracy, which were extraordinary in the context of seventeenth-century English culture. The past four centuries have witnessed both enormous increases in diversity and (at times at least) grudging acceptance of that diversity. The challenge has been to adapt an institution well suited to the goal of producing consensus among people who shared the same ideals to a world in which disagreements are taken for granted and citizens hold strikingly different convictions.

2) The work of researchers allowed the development of a nuanced and critical understanding of New England Town Meetings. Nonetheless, in academic and popular discussions alike, these assemblies have retained a central place in the democratic imagery. What do you think are the main ways in which the New England Town Meeting has affected the idea of deliberation in the United States or more generally in the Anglo-Saxon world?

F.B.: The premise of this question is that town meetings have retained a central place in "democratic *imagery*." True enough. But imagery is not enough. Should I attend my town meeting this spring in order to sustain an image? Or should I pretend I am *practicing democracy*? Perhaps this is a good time to recall the dynamic that occurred between about 1980 and 2000, when some citizens used town meetings to pass non-binding resolutions dealing with national and international policies, from banning nuclear weapons to impeaching presidents. This tactic made headlines. But it camouflaged the continuing loss of local, meaningful and (most importantly) binding decision-making authority on *local* matters in Vermont's town meetings.

But yes. Town meetings still hold a solid place in our democratic imagery (albeit not as central a place as earlier). Nevertheless, the gap between the democratic imagery of town meeting and its reality as a decision-making institution continues to grow. The gap yawns wider not because the imagery has grown stronger but because the town's decision-making power has declined.

W.K.: The town meeting has a central place in our political imaginary because of the close connections between democracy and community. Non-democratic systems of political rule do not require community, and may even thrive in its absence. Yet to imagine a form of democracy is also to imagine a form of community, and the options for community in our social imaginary (Taylor, 2003) can point toward possibilities which conceal as much as they reveal.

While it's tempting to see the early town meetings as incarnations of the ancient Athenian *ekklesia*, the differences are significant; the Athenian Assembly was

enormous (6,000 citizens for a quorum) and conducted rather differently. Yet in one way it was very similar to American town meetings, especially those from the colonial era. The success of the Athenian government resulted in part from the homogeneity of the participants, which was only made possible by a system heavy in exclusions – no women, slave, metics or foreigners permitted. The Kleisthenic reforms introduced some diversity, relative to economic classes of Athens and the relationship between Athens and its outlying communities. Josiah Ober (among others) credits these reforms for strengthening Athenian democracy.

The paradox of imagining community in the US has been aptly summed up in the national motto, *E pluribus unum*. Manifold ways of discursively and imaginatively achieving unity from diversity exist; many are provisional achievements, useful until either diversity shifts (through immigration or other means) or consciousness of diversity shifts. So the New England Town Meeting has a hold on our imagination because in that space (though maybe not in reality) democracy seemed to work as a discursive practice based in civic relationships. In our imagination, just as with the Athenian assembly, we don't think about how exclusive and repressive it might have been. Yet the New England Town Meeting, like Habermas' ideal speech situation, serves as a useful if ambiguous normative anchor for critique of present practices.

M. M. : It is true that the New England Town Meeting holds a place in the imagination for many Americans. Norman Rockwell, in his series of four 1943 oil paintings representing the Four Freedoms Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke of in his 1941 State of the Union address, chose to represent Freedom of Speech with a scene from a New England Town Meeting. This choice is not entirely surprising given that Rockwell lived in small Vermont town of about 1,400 people at the time. It is also not entirely surprising that this scene appears on the cover of one of the most impressive studies of the New England Town meeting, it too a product of Vermont. With all its flaws, the New England Town Meeting, as practiced in many towns, remains one of the few and longest-lived examples of an institutionalized form of direct, oftentimes deliberative democracy in the world. Although most places in the United States no longer have, or never had, similar institutions, I believe that many Americans see it as part of the American experience. This iconic place of the Town Meeting arises, at least in part, from many Americans' views of the position of the country in history, and more specifically, its place in a vision of advancing democracy. It is interesting, however, that in my research I have found that some of those who live in towns with a Town Meeting are not as enamored of it as the broader public in the United States might be. One interviewee described it as an "archaic form of government." At a public hearing in a town debating whether to switch from the traditional town meeting to a referendum, some citizens also argued that the town meeting is out of date and anachronistic, in addition to raising concerns about possible fraud, procedural concerns, and the low levels of citizen

participation. Thus, while the New England Town Meeting continues to exert influence in the democratic imaginary for many Americans, for those who live under it as a form of local government often see it in more complex terms. Still, my research reveals that many officials and citizens continue to defend the Town Meeting, with all its complexities, as representing true democracy at its best.

J.K.: Democracy in America is suffering in 2016 because it lacks precisely what the experience of participating in town meetings was long thought to provide: experience in the hard, frustrating work of resolving conflicts through deliberation. From the founders of seventeenth-century New England towns, through the analysis provided in Tocqueville's study of democracy, to the focus on local engagement in the writings of progressives such as John Dewey and the New Dealers he inspired, and culminating in the communitarianism that emerged in the 1980s and persists in the writings and speeches of Bill and Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, emphasis on the role of face-to-face interaction in creating a vibrant political culture of self-government has been a staple of American political thought.

G. S.: New England Town Meetings exemplify an interesting tension within the theory and practice of participatory and deliberative democracy. The characteristics of local community self-government embodied by New England Town Meetings retain a strong appeal. While the current trend in democratic theory is towards conceptualizing and analyzing large-scale deliberative systems, there has always been a 'small is beautiful' tendency in democratic and progressive thought. A significant number of activists and academics are inspired by a utopian vision of a sustainable, small-scale, post-industrial society: the New England Town Meeting is taken as a rare exemplar of this utopian impulse.

J.M. : The goal of my study of a New England town meeting in *Beyond Adversary Democracy* was to lace with greater realism this central image within the democratic imaginary. The study then unexpectedly began to inform the normative and empirical work on deliberation that developed afterward. Sophisticated theorists of deliberation today all acknowledge the significant practical problems involved in trying to achieve the ideal equal opportunity to influence. Even in James Fishkin's *Deliberative Polls*, where trained facilitators work consciously to bring out all opinions, the more educated talk more frequently. Yet Alice Siu has shown that in the particular context of the *Deliberative Polls* she studied, the opinions of the more educated do not influence the outcome more than the opinions of others. We need more empirical work using open-ended interviews to investigate the experiences of participants from different classes, ethnicities, and other backgrounds in such meetings.

W.K.: The face-to-face character of the town meeting has a direct impact on the kind of community it can embody. People cannot be anonymous on several dimensions, as they can online. Others can make assumptions about one's race, gender, age, socio-economic status and so on in person, while in cyberspace this information is largely concealed. So while face to face and online communities can both be ideologically diverse, the town meeting engages social and cultural diversity directly, and people's arguments are, in a sense, inseparable from those social and cultural identities.

3) The Town Meetings currently held in many New England towns are part of a vast and complex galaxy of initiatives seeking to enhance citizen's participation and deliberation. Do New England Town Meetings present substantial similarities to other experiments occurring elsewhere? Can they be placed within a certain family of democratic experiences or do they retain a substantial degree of peculiarity? What do you think are the main strengths and weaknesses of the New England Town Meetings model?

G. S.: The New England Town Meeting is an exemplar of open assembly-based democracy where the principle of political equality is understood as equal access to the decision-making forum for all members of the demos: equal right to be present, speak and stand for office and equal decision-making power through the vote. We can understand recent innovations in democratic design as a response to some of the limitations of the actual practice of New England Town Meetings and analogous forms of local community self-governance.

For example, the architects of mini-publics such as citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries and deliberative polls have carefully crafted institutions to respond to perceived weaknesses of the open assembly model. The application of random selection means that such democratic spaces can operate at scale and bring together a heterogeneous group of participants that better reflect the broader population. The application of independent facilitation further enhances the qualities of free and fair deliberation.

Working with the grain of open assemblies, the original designers of participatory budgeting (PB) in Porto Alegre crafted an institution in which demands from open local assemblies are integrated into a broader participatory structure. Small is beautiful in understanding the needs of particular communities, but a structure is in place that promotes participation amongst some of the poorest sectors of society and realizes the redistribution of significant budgetary resources across localities.

The clearest indication that the idea of the Town Meeting continues to resonate in the democratic imaginary is the emergence of the 'Twenty-first Century Town Meeting' model. Originally developed by the now defunct US non-profit America Speaks, Twenty-first Century Town Meetings bring together hundreds, and at times thousands, of citizens to debate issues of public concern, using ICT

to enable interaction. While these events are a long way from the actual practice of New England Town Meetings, the appropriation of the name was important in establishing the pedigree of this new democratic institution.

W. K.: In the last two decades, a new form has arisen, with a new name: the “town hall meeting,” or “town hall,” to describe open public meetings on one or more issues that are intended only to allow the public to voice opinions and ask questions, not to vote. In principle these descend from the forums of the early 20th century (Keith, 2007) and the name from Town Hall, Inc., which was founded in 1920 after the passage of the 19th Amendment, to provide a place for public discussion and education for women who could now vote. As I have argued, forums and town meetings genuinely served (fairly bland) educational purposes. The name was meant to invoke continuity with US traditions.

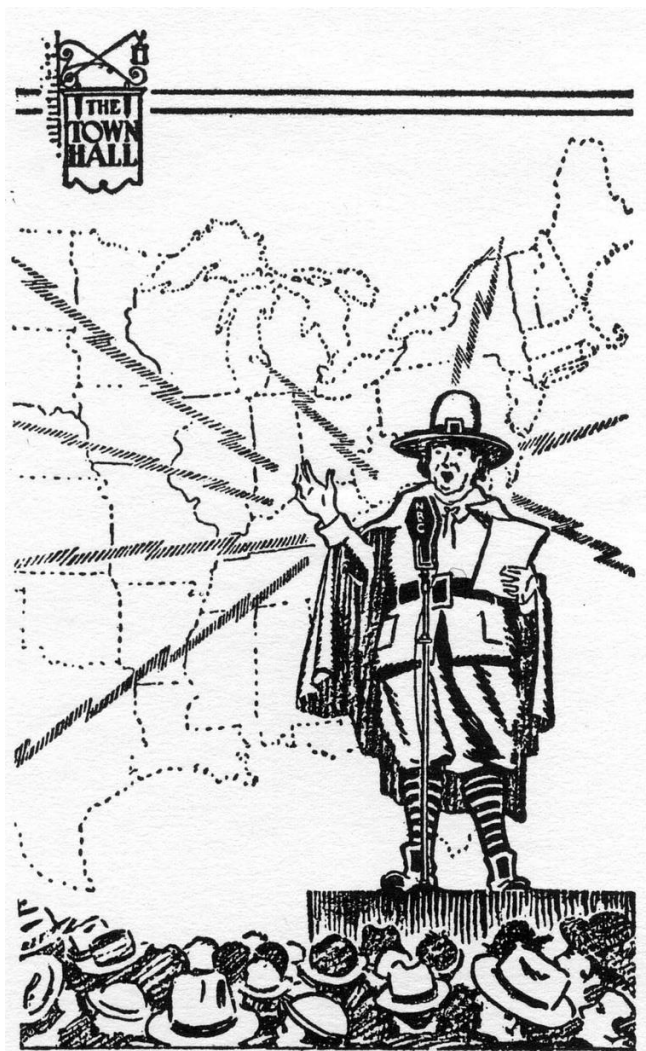


Figure 1: Town Hall, Inc cover

But lately “town halls” have become little more than political theater for politicians, bearing scant relation to the current institutions of governance in New England states. The cooptation of democratic forms for public relations purposes makes it increasingly difficult to determine how they can be a setting for what David Mathews has called public “choice work.” In the US, such events function both as a gesture toward engagement with the public and as a way to generate sound bites. Since the audiences are often screened to admit only those favorable to the organizers; they have been stripped of any interactional or dialogic qualities which don’t meet public relations needs – though dialogue is what they epitomized in our imagination. In short, they have become a farcical imitation of democracy, and insofar as they pollute the public imagination, they corrode the chances for meaningful events. Countries which maintain better public rhetorical spaces for relatively non-partisan events will have the best opportunities for productive events.

J.M.: I agree with both William and Graham. The traditional New England town meetings are an implicit model for experiments occurring elsewhere and they can indeed be placed within the important family of direct democratic experiences. But they do retain a substantial degree of peculiarity.

First, as mentioned earlier, they rarely if ever incorporate any of the new institutional mechanisms that have been devised for improving the quality of public deliberation.

Second, and most importantly, town meetings decisions binding on the participants. Some theorists, such as Amy Guttman and Dennis Thompson, consider binding decisions a requirement for deliberative democracy. Some reserve the term “deliberative democracy” for instances in which deliberation ends in a binding decision, while deploying the term “democratic deliberation” for deliberation that is not binding but adheres to other democratic norms. As far as I know, the town meeting form, whether instantiated in the New England town meeting or the classic kibbutzim, is the only geographically based, frequently practiced form of face-to-face direct democracy that is both deliberative and binding on the deliberators.

I have enumerated some of the weakness of the town meeting form of democracy earlier in this interview and in *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. The weaknesses include the dynamics of face-to-face interaction that produce anti-egalitarian and anti-deliberative results. There is little deliberative subtlety in the discussion, because generally the citizens at the meeting get to speak only once at the most and often do not express themselves in ways that satisfy them retrospectively. The meeting does not provide enough time or a congenial setting for the give-and-take and due consideration characteristic of good deliberation.

The greatest strength is that the setting of face-to-face interaction ending in a binding decision gives the losers in any vote a fairly good understanding of why they lost: a majority of their neighbors took the opposing position. They know who those neighbors are, even when they do not know them personally. They have heard some of them speak, they have seen how they present themselves in public, and they realize that for whatever reason – self-interest or a misguided sense of the public good – these neighbors of theirs are convinced that they are right. The problem is not “les ils” at a higher level but their own neighbors. This is an important lesson – perhaps the most important lesson – of democracy.

M.M.: Since they are an example of a regular, legally instituted, formally inclusive, direct, participatory, face-to-face, and oftentimes deliberative democracy, I agree with Jane that traditional New England Town Meetings do represent a fairly unique type of democratic experience. Institutions of direct democracy in the Swiss cantons of Appenzell Inner Rhodes and Glarus would likely also be examples of this form of institution. I remain unaware of any other experiments occurring elsewhere that combine all of these democratic elements. While many are participatory, face-to-face, and deliberative, as Jane points out, they often lack the legally instituted power to make decisions; they thus become consultative or recommending institutions. While others have institutionalized power to make binding decisions, they are often not face-to-face or formally deliberative. Yet many towns in New England have abandoned the traditional town meeting format and now have processes that are similar to forms of direct democracy such as referenda and initiatives that are much more common throughout the world. In fact, it is this trade-off between formal decision-making power and face-to-face deliberation that lies at the heart of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the New England Town Meetings model in my opinion.

Many experiments in face-to-face deliberative participation by citizens explicitly avoid having them make a formal group decision on the issue under discussion. James Fishkin’s Deliberative Opinion Polls began with this and continues to use it in most cases. The Citizens’ Initiative Review run by the organization Healthy Democracy in the United States, while part of the formal legal structure in the State of Oregon, has now moved away from having citizens make a formal group decision. My understanding of why organizers have made these decisions is that freeing a group from having to make formal decisions likely increases the deliberative quality of citizen interactions, allowing a greater freedom of exchange of ideas and more respectful and reciprocal interactions. Yet in both of these cases, and many others besides, the key reason that the groups had no formal power was that they were not inclusive. The group of citizens was only a select, random sample of citizens, and while organizers aim at making such a group representative, the deliberating group was not inclusive of all eligible citizens. In order to grant citizens formal decision-making power, and thus increase their sense of political efficacy, a direct

democratic institution must include all citizens. Yet doing this with any political entity larger than a small town creates practical issues that are often hard to overcome. Thus, most forms of direct democratic participation involve some form of what we might call “drive-thru democracy.” Like hungry customers at an American fast-food restaurant, citizens can register their preferences quickly and conveniently in the voting booth. While direct and participatory, they need not engage in any face-to-face deliberation with their fellow citizens. This is not to say that such deliberation does not occur in the informal political and social sphere; it most certainly does to some degree. Yet there is never that moment of coming together as a political community to discuss together as democratic citizens the important issues the community faces.

F.B.: Actually the New England town meeting was not created to “enhance citizen participation and deliberation.” It was created to govern. And govern it did and does, although (and unfortunately) with a far more restricted agenda. The towns, with their thick and truly local political systems, still govern themselves through a legislature of the whole, bound by consistent procedures (Robert’s Rules of Order) which, in my experience for over half a century, are almost always strictly enforced by the elected moderator. This procedural rigor is one of town meeting’s most distinguishing characteristics. It must be a central consideration in any attempt to judge or *compare* town meetings with any other form of political participation. (I have sent several thousand students to attend and record data at town meetings and have read papers on the experiences of every one. The consistency and rigor with which Robert’s Rules were enforced was their greatest surprise.)

Thus, the fair and important question: “are town meetings similar to other experiments elsewhere?” needs some adjustment. Town meeting is not an experiment. It was not created, nor does it exist, to “enhance citizen’s participation.” As I pointed out earlier, town meetings exist to govern. This institution of communal but constrained verbal participation leading to a decision does not perform perfectly the unique and tricky melding of participation and decision. But I think it best to see their imperfections as testimony to the humanity of their citizens. It is because town meetings *govern* that their citizens sometimes experience anger, fear of conflict, even (in very cases) attempts at bullying. They know that the decisions they make collectively will affect their lives – the taxes they pay next year, the state of their roads, and the quality of their kid’s education. It is because the town meeting actually governs that it can also act (as Jefferson said) a “schoolhouse” of democracy. If a bully appears on the playground once in a while, what else might one expect? (We *learn* from bullies.) Town meeting, warts and all, remains the most authentic form of democracy in America.

W.K.: The problem of creating and sustaining this kind of public rhetorical space is one of education and structure. Structurally we should be considering

both architecture (How many people? Can they see/hear? What technologies would make large spaces practical?), and preparation. The parliamentary model (people show up, there is an agenda, the meeting proceeds according to it) is probably not the best one for town halls intended to foster discursive engagement. Rather, they require in-depth work with a specific community to be structured around versions of issues which matter to that community. If the issue cuts deeply, this may mean months of work.

Educationally, we should ask whether current versions of the town hall embody discursive practices based in healthy civic relationships, and what kind of education would get us to that. What I would call health in this context is the ability of people to balance their differences, which may be great, with the sense of a common project (making good decisions) and a commitment to valuing disagreement. No doubt this is a difficult balance to maintain, and perhaps one best distributed across numerous interactions and issues.

J.K.: I think Jane Mansbridge and Frank Bryan have identified the problem: the New England town meeting was created to govern small communities of like-minded people, and as power was exercised, some people won and others lost. Our standard for what counts as *democratic* now is much higher, as it should be, because democracy is an ethical ideal as much as it is a set of institutions. We now aspire to inclusion, to genuine give-and-take among people with different degrees of education and unequal access to power and authority. As a result, the features that characterized New England town meetings, easily the most democratic institutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, now seem to us problematic. Finding ways to bring these institutions, created for villages containing only a small number of generally like-minded people, into the twenty-first century will require making use of new technologies and new institutional forms, some of which are being tried out in European and Latin American nations as well as the United States. Making progress toward democracy is a never-ending challenge, and continuing to study and tinker with the forms of town meeting will remain a vital part of understanding this imperfect exercise of local self-government.

References

- Bryan, F. M. 2004. *Real democracy: The New England town meeting and how it works*, University of Chicago Press.
- Bryan, F. M. 2010. *Real democracy: The New England town meeting and how it works*, University of Chicago Press.
- Clark, S. & Teachout, W. 2012. *Slow democracy: Rediscovering community, bringing decision making back home*, Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Keith, W. M. 2007. *Democracy as discussion: Civic education and the American forum movement*, Lexington Books.
- Mansbridge, J. J. 1983. *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, C. 2003. Cross-purposes: The liberal-communitarian debate. *Debates in contemporary political philosophy: An anthology*, 195-212.