What We Can Learn from Town Meetings

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Abstract

This essay offers a response to the special issue essays. It highlights key ideas from the articles and reflects on lessons that town meetings have for our contemporary public engagement.

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Americans are increasingly critical of our current form of democracy. They want more choices, more information, less nastiness, and more of a say (Schleifer and Diep, 2019). So it makes sense that we should look to an historic format for local decision-making that seems – regardless of whether you are looking through a haze of Norman Rockwell nostalgia or the cold light of the present day – to have given Americans at least *some* of the things they want.

For public engagement practitioners today, who have mastered a wide range of meeting techniques and formats, it is difficult to look at New England town meetings (either historical or contemporary) without wanting to *fix* them. Though town meeting participants have the opportunity to wield official power by voting on key decisions such as whether to pass the town budget, the meetings retain some of the main trappings of 'parent-child' public engagement: the officials and experts are positioned above citizens, literally and figuratively; there is little in the way of listening, dialogue, or deliberation; and residents use a solitary microphone to express their frustration (Leighninger, 2006). In the concluding essay to this special issue, Jane Mansbridge laments that "break-out groups of no more than twelve, 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."

No one is suggesting that the New England town meeting offers an easy template for 21st Century democracy. Neither the historians (who all recognize that this form of governance excluded most of the 18th Century population) nor present-day New Englanders (many of whom are trying to replace town meetings with other governance mechanisms) would go that far. But as the essays in this issue illustrate, we can learn some things from both historic and contemporary town meeting experiences that we can apply to the democratic challenges we face today. There are three lessons to consider:

1. We need to pay attention to the social aspects of how communities operate, and not treat the mechanisms of governance as if they exist in a purely political sphere.
2. Meaningful democracy requires conscious, proactive efforts at inclusion, not just in political processes but in community settings.
3. Both historic and contemporary New England town meetings combine deliberation with decision-making authority – unlike mainstream political systems today, which tend to produce either pointless exercises or "drive-

thru democracy." And yet, New England town meetings are declining: fewer people attend, fewer decisions are put on the agenda, and more towns are replacing them with other forms of governance. This represents a tremendous challenge and opportunity for democratic innovators.

"To Imagine a Form of Democracy is Also to Imagine a Form of Community"

Many of the essays in this collection describe the extent to which town meetings have influenced, and been influenced by, the surrounding social scene. As William Keith puts it in the concluding essay, "The town meeting has a central place in our political imaginary because of the close connections between democracy and community."

Some of the authors who focus on 18th Century town meetings, like Michael Zuckerman, argue that the symbiosis between politics and community served to silence dissent and preserve the hegemonic rule of local elites. Others, like David Hall, argue that the religious and social patterns of Colonial New England encouraged participation that was far more authentic and egalitarian. Daniel Mandell seems to take a middle road, observing that "the normal New England town meeting was more an exercise in building consensus than a battleground for rough and tumble democracy." All three authors would presumably agree with Hall's contention that upholding "neighborliness" and "peace" was an important function of town meetings – they would differ on whether that neighborliness promoted equality or concealed inequality.

But for good or ill, the interactions between people on the street, in church, and in other community spaces had an impact on the political decisions they made together, and that has some value in itself. Even Zuckerman's more negative view of 18th Century town meetings may have some appeal to contemporary citizens looking for a little more neighborliness in their politics.

Over the last thirty years, engagement practitioners have been successful at spreading engagement tactics, argues Caroline Lee, but that hasn't transformed our culture or our politics. While her claim that "deliberation is a Fortune 500 phenomenon" embraced enthusiastically by business and government seems somewhat exaggerated, Lee's article does point out the limitations of defining participation as simply a better way of making public decisions. If people aren't engaged with their officials, their organizations, and each other in regular, ongoing ways, the decisions reached through deliberative processes often lack the public will necessary to implement them. It is the connection to community, the likelihood

that officials are involved in those conversations happening on the street, in churches, and in city hall, that gives public participation its political capital.

Without that connection, most of us not only feel powerless, we can't even imagine a community or polity where we would hold any power. "In our own mighty nation-states, dominated by wealth unimaginable two or three centuries ago, we have lost that feeling of involvement and that sense of personal consequence," writes Zuckerman. "Worse, we haven't a clue how to recapture it."

Meeting this challenge will require rethinking community, not just adopting new political processes. Lee writes that:

> "The future of the town meeting may not depend solely on the, albeit important, continuing qualitative improvement of deliberative assemblies, but also on the linkage between meetings as an instrument and the shared vision of those who are, in good faith, carrying on the struggle for a more democratic society. Time and time again democratic theory has shown that the fate of deliberative democracy cannot be bound by the limits of deliberative or participatory devices. Town meetings, like other forms of democratic experience, must find their natural place within the broader context of the overall struggle for democracy."

In the concluding interview, William Keith says that "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…" The process fixes we engagement practitioners have dreamed up are necessary, but insufficient for helping people recapture their sense of personal consequence. In order to finish the job, we need to be creative about supporting and connecting the ways that people interact in the community, not just city hall.

"The Open Door is Not Enough" – Inclusion, Clubs, And "Counterpublics"

Paying attention to community is particularly important if we want politics and public life to be inclusive and equitable. Once again, good process is necessary, but insufficient. In his study of the role of the Mahicans in 18th Century Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Mandell found "a relatively easy embrace of New England public meeting norms and town offices: proposals were discussed in the Mahican language until a community decision (probably a consensus) emerged in a voice vote, and tribal leaders were elected as selectmen and constables." He argues that "their vigilant participation in the town meetings demonstrated that North American Indian groups could comfortably adopt that polity."

But once the cultural calculus of Stockbridge changed, the Mahicans' ability to participate was no longer enough – the Europeans moved to "legal formalism" and gradually forced them out of the polity and eventually the community.

The main lesson is that "the open door is not enough," says Jane Mansbridge. "For meaningful democracy, direct face-to-face forums require conscious efforts at inclusion." The 'democratic societies,' or clubs, that emerged in the 1790s provide one historic model of how that can happen. Robert Martin's essay describes the clubs as "counterpublics" that provided spaces that allowed "opposition groups [to] develop solidarity and articulate theories and narratives that challenge the status quo."

"And the clubs did attract average citizens," not just aristocrats or intellectuals, argues Martin.

> "In a world still colored by deference to gentlemen, organizations formed for ongoing political discourse by common men were a powerfully democratizing force…In fact, while the clubs' various published resolutions and declarations on political issues were contributing to the democratic public sphere, the semi-private meetings were serving a different purpose: they strengthened the members' ability to counter the exclusions of a deferential political culture."

 The clubs allowed people who would not otherwise feel personally consequential to share experiences, strengthen relationships, exchange information, build confidence, and plan for action. Early 19th Century America seemed to benefit from the combination of these oppositional spaces with governance formats, like the town meeting, that helped people find common ground between positions.

We should keep these kinds of social and political checks and balances in mind as we try to deal with the inequity, partisanship, and mistrust that plague our systems today. To redesign democracy for inclusion, we should think about the architecture of community, not just politics, and spaces that allow for opposition but are connected with consensus-building processes.

"Combining the *Demos* and the *Kratos*"

Perhaps the salient feature of New England town meetings, both historical and contemporary, is that the people who attend have the opportunity to wield official power. They can learn and deliberate, and then they can vote on what their government should do. As Frank Bryan points out in the concluding interview, "the

New England town meeting was not created to 'enhance citizen participation and deliberation.' It was created to govern."

This is an opportunity that many Americans seem to want today: the number of initiatives and referenda on the ballot doubles with each election, and citizens seem compelled by other kinds of processes, such as participatory budgeting, that give them an official say on public issues or public budgets (Leighninger and Moore-Vissing, 2019).

But in the concluding essay, Michael Morrel warns that merely giving people decision-making authority through voting may not result in better decisions:

> "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."

Drive-thru democracy can lead to decisions that many voters seem to regret once they learn more about the issue (the Brexit vote being one case in point – see Leighninger and Moore-Vissing, p. 31). On the other hand, many deliberative processes have failed to have a discernible impact on policymakers or the policies they enact. We are faced with a political system that, increasingly, seems to be giving us either deliberation without power or power without deliberation.

Local governance seems like an ideal place to combine deliberation with power. In the concluding interview, Jane Mansbridge predicts that "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."

It strange, then, that New England towns are actually reducing the authority of citizens at town meetings or doing away with town meetings entirely. Why is that? It may be that town meetings are caught in a vicious cycle: whenever attendance sags (perhaps due to the frustrating parent-child dynamic), officials take more decision-making power away from the town meeting format, which causes fewer people to attend. Bryan says, "I am often asked: 'Why does town meeting attendance continue to decline?' Why attend if the meeting no longer makes important decisions?"

If town meetings are caught in a vicious cycle, there ought to be many ways to break it. Mansbridge's list of process improvements, repeated at the beginning of this essay, would undoubtedly make town meetings more participatory, deliberative, and gratifying for citizens and officials alike. Officials could use real-time online balloting to understand where attendees stand on an issue and to give people the confidence that their voices and votes matter (Carcasson and Currie, 2013). Intensive recruitment efforts, such as those described by Lee, could raise turnout for these improved town meetings.

But the experimentation with town meeting should extend into the community, beyond the meetings themselves. We can map the ways that people interact, both online and in person, to discover how, when, and where they engage – what are the 21st Century counterparts to the 18th Century clubs described by Robert Martin? Can those democratic spaces be connected, and more created? With the technological capacities we have today in addition to our experience with face-to-face processes, we have many ways of informing community conversations, recognizing the work of the participants, and aggregating their conclusions so that they enrich public debates (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015).

"We have quite lost the capacity to combine the *demos* and the *kratos* – the people and the rule – of democracy," worries Michael Zuckerman. The New England town meeting provides us with a testbed for trying out new combinations. We should take advantage of the opportunity before it is too late.

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