

Town Meeting: A Representative but Non-Sovereign Institution

Thesis by
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree of
Bachelor of Science in History

The logo for the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), featuring the word "Caltech" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font.

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Pasadena, California

2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have not written an acknowledgments section before, so please forgive my mistakes and know they were (most likely) not intentional.

I guess the normal place to start with is my parents. If family is a prison, I could not have asked for kinder, more supportive jailers. Thank you; now and forever.

I also want to thank all the teachers throughout my life who have helped me in my quest to make sense of the world. On that note, I want to particularly thank my thesis advisor, Maura Dykstra, who taught me that most of the things I thought I knew, not only did I not know, but, in most cases, I couldn't possibly know. This work could not have existed without you, not on paper and not even in my imagination. I also want to thank, from the bottom of my heart, my option advisor, Tracy Dennison, whose unwavering support was the only thing that kept me going more than once in this thesis process. If I am historian, in any sense of the word, it is mostly thanks to the two of you. I also want to thank Michael Savage who provided helpful feedback in this process even on very short notice and J. Morgan Kousser who went over and above what could be expected in his help with tracking down sources. Last but not least, I want to thank Jean-Laurent Rosenthal who was not directly involved in the thesis process but influenced it nonetheless through our discussions and by exposing me to economic history.

I also want to thank all my friends who took the time out of their busy lives to be there for me and to provide feedback on my writing. Olivia, Orfeas, Reggy, Andrew, and, especially, Niv, you may not realize it but you helped me immensely and I am very grateful to all of you. I also want to thank Enrico who was not directly involved in the thesis process, but without whose influence I would not be the person I am, and I would certainly not have produced this piece of writing.

I am not sure if it is customary to thank people you do not personally know, but I feel like I must also thank David Harvey. His online lectures on reading *Capital* were a wonderful companion during my writing breaks and certainly helped provide clarity and organization for my thoughts on the thesis subject matter.

I really hope I did not forget anyone, but worry not, there is probably a lot more writing in my future for which any and all help and feedback will always be appreciated.

ABSTRACT

Questions of democracy are fundamental for modern society. One of the main distinctions made in the study of democracy is between direct and representative democracy. While most democratic institutions today are representative, the roots of democracy lie in direct democracy, a system in which citizens vote directly on the issues rather than on candidates who will then make the decisions. One of the most historically significant institutions in the area of direct democracy, especially in the American tradition, is the town meeting. Unfortunately, most of the discussion on the town meeting has focused on the question of representation (for example attendance rates at meetings) resulting in a substitution of a broad discussion on democracy with a narrow discussion on representation. The aim of this thesis is not only to illustrate this issue, but also to indicate how the addition of another axis of analysis, power-external/sovereignty, can untangle some of the confusing aspects of the existing narratives regarding the town meeting. The thesis draws upon a variety of documents, such as 17th century town meeting records, the writings of Thomas Jefferson, a 20th century radio show, and present day news articles, in order to aid in the reconceptualization of core issues such as power and representation, as well as to provide new insights in topics such as the use of direct democracy for purposes of political education. The hope is to inspire more advances in our understanding of the limitations and shortcomings of our current framework of analysis for the town meeting, as well as to introduce different perspectives of analysis which, in combination with representation and power, can provide a more holistic understanding of the town meeting institution.

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Introduction

“According to the folk cultural view of American history, the town meeting was the only major governing body in the communities of colonial New England and was an eminently democratic institution.”¹ I can think of no better explanation for the study of the town meeting institution² than this succinct statement of both its perceived historical importance as a “governing body” and also its importance as a “democratic institution.” While there have been many governing bodies in history, there is something special about the democratic nature of this institution: it is an institution of direct democracy. In fact, in a world where American culture is so dominant, the town meeting tradition is at the core of conceptions of direct democracy.³

¹ Bruce C. Daniels, “Connecticut’s Villages Become Mature Towns: The Complexity of Local Institutions, 1676 to 1776,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1977): 83–103, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1922627>.

² “Town meeting” as the topic of this paper does not simply refer to the New England institution of the 17th and 18th century or the few remaining town meetings today. It includes any institution that draws on the idea of the town meeting as that exists in the individual or collective imaginary, such as *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* and even to some extent modern town hall meetings (the distinction between town meeting and town hall is clear for those in the field but not as much for the general population; in fact, at the time of writing this thesis, a Google search for “town meeting” also returns results with “town hall” highlighted as a search term.). The boundaries of what is relevant to the study of town meetings are not timeless but dynamic as they shift to encompass what is perceived by the audience as a town meeting. The emphasis in all cases is placed on the theoretical construction of the town meeting institution, on the mythology rather than the reality, but some reference will also be made to events and data gathered at recent New England town meetings.

³ As a proof of concept, at the time of writing, the top result for “direct democracy” on JSTOR is an economics paper whose definition of terms begins with the following: “Direct democracy is an umbrella term that covers a variety of political processes, all of which allow ordinary citizens to vote directly on laws rather than candidates for office. The *town meeting*, in which citizens assemble at a particular place and time to make public decisions, is the earliest form of direct democracy, dating back at least to ancient Athens.” John G. Matsusaka, “Direct Democracy Works,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 2 (2005): 187.

There has been a great deal of discussion on the quality of the town meeting as a democratic institution.⁴ However, most of the narratives dealing with the town meeting are centered on the question of representation (the most basic form of this is expressed in questions of attendance rates at the meetings),⁵ often ignoring most other aspects of the issue. The main purpose of this work is to examine these narratives, focusing on the ways in which such a reduction from democracy to representation affects conceptions about the institution and often leads to contradictory statements. The aspect of power (more specifically power-external, or sovereignty) is stressed throughout this thesis to emphasize how its consideration can work in complimentary ways to that of representation to improve our understanding of the town meeting institution.

The analysis consists of three main parts: the actions taken by the main agents affecting the function of town meetings,⁶ the narratives constructed about town meetings by non-participants, and the philosophical framework of interpretation. It is important to understand that these are not three distinct parts to be connected through a simple causal relationship. For example, George V. Denny Jr. is a participant and organizer of *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, but he is also a non-participant narrative-creator with regards to the early New England town meeting.⁷ The narratives that Denny has constructed about the

⁴ A comprehensive overview may be found at Joseph F. Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1999), 2–9.

⁵ See for example these two: Frank M. Bryan, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*, 1 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*.

⁶ This is a broad concept encompassing the behavior of attendees at the town meeting, the laws passed by the courts regarding the operation of the meetings, and much more.

⁷ For more on Denny you will have to wait for the discussion on *America's Town Meeting of the Air* later on in the paper.

early town meetings shape his organization of *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, but his experiences of *America's Town Meeting of the Air* can also alter his understanding of the workings of early town meetings. In a similar way, the philosophical framework developed in this paper for the examination of both the actions of agents and the narratives of observers is shaped by a specific understanding of those actions and narratives, but its application to those actions and narratives itself affects the understanding of both.⁸

To address this issue, the presentation of the material will be done in the following way: 1) a brief examination of modern, general-audience discussion on town meetings will be used to introduce the terms central to most town meeting narratives, 2) a brief description of the history of town meeting institutions will be presented in combination with an analysis of the available sources, 3) some of the fundamental town meeting narratives will be outlined with an emphasis on contradictions they illustrate, 4) the philosophical framework of analysis will be presented, and 5) a more in-depth analysis of a broader collection of town meeting narratives will be conducted utilizing the tools introduced in the framework and connecting back to the history of the institution while trying to elucidate some the aforementioned contradictions (the analysis of the *America's Town Meeting of the Air* radio show occurs at the end of this section).

⁸ This could be reductively presented as a chicken-and-egg question. One can examine the chicken first or the egg, but, in either case, the second examination will shed new light on the concept first examined and a re-examination of it will offer considerably more insight than the first pass.

STARTING FROM THE END: TOWN MEETINGS TODAY

Town meetings of a form very similar to that of the traditional town meeting take place in many towns in the United States today, usually once a year. The analysis of these modern meetings is the topic of much of the more recent work on town meetings⁹ and will be considered in the final section of the thesis. What we will consider for this brief introduction into modern conceptions of the town meeting instead has to do with the broader notion of the assembly, for which the “town meeting” or “town hall” is often a stand-in term. More specifically, we will look at two articles published in April of this year.

In the first one,¹⁰ we are informed that Democratic presidential candidate Beto O’Rourke promises in the event of his presidency the institution (or revival, depending on the narrative you ascribe to) of town hall meetings with the following properties: “Not a handpicked audience. Not a theatrical production. But a real, live, town hall meeting -- not just to answer questions, but to be held accountable.” One can notice here many of the themes that come up in the analysis of town meeting and will also be brought up in this thesis. The question of representativeness of those attending the meeting, which as discussed in the introduction has a central role in most discussions of the democratic

⁹ For example: Bryan, *Real Democracy*; Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 1st edition (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

¹⁰ Eric Bradner CNN, “Beto O’Rourke Says His Cabinet Secretaries Would Hold Monthly Town Halls,” CNN, accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/01/politics/beto-orourke-cabinet-members-town-halls/index.html>.

quality of the town meeting, is here represented as “not a handpicked audience”. The question of power and the contradiction between appearance of power and reality, which will serve as a fundamental axis of analysis in this thesis, is addressed here in the form of a “theatrical production”. The form and content of the discussion itself (“real, live, [...] not just to answer questions”) is also touched on as is the question of sovereignty through the related notion of accountability.

The second article,¹¹ on the Bernie Sanders Fox News Town Hall, acts in a complementary fashion, bringing to attention the questions of level of attendance and, most importantly, the theme of bridging a partisan gap and the “covering of all sides” much like the *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* as we will see later on. One might already start seeing signs of tension and contradictions. The first article emphasizes that town meetings should be about more than “just to answer questions”, while in the second case the entire premise is for a candidate to answer questions, which may not even be questions posed by the attendants but by the media organizing the event.¹²

In any case, at this point in the thesis, a deeper analysis of such articles will not do much more than demonstrate the ubiquity of such contradictions without however

¹¹ Tony Maglio and Reid Nakamura, “Bernie Sanders on Fox News Is Most-Watched Town Hall of 2019,” *TheWrap*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.thewrap.com/bernie-sanders-town-hall-fox-news-ratings/>. This second article may be read in a different light following the presentation of the ideas of unitary and adversary democracy as outlined in Jane Mansbridge’s *Beyond Adversary Democracy*.

¹² The issue of using the “town meeting” in this way is addressed by Bryan with reference to US President Bill Clinton’s use of “town meetings”. Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 51–53. In this case “town meeting” appears in quotes in the original to indicate that what was presented as a town meeting by Clinton was a simple town hall Q&A session without any voting or any aspect of direct democracy.

clarifying the underlying causes. For that reason, we now turn to examine our understanding of the basic history of town meetings and the sources that have shaped it.

Chapter 2

HISTORICAL FUNDAMENTALS AND SOURCES

The town meeting tradition appears to begin in Massachusetts some time between 1620 and 1650. A rudimentary description of the infancy of the institution is provided by Zimmerman: “The practice at the early town meetings was not documented adequately and undoubtedly varied from town to town. It appears that all adult male residents of the town generally were permitted to attend town meetings and speak. However, only freemen usually were allowed to vote. They originally were the shareholders of the Massachusetts Bay Company and later included men who were granted political freedom.”¹³ This is a description of the structure of the town meeting, but not its contents.

The contents, for the purpose of this thesis, are to be found in the meeting records of the various towns.¹⁴ A survey of those records led me to the disappointing and initially surprising conclusion that this “major governing body”, as Daniels characterized it, had a very limited sphere of governance, not only in the potentially expected geographic sense but also in the sense of the topics discussed. As a matter of fact, when reading these records one has the feeling of reading mundane logistical documents outlining very little other than

¹³ Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 19.

¹⁴ The following are examples of some of the records examined in the research process of this thesis: Dedham (Mass.), *The Early Records of the Town* (Dedham Transcript Press, 1899), <http://archive.org/details/earlyrecordstow01hillgoog>; N. Y.) Jamaica (New York, Josephine C. Frost, and Long Island Historical Society, *Records of the Town of Jamaica, Long Island, New York, 1656-1751* (Brooklyn, N.Y. : Long Island Historical Society, 1914), http://archive.org/details/recordsoftownofj01jama_0; Watertown (Mass.) and Historical Society of Watertown (Mass.), *Watertown Records* (Watertown, Mass. [etc.], 1894), <http://archive.org/details/watertownrecords01wate>.

the election of representatives and town officials (a function not foreign to a modern “democratic” institution, but at least noteworthy in the case of a direct democracy) and the covering of expenses, such as the wages of the officials and maintenance of the town school.¹⁵

The initial surprise takes a new form when one reads what may be under some definitions the first document recognizing the institution of the New England town meeting: *The General Laws and Liberties of the Massachusetts Colony*.¹⁶

TOWNSHIP

WHEREAS particular Towns have many things which concern onely themselves and the ordering their own affairs, and disposing of business in their own Town;

It is therefore Ordered, That the Freemen of every Town, with such others as are allowed, or the major part of them, shall have power to dispose of their own Lands and Woods, with all the Priviledges and Appurtenances of the said Towns, to grant Lots, and also to chuic their own particular Officers, as Constables, Surveyors for the High wayes, and the like Annually, or otherwise as need requires; And to make such Laws and Constitutions as may concern the welfare of their Town; Provided they be not of a Criminal, but of a Prudential nature, and that their penalties exceed not *twenty shillings* for one offence, and that they be not Repugnant to the publick Laws and Orders of the Country.

¹⁵ The sole exception to this I came across were the records of the Boston town meeting in the decade leading up to the American Revolution. Even if one fails to notice the difference in topic from discussions on chimney cleaning regulations to public denunciations of a merchant not agreeing to participate in the boycott in response to the Boston Massacre (Boston (Mass.). Record Commissioners, *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston : Containing the Boston Town Records from 1770 to 1777* (Boston : Rockwell and Churchill, 1887), 16, <http://archive.org/details/reportofrecordco1817bost.>), one can hardly fail to notice the difference in style between a dry document listing what was voted on and a lively exposition of the beliefs, pains, dreams, and other thoughts of the participants that take over the records in these last few years leading up to the Revolution.

¹⁶ Massachusetts, *The General Laws and Liberties of the Massachusetts Colony: Revised & Re-Printed, by Order of the General Court Holden at Boston. May 15th. 1672. Edward Rawson Secr. : [Two Lines from Romans]*, 2006, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/N00114.0001.001>.

And if any Inhabitant shall neglect or refuse to observe them, they shall have power to leavie the appointed penalty by Distress.

This confrontation with a disparity between the vibrant, self-legislating, direct-democratic assembly that one might expect to find and the mundane, non-sovereign assembly, largely tasked with electing representatives is one of the main contradictions addressed in this analysis. In the process of examining this issue, one comes up against another formulation of the main question of the thesis: How is this issue, and the broader question of sovereignty, addressed (or ignored) in the existing literature on the town meeting, and through what lens can we view the town meeting institution to address the potentially problematic collective conception of the town meeting?

The aforementioned disparity is mostly addressed through the study of documents such as the town records and the General Laws mentioned above.¹⁷ These types of sources constitute what was referred to earlier as actions of agents affecting the town meeting. The analysis of the main question relies on narratives relating to the town meeting from a variety of sources. These include academic analyses of the town meeting, often-quoted passages attributed to authority figures like Thomas Jefferson, material relevant to the 20th

¹⁷ If the lack of power vested in the town meetings of Massachusetts according to the *General Laws* is a case for concern and reexamination of our beliefs about the ideal of the town meeting as a democratic institution, the equivalent documents for other states are even more concerning. In New York, for example, the right to a town meeting is not granted to all towns in the state with a single act but on a case by case basis for each town. New York (Colony), William Walton, and Peter Van Schaack, *Laws of New-York: From the Year 1691, to 1773 Inclusive* (New-York: Printed by Hugh Gaine, printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty in the Province of New-York, 1774), 233, 262, 345, 404, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/010476476>. (the list of pages is not exhaustive) Most importantly, the town meeting is presented as primarily a meeting for the election of representatives and town officers and often referenced as such. (For example: "[M]any of the inhabitants cannot attend the annual Meetings for the Election of Officers" New York (Colony), Walton, and Van Schaack, 417.) These town meetings are conceived as direct-democratic institutions in about the same way that polling places today are designed to be direct-democratic institutions given the right of citizens to discuss before voting; they are not.

century radio show *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, and even the present-day general-publication articles discussed in the previous section. Our source base is thus composed of actions of agents affecting the meeting and narratives of non-participants. Actions with no impact on the meeting are obviously irrelevant, but narratives of participants would certainly be incredibly useful in this study. Unfortunately, despite many attempts, I was not able to find documents of this category, such as potential diaries where attendants of the meeting would have recorded their thoughts on it, with the exception of some material on *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, which will be presented later on.

TOWN MEETING NARRATIVES: OVERVIEW AND CONTRADICTIONS

A brief survey of the literature quickly reveals the following very interesting pattern: the analysis of the town meeting is based almost exclusively on the questions of its form rather than its content. For example, you will find more discussion on the question of what constitutes a “properly warned” meeting,¹⁸ only one aspect of form, than on the topics discussed at the meetings themselves,¹⁹ an aspect of content of great importance.²⁰ One finds discussions on the level of agreement,²¹ the spirited or not nature of the discussion,²² and many other questions relating to the discussion but very infrequently is there any commentary on the discussions that took place at the town meeting. In the vast majority of cases the topics are said to be the election of representatives (especially selectmen) and the

¹⁸ Kenneth A. Lockridge and Alan Kreider, “The Evolution of Massachusetts Town Government, 1640 to 1740,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1966): 571, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1919125>; Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 5; Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 28–30.

¹⁹ The question of the content is linked to the question of power as recognized even by those who mention the topics briefly and even then only to dismiss their importance: “Although the meeting usually chose not to involve itself in decision-making beyond electing officers, its frequent flurries of activity during controversies left no doubt where internal power ultimately lay.” Here, we already bear witness to the recognition of one of the most important contradictions in the nature of the town meeting, a direct-democratic institution whose main role is the election of representatives. This contradiction is quickly swept under the rug in a way that will quickly become familiar in the case of such uncomfortable contradictions.

²⁰ The topics are not the only aspect of content. The level (depth) of analysis might be another. An even more potentially obscure aspect of content is the participation time for different speakers as for example analyzed by Bryan who measures speaking time for women vs men. Content and form interact in a way such that it is not always possible to say that something affects purely form or content, but they are still a useful dipole to keep in mind.

²¹ Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*; Daniels, “Connecticut’s Villages Become Mature Towns,” 95.

²² Bryan, *Real Democracy*; Daniels, “Connecticut’s Villages Become Mature Towns,” 96.

balance of a rudimentary budget which is usually comprised of the salaries of a handful of elected officials and town officers such as the schoolmaster.²³ This is in agreement with the survey of the town meeting records of various towns throughout the 17th and 18th century outlined above. The choice of topics in *America's Town Meeting of the Air* is exceptional not only in the way in which those topics qualitatively compare with those of the New England town meetings,²⁴ but also in the fact that this radio show at least once examines itself as the topic of discussion and provides the precise participants' commentary on the institution (or narratives of agents if you prefer) that would have been so useful for the New England town meetings.²⁵

One of the most striking contradictions in the sources relating to the town meeting can be found when comparing the *General Laws and Liberties of the Massachusetts Colony* discussed in the previous section with the town meeting narrative we find Thomas Jefferson presenting. The following excerpt from Frank Bryan's *Real Democracy* presents some aspects of this narrative and introduces considerations of sovereignty in such narratives: "With Jefferson the town meeting democracy that once threatened the Republic

²³ This is true for most, if not all texts, I encountered in my research. As one example I give the following: John L. Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth: Society and Political Culture in Worcester County, Massachusetts 1713-1861* (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 97.

²⁴ The topic of the first *America's Town Meeting of the Air* radio show was "Which Way America: Fascism, Communism, Socialism or Democracy?" It would of course be impossible for people in the 17th century to be discussing ideas not yet formulated but one might expect or hope for discussions on for example mercantilism or other questions of political economy.

²⁵ Maybe the most explicit case of this is the radio show of November, 5, 1936, whose topic was "Public Opinion and the Town Meeting Idea." ("*America's Town Meeting of the Air*," accessed May 24, 2019, <http://archive.org/details/ATMOTA>.) Keep in mind the importance of the institution placing itself as the object of its own inquiry and deliberation as it will prove useful in understanding "autonomy" as it will be defined later in the thesis.

(‘shook to its very foundations,’ he said)²⁶ became ‘the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self government.’²⁷ When referring to the town meeting Jefferson even asserts that “the organization of this little selfish minority [the New England town] enabled it to overrule the Union.”²⁸ Of course one cannot imagine a New England town meeting today overruling the United States government. In a similar way, the institution described in the *General Laws* is not one of such power. No historian will be surprised that an institution has changed over time, but the existence of such a shift offers the excuse for an inquiry and an attempt to elucidate the nature of that shift.

The following excerpt on the origins of the Massachusetts Constitution (a model for the US Constitution) serves to illuminate not only the conflict for sovereignty between institutions of direct and representative democracy that Jefferson points to above, but also the ease with which the label of democracy is put on the process where the people assemble, deliberate, and then are ignored while someone else gets to decide:

Massachusetts was the first to take the step. [...] 1777, when the General Court, after seeking specific authorization from the voters, drafted a constitution and submitted it to the towns for a vote by all adult males. The result was an overwhelming rejection. [...] In 1779 accordingly there was held, for the first time in independent America and perhaps in the world, a convention popularly elected for the exclusive purpose of drafting a constitution to be submitted to the people for ratification, with a provision

²⁶ The quote referenced is: “How powerfully did we feel the energy of this system in the case of the embargo? I felt the foundations of the government shaken under my feet by the New England townships.” Thomas Jefferson, *Jefferson: Political Writings*, ed. Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 205.

²⁷ Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 26.

²⁸ Jefferson, *Jefferson*, 205.

that a two-thirds majority of the whole people (not simply a majority of towns) would be required to put it in effect.

Town meetings discussed the document clause by clause, accepting some articles, rejecting others, and suggesting various amendments. Although there was no two-thirds majority of the whole people for many provisions, the convention, which reconvened to count the returns, ignored the suggestions, interpreted revisions as acceptances, and declared the constitution adopted. In spite of this dubious final procedure, the Massachusetts constitution could be said, with more plausibility than any other, to be an act of the sovereign people. As such, it gave to the other branches of government a popular authorization [...]²⁹

One of the most dramatic expressions of the confusion that can arise from the lack of a clear framework regarding the nature of power as it relates to the town meeting comes from J. R. Pole who presents us with direct-democratic town meetings repeatedly conceding power to their elected officials and then asks: “How then are we to explain the paradox of popular consent to a scheme of government which systematically excluded the common people from the more responsible positions of political power?”³⁰ My hope is that following the presentation of the framework in the next section, the reader will recognize a potential explanation of this paradox being that such a curious evolution in the internal power structure of the town meeting could in part be driven by the external power structure imposed on the town meeting. To simplify, the people might be giving up their power within the assembly, because the assembly lacks power when compared to other institutions.

²⁹ Edmund Sears Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America*, 1st edition (New York: Norton, 1988), 258. (*Inventing the People* is not a study of the town meeting but of the ideological development of popular government in England and the United States more broadly.)

³⁰ J. R. Pole, “Historians and the Problem of Early American Democracy,” *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 3 (1962): 641, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1844105>.

FRAMEWORK

Demos and Kratos

Democracy is etymologically derived from *demos* meaning common people and *kratos* meaning strength or power, the combination of which leads to (various forms of) political power belonging to the common people. It is possible to associate most topics of discussion relevant to the town meeting with either *demos* or *kratos*, or a combination of the two; although, for some topics, a simple association of this sort may not be very informative (such is the case for the “School of Democracy” theme which will be introduced after the presentation of the framework).

For example, the question of who makes up “the people” is a question fundamentally associated with the *demos* part of democracy. It is generally accepted that “the people” in a democratic institution are equal, but the definition of “the people” has historically often excluded women, slaves, those below a specific age, and many other categories. In the case of the town meeting, one of the categories that has attracted a lot of attention is that related to the ownership of property. As a result, one can find a lot of discussion on whether the town meeting institution was truly democratic which focuses

disproportionately on the economic conditions at the time and attempts to establish what percentage of the townspeople owned enough property to qualify as freemen.³¹

Power is of course not irrelevant to the definition of “the people”, but it is not power in the context of the democratic institution itself that determines this definition as that would require causality to work backwards in time. Instead, it is the power structures in existence at the time of the founding of the institution that play a role. The town meeting does not construct a definition of freemen in a vacuum. It adopts a definition shaped by the society in which it is created. The definition of “the people” that determines the *demos* for the town meeting democracy is thus affected by power, but as it exists before and outside the institution, not by the power structures of the town meeting itself. A change to the definition of the *demos* by the democratic institution itself is possible but it constitutes the creation of a new institution. If a town meeting in the 17th century were to decide to include women in its definition of freemen it would have created a new and radically different institution, even if it maintained the same name and initially similar structures. The *demos* of the first institution creates the democratic institution when it agrees on the form of its *kratos* and, then, through that *kratos*, it decides on a new definition of the *demos*. When this new *demos* assembles to revise the instituted form of *kratos*, this action constitutes the foundation of a new democratic institution, which might be inspired and influenced by the previous one but is different from it.

³¹ For example, the works of Robert E. Brown and Charles Beard on old (pre-19th century) town meetings. Also: Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth*, 42–45.

A specific intersection of *demos* and *kratos*, the power relations between members of the *demos*, has also attracted a lot of attention. The definition of terms and creation of a framework (implicit or explicit) in most other town meeting narratives, including the ones focused on internal power relations, has been based on a binary distinction in the internal workings of a democratic institution. When that distinction is on the basis of participation we have the distinction between direct and representative democracy leading to an analysis of levels of participation.³² When the distinction is on the basis of the relationship between the interests of citizens (whether those interests are in opposition or form a “common interest”) we have an analysis of adversary and unitary democracy.³³ The analysis of the level of participation is an attempt to quantitatively measure power relations, while the discussion of interests is an attempt to qualitatively reconsider the appropriateness of those relations and our related premises. In this category of internal power relations also belongs the discussion on the role of the selectmen³⁴ and in general the details of representation. The question of the effects of population size lies somewhat outside the *demos-kratos* division but the effects analyzed usually lie in the sphere of internal power relations.³⁵

³² This is for example the case in Bryan, *Real Democracy*. and we will return to it in our definition of democracy. Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*. also analyzes the notion of low attendance at a direct democracy as a form of representation. The question of representativeness of the *demos* regarding the townspeople that is addressed by Brown and Beard in the questions of property mentioned above here becomes a question of the representatives of the participants regarding the *demos*.

³³ Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*.

³⁴ For example: Lockridge and Kreider, “The Evolution of Massachusetts Town Government, 1640 to 1740.”

³⁵ Daniels, “Connecticut’s Villages Become Mature Towns,” 99–100.

In any case, almost all the questions asked about the town meeting are questions on the internal workings of the community, as if the town were completely isolated from the outside world, unaffected by power structures external to it. There has been some recognition of the fact that in practice the town meeting was often not the locus of power in colonial America with various other groups being recognized as equally or more important³⁶, but it always appears as a realization of a conflict between an expectation of grandeur and a reality of compromise. A consideration of the excerpt from the *General Laws and Liberties of the Massachusetts Colony* presented above should suffice to indicate that such a presentation is somewhat misleading.

The argument I want to make is that the conception of the town meeting even as an ideal has always lacked the aspect of real power, it is almost always a body representative of the people but it is never a sovereign body, either having some decision-making role while subordinate to another institution or having no decision-making role at all. This feature of the town meeting institution has been widely ignored, or recognized only to be quickly swept under the rug again.³⁷ I hope that by bringing the issue of *kratos* to the surface again and discussing the importance of power-external, even if it is not very relevant to the *demos* part of democracy, I can help illuminate some misconceptions and contradictions in the existing narratives and emphasize that in questions of democracy one must remember the meaning of both *demos* and *kratos*. I am not proposing a substitution of analyses focusing on representation with only analyses focusing on power, since that would

³⁶ See for example Daniels, 83–84.

³⁷ See for example Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth*. discussed below.

probably lead to about as many misconceptions and contradictions, but a more holistic view in which power affects representation and representation affects power just as they both affect and are affected by multiple other factors.

The question of representation made apparent the need and analytical practicality of the distinction between direct and representative democracy and the question of motivation and benefit did the same for the distinction between adversary and unitary democracy. I argue that the question of power-external, of sovereignty, should also be introduced and offer another, independent (not reducible to a combination of the already existing axes) but correlated axis of analysis. The purpose of this is not only to expose previously hidden tensions, but also to demonstrate the ways in which this axis is connected to the others. This will be demonstrated in particular detail for the case of representation as it appears in Bryan and Zimmerman. In short, a direct-democratic but non-sovereign institution will differ from a direct-democratic and sovereign institution, as will a representative but non-sovereign institution compared to a representative and sovereign one,³⁸ and it will do so in ways that an analysis focused on representation but ignoring sovereignty might be able to take notice of but will fail to elucidate.³⁹

³⁸ The purpose of this example is to highlight that we are not comparing two institutions and applying different labels to that single divide, but that every different lens creates a new divide and adds to the complexity and multiplicity of forms in which we perceive the existence of an institution. The binary presentation is such only for the sake of simplicity; it is reductionist and there is no reason not to talk about democratic institutions as existing somewhere on the power (or sovereignty) spectrum, the representativeness spectrum, and so on.

³⁹ The discussion on the *demos-kratos* axis of analysis is not extensive but should be sufficient for the purpose of this paper. One example of how this part of the framework can help us situate other aspects of the town meeting discussion comes from the consideration of poor relief. Since early town meetings had a minimum property requirement, it follows that those eligible for poor relief most likely did not belong to the *demos*. This means, that while questions of poor relief are to a large extent internal matters in the

Definition of Democracy and Autonomy

Every in-depth analysis of the town meeting begins with a discussion of democracy⁴⁰ and most importantly a clear distinction between direct (real) and representative democracy. I would like to use the following definition provided by Frank Bryan in *Real Democracy* as a starting point, since I believe that when considering both year of publication and influence *Real Democracy*, and Bryan's work in general, is of great importance for both the town meeting and direct democracy in general:

Certainly all polities that call themselves democracies are "real". But I say that nearly all representative structures that provide the frame of governance for the "democracies" of the world are substitutes for democracies, not approximations of democracy. This is *not* to say these "democracies" are less than they might be or that they are not better at what they do than town meeting is at what it does. It is to say that using the word "democracy" to cover representative systems is, as Robert Dahl observed, an "intellectual handicap." Real democracy (for good or ill) occurs only when all eligible citizens of a general-purpose government are legislators; that is, called to meet in a deliberative, face-to-face assembly and bind themselves under laws they fashion themselves.⁴¹

This definition is meant for an audience familiar with representative systems like the current Western "democracies" and thus focuses on distinguishing true, direct democracy from such systems by stressing universal participation and the face-to-face nature of the process. As such, it merely glosses over an aspect of democracy that is crucial

context of the town, they are questions of power-external in the context of the town meeting. In the same way that the British colonial authority could make decisions external to the town meeting and enforce them on the town meeting, the town meeting makes decisions for the poor in which they themselves do not participate and then proceeds to enforce them as a force external to the poor. Questions of power-external where the meeting dominates are as widely ignored as those where it is dominated.

⁴⁰ For example: Bryan, *Real Democracy*; Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*; Pole, "Historians and the Problem of Early American Democracy."

⁴¹ Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 3–4.

for the case of the town meeting, the fact that the citizens of a democracy “bind themselves under laws they fashion themselves”. I would like to rephrase that as “bind themselves ONLY under laws they fashion themselves”. The importance of such a distinction is related to the notion of sovereignty and power-external and should become clearer with the introduction of another concept, autonomy, as defined by Cornelius Castoriadis, who also contributed significantly to the study of democracy:

What is an autonomous society? I had at first given to the concept of autonomy, as extended to society, the meaning of 'collective management'. I have now been led to give it a more radical content, which is no longer simply collective management ('self-management') but the permanent and explicit self-institution of society; that is to say, a state in which the collectivity knows that its institutions are its own creation and has become capable of regarding them as such, of taking them up again and transforming them.⁴²

This definition places democracies not in opposition to representative systems, but to any system with a strict dogma, any axiomatic logic, whether it be religious, philosophical, or otherwise. Autonomy and democracy are not perfect synonyms, but Castoriadis does use the two interchangeably at times.⁴³ Autonomy as defined above may be considered a high bar to set for calling the town meeting a true democracy,⁴⁴ but one can at least hope that a democratic institution will be closer to that definition than to that of heteronomous (the opposite of autonomous) societies, those that “cannot put into question

⁴² Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, Blackwell Readers (Oxford ; Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 29–30.

⁴³ For example: “The first condition for the existence of an autonomous society – of a democratic society – is that the public [...]” Castoriadis, 407.

⁴⁴ Especially considering the importance of the Christian dogma for the colonial American society we would have to discard the broader philosophical content of autonomy and restrict the “explicit self-institution of society” to the political sphere, a society which recognizes at least its legal texts as malleable and deriving from its collective decision-making. I will return to this point in the discussion of *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*.

their own institution and [they] produce conformal and heteronomous individuals for whom the putting into question of the existing law is not just forbidden but mentally inconceivable and psychically unbearable.”⁴⁵ Is it possible then for an institution to satisfy Bryan’s definition while failing that of Castoriadis?

The town meeting as defined in the excerpt from *The General Laws and Liberties of the Massachusetts Colony* above is based on direct participation and equal representation of the free citizens. It is however, also confined to a specific set of topics and most importantly it is bound by another set of laws. The freemen are allowed to act as legislators, as Bryan requires, but only as long as their laws “be not Repugnant to the publick Laws and Orders of the Country.”⁴⁶ There is thus a somewhat well-defined sphere of autonomy for the townspeople on issues such as how to “dispose of their own Lands and Woods” and even a somewhat open statement regarding the limit of what those issues are as “or otherwise as need requires”,⁴⁷ but the towns are also bound by an institution which they are not able to question and that is the colonial legal system.⁴⁸ Questioning that institution may

⁴⁵ Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, 336.

⁴⁶ Note that for the Court to oppose a law proposed by the town meeting it does not even require the legal justification of a conflict with other laws of the country, as the previous requirement for town meeting laws is that they be “not of a Criminal, but of a Prudential nature” and whether the standards for “prudential nature” are met is definitely open to interpretation.

⁴⁷ The question of the extent to which this open statement was made use of is somewhat beyond the scope of this work, but a survey of town meeting records from a variety of towns reveals that in most cases the issues decided on at the town meeting were precisely those listed with only a few minor exceptions before 1770. During the revolutionary period this becomes more complicated.

⁴⁸ At some point Bryan shifts from a comparison between Athens, Vermont, and Athens, Greece, to one between Athens, Vermont, and Pallenais, one of the demes of Attica. He then says of these two: “As core units of larger political entities to which sovereignty was owed, both were only partial democracies.” He then goes on in a footnote to say: “For most of their history both places were probably much more “full” democracies than partial ones. Taxes and military service were their principal obligations to the larger units they belonged to. [...] Vermont towns cared for their poor, educated their children, maintained their own roads, and performed nearly every other important government function in the life of their citizens. Thus, for three-quarters of their historical existence the towns, for all practical purposes, were pretty

not be “physically unbearable” as would fit the description of a heteronomy, but it is far from encouraged as one would expect in an autonomous society.

much full democracies.” (Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 10.) Bryan approaches the question of sovereignty here as a matter of what issues are decided by each body. I would argue that he ignores the most important issue, the division of issues, itself. The decision of which body decides on what issues is made as we just saw by the Court and is not fixed in a way that allows the town meeting to stand its ground in a confrontation; if the Court finds a decision to not be of a “prudential nature” it can overturn it at any time. This distinction that Bryan draws in the issues exists at the mercy of the Court, and while that might satisfy Bryan’s notion of a “full democracy”, I believe it leaves a lot to be desired.

REVISITING THE NARRATIVES

Town Meeting: School of Democracy

While the lack of sovereignty of the town meeting institution is not explicitly recognized by its supporters, I would argue that it finds an implicit expression in attempts to justify the town meeting as an institution through functions other than legislating. The most ubiquitous of these functions is the town meeting as a school of democracy. This idea of town meetings as instruments of political education dates at least as far back as de Tocqueville who in the 1830s wrote that “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.”⁴⁹ Bryan provides a series of similar quotes from John Stuart Mill, Timothy Dwight, James Bryce, and others.⁵⁰ Zimmerman refers to “the education theme”⁵¹ as such, recognizing its widespread presence in discussions of the town meeting institution, and presents a summary of opinions of various town meeting advocates on the matter.

What none of these commentators explicitly states is that much in the same way that the purpose of a school is to provide a significantly simplified and lower-stakes version of the real-world skill it is teaching, the town meeting too is intended as an institution

⁴⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, chap. 5, accessed May 24, 2019, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/tocqueville/alexis/democracy/>.

⁵⁰ Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 27–28.

⁵¹ Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 4.

deciding only on issues of secondary importance and always under the supervision of a higher political authority capable of overturning the town meeting decisions it finds disagreeable. This educational nature of the town meeting is especially emphasized in the case of *America's Town Meeting of the Air* which, having no political power, presents itself as a means to political education rather than the exercise of political power.⁵² The expectation is potentially that such an institution will for some time function as a training-wheels democracy, but that once the people are ready they will finally be allowed to decide on the important issues; that is certainly the impression one gets from the Carole Pateman quote at the start of the last chapter of Bryan's *Real Democracy*: "We do not learn to read or write, ride or swim, by merely being told how to do it, but by doing it, so it is only by practicing popular government on a limited scale that the people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger scale."⁵³

The only issue, however, is that there is never any provision for removing the training wheels in the case of the town meeting. The argument against political elites, that even if the people are not ready to rule themselves they will gain the ability to do so through practice, undergoes a catastrophic reversal into a veiled argument for perpetual paternalism: the people are allowed to decide and learn through their mistakes but since they are expected to make mistakes they are only allowed to decide on trivial matters. A "democratic" institution of this sort does not provide any real power for the people but it

⁵² H. A Overstreet and Bonaro W Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 30, 86–88.

⁵³ Carole Pateman, "Participation and Democratic Theory by Carole Pateman," Cambridge Core, October 1970, 31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511720444>.

does provide a great deal of legitimacy for the paternalist, representative structures that have power.

Classical⁵⁴ Town Meeting

The presentation of this section poses a very particular problem in being an attempt to present the lack of a thing rather than the existence of a thing. It would be much easier to present the fact that the analysis considers representation than the fact that it overlooks sovereignty, especially given the fact that it does so in the relative and not the absolute sense. It would be pretty much impossible to discuss democracy while completely ignoring questions of power. The argument I am making is not that previous analysis was unaware of the issue of power-external but that it has chosen to ignore it a great deal more than it should have. Bryan, Zimmerman, and Mansbridge, for example, do not entirely ignore sovereignty, but, in 300-page books, the considerations of sovereignty take up about 5 pages, with representation getting the lion's share every time. The case is not much different for other authors or when one attempts to consider the shares attributed to each topic in a qualitative rather than a quantitative (number of pages) manner. As a result, the presentation will focus on the few cases when power is addressed to illustrate the ways in which that analysis is lacking, as well as the cases when the authors discuss the significance of various parameters and seem to subconsciously overlook the aspects related to power.

⁵⁴ This section will consider narratives relating to both older and more recent town meetings, but not those relating to the *America's Town Meeting of the Air* radio show. The analysis on the latter will come at the end due to the many particularities of this institution.

The presentation of the second category is significantly shorter and will thus be done first, in the next two paragraphs.

A characteristic example of the overwhelming importance ascribed to representation compared to sovereignty can be found towards the end of *Real Democracy* when Bryan provides the following summary: “All things considered – from attendance levels to the length of the meeting – what does real democracy look like at its very best? What does it look like at its very worst? Real democracy demands first the presence of citizens. Then comes deliberation. Third, real democracy requires that no cohort of society be excluded. Finally, the amount of time devoted to deliberation needs to be sufficient.” None of these points are in any way related to sovereignty or a requirement that the community be free from any laws except those agreed upon through the process of direct democracy. The training-wheels democracy of the town meeting satisfies all of these conditions with the potential of letting the “kids” discuss while leaving all serious decisions to the “adults” in a fashion that is very unsatisfactory for a conception of democracy that considers autonomy, one that wants to claim that it is power that belongs to the people and not just the right to assemble and discuss.

After providing an etymological definition of democracy as “power of the people”, in *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action*, Zimmerman claims that “The New England open town meeting comports with the classical definition of democracy. However, the relatively small percentage of registered voters who attend town meetings, with the exceptions of towns with very small populations, raises the question whether the

participants are representative of the electorate at large and make *pro bono publico* decisions that promote and protect the public weal.”⁵⁵ The discussion continues on about the nature of the attendees of the town meeting, their interests, and their representativeness with regard to the town population. The question of whether an institution functioning within the confines of the colonial authority of old or the modern state can truly possess power does not appear to be of much importance.

As far as insufficient analyses of sovereignty-related issues are concerned we will first come back to Bryan’s *Real Democracy*. A common theme in discussions of the town meeting is to begin with a reference to ancient Athenian democracy.⁵⁶ Bryan’s reference is particularly extensive and the one to most explicitly recognize the significant difference in sovereignty between the two institutions. Specifically, he says that in the town meeting case the “final repository of sovereignty”⁵⁷ resides outside the institution while the ancient Athenian direct democracy was sovereign. There is however no discussion of potential implications of this difference. Given the detail to which Bryan goes to distinguish between representative and real (direct) democracy and introduce different terms for those two different systems, as evidenced in the quote used as a starting definition of democracy in this paper, I would say that this is somewhat curious that he does not decide to make such a distinction of terms for the ancient Athenian “real democracy” and the town meeting “real

⁵⁵ Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 10.

⁵⁶ See for example reference 3, as well as, Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 1–12; Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, ix–xi, 13–14; *New York’s Town Meeting Hall*. ([New York:, 1920), 1, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nnc2.ark:/13960/t2h72w238>.

⁵⁷ Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 11.

democracy”.⁵⁸ In general, it seems like in most cases when the connection between the two institutions is made, the issue of sovereignty is ignored, potentially in the hopes that this loose connection will leave the impression of a town meeting that shares the sovereign characteristics of the ancient Athenian democracy.

One of the most fascinating considerations of the overlap of *kratos* and *demos*, one that also addresses sovereignty, can be found by combining the results of Bryan and Zimmerman in light of some of Mansbridge’s observations as follows.

In *Real Democracy*, Bryan points to a very strong correlation between attendance and town meeting size.⁵⁹ Bryan’s data also lead him to the conclusion that “Beyond town size, issues are the single most important variable that draws citizens to town meeting. Beyond meeting size, issues are the most important determinant of discussion at town meeting.” For the section explaining this, Bryan begins with a quote from Mansbridge: “Citizens are not likely to ‘fly to the assemblies’ [Rousseau] when the decisions they make in those assemblies are trivial.” I would argue that a non-sovereign institution will often be reduced to dealing with exactly such trivial issues while the issues of great importance will be decided upon by other institutions.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Specifically, a list of differences between the two institutions is introduced with “Some dramatic differences add spice to the comparison.” and eventually dismissed with “But for all these differences, the comparison [...] remains remarkable.” without any discussion of the potential significance of such differences and how using the same term to describe both systems might constitute, in Bryan’s own terms, a “handicap”. (Bryan, 8–11.)

⁵⁹ After collecting data to an extent unprecedented in the study of town meetings and analyzing it Bryan reaches the result that smaller towns have higher attendance. See especially Bryan, fig. 3.3. for a very scientifically convincing result.

⁶⁰ See reference 15 above.

As representation is a crucial point for Zimmerman, high levels of participation are useful in painting the picture of a democratic institution. Comparing attendance data from multiple town meetings in six different states Zimmerman concludes that:

The data also indicate there is a positive correlation⁶¹ between the average participation rate and the two states where the powers of the town meetings have been curbed the most. In twenty-one Rhode Island towns, the annual town meeting may act only on the proposed budget, and all other legislative matters are the province of the town council. A Rhode Island special town meeting may act only on proposed appropriations. Similarly, eight Connecticut towns have only a financial town meeting, and in many other towns the primary assembly shares power with the Board of Selectmen and the board of finance. The direct correlation is not surprising, as numerous voters apparently have concluded that the town meeting no longer addresses major issues that would attract their participation.⁶²

Specifically, the weighted attendance averages for 1996⁶³ are 5.33% and 6.90% for the two states with the most curbed powers and 11.89%, 22.60%, 26.03%, and 28.17% for the rest of the states examined. I would argue that this is a fairly significant difference and one that illustrates the importance of considering the issue of power when analyzing the town meeting. Zimmerman goes on to say that “Also promoting the decline in meeting attendance are federal and state mandates and restraints. A mandate directs a town to initiate a particular course of action that typically costs money, and a restraint forbids a town to make a specified action. [...] Mandates and restraints reduce the competence of the town meeting to act on specified matters and divert town funds, thereby discouraging voter participation.” This demonstrates at least some appreciation for the importance of

⁶¹ Note that the “positive correlation” Zimmerman mentions is an inverse correlation.

⁶² Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 165.

⁶³ The only year for which such data is presented.

sovereignty for democracy if not directly then at least through its effect on the level of participation. Even if the only issue of importance is representation, then sovereignty is also important through its relationship with attendance rates.

In what serves as a useful way of placing the aforementioned results of Bryan on size and Zimmerman on meeting power as they both relate to participation in a context of motivation⁶⁴ Mansbridge says: “Small size does increase the average individual’s power within his or her group, but it also reduces the group’s power vis-à-vis the rest of the world. [...] At the same time, Bedell knows that the national government, which can declare war or restructure the economy, has more power over its citizens than any local government. Large governments usually exercise more power (that is, make more collective choices) than smaller units.”⁶⁵ The second part of this quote also touches on the issue of sovereignty and competing loci of power, but the issue is not analyzed any further after this.

It appears we have found useful material to help Pole make some sense of the paradox that was presented before the Framework section: “How then are we to explain the paradox of popular consent to a scheme of government which systematically excluded the common people from the more responsible positions of political power?”⁶⁶ It is not simply popular consent setting the groundwork for self-exclusion, but also exclusion sowing the seeds of apathy that creates the façade of popular consent, especially in a setting where

⁶⁴ Making the assumption that people are motivated to attend a meeting where they feel their presence will matter, that they have some ability to influence outcomes. This assumption is not unreasonable especially in light of Zimmerman’s results mentioned above.

⁶⁵ Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 279.

⁶⁶ Pole, “Historians and the Problem of Early American Democracy,” 641.

there wasn't much power to be taken away from the people in the first place or much of a need for real popular consent to do so.

The second major consideration of power appears when approaching the issue of the American Revolution and the relationship between town meetings and the federal government established after the Revolution.

We have already seen Jefferson present the town meeting as an institution of significant power, at least sufficient to clash with the federal government, as well as Edmund Morgan present the disgraceful treatment of the town meeting decisions on the Massachusetts Constitution.⁶⁷ It is also interesting to note that Castoriadis speaks of the “town meetings during the American Revolution” as an example of an autonomous society,⁶⁸ while we have already seen that in many ways the town meeting does not meet the standards of an autonomous society. This could be due to a lack of familiarity on the part of Castoriadis with the town meetings,⁶⁹ but I would also argue that it may be due to the fact that, during that period of the American Revolution, the authority of the colonial legal system was challenged and the town meetings broke the yoke of heteronomy.

It is in the years leading up to the revolution, and especially right after the Boston Massacre, that we find some of the most radical interpretations of “otherwise as need

⁶⁷ See reference 29.

⁶⁸ Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, 276.

⁶⁹ The democratic institution mainly studied by Castoriadis was the ancient Greek democracy, not the American town meetings.

requires”⁷⁰ when the townspeople use the meeting to discuss grievances with the troops as well as the possibility of opposing the colonial power.⁷¹ The colonial laws are at this point treated as malleable in the meeting which is a significant step towards autonomy. The conflict between conception and reality occurs not when the town meeting fails to act as a source for democratic governing but when it succeeds, in the process ascending de facto to a higher position than the one that was granted to it in theory. After the establishment of a United States government the town meetings once again become subservient to an outside authority reverting to a largely heteronomous state as before.⁷² Bryan says that “The framers went to Philadelphia in 1787 dreading real democracy. Many say Americans adopted the Constitution *because* they dreaded real democracy” and does not hesitate to characterize the Constitution as “democracy-proof”.⁷³

Another brief mention of town meetings clashing with a higher authority is provided by Zimmerman, once again without any commentary on its potential significance or any attempt to situate in a meaningful way in the town meeting tradition: “The Massachusetts town meeting played an important part in the events leading to the Revolutionary War. General Thomas Gage, who was appointed governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1774, forbade the holding of town meetings without his specific consent.

⁷⁰ Massachusetts, *The General Laws and Liberties of the Massachusetts Colony*.

⁷¹ Boston (Mass.). Record Commissioners, *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*. See reference 15 above.

⁷² An interesting exception to this is noted by Bryan when he relays an instance of a Vermont town meeting which in 1974 voted to impeach President Nixon. (Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 48.) This decision did not of course play any significant role in the eventual impeachment, but it does provide another example of a town meeting going beyond what would be considered its typical jurisdiction and attempting to decide on an issue traditionally reserved for a higher (non-direct-democratic) authority.

⁷³ Bryan, 25–26.

Salem selectmen nevertheless posted a warning for a town meeting that was held in the presence of the governor and two regiments. Although seven town leaders were arrested, they were not punished. Shortly thereafter, the town of Danvers held a town meeting, and Governor Gage responded: ‘Damn ‘em! I won’t do any thing about it unless his Majesty sends me more troops.’”⁷⁴ This is another example of the town meeting’s function as a true democratic body being directly linked with a conflict with external authority and a disobedience to colonial mandates during the Revolution.

Brooke also grapples with the questions of autonomy and sovereignty addressed in this paper but does so only on a superficial level. In *The Heart of the Commonwealth*, he notes that “authority and legitimacy within the town in colonial Massachusetts Bay ultimately rested in the king and was overseen by his appointed agents on the county courts”, but does not seem to consider this an issue of importance as it is quickly dismissed later in the same page on the grounds that “While sovereignty might ultimately rest in a monarchical figure, the people jealously guarded these rights and privileges against all attempts at arbitrary intervention.” A consideration of autonomy should make it clear that there is a crucial philosophical difference between a people in charge of its own society and able to transform its laws at any time and one fighting to maintain a specific set of rights conceded by a despot.

⁷⁴ Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting*, 2.

America's Town Meeting of the Air

America's Town Meeting of the Air consists of both a set of narratives relating to the traditional town meeting and an attempt to create a modern town meeting institution. As such, it was deemed to be a more complicated issue and its analysis was left last.

America's Town Meeting of the Air was a radio show running from May 30, 1935, to July 1, 1956, initially on the NBC Blue Network and then on ABC Radio. The discussion took place in The Town Hall⁷⁵ in New York. This venture was organized by the League for Political Education which began as a group advocating for women's suffrage in 1894. George V. Denny Jr. was the moderator of the show (which appears to have been mostly his idea)⁷⁶ and also the director of the League and Town Hall between 1937 and 1951. One of the main ways in which *America's Town Meeting of the Air* stood apart from the town meetings that the analyses until now have focused on was that it lacked even the false promise of some sort of power, it is explicitly a forum of discussion but not decision-making and certainly not legislating or enforcing any action. That difference does not prevent Denny from making reference to the town meeting tradition, not only indirectly through the choice of name, but also directly when for example he says on the episode titled "What Can We Do To Improve Race And Religious Relationships In America": "Let's face tonight's question in the spirit of the early New England town meeting."⁷⁷

⁷⁵ For more information see: "History," The Town Hall, accessed May 24, 2019, <http://thetownhall.org/history>.

⁷⁶ Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*,.

⁷⁷ "America's Town Meeting of the Air."

Denny has many confused and somewhat contradictory (or at least disappointing) ideas about what democracy means as one might be able to infer from the nature of *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, which as was said has this curious property of being a town meeting without any power or even the promise of limited, local (non-sovereign), or eventual power. The institution of the town meeting is a direct-democratic institution and that is recognized by Denny at least in the attempt to include the audience in the discussion.⁷⁸ Despite this, when asked for a definition of democracy, Denny does not, like Bryan, construct his definition in opposition to representative democracy, but in opposition to dictatorships. In his definition, Denny does not simply ignore the distinction between direct and representative democracy; he provides a definition that almost entirely excludes direct democracy presenting the representative system as the entirety of the democratic options:

Democracy is a constitutional form of government with a system of checks and balances, parliamentary assembly, popular suffrage, periodic elections, and a bill of rights. It is based upon respect for the individual and, while adhering to the principle of majority rule as a fundamental tenet of democracy, the rights of minorities to full privileges of citizenship are not abridged under this form of government. It is the aim of democracy to give the fullest measure of freedom to the individual to develop his maximum capacities so long as this development does not interfere with the welfare and rights of others. Democracy presupposes a system of universal education and

⁷⁸ Denny imposes a limit to the number of words in audience member's questions, but this seems to be inspired by a belief in the impracticality of allowing audience members to go on without end, rather than a conception of guests as in some way superior to the audience. This separation into main speakers and an audience that asks questions is projected onto the traditional meetings as well but there is no reason to think that there's historic validity to this. "And, as in the historic town meetings, the people themselves were to take part by questioning the speakers and being answered in person." Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 6. It is unclear if the comparison is meant to continue after "take part", but there is no indication of it stopping and the conceptions of the traditional town meeting and the radio show diverging.

the dissemination of unbiased news and information on a basis which will permit of an honestly informed public opinion.

This definition is provided in the *Town Meeting Discussion Leader's Handbook* which was intended to aid with the creation of groups of students in school around the United States who would listen to *America's Town Meeting of the Air* and have their own discussions on the topics.⁷⁹ Not only is the face-to-face assembly of Bryan substituted with a parliamentary assembly, but the consensus decision-making and unitary view of interests that Mansbridge detects in the town meeting is replaced with a system of checks and balances and majority rule. Denny's definition does not echo the ideas of the town meeting tradition but of the United States Constitution.⁸⁰

The unitary democracy view that we see in Mansbridge is not to be contrasted with a simple adversary democracy view of majority rule in Denny, but a certain sort of enlightened centrist minority rule using majority rule. In *Town Meeting Comes To Town*⁸¹ one reads that the American public is almost evenly split between dogmatic Republicans

⁷⁹ It is interesting to note that these school discussion groups are assumed to be of a hierarchic character with the handbook intended especially for their "leader". George Vernon Denny, *Town Meeting Discussion Leader's Handbook*, ([New York, c1940]), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89096973458>.

⁸⁰ The argument about the way that the conception of democracy in the Constitution differed from that of the town meeting tradition is present in both Mansbridge and Bryan. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 15–17; Bryan, *Real Democracy*, 25–26. See reference 72 above.

⁸¹ There's an important issue with this source: there is no mention of how exactly the authors, Harry and Bonaro Overstreet, know Denny whose thoughts they appear to be presenting. There is no preface or introduction to the book. There seems to be some sort of reliability since for example the definitions of democracy and dictatorship from the *Handbook* are reproduced word for word (Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 28–29.) but they are provided without quotation marks and the book lacks a bibliography or more than a handful of references overall. I will treat it as a friendly biography of sorts but with some reservation as to how much the ideas contained here are Denny's rather than the Overstreets'.

and dogmatic Democrats with a few Independent voters in between⁸² who get to determine the outcome of elections with their swing vote.⁸³ “If we can educate this minority so that it will know true from false, wise from foolish, it can save America.”⁸⁴ The first half of Bryan’s definition of democracy seems most relevant than ever: “[N]early all representative structures that provide the frame of governance for the ‘democracies’ of the world are substitutes for democracies, not approximations of democracy. This is *not* to say these ‘democracies’ are less than they might be or that they are not better at what they do than town meeting is at what it does. It is to say that using the word ‘democracy’ to cover representative systems is, as Robert Dahl observed, an ‘intellectual handicap.’” I would argue that using the term “democracy” for this sort of rule by a centrist, “independent”, enlightened (owing to *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*) minority which decides policy by shifting its support between two parties, is certainly an intellectual handicap.

The portrayal of the director, a position held by Denny for most of his time as moderator of the radio show, in *Town Meeting Comes To Town* is also somewhat concerning for a democratic institution: “Thus the director has to be, in addition to everything else, a kind of father to the flock. [...] He has, then, as it were, to lend them his calm wisdom until such time as they get their own back.”⁸⁵ A lack of patronizing is not

⁸² A simple “| R | I | D |” schematic in the book indicates the location of the independents in the political spectrum as between the two parties, Republican and Democrat. Overstreet and Overstreet, 25.

⁸³ Overstreet and Overstreet, 23–26.

⁸⁴ This idea is also referenced in *Radio Builds Democracy* where Denny says that there are some people who are not closed-minded: “These are the people who swing our elections; these are the people who are leaders in their communities; these are the people who have the capacity to deal with ideas; they are the ones for whom these programs are primarily produced.” George V. Denny, “Radio Builds Democracy,” *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 14, no. 6 (1941): 376, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2262537>.

⁸⁵ Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 117.

necessarily the core of democracy, but so much patronizing cannot be conducive to a democratic spirit.

The definition of dictatorship that follows the one for democracy in the *Handbook* and is contrasted to it leads Denny to another interesting choice when he says that “Dictatorships are usually aggressively nationalistic and militaristic” only to continue a page later with the purpose of the *Handbook*:

Every American can take part in this fight [against totalitarianism]; every citizen can do his part in building our first line of defense against totalitarianism. There is a place for everyone in this People’s Army of American Democracy. As a leader in this army, you have a particular responsibility. To assist you in meeting your responsibility, we have issued this handbook and the other aids prepared by our Advisory Service. These are your weapons; your own group will have to supply the ammunition, and our weekly program, “America’s Town Meeting of the Air,” will serve as the fuse.⁸⁶

For someone who draws a connection between militarism and dictatorships Denny makes very extensive usage of militaristic imagery for his “People’s Army of American Democracy”.⁸⁷

In *Town Meeting Comes To Town* we find an excerpt that is of interest in the matter of power and the town meeting: “The Revolution, it will be remembered, was initiated, sustained, and eventually won because Americans had learned the art of coming together and talking things out in their town meetings. They had thereby established for themselves a way of forming a public opinion which could be powerful to originate and support public

⁸⁶ Denny, *Town Meeting Discussion Leader’s Handbook*, 5.

⁸⁷ Such contradictions of “Bombing for peace” are usually more elaborately constructed nowadays.

action.”⁸⁸ Denny recognizes the importance of political action but he doesn’t see it as occurring at the town meeting but as merely originating from the discussion at the town meeting. The removal of the legislative role of the assembly is not only done for the radio show but also retroactively for the traditional town meeting. Denny once again deals with the contradiction by refusing to acknowledge it and attempting to reduce dissonance in the way that entails the least personal existential threat: his radio show is a town meeting, so all the town meetings have to be as toothless as that radio show.

Despite the multiple shortcomings of the host to present a satisfactory ideological framework in line with the tradition of the town meeting, the topics discussed are important and the level of discussion is often more than satisfactory. For example, in the episode titled “Personal Liberty And The Modern State” one can find a presentation of the idea of universal basic income that is not much different to those discussed today.⁸⁹ Most importantly, *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* takes on as a subject of study (among many others) itself on the episode titled “Public Opinion And The Town Meeting Idea”. The importance of such an action, the critical examination of not only others but your own self, in this case your own institutions, is present in Castoriadis’s definition of autonomy and is echoed by Dorothy Thompson early on in this episode when she says that a democratic society is defined by:

consent, not given or withheld once, in the selection of a policy or a leader, but given or withheld continually, constantly being amended by changes in judgement based upon increased experience or increased knowledge or

⁸⁸ Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 224.

⁸⁹ “America’s Town Meeting of the Air,” 42:55.

changed conditions. The rule of a majority frequently cast aside by a minority free to speak its mind. Such a society whose authority rests in the long upon consensus of opinion is dynamic. It is a society constantly in the state of revision, changing its structure, even its aim, as it goes along. It is often not efficient. It often makes mistakes.

In the span of a minute, Thompson touches on most of the main points discussed in this essay: representation, autonomy, consensus vs majority rule, and the theme of education.

America's Town Meeting of the Air may have little in the way of power, but the ideas being engaged with are certainly not trivial.

The lack of sovereignty in this institution is also revealed through the heteronomous way in which the boundaries of its own discussions are often constrained in a potentially subconscious manner. The assembly has no political role, so it is reduced to a commentary on the acts of the President, the Supreme Court, and other actors in the political scene. The participants thus do not often present personal positions but simply express their support for the political body that is the closest to their position. This results in the precise factionalism that Denny proclaims to be fighting against. This is in line with the adversary type of democracy that Denny has accepted as a premise in his definition. This is true to a significant extent to episodes such as "Should the President's Civil Rights Program Be Adopted?" but also relevant to ones like "What Does Democracy Mean?" The lack of sovereignty is sometimes restrictive to the conversation in the alternatives considered as well; the laws external to the assembly taken as fixed. For example, one of the speakers in "Should the President's Civil Rights Program Be Adopted?" wonders why so much importance is put on constitutionality to receive a response mocking his question as asking

“What’s the Constitution among friends?”⁹⁰ Well, if one accepts Mansbridge’s construction of the town meeting as a body of unitary democracy, that is exactly what the town meeting tradition is about: An assembly of friends with the power to change their own constitution.⁹¹

Most of the above commentary on *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* has probably provided more in the way of indicating the complicated nature of this radio show rather than significantly clarifying any aspect of it. That is to be expected for an institution with such a strongly contradictory character. One final point that may help to illuminate some aspect of this endeavor is to remind ourselves that this was organized by a group of advocates for women’s suffrage called the League for Political Education. In *Town Meeting Comes To Town* we find the following excerpt in the discussion of correspondence received from the audience:

One gets a picture from the following letter that tells the story of womanhood all over America:

⁹⁰ “America’s Town Meeting of the Air,” 30:20.

⁹¹ In the preface of *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, Mansbridge guides the reader through a contemplation of “democracy” and “equality” until she comes across Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, from which she cites: “Friendship is equality.” Expanding on that she says that “According to Aristotle, the Greeks saw friendship as the necessary basis for the state. Equality, consensus, face-to-face contact, and, I would add later, common interest were distinguishing features of that friendship.” Following this, Mansbridge introduces the main point of the book, the idea of unitary democracy as opposed to adversary democracy: “Unitary democracies are like friendships. They assume a high level of common interest. They are distinguished by consensus, face-to-face assembly, and an emphasis on a rough equality of respect among the members. Adversary democracies, on the other hand, are compatible with large-scale polities in which the members do not know or care for one another. They assume conflicting interests. They are distinguished by majority rule, the secret ballot, and an emphasis on the equal protection of the members’ interests rather than on equal respect.” The town meeting is of course presented as (at least ideally) an example of unitary democracy. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, vii–x.

You do not perhaps realize how much it means to many suburban housewives who, like myself, depend to so great an extent on the radio for information and inspiration.

It is difficult to remain alert on the issues of the day when one is concerned with cooking, cleaning, packing lunches, bathing the baby, and keeping the perennial borders being annihilated by the puppy. Because the budget simply will not stretch to the extent of hiring someone to come in to stay with the baby, there is little opportunity for the exchange of ideas with our fellow-creatures.⁹²

If the town meeting tradition of a direct-democratic institution is not truthfully adhered to then at least the ideals of political education and women's suffrage are certainly upheld in *America's Town Meeting of the Air*.⁹³

⁹² Overstreet and Overstreet, *Town Meeting Comes to Town*, 54.

⁹³ Many people today might consider it unreasonable to claim that one can uphold feminist values and still appoint a male director for the League and moderator for the radio show discussions or invite a majority of male guests etc, but I think that considering the historical context the inclusion of even some women in the way that it was done in the radio show discussions was relatively progressive and the venture seems to have benefited at least the one woman who sent the aforementioned letter who it is not unreasonable to assume was not alone in her beliefs. This question is not central to the topic at hand and anyone who wishes to analyze it more is encouraged to do so.

Conclusion

We began our exploration of the town meeting with “the folk cultural view of American history,” in which, “the town meeting was the only major governing body in the communities of colonial New England and [was] an eminently democratic institution.”⁹⁴ We came to realize that both its role as the “major governing body” and its “eminently democratic” character are significantly more complicated matters than they appear to be at first glance and we examined some of the ways in which existing narratives for the town meeting present both topics in unsatisfactory ways. The contradictions were always at the forefront. We saw a town meeting institution that “threatened the Republic”, according to Jefferson, while, at the same time, all its feedback and suggestions were ignored in the shaping of the Massachusetts Constitution and we saw a direct democratic institution whose main role was the election of representatives. These contradictions caused confusion far and wide, from researchers like J. R. Pole to *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* moderator George V. Denny Jr. We attempted to elucidate some of these contradictions by bringing to the forefront the matter of power-external, which has long been ignored in the literature, and to conceive of it in different ways through the *demos-kratos* framework and through the notion of autonomy. This allowed us to demonstrate the new insights gained by examining the town meeting through a different lens, most interestingly in the case of the education theme, as well as the interconnectedness of the various axes of analysis such as in the case of meeting power and attendance rates.

⁹⁴ Daniels, “Connecticut’s Villages Become Mature Towns.”

It is precisely this theme of education that I want to take up again in this first of closing remarks, closing reflections, inspired by the preceding analysis, not just on the town meeting but on democracy in general. The reversal of the meaning ascribed to the educational function of democracy from a process where increased participation eventually leads to better decision-making to a paternalist reformulation where increased participation must be avoided because of the inherent risk of mistakes is still relevant today. This paternalist formulation is an underlying assumption for many today, both in the public sphere where the reaction to potential voters behaving in an immature way or being uninformed is to propose that they should not be voting⁹⁵ and in the sphere of politics where it is expressed in the belief in a technocratic administration as part of a process of rationalization of society. As such, it is important to continue to recognize the potential of democracy for political education just as we recognize the importance of education for democracy, but to do so in a truly progressive and empowering way.

Tangential to the topic of education I would like to also return to the description of the ratification of the Massachusetts Constitution by Edmund Morgan. Morgan, who is the author of some of the most commonly assigned books in college history courses,⁹⁶ has no issue labeling as democracy a process in which the people express their will only for that

⁹⁵ As examples of this I would point to commentary on street interview segments such as *Lie Witness News on Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and responses to proposals of broadening suffrage such as the following article: "Lowering the Voting Age to 16 Is a Crazy Idea," *Washington Examiner*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/lowering-the-voting-age-to-16-like-nancy-pelosi-wants-is-a-crazy-idea>.

⁹⁶ For example "*The Puritan Dilemma* [is] the most commonly assigned book in US history survey courses" according to "Edmund Sears Morgan (1916—2013) | AHA," February 25, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180225002501/https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2013/in-memoriam-edmund-sears-morgan>.

will to be ignored by the decision-makers. A criticism of such a use of the term is of special importance in the context of modern representative systems where officials are frequently elected on a platform which they do not adhere to during their time in office without the democratic legitimacy of such a system being brought into question as a result. The history of the town meeting can perhaps serve as a reminder that the political sovereignty of the people extends further than a vote every four years.

Last but not least, let us revisit the idea of an autonomous or heteronomous society and ask how narratives of present day American democracy might appear under that lens. What is the meaning of legal precedent, which has an almost sacred quality in the modern U.S., in an autonomous society? Is the attachment on “what the Founding Fathers intended”, as people often say, not a sign of a deeply heteronomous society? What is the meaning of such an attachment for someone who also claims to be inspired by the democratic tradition of the town meeting in light of Bryan’s characterization of the Constitution as “democracy-proof”?

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