Town Meetings Are Not Direct Democracy: Representative Democracy as Participatory Democracy

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, researchers and democratic practitioners have exhibited a surge of interest in participatory government and direct democracy. Critics, arguing that representative mechanisms are unavoidable and/or laudable, have dismissed the movement. This chapter uses a close reexamination of the New England town meeting--an archetypal institution of participatory direct democracy--to argue that the two positions are more compatible than previously thought. Using qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze “Northmont,” Vermont, I turn town meeting’s reputation on its head: in actual practice, town meetings involve hardly any direct democracy, and instead they primarily serve representative functions. As representative institutions, however, town meetings nonetheless are highly participatory, in ways that confound unidimensional scales like the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum and Arnstein’s ladder. In sum, “weak democracy” and “strong democracy” are not always oppositional categories; the New England town meeting provides an example of a highly participatory representative system.
Note to workshop participants

Hello, DCC participants!

Thanks for your attention to my draft here--I am excited for our session! This note is to give you some context for this piece and to help you try to help me.

This is the third chapter of my dissertation. Overall, the dissertation looks at different facets of the New England town meeting in order to explore the topics of democratic participation and collective action. Methodologically, I also am using the dissertation to try out ways of combining ethnography--I am a sociocultural anthropologist--with quantitative representations of social phenomena.

I’ve excerpted out some sections of the chapter in order to keep the piece to a reasonable length. You’ll find additional explanatory notes when you reach those places.

I particularly would appreciate your help with the final section, which you will see is undertheorized and under-illustrated.

I also would appreciate any reading recommendations anyone might have within the enormous literature on representative-constituent interaction.

And of course I also am looking forward to whatever ways our conversation might meander.

See you soon,
Averill
INTRODUCTION

What does it take for a democratic government to successfully reflect the will of the people? Enthusiasts for participatory-, deliberative-, and direct- democracy ("PD3") argue that hands-on involvement by citizens is crucial—the more, the better.\(^1\) This strain of thought is exploding anew in the early 21st century, with scholars and practitioners exploring new methods of citizen governance: participatory budgeting, citizen juries, deliberative polling, Consensus Conferences, National Issues Forums, 21st Century Town Meetings, and many, many more.\(^2\)

PD3 has no shortage of critics, however, who advocate instead for the necessity and superiority of representative institutions. PD3 institutions, these critics contend, place unrealistic demands upon citizens’ time and competency. Moreover, citizens may not want more control than what is afforded them by representative mechanisms. Within this line of thinking, citizens’ major responsibility is to use votes to choose among alternatives set out by competing leaders.\(^3\)

For “weak democrats” (see Barber 1984), the key metric of democratic success is not how much direct control the citizenry can assume, but whether the citizenry possesses the necessary tools to keep representatives tethered tolerably close to its preferences.

This chapter suggests a line of rapprochement between PD3 enthusiasts and critics, attending particularly to ways that citizen oversight of officers can take highly participatory

\(^2\) Partial catalogs of recent practitioner projects have been assembled by Nabatchi et al. (2012) and Nabatchi and Leigninger (2015). The participedia.net project is another useful resource. For PD3 theory, the number of recent review works speaks to just how much this field is exploding: Bowman (1998), Freeman (2000), Gastil (2000), Chambers (2003), Carpini et al. (2004), Lupia and Matsusaka (2004), Ryfe (2005), Thompson (2008), Graham Smith (2009), Nabatchi et al. (2012). On Americans’ waxing and waning interest in deliberative and participatory democracy, see Gastil and Keith (2005) and Morone (1990).
\(^3\) For classic expressions of this position, see Schattschneider (1960, 1969) and Schumpeter (1942). A recent examples is Posner (2005).
forms. To reach that point, I closely reexamine the New England town meeting, which is a leading symbol of what Morone (1990) has called “the democratic wish”: the utopian longing for hands-on populist self-governance in the face of the shortcomings du jour of American representative democracy. For PD3 enthusiasts, town meeting is an inspirational model; for critics, town meeting is a disparaged false hope. In either form, town meeting has assumed a predictable role in debates over American democracy: a metonym for the extreme participatory pole.

This chapter empirically disputes this received understanding of town meeting, using Northmont as a case study. I use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews with Northmonters, a content analysis of meeting agendas, and a line by line speech analysis of five years’ worth of meetings. I pursue a bundle of questions: How did citizens in my field site use town meetings to self-govern? What was the nature of their

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6 [Note to workshop participants: Northmont, my fieldsite, has been introduced previously in the dissertation It is in northern Vermont, practically next door to Québec, with a population of 1,200 people. It often is described as a recreational paradise thanks to its natural landscape and its proximity to a ski resort. Nonetheless, it’s not an unusually well-off community. It matches the national average for individuals under the poverty line, and various other SES indicators also closely match national averages. Racially and with regard to national origin, the population is very homogeneous, in line with Vermont overall: it’s 99% white and 98% non-Hispanic, 5% foreign-born and 2% non-citizen. The most important demographic feature is the split between the “old-timers” who have generational roots and the “recent” arrivals since the late 1960s. Predictable economic and cultural differences are in play there. Socially, the town is somewhat self-contained, but the majority of residents do their earning and shopping elsewhere. It takes a solid twenty minutes to drive to one of the larger towns in the region that has a fuller offering of stores and amenities, and it’s forty minutes in either direction to reach a true population center (i.e., 5,000+ people). Northmont does have a small grocery store, a Post Office, a K-8 elementary school, and a quite large per capita number of restaurants and bars. The latter is due to the nearby ski resort, which also gives Northmont a very high percentage of housing stock not devoted to primary residency, and a significant service economy.]
deliberations? What role did they afford to their officers? How did they interact with their officers? Who--citizens vs. officers--took on what roles during the several stages of problem-framing, information-gathering, solution-developing, and decision-making? I show that the actual town meeting (as opposed to the stylized version of the American political imagination) is the spitting image of the critics’ own models: officers played outsize roles in the development and determination of municipal policy, citizens mostly just ensured that officers stayed disciplined as community stewards, and--on those occasions when citizens desired--the machinery for un-ignorable populist intervention was dusted off.

Broken out of its stereotyped image, town meeting becomes freshly useful as a conceptual tool for theorizing American democracy. If town meeting actually is primarily an institution of representative democracy, but participants simultaneously find it extremely satisfying as a participatory institution, what is going on? Rapidly dismissing the explanation that participants might be deluded, I instead argue that the town meeting case shows us that “weak democracy” and “strong democracy” are not always oppositional categories, but instead can be overlapping and interdependent. I attend especially to the participatory qualities of certain kinds of citizen engagement with representative structures. En route to these conclusions is a reassessment of participatory scales like Arnstein’s ladder (1969) and the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (2014), which enjoy widespread currency for both descriptive and normative purposes (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015, Kelty 2017:S82). The unidimensionality of such scales, I argue, makes them poor instruments for understanding citizen agency within democratic processes.
HOW NORTHMONTERS WILL DESCRIBE TOWN MEETING, IF
ONE WILL LISTEN

“What is town meeting? What is it for?” Northmont’s 2014 town meeting had just broken up, and I was chasing the dispersing participants into the parking lot and down Main Street with these two questions. Here are some typical responses:

**Jillian Kiln:** An opportunity for people to make themselves heard, express both grievances and their hopes and ideals for the community.

**Ben Flanners:** It’s so people know where their tax money is going, basically.

**Jack Helprin (his first Town Meeting):** I think it’s a great opportunity for people to voice their opinions and vote. Instead of sitting around and just saying, “How come that happened, and why didn’t I get a chance to say something?” Well, you want a chance to say something, show up. End of story.

**Averill:** Say something about what?

**Jack:** How the town runs. Where our money goes, our tax dollars, everything else. […]

**Regina Filippe:** It’s a very democratic way of doing things. I think Vermont is, you know, a lot different than a lot of other states. They still run these town meetings. [When I lived in Oregon,] I was so used to just going and voting on issues, and there wouldn’t be a place where you can talk about it and express your opinions about it and have discussions with fellow residents right there in the same room.

**Mike Caster:** It allows me to have a process with the town. I’m able to vote on what happens in the town. So I’m directly involved. I can ask questions.

**Melanie Shields:** It’s an opportunity for the townspeople to come together to decide the fate of their town.

**Matthew Shanksley:** We had the opportunity as a community to be able to take agency over decisions involving our town […] in the experience of direct democracy.
Marie Dahl (Select Board member): The people are involved, and they get a chance to give their own feedback, and they actually have a chance to have direct input on the outcome of what happens in their own town and their own state.

Eliza Gray (Select Board member): The community gets together and makes decisions. […]

Anne Evans (Select Board member): It becomes personal, it really does. You decide what the questions are, and you participate in the answers.

Marie: You can see the connection between your opinion and the outcome.

Anne: Yeah. And you learn a lot about your neighbors too.

Arielle Chesters: I’d say it’s a process that all town members are able to engage in, at whatever level they feel comfortable […] for decision-making within the town.

Chip Sellers: True democracy, that’s the way I see it. It’s my duty to be here. I feel like it is; some people don’t. A lot of people don’t show up, and they don’t get to participate.

Arielle: You can’t complain if you don’t come.

Jenn Sellers: That’s what I was going to say. It’s your place to be heard, if you want to be heard.

Arielle: I think it’s also an opportunity to understand how the decisions are made and what they really entail. It’s an opportunity to ask those questions.

Jenn: Yeah, it’s really your only place to get answers to the questions a lot of people have.

Ed West: It’s democracy at its purist.

Eric Shiller: Town meeting’s a chance to say what you’ve gotta say about the way things are being run.

Mark Gregson: It’s the time of the year we get together and talk about the necessary business that we would just as soon ignore at any other time of year. […]

Averill: And what do you do?

Mark: You put in your two cents’ worth. You just give your opinion on whatever the topic is.

Jeff Marcheau (Select Board member): People in town get together and discuss and go over the budget. And we explain how we came up with the budget.

Jane Billod: I would say that it is a relatively friendly gathering of townspeople to determine issues such as Select Board… Different budgets. To discuss topics that don’t necessarily
get talked about on a daily basis, but it’s good to have everybody come together and review those things. [...] It’s a way for people to reconnect once a year with a government that they don’t necessarily participate in, but it helps just bring them back to the issues and help them get a feel for what’s going on.

When I heard these answers at the time, I took them to be straightforward celebrations of town meeting as a participatory institution of deliberative direct democracy. As I got deeper into this chapter’s quantitative speech analyses of Northmont’s town meetings, causing me to realize how little of town meeting was devoted to direct democracy functions, I therefore thought that I had identified a severe disjuncture between ideology and practice. “Aha,” I thought, “Northmonters celebrate how much direct impact they have at town meeting, but that’s not what they actually do!”

But with careful review as I embarked upon subsequent drafts of this chapter, and to my chagrin as an ethnographer, I started realizing just how much I had been reading into the responses. Certainly some of the language suggested that respondents understood town meeting to involve direct democratic rule—for instance, the invocation of “pure democracy” and the remark about “taking agency over decisions.” But many, many other phrases were more ambiguous: “having a say,” “voicing one’s opinion,” “having an impact,” “being directly involved,” “making oneself heard,” “the people are involved.” Phrases like these clearly indicated some kind of democratic agency, but I had been jumping to a conclusion that they referred to PD3-style legislation. The evolution of my interpretation continued: As I digested the possibility that my initial interpretation had leaned too heavily on town meeting’s reputation, additional phrases started leaping out to me: “I can ask questions,” “an opportunity to understand how the decisions are made,” “know where the tax money is going,” “explain/learn how the Select Board and Budget Committee came up with the budget,” “give feedback,” “reconnect with town government,” “get a feel for what’s going on.” These all suggested an understanding
of town meeting as providing satisfying, impactful participation that wasn’t necessarily rooted in direct legislation. Particularly important to respondents seemed to be the opportunities to come abreast with town affairs and to make officers squirm a little if necessary.

If I had been a better listener, I might not have needed to conduct the rest of this chapter’s painstaking analysis before reaching the insight that town meeting was only partially an institution of citizen legislation. What follows is the corroboration of what Northmonters understood all along, even if they lacked an unambiguous vocabulary for expressing it.⁷

[NOTE TO WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS]

[In the full chapter, the next two sections walk through my methods for data procurement and analysis. For our workshop, I have replaced these sections with summaries, because otherwise they span 20+ pages, and I instead would like to reserve your attentions for help with the larger argument of the chapter. In other words, I’m asking you to take my findings on faith, because I very much more need your help with what I’m doing with those findings—how I’m interpreting them and trying to make them speak to larger issues. If there is interest, during the session I would be happy to discuss my methods and analysis. For anyone who is especially interested, email me at ajleslie@uchicago.edu and I can send you the un-excerpted version.]

WHAT PARTICIPANTS DO AT TOWN MEETING, PART 1:

AGENDA ANALYSIS

⁷ I do believe that Northmonters’ language and thinking still was partially captive to traditional concepts. Anthropologists working around the world have been attentive to the incomplete consonance between a society’s ideologies and practices.
[This section analyzes the agendas (or “Warnings”) of Northmont town meetings. I show that a large number of the items of business (“articles”) are related directly to officer matters. I then show how the remainder either tend toward the minor or have been extensively pre-channeled by officers.]

**WHAT PARTICIPANTS DO AT TOWN MEETING, PART 2:**

**SPEECH ANALYSIS**

[This section corroborates the agenda analysis from a different angle. The problem with the agenda analysis is that the meeting Warning only loosely guides the course of discussion; non sequiturs and shoehorned topics abound at town meetings. I therefore perform a line by line content analysis of participants’ speech at Northmont’s five annual meetings from 2010-2014. I aggregate the lines by type, thereby producing a full accounting of what Northmonters used their town meeting to do, in a way that the agenda analysis could not. I first show that less than half the time is spent on local governance (Figure #pluto3). I then break out that local governance to a new whole, which I analyze in terms of both the number of speaking acts of each type that occur, and each type’s cumulative duration. At first (Figure #neptune1), the ratio of representative functions to direct democracy appears to validate the romantic image of town meetings. However, a closer examination reveals that much of the “direct democracy” activity was actually quite officer-dependent; Figure #neptune4 shows the breakdown. “Due diligence” activity was when the assembly simply made sure it understood the article question as posed by officers, before easily ratifying it. “Settling” activity was when the assembly gave an answer yes or no to an article question as posed by officers. Settling activity stayed entirely within the parameters of the question as posed by officers. “Amendment” activity was when the assembly discussed deviating from the course set out by officers. Amendment activity was severely constrained, however, by state law and by]
structural and cultural factors. In practice, amendment activity happened quite infrequently, and to mostly minor effect. I walk through every instance of amendment activity from the five years (there were twelve) to show how modestly they departed from officers’ framing of and proposed solution for issues. I also note that the occasion for the lion’s share of the amendment activity was an adjudication of disagreements between two different boards—an officer centered activity once again. Finally, “creativity” activity was when the assembly used town meeting to revamp or go beyond officers’ pre-work. I argue that everything except for the creativity and some parts of the amendment activity should be counted as a representative function. Having summarized the section to this point, I’ll now drop you back into the section at its concluding moment.]

Fifteen minutes in the average year: that was how much of Northmont’s town meeting consisted of citizens escaping the gravity of their officers.⁸ Given an average total meeting length of 3 hours and 23 minutes, those fifteen minutes represented 7.4% of the assembly’s time commitment. Considering just the time spent in discussion of local government—an average of 1 hour and 39 minutes—the percentage is 15.2%.⁹

We can conclude, then, that town meeting was deliberative direct democracy only in its surface form. Town meeting primarily was a chance for Northmonters to supervise and (if necessary) put checks upon their officers. The famous floor deliberation of town meeting was not

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⁸ This is a sum of the <<CREATIVITY>> time with the time spent on amendments #2, #3, #7, #10, #11, and #12.

⁹ Townsend (2004:245), in a partially similar analysis of a town meeting in Massachusetts, found that the ratio during deliberation of what she categorized as “questions”: “answers”: “arguments”: “comments” was 64:71:123:17, or 23%:26%:45%:6%. (These numbers are the sums of the individual evening tallies that Townsend provides.) Her categories only loosely can be translated into mine, but most “questions” and “answers” probably corresponded to my idea of “officer engagement” and “due diligence,” whereas “arguments” and “comments” probably spanned my spectrum all the way from “officer engagement” through “creativity.” That span—because she had no need to break out representative vs. direct democracy functions—explains why her tally indicates a percentage of citizen argumentation and commentary that is so much higher than mine.
so much a creative flowering of citizen input as a reactive ratification or rejection of officer choices. Much of the meeting agenda consisted of the assembly deciding whether to endorse a pathway suggested by officers, or whether to send officers back to the drawing board to develop a new proposal. Citizens also used the meeting to make inquiries and requests to officers, to give feedback on officers’ conduct, and to discipline their officers. (When effective, that disciplinary effort ensured that officers would spend the entire following year measuring any of their ideas against their imagination of how the next year’s assembly might react). The direct legislation aspect of town meeting paled in comparison to these functions, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

TOWN MEETING AS REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?

But if town meeting wasn’t direct democracy as expected, it also diverged from representative democracy in three respects.

The first lies with the attitude of participants: participants insistently described town meeting in participatory terms. We saw this fact in the interview snippets presented earlier in the chapter, and Chapter Six will offer further illustration. Many Northmonters used town meeting as a direct, stark contrast to representative institutions at the federal and state levels. [Quotes from Northmonters and from the booster literature.]

The second divergence takes us to structure and process. Other representative systems rely upon various kinds of indirect pressure upon representatives: regularity of elections, possibility for input and lobbying, mechanisms for removal from office, etc. Town meeting government, by contrast, retained the ultimate decision-making power for the citizenry. Year by year and topic by topic, policy might be developed via processes closer to one or the other pole
of Arnstein’s (1969) or the IAP2 (2014) participatory scales, but the final say on whether or not something would become law belonged to the assembly itself. In practice, of course, it could be difficult (or illegal) for the assembly to generate new courses of action during the meeting that were entirely independent of what their officers had framed. But under nearly all circumstances, the assembly had an absolute power at least to say “no,” or to send their officers back to the drawing board to try again, or or to demand that the re-attempt be conducted on some higher rung of the scale. The cost might be a year’s delay in addressing a problem or pursuing an opportunity, and there might be attendant expenses and consequences, but the assembly could stymie officers at will. Even under the extremes of officer dominance, this “veto” power meant that town meeting therefore wasn’t reducible to representative democracy.

The third point is closely related to the second. The citizenry at town meeting were therefore in control of which rung of the ladder they wanted to occupy at any given moment. Under most circumstances the citizenry might have been quite passive in its choice of rung, being guided by habit, tradition, or whether a given crop of officers was taking the initiative vs. leaving a gap that needed to be filled. Nonetheless, there was a meaningful ability for the assembly to start actively repositioning themselves on the ladder whenever they liked. A contrast to American Constitutionalism is instructive. There, the citizenry in theory has the bedrock authority to rewrite the roles of their representative structure, but the practical realities of the processes that are available to them--Constitutional amendments, targeted mass-mobilizations--are slow, cumbersome, difficult, and uncertain. In New England town meeting, the citizenry can, at the drop of a hat, pull from a well-developed (if still not perfectly satisfying) repertoire of legal and cultural tools. When a town meeting assembly did decide to rouse itself, it had tools available to make its representatives “respond [...] with the utmost seriousness” (Hibbing and
Theiss-Morse 2002:131). And yet, even when asserting itself in this manner, the assembly most often did not resort to direct legislation of its own, but to shaming, shouting at, or replacing its representatives.

Taking the outsize role of officers into account while still respecting these three points, how should we classify town meeting? As “representative democracy with a strong populist component or potential”? As “latent direct democracy”? As “direct democracy strongly channeled by officers”? Descriptions like these are nicely synthesized in the theories of “monitorial citizenship” and “stealth democracy” that are described in the next section. Both theories were developed as critiques of PD3 in general and of town meeting specifically, but with our new understanding of town meeting we will be able to take them in a different direction.

**MONITORIAL CITIZENSHIP AND STEALTH DEMOCRACY**

Schudson’s (1998a, 1998b) “monitorial citizenship” and Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s (2001b, 2002) “stealth democracy” are models of American democracy where an absolute distinction between representative democracy and direct democracy is replaced with attention to the dynamically oscillating balance of power between representatives and citizenry. Neither author would put their theory in the terms I have just used, but I will stand by the characterization. Both suggest that citizen power is best structured around opportunities for on-demand but rarely-exercised citizen intervention, with trustworthy representatives conducting affairs in the background all the rest of the time. For each theorist, representation ought to preponderate in American democracy, but representative systems also ought to be shot-through with latent direct democracy. Though to be rarely used, the structures that allow on-demand participation to occur and to have meaningful impact are indispensable.
Schudson reacts to what he refers to as the “Progressivist fallacy”: the ideal of citizenship that emerged from the Progressive Era that valorizes omnicompetent, hyper-informed, continually active citizens. Schudson argues that--whether or not the ideal was appropriate even in that era--it certainly is misplaced in the present age of information overload and governmental complexity. He proposes the idea of “monitorial citizenship” to describe Americans’ implicit practice, and he argues that that implicit practice is a perfectly sound basis for American democracy. The implicit practice, he suggests, could stand to be elevated to the level of an explicit norm. “I would propose,” he writes, 

that the obligation of citizens to know enough to participate intelligently in governmental affairs be understood as a monitorial obligation. Citizens can be monitorial rather than informed. Monitorial citizens scan (rather than read) the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very wide variety of ends and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways. [...] Print journalists regularly criticize broadcast media for being only a headline service, but a headline service is what, in the first instance, citizens require. [...] Walter Lippmann was right: if democracy requires omnicompetence and omniscience from its citizens, it is a lost cause. There must be some distribution across people and across issues of cognitive demands of self-government. [...] Monitorial citizens tend to be defensive rather than proactive. [...] The monitorial citizen engages in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering. Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. [...] They look inactive, but they are poised for action if action is required. The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else” (1998a:310-311).

In a compatible manner, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that pundits, politicians, and social scientists are wrong to believe that Americans are populists. They level a powerful critique of PD3 enthusiasts’ claim that “people must really want to participate but are just turned off by some aspect of the political system” (2002:3, 127).
Most people have strong feelings on few if any of the issues the government needs to address and would much prefer to spend their time in nonpolitical pursuits. Rather than wanting a more active, participatory democracy, a remarkable number of people want what we call stealth democracy. [...] The people want to be able to make democracy visible and accountable on those rare occasions when they are motivated to be involved. They want to know that the opportunity will be there. [...] Until that time, however, most people prefer not to be involved and therefore desire unobtrusive accountability. (2)

Americans not only don’t want to be responsible for governance, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue, they “do not even want to be placed in a position where they feel obligated to provide input to those who are making political decisions” (131). Americans “are unenthusiastic about representative, not to mention direct, democracy” (149), and “most merely equate democracy with freedom” (150). Americans mostly just want to ensure that elites don’t profit from their offices (2); the great fear of the American people is “being played for suckers” (130, 235). This fear is what has led to the false impression that American citizens want more involvement: “Since the people constitute one obvious check on the ability of decision makers to be self-serving, it often appears as though the people want more political influence for themselves, when in fact they just do not want decision makers to be able to take advantage of them” (2, 87-88, 139). Given the single-axis scale used by most surveys, the only way that respondents have possessed for indicating their displeasure with representative government has been to assert the importance of a greater role for the people. When Hibbing and Theiss-Morse offered multiple axes on which to chart a preference, respondents’ true preference emerged: to censure broken representative government and to remain uninvolved (2002:88[?]). “The ideal form of government, in the opinion of many people, is one in which they can defer virtually all political decisions to government officials but at the same time trust those officials to be in touch with the American people and to act in the interest of those people and not themselves” (159). A different
theory of representation is therefore needed (150-151): “What most people usually want out of their representative is not particular roll-call votes or policy outcomes [...] but a general sense that those in government understand and care what life is like for ordinary people.”10 In sum, “people’s preference [is] for a democracy that is not particularly democratic (but can be made to be if needed) but which renders it impossible for decision makers to act on the basis of selfish motivations” (86). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse call this “stealth democracy.”

It is useful to connect Schudson’s and Hibbing/Theiss-Morse’s theories to participatory scales like Arnstein’s ladder (1969) and the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (2014). Arnstein assesses degrees of citizen participation from “nonparticipation” through “token” forms of participation to various kinds of “citizen control.” The IAP2 chart similarly moves from officers “informing” the public about decisions, to officers “consulting” or “involving” the public, to full “collaboration” between officers and citizens, to “empowerment” of citizens to make the final decision. Critique of PD3 hold that most or all of a political community’s politics will (and should) occur on lower rungs of the ladder. Monitorial/stealth democracy grants that occasional climbs up the ladder are an important part of the system.

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10 Schudson (1998b) makes an amusing, apt observation that piggybacks on this point from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse: Because American political vocabulary is dominated by the informational concept of citizenship, one often finds that candidates in apolitical contests (“elections of team captains, class presidents of student councils, elections in fraternities and sororities, most elections of school boards, many elections of local government, and most elections in professional associations”) nonetheless “feel obliged [...] to concoct some pseudo-policy statements [even though] only under the most unusual circumstances would any voter decide on this basis.” Chapter Four’s discussion of Northmont’s elections illustrates this phenomenon--as well as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s larger point about representational ideals--in action.
TOWN MEETING AS MONITORIAL/STEALTH DEMOCRACY:

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Schudson described a democracy based on two sets of institutions: one to keep citizens shallowly exposed to political affairs, the other to enable deeper dives and meaningful intervention if and when their alarms ring. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, meanwhile, identified three characteristics of stealth democracy: “a democracy that is [1] not particularly democratic (but [2] can be made to be if needed) but [3] which renders it impossible for decision makers to act on the basis of selfish motivations” (2002:86; numbering added). Town meeting, exhibited exactly these features. Schudson and Hibbing/Theiss-Morse, though, had identified town meeting as the embodiment of what they were arguing against. 11 What do we learn by seeing town meeting not as the embodiment of PD3 but as the embodiment of monitorial/stealth democracy?

First, the recharacterization alone will be of interest to my New Englander and PD3 audiences. The recharacterization will affect how practitioners and reformers approach town meeting. It even may help provide the missing vocabulary that I mentioned previously, for locals being able to express the simultaneously participatory and officer-centric nature of what they do implicitly. My recharacterization also should affect how the broader field of PD3 studies uses town meeting to think with. For some purposes, town meeting now should not be used as a model for participatory, deliberative, or direct democracy enterprises. For other purposes, town

11 Schudson (1998a:16-19), Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002:239, 205, 169, 40, 92-93, 95). Schudson’s attitude toward town meeting is not explicitly negative, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s is. What he does do is show how it embodies a prior, consensual, communal model of citizenship, which presumably puts it at odds with contemporary models (informational, rights-bearing, or monitorial). Elsewhere he also expresses a general skepticism about deliberative democracy in the town meeting vein (Schudson 1997).
meeting may still be a terrific inspiration--and its actual contours as a highly complex mediation between officers and citizens, rather than its imagined contours as naked direct democracy, may in fact make it *more* useful to think with.

There is also a larger way, though, that town meeting now becomes useful to think with. I suggest that “strong democracy” and “weak democracy” are not opposed after all, but are interdependent or even related. The first thing we can observe is that PD3 is a crucial backstop for monitorial/stealth democracy. Schudson and Hibbing/Theiss-Morse both acknowledge that some form of increased citizen participation must be available as monitorial/stealth democracy’s rarer phase. The field of PD3 studies will be indispensable for developing appropriately designed and practiced institutions for this phase.

PD3 scholars and practitioners, however, are unlikely to be happy at the prospect of redirecting their energies toward designing backup institutions that will be used only rarely. That redirection would be a significant demotion of impact and prestige. Fortunately for them, the town meeting findings suggest that PD3 has a greater role than that. In Northmont, the participatory component of monitorial/stealth democracy couldn’t be neatly hived off as a stage. This was so in multiple regards.

First is the temporal interpenetration of the two phases--the rapidity and the fluidity with which they alternated. Citizens and officers foxtrotted in circles and zigzags across scales like Arnstein’s. They did so year by year, topic by topic, speaker by speaker, and utterance by utterance. Town meeting may be exceptional in the extent to which it careened across the scale--and town meeting also is an institution where the power of the people to sweep in at higher rungs

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12 I recall that even the patron saint of participatory democracy suggested that the minimal commitment of an active citizenry was to gather periodically to deliberate whether the present representative arrangement was still satisfactory (Rousseau 1762:119-120 [III.18.6-8])
is unusually literalized in law and in structure and in practitioner culture—but I suspect that few
democratic systems display *no* such fluidity. A city official’s constituent forum, for instance,
often passes in and out of Arnstein’s rungs spanning from “manipulation” to “consultation” and
“placation.”

In theory, a sufficiently sensitive and granular analysis could capture an institution’s
moment-by-moment escalations and descents, even for an institution that yo-yos as much as
town meeting. My own analysis earlier in the chapter was just such an effort. But what comes
out of being able to identify the rung at any given moment? What comes out of trying to boil an
institution’s movement down to an overall score?¹³ Instead, what matters may be the patterns of
transition among rungs. That is, something like Arnstein’s ladder should be applied in 2-D, with
a temporal or kinetic dimension complementing the verticality. Examining a given democratic
institution, our key question then would be not “which?” (strong or weak) but “when?” and also
“why then?”

Another approach entirely is to reconsider what counts as “participation.” Something that
the town meeting case illustrates particularly well—and Chapter Four will illustrate this point—is
that there is a whole realm of “participatory” activity within “weakly democratic” representative
institutions. In town meeting, the engagement of citizens with their officers is hands-on, it is
time-intensive, it is impactful, and it has the kinds of transformative effects upon individuals and
communities that PD3 enthusiasts celebrate. In many key regards, it resembles the participation
of traditional participatory theory. How have we ended up with a theoretical lens that casts such
participation as “weak”?

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¹³ For instance, one might develop a method to average the different rung plotments that occur across a process. Alternatively, one could say that an institution’s overall score is whatever the lowest rung is at any part of the process. Etc.
As PD3 enthusiasts and critics have argued about which rung of Arnstein’s ladder to peg various scales of American democracy to, I wonder if they have gotten mutually caught up in an assumption that participation is unidimensional. Such scales imply that participation is a zero-sum game: the more officers control, the less citizens do, and vice versa. Could we instead plot citizen and officer activity on separate axes? Can control be seen as a relational product rather than as a possession?

In asking these questions, I am inspired by trying to view my fieldwork through Scott’s (1990, 2012a, 2012b) discussion of “infrapolitics” (kinds of political activity that are “below the visible spectrum”), and his discussion of what I think of as a poli-sci version of the fundamental attribution error: observers tend to attribute political outcomes to the agency of leaders rather than to sociopolitical contexts or to the accumulation of millions of subtle actions by the masses. For instance, Scott (2012:22-29) draws upon Branch (1988) to show that charismatic leadership is largely dependent upon improvisational trial and error, with the reactions of the mass guiding the behavior and positions of the leader. This influence of the crowd, Scott argues, constitutes a special kind of collective action. The results of that collective action, though, are attributed to the agency of the leader. The action of a citizenry upon representatives is similar. At town meeting, all of the <<DUE DILIGENCE>> + <<SETTLING>> activity appears to be a matter of the assembly following in officers’ groove, but that is to overlook what an involved task it is to oversee officers in that manner. It is to overlook the extraordinary amount of overt and subtle disciplining and steering of officers that is occurring as citizens appear to be trailing in representatives’ wake. With just a little bit of extra attention, we can recognize the participatory potential of certain forms of “weak” democracy. A participatory democrat can reconsider the
assumption that the goal is to climb as high as possible on Arnstein’s ladder; strong, rich participatory institutions might be possible to build at many of the lower rungs as well.
Figure #[pluto3]
Figure #[neptune1]
Figure #[neptune4]