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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Hi, Bob — I linked directly to the Vermont Life article at archive.org. No disrespect to Chris, but he added nothing to the quotes.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Democracy is not only about voting. It also requires
2 thought.

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 The essence of informed deliberation is already served by
4 Representative Town Meeting

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 RECENTLY, I stumbled upon some inadvertent
7 endorsements for a town meeting–style of governance I thought I
8 would share.

9 In the video [“I Drove To The Worst Place In Vermont. This](#)
10 [Is What I Saw”](#) (spoiler alert: It’s not that bad), the host raises the

11 question about the values unique to Vermont. While
12 acknowledging the rise in polarization in the country generally, a
13 guest from Vermont zeroes in on “old school Vermont,” where
14 everyone at Town Meeting argues with each other, but then has
15 lunch and talks about what unites them.

16 In the [“Guns, Division, and Violence in America”](#)
17 [episode of *The Coffee Klatch* podcast](#), host Robert Reich and his
18 guest, Heather Lofthouse, president of Inequality Media Civic
19 Action, observe that democracy is not only about voting; it also
20 requires thought. That is why deliberation is so important.

21 Simply pushing “yes” or “no” on your iPhone is not
22 democracy. Democracy requires us to understand the issues and
23 change our positions if there are good arguments on the other
24 side.

25 In a clip of an Obama Foundation video, “How to Stop
26 Authoritarianism Across the Globe: a Conversation with President
27 Obama” (bit.ly/851-obama), Zuzanna Rudzińska-Bluszcz,
28 undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Justice in Poland, notes
29 that for some time, her country limited democracy to voting but
30 democracy is something to be practiced, people need to be
31 engaged and empowered. What a democracy needs is an active
32 citizenry, she says.

33 After a review of these clips. I would wager the reader
34 might now agree that deliberation is a piece of our town
35 decision-making we do not want to lose. As Frank Bryan and
36 John McClaughry argue in their 1989 book, *The Vermont Papers:*
37 *Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale:*

38 “Town meeting government asserts the fundamental
39 wisdom of the common person, sanctifies openness, abhors
40 secrecy, holds the human spirit in the highest esteem, and is
41 grounded in a fundamental trust that the truth will out in any free
42 debate of citizens assembled,” they write.

43 Town Meetings, Bryan and McClaughry continue, “must
44 have been in the mind of E.B. White when he conceived his

45 classic definition of democracy: ‘the recurrent suspicion that
46 more than half the people are right more than half of the time.’”

47 * * *

48 THAT LEAVES US, THEN, with two choices: open Town
49 Meeting (OTM) or Representative Town Meeting (RTM). Currently
50 we have RTM.

51 How did we get here? One factor was the size of the
52 town. Our population hovers around 12,000 — too small to be
53 considered a city and a bit too big to be grouped with the small
54 towns.

55 In a 1989 *Vermont Life* article, [“The Brattleboro Way: Is
56 This The Future of Town Meeting?”](#) Fred Stetson wrote that by the
57 1960s, Brattleboro was “seeking stability and an escape from
58 Town Meeting Day shenanigans.”

59 Then-Town Manager Corwin “Corky” Elwell talked about
60 the previous traditional open Town Meeting. “At times it got
61 pretty unruly. It really was a case of who could pack the
62 meeting,” he said. “It was pretty easy for the proponents of an
63 issue to get their troops there and approve whatever was needed.
64 Of course, there was nothing illegal about it. It’s just not a very
65 stable way to carry on a local government.”

66 A clear advantage of RTM is that it is indeed
67 representative, in the way explained on the [Brattleboro Town
68 website](#): “The total number of town meeting representatives is
69 based on the number of registered voters per district.”

70 * * *

71 THAT BEING SAID, what needs to be changed?

72 Proponents of OTM believe the more open format will
73 allow more voices to be heard. As a chair of one of the three
74 districts, part of my job every year is to fill vacancies. And we
75 usually have openings. Last year was more competitive than
76 usual and allowed candidates to voice their reasons for serving.
77 In addition, district meetings, held voluntarily during the year,
78 allow residents to learn the process and become informed.

79 This is the goal: working towards an informed, engaged,
80 and representative electorate to make the decisions at Town
81 Meeting.

82 The essence of informed deliberation is served by RTM,
83 as members have a stake in running for office, gathering
84 signatures on petitions, talking to neighbors, and studying the
85 issues before the meeting.

86 Let's work to improve what we have — while we keep
87 the strengths and address the weaknesses.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

88 **ROBERT A. OESER** represents District 9 as a member of
89 Brattleboro's Representative Town Meeting.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

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LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

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####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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