

To return to our questions: Are the political institutions of polyarchal democracy actually necessary for democracy on the large scale of a country? If so, why? To answer these twin questions, let us recall what a democratic process requires (fig. 7).

WHY (AND WHEN) DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES?

As the focus of democratic government shifted to large-scale units like nations or countries, the question arose: How can citizens *participate effectively* when the number of citizens becomes too numerous or too widely dispersed geographically (or both, as in the case of a country) for them to participate conveniently in making laws by assembling in one place? And how can they make sure that matters with which they are most concerned are adequately considered by officials—that is, how can citizens *control the agenda* of government decisions?

How best to meet these democratic requirements in a political unit as large as a country is, of course, enormously difficult, indeed to some extent unachievable. Yet just as with the other highly demanding democratic criteria, this, too, can serve as a standard for evaluating alternative possibilities and solutions. Clearly the requirements could not be met if the top officials of the government could set the agenda and adopt policies independently of the wishes of citizens. The only feasible solution, though it is highly imperfect, is for citizens to elect their top officials and hold them more or less accountable through elections by dismissing them, so to speak, in subsequent elections.

To us that solution seems obvious. But what may appear self-evident to us was not at all obvious to our predecessors.

As we saw in Chapter 2, until fairly recently the possibility that citizens could, by means of elections, choose and reject representatives with the authority to make laws remained largely foreign to both the

theory and practice of democracy. As we saw, too, the election of representatives mainly developed during the Middle Ages, when monarchs realized that in order to impose taxes, raise armies, and make laws they needed to win the consent of the nobility, the higher clergy, and a few not-so-common commoners in the larger town and cities.

Until the eighteenth century, then, the standard view was that democratic or republican government meant rule by the people, and if the people were to rule they had to assemble in one place and vote on decrees, laws, or policies. Democracy would have to be town meeting democracy; representative democracy was a contradiction in terms. By implication, whether explicit or implicit, a republic or a democracy could actually exist only in a small unit, like a town or city. Writers who held this view, such as Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were perfectly aware of the disadvantages of a small state, particularly when it confronted the military superiority of a much larger state and were therefore extremely pessimistic about the future prospects for genuine democracy.

Yet the standard view was swiftly overpowered and swept aside by the onrushing force of the national state. Rousseau himself clearly understood that for a government of a country as large as Poland (for which he proposed a constitution), representation would be necessary. And shortly thereafter the standard view was driven off the stage of history by the arrival of democracy in America.

As late as 1787, when the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia to design a constitution appropriate for a large country with an ever-increasing population, the delegates were acutely aware of the historical tradition. Could a republic possibly exist on the huge scale the United States had already attained, not to mention the even grander scale the delegates foresaw?* Yet no one ques-

*A few delegates daringly forecast that the United States might ultimately have as many as one hundred million inhabitants. This number was reached in 1915.

tioned that if a republic were to exist in America it would have to take the form of a *representative* republic. Because of the lengthy experience with representation in colonial and state legislatures and in the Continental Congress, the feasibility of representative government was practically beyond debate.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the traditional view was ignored, forgotten, or, if remembered at all, treated as irrelevant. "It is evident," John Stuart Mill wrote in 1861,

that the only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state is one in which the whole people participate; that any participation, even in the smallest public function, is useful; that the participation should everywhere be as great as the general degree of improvement of the community will allow; and that nothing less can be ultimately desirable than the admission of all to a share in the sovereign power of the state. But since all cannot, in a community exceeding a single small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of the public business, it follows that the ideal type of a perfect government must be representative.⁴

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE FREE, FAIR, AND FREQUENT ELECTIONS?

As we have seen, if we accept the desirability of political equality, then every citizen must have an *equal and effective opportunity to vote, and all votes must be counted as equal*. If equality in voting is to be implemented, then clearly elections must be free and fair. To be free means that citizens can go to the polls without fear of reprisal; and if they are to be fair, then all votes must be counted as equal. Yet free and fair elections are not enough. Imagine electing representatives for a term of, say, twenty years! If citizens are to retain *final control over the agenda*, then elections must also be frequent.

How best to implement free and fair elections is not obvious. In the late nineteenth century the secret ballot began to replace a public show of hands. Although open voting still has a few defenders, secrecy has become the general standard; a country in which it is widely violated would be judged as lacking free and fair elections. But debate continues as to the kind of voting system that best meets standards of fairness. Is a system of proportional representation (PR), like that employed in most democratic countries, fairer than the First-Past-the-Post system used in Great Britain and the United States? Reasonable arguments can be made for both, as we'll see when we return to this question in Chapter 10. In discussions about different voting systems, however, the need for a fair system is assumed; how best to achieve fairness and other reasonable objectives is simply a technical question.

How frequent should elections be? Judging from twentieth-century practices in democratic countries, a rough answer might be that annual elections for legislative representatives would be a bit too frequent and anything more than about five years would be too long. Obviously, however, democrats can reasonably disagree about the specific interval and how it might vary with different offices and different traditional practices. The point is that without frequent elections citizens would lose a substantial degree of control over their elected officials.

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE FREE EXPRESSION?

To begin with, freedom of expression is required in order for citizens to *participate* effectively in political life. How can citizens make their views known and persuade their fellow citizens and representatives to adopt them unless they can express themselves freely about all matters bearing on the conduct of the government? And if they are to take the views of others into account, they must be

able to hear what others have to say. Free expression means not just that you have a right to be heard. It also means that you have a right to hear what others have to say.

To acquire an *enlightened understanding* of possible government actions and policies also requires freedom of expression. To acquire civic competence, citizens need opportunities to express their own views; learn from one another; engage in discussion and deliberation; read, hear, and question experts, political candidates, and persons whose judgments they trust; and learn in other ways that depend on freedom of expression.

Finally, without freedom of expression citizens would soon lose their capacity to influence *the agenda* of government decisions. Silent citizens may be perfect subjects for an authoritarian ruler; they would be a disaster for a democracy.

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE THE AVAILABILITY OF ALTERNATIVE AND INDEPENDENT SOURCES OF INFORMATION?

Like freedom of expression, the availability of alternative and relatively independent sources of information is required by several of the basic democratic criteria. Consider the need for *enlightened understanding*. How can citizens acquire the information they need in order to understand the issues if the government controls all the important sources of information? Or, for that matter, if any single group enjoys a monopoly in providing information? Citizens must have access, then, to alternative sources of information that are not under the control of the government or dominated by any other group or point of view.

Or think about *effective participation* and influencing the *public agenda*. How could citizens participate effectively in political life if all the information they could acquire was provided by a single

source, say the government, or, for that matter, a single party, faction, or interest?

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE INDEPENDENT ASSOCIATIONS?

As we saw earlier, it took a radical turnabout in ways of thinking to accept the need for political associations—interest groups, lobbying organizations, political parties. Yet if a large republic requires that representatives be elected, then how are elections to be contested? Forming an organization, such as a political party, gives a group an obvious electoral advantage. And if one group seeks to gain that advantage, will not others who disagree with their policies? And why should political activity cease between elections? Legislators can be influenced; causes can be advanced, policies promoted, appointments sought. So, unlike a small city or town, the large scale of democracy in a country makes political associations both necessary and desirable. In any case, how can they be prevented without impairing the fundamental right of citizens to participate effectively in governing? In a large republic, then, they are not only necessary and desirable but inevitable. Independent associations are also a source of *civic education and enlightenment*. They provide citizens not only with information but also with opportunities for discussion, deliberation, and the acquisition of political skills.

WHY DOES DEMOCRACY REQUIRE INCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP?

The answer is to be found, of course, in the reasons that brought us to the conclusion of the last chapter. We hardly need to repeat them here.

We can view the political institutions described in this chapter and summarized in figure 6 in several ways. For a country that lacks

one or more of the institutions, and is to that extent not yet sufficiently democratized, knowledge of the basic political institutions can help us to design a strategy for making a full *transition* to modern representative democracy. For a country that has only recently made the transition, that knowledge can help inform us about the crucial institutions that need to be *strengthened, deepened, and consolidated*. Because they are all necessary for modern representative democracy (polyarchal democracy), we can also view them as establishing a *minimum level for democratization*.

Those of us who live in the older democracies, where the transition to democracy occurred some generations ago and the political institutions listed in figure 6 are by now solidly established, face a different and equally difficult challenge. For even if the institutions are necessary to democratization, they are definitely not *sufficient* for achieving fully the democratic criteria listed in figure 6 and described in Chapter 4. Are we not then at liberty, and indeed obligated, to appraise our democratic institutions against these criteria? It seems obvious to me, as to many others, that judged against democratic criteria our existing political institutions display many shortcomings.

Consequently, just as we need strategies for bringing about a transition to democracy in nondemocratic countries and for consolidating democratic institutions in newly democratized countries, so in the older democratic countries we need to consider whether and how to move beyond our existing level of democracy.

Let me put it this way. In many countries the task is to achieve democratization up to the level of polyarchal democracy. But the challenge to citizens in the older democracies is to discover how they might achieve a level of democratization *beyond* polyarchal democracy.

CHAPTER 9

Varieties I

DEMOCRACY ON DIFFERENT SCALES

Are there different varieties of democracy? If so, what are they? Because the words *democracy* and *democratic* are bandied about indiscriminately, it is tempting to adopt the view of Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*:

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be the master—that’s all.”

BUT WORDS DO MATTER

If we accept Alice’s view, then everyone is free to call any government a democracy—even a despotic government. That happens more often than you might suppose. Authoritarian leaders sometimes claim that their regime is really a special type of “democracy” that is superior to other sorts. For example, V. I. Lenin once asserted: “Proletarian democracy is a million times more democratic than any bourgeois democracy; Soviet government is a million times more democratic than the most democratic bourgeois republic.”¹ This from the man who was the major architect in con-

structing the foundations of the totalitarian regime that ruled the Soviet Union for more than sixty years.

Fictions like these were also created by leaders and propagandists in the highly authoritarian “people’s democracies” created in Central and Eastern Europe in countries that fell under Soviet domination during and after World War II.

But why should we cravenly accept the claims of despots that they really are democrats? A cobra does not become a dove because its owner says so. No matter what a country’s leaders and propagandist may claim, we are entitled to judge a country to be a democracy only if it possesses *all* of the political institutions that are necessary to democracy.

Yet does this mean that democratic criteria can be satisfied only by the full set of political institutions of polyarchal democracy described in the last chapter? Not necessarily.

- The institutions of polyarchal democracy are necessary for democratizing the government of the state in a large-scale system, specifically a country. But they might be unnecessary or downright unsuitable for democracy in units on a smaller (or larger?) scale, or in smaller associations that are independent of the state and help to make up civil society. (More on this in a moment.)
- The institutions of polyarchal democracy were described in the preceding chapter in general terms. But might not democratic countries vary a great deal, and in important ways, in their specific political institutions: electoral arrangements, party systems, and the like? We’ll consider some of these variations in the next two chapters.
- Because the institutions of polyarchal democracy are necessary does not imply that they are sufficient for democracy. Yes, a political system with these institutions will

meet the democratic criteria described in Chapter 4 more or less satisfactorily. But is it not possible that other, perhaps additional, institutions might enable a country to achieve one or more of those criteria more fully?

DEMOCRACY: GREEK VERSUS MODERN

If the political institutions required for democracy must include elected representatives, what are we to say about the Greeks, who first applied the word *democracy* to the governments of their city-states? Wouldn't we be pushing our present perspective to the point of anachronistic absurdity if we were to conclude that, like Lenin, Mussolini, and other twentieth-century antidemocrats, the Greeks simply misused the term? After all, it was they, not us, who first created and used the word *democracy*. To deny that Athens was a democracy would be rather like saying that what the Wright brothers invented was not an airplane because their early machine so little resembled ours today.

By proceeding with due respect for past usage, perhaps we can learn something about democracy from the people who not only gave us the word but provided concrete examples of what they meant by it. If we examine the best known example of Greek democracy, that of Athens, we soon notice two important differences from our present version. For reasons we've explored, most democrats today would insist that an acceptable democratic system must meet a democratic criterion that would have been unacceptable to the Greeks: inclusion. We have also added a political institution that the Greeks saw not only as unnecessary for their democracies but downright undesirable: the election of representatives with the authority to enact laws. We might say that the political system they created was a primary democracy, an assembly democracy, or a town meeting democracy. But they definitely did not create representative democracy as we understand it today.²

ASSEMBLY DEMOCRACY VERSUS REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

Accustomed as we are to accepting the legitimacy of representative democracy we may find it difficult to understand why the Greeks were so passionately attached to assembly democracy. Yet until recently most other advocates of democracy felt as they did, all the way down to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762, when *On the Social Contract* was published. Or beyond, to the Anti-Federalists who opposed the new American Constitution because they believed that under a *federal* government they would no longer be able to govern themselves; and to the citizens of cantons in Switzerland and towns in Vermont who to the present day have jealously preserved their town meetings; and to American students in the 1960s and 1970s who fervently demanded that “participatory democracy” should replace representative systems; and to many others who continue to stress the virtues of democratic government by citizen assemblies.

Advocates of assembly democracy who know their history are aware that as a democratic device representation has a shady past. As we saw in Chapter 2, representative government originated not as a democratic practice but as a device by which nondemocratic governments—monarchs, mainly—could lay their hands on precious revenues and other resources they wanted, particularly for fighting wars. In origin, then, representation was not democratic; it was a nondemocratic institution later grafted on to democratic theory and practice.

Beyond their well-founded suspicion of this institution lacking democratic credentials, the critics of representation had an even more basic point. In a small political unit, such as a town, assembly democracy allows citizens desirable opportunities for engaging in the process of governing themselves that a representative government in a large unit simply cannot provide.

Consider one of the ideal criteria for democracy described in Chapter 4: opportunities for participating effectively in decisions. In a small unit governed by its citizens gathered in a popular assembly, participants can discuss and debate the questions they think important; after hearing the pros and cons, they can make up their minds; they can vote directly on the matters before them; and as a consequence they do not have to delegate crucial decisions to representatives, who may well be influenced by their own aims and interests rather than those of their constituents.

Given these clear advantages, why was the older understanding of democracy reconfigured in order to accommodate a political institution that was nondemocratic in its origins?

REPRESENTATION ALREADY EXISTED

As usual, history provides part of the answer. In countries where the practice of electing representatives already existed, democratic reformers saw a dazzling opportunity. They saw no need to discard the representative system, despite its dubious origins and the narrow, exclusionary suffrage on which it rested. They believed that by broadening the electoral base the legislature or parliament could be converted into a more truly representative body that would serve democratic purposes. Some of them saw in representation a profound and dazzling alteration in the prospects for democracy. An eighteenth-century French thinker, Destutt de Tracy, whose criticisms of his predecessor, Montesquieu, greatly influenced Thomas Jefferson, observed triumphantly: "Representation, or representative government, may be considered as a new invention, unknown in Montesquieu's time. . . . Representative democracy . . . is democracy rendered practicable for a long time and over a great extent of territory."³

In 1820, James Stuart Mill described "the system of representation" as "the grand discovery of modern times."⁴ New invention,

grand discovery—the words help us to recapture some of the excitement that democratic reformers felt when they threw off the blinders of traditional democratic thought and saw that a new species of democracy could be created by grafting the medieval practice of representation to the ancient tree of democracy.

They were right. In essence the broadening process eventually led to a representative government based on an inclusive demos, thus helping to achieve our modern conception of democracy.

Still, given representation's comparative disadvantages, why didn't democratic reformers reject it altogether and opt instead for direct democracy in the form, say, of a Greek-style people's assembly? Although this possibility had some advocates, most advocates of democracy concluded, like the framers of the U.S. Constitution, that the political unit they wanted to democratize was too large for assembly democracy.

ONCE MORE: ON SIZE AND DEMOCRACY

Size matters. Both the number of persons in a political unit and the extent of its territory have consequences for the form of democracy. Imagine for a moment that you're a democratic reformer in a country with a nondemocratic government that you hope to democratize. You don't want your country to dissolve into dozens or perhaps hundreds of ministates, even though each might be small enough for its citizens to gather frequently to exercise their sovereignty in an assembly. The citizens of your country are too numerous to assemble, and what's more they extend over a territory too large for all of you to meet without daunting difficulties. What are you to do?

Perhaps today and increasingly in the future you might be able to solve the territorial problem by employing electronic means of communication that would enable citizens spread out over a large area to "meet," discuss issues, and vote. But it is one thing to enable

citizens to “meet” electronically and quite another to solve the problem posed by large numbers of citizens. Beyond some limit, an attempt to arrange for them all to meet and engage in a fruitful discussion, even electronically, becomes ridiculous.

How big is too big for assembly democracy? How small is small enough? According to recent scholarly estimates, in Greek city-states the citizen body of adult males typically numbered between two thousand and ten thousand—about the right number, in the view of some Greek political theorists, for a good *polis*, or self-governing city-state. In Athens, however, the citizen body was much larger than that—perhaps around *sixty thousand* at the height of Athenian democracy in 450 B.C.E. “The result,” as one scholar has written, “was that Athens simply had too many citizens to function properly as a *polis*.” A century later, as a result of emigration, deaths from war and disease, and additional restrictions on citizenship, the number may have been reduced by half, which was still too many for its assembly to accommodate more than a small fraction of Athenian male citizens.⁵

A bit of simple arithmetic soon reveals the inexorable consequences of time and numbers. Suppose we begin with a very tiny unit, a committee, let us say, of just ten members. We think it might be reasonable to allow each member at least ten minutes for discussing the matter at hand. So we shall need about an hour and forty minutes for our meeting, certainly not an exorbitant amount of time for our committee members to spend in meeting. But suppose the subject is so complicated that each committee member might require a half-hour. Then we’ll need to plan on a five-hour meeting, or perhaps two meetings—still an acceptable amount of time.

But even fairly large committee would prove to be a small citizen assembly. Consider, for example, a village of two hundred persons where the entire adult population consists of, say, one hundred persons, all of whom attend the meetings of an assembly. Suppose each

TABLE 1. *The high price of participatory democracy*

Number of Persons	Total time required if each person has					
	10 minutes			30 minutes		
	minutes	hours	8-hour days	minutes	hours	8-hour days
10	100	2		300	5	
20	200	3		600	10	1
50	500	8	1	1,500	25	3
500	5,000	83	10	15,000	250	31
1,000	10,000	167	21	30,000	500	63
5,000	50,000	833	104	150,000	2,500	313
10,000	100,000	1,667	208	300,000	5,000	625

is entitled to a total of ten minutes. That modest amount would require two eight-hour days—not impossible but surely not easy to bring about! Let's stay for a moment with our assumption of just ten minutes for each citizen's participation. As the numbers go up the situation becomes more and more absurd. In an "ideal polis" of ten thousand full citizens, the time required is far beyond all tolerable limits. Ten minutes allotted to each citizen would require more than two hundred eight-hour working days. A half-hour allotment hour would require almost two years of steady meetings (table 1)!

To assume that every citizen would want to speak is, of course, absurd, as anyone with the slightest familiarity with town meetings knows. Typically a few persons do most of the talking. The rest may refrain for any one of many reasons: because what they intended to say has already been covered adequately; or they have already made up their minds; or they suffer from stage fright, a sense of inadequacy, lack of a pressing interest in the subject at hand, incomplete knowledge, and so on. While a few carry on the discussion, then, the rest listen (or not), and when the time comes for a vote they vote (or don't).

In addition, lots of discussion and inquiry may take place elsewhere. Many of the hours required in table 1 may actually be used in

discussing public matters in informal settings of many kinds. So we should not read table 1 in too simple-minded a way. Yet in spite of all reasonable qualifications, assembly democracy has some severe problems:

- Opportunities for participation rapidly diminish with the size of the citizen body.
- Although many more can participate by listening to speakers, the maximum number of participants in a single meeting who are likely to be able to express themselves in speech is very small—probably considerably less than a hundred.
- These fully participant members become, in effect, representatives of the others, except in voting. (This exception is, however, important, and I'll return to it in a moment.)
- Thus even in a unit governed by assembly democracy, a kind of *de facto* representative system is likely to exist.
- Yet nothing insures that the fully participating members are representative of the rest.
- To provide a satisfactory system for selecting representatives, citizens may reasonably prefer to elect their representatives in free and fair elections.

THE DEMOCRATIC LIMITS OF REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

So representation, it appears, has the advantage. Or does it? The irony of the combination of time and numbers is that it impartially cuts both ways: it swiftly reveals a great democratic defect in representative government. Returning to table 1 and our arithmetical exercises, suppose we now calculate the time that would be required if each citizen were to meet briefly with his or her representative. Table 1 provides a devastating case against the participatory possi-

bilities of representative government. Let's imagine that an elected representative wishes to set aside ten minutes for discussing matters with each adult citizen in the representative's district. We'll ignore travel time and other practicalities. Suppose the district contains ten thousand adult citizens, the largest number shown in table 1. Q.E.D.: The representative would have to allow more than half the days of the year just for meetings with constituents! In the United States, representatives to the U.S. Congress are elected from districts that on average contain more than four hundred thousand adult citizens. A member of the U.S. House of Representatives who wished to devote just ten minutes to each citizen in the district would have no time for anything else. If he or she were to spend eight hours a day at the task, every day of the year, she or he would need more than twenty years, or ten terms, longer than most representatives ever remain in Congress.

Assembly democracy or representative democracy? Small-scale democracy or large-scale democracy? Which is better? Which is more democratic? Each has its passionate advocates. As we have just seen, a strong case can be made for the advantages of each. Yet our rather artificial and even absurd arithmetic exercises have revealed inexorable limits on civic participation that apply with cruel indifference to both. For neither can escape the impassable bounds set by the interaction of the time required for an act of participation and the number of citizens entitled to participate.

The law of time and numbers: The more citizens a democratic unit contains, the less that citizens can participate directly in government decisions and the more that they must delegate authority to others.

A FUNDAMENTAL DEMOCRATIC DILEMMA

Lurking in the background is a fundamental democratic dilemma. If our goal is to establish a democratic system of government

that provides maximum opportunities for citizens to participate in political decisions, then the advantage clearly lies with assembly democracy in a small-scale political system. But if our goal is to establish a democratic system of government that provides maximum scope for it to deal effectively with the problems of greatest concern to citizens, then the advantage will often lie with a unit so large that a representative system will be necessary. This is the dilemma of citizen participation versus system effectiveness:

The smaller a democratic unit, the greater its potential for citizen participation and the less the need for citizens to delegate government decisions to representatives. The larger the unit, the greater its capacity for dealing with problems important to its citizens and the greater the need for citizens to delegate decisions to representatives.

I do not see how we can escape this dilemma. But even if we cannot escape it, we can confront it.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL, SOMETIMES

As with all other human activities, political systems don't necessarily realize their possibilities. A book title captures the essence of one perspective: *Small Is Beautiful*.⁶ Unquestionably, it is possible in theory for very small political systems to attain a very high level of citizen participation that large systems can never match. Yet they often, perhaps usually, fall far short of achieving their potential.

The town meetings in some of the smaller towns of New England provide good examples of limits and possibilities. Although in most of New England the traditional town meeting has been mainly or entirely replaced as a legislative body by elected representatives, it is alive and well in the mainly rural state of Vermont.

A sympathetic observer and participant who studied town meetings in Vermont found that 1,215 town meetings were held between

1970 and 1994 in 210 Vermont towns of fewer than forty-five hundred residents. From the records of 1,129 of these town meetings he concluded that

the average number of people in attendance when the attendance count was the highest at each meeting was 139. An average of 45 of these participated at least once. . . . [O]n average 19 percent of a town's eligible voters will be present at town meeting and 7 percent of a town's eligible voters (37 percent of the attenders) will speak out at least once. . . . The great majority of people that speak will do so more than once. . . . The average meeting takes almost four hours . . . of deliberative time. It lasts long enough to give each of its attenders two minutes and 14 seconds of time to talk. Since many fewer speak than attend, of course, the average time available for each speaker is almost exactly five minutes. . . . Conversely, since there are about four times as many participations as there are participators, the average town meeting allows for only one minute and 20 seconds for each act of participation.⁷

Town meetings, it appears, are not exactly paragons of participatory democracy. Yet that is not the whole story. When citizens know the issues to be dealt with are trivial or uncontroversial, they choose to stay home—and why not? But controversial issues bring them out. Although my own town in Connecticut has largely abandoned its traditional town meeting, I can recall questions on which citizens were sharply divided and turned out in such numbers that they overflowed the high school auditorium; a second meeting scheduled for those unable to get in to the first proved to be equally large. As in Vermont, discussions at town meetings are not dominated by the educated and affluent. Strong beliefs and a determination to have one's say are not by any means monopolized by a single socioeconomic group.