

Mobilizing and Transformative Organizing In-Action at the New England Town Meeting

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Abstract

This paper identifies examples of mobilizing and organizing in the New England Town Meeting. Mobilizing and organizing are frameworks of collective action. Organizing has a transformative effect on individuals while mobilizing does not. The open New England Town Meeting, as it is conceptualized in this paper, consists of participation, deliberation, and governance. The data for this paper comes from the case of Brentwood, New Hampshire's 2023 Town Meeting. The researcher created field notes using ethnographic participant observation and video which were analyzed using latent content analysis. This paper found that examples of mobilizing consist of invoking a higher authority, using data, continuously pushing for a position, simplifying policy, and acting with emotion. For organizing, this paper found examples of using experience, asking information gathering questions, sharing ideas, and modifying the process. Themes found throughout these examples include authority, discovery, process, and emotion. This paper supports mobilizing and organizing as distinct types of collective action. Transformation is a key aspect of organizing, and thus organizing, in its forms and occurrences, may be a helpful tool to analyze and ensure healthy democracies. This paper develops the participatory deliberative governance concept which incorporates transformation into participatory and deliberative democratic theory.

Keywords: organizing, mobilizing, collective action, participatory democracy, direct democracy, deliberative democracy, governance, New England Town Meeting

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Introduction

The town meeting is a form of governance practiced in the New England region of the United States from the colonial era to today where eligible residents come together to deliberate and make decisions. The open town meeting has residents add to an agenda and then gather to discuss, debate, amend, and decide on issues within their local government's purview. Residents catch up with their neighbors while also raising concerns directly to their elected officials, bureaucrats, and town volunteers and receive responses and reactions in real time. It is a place where the public either directly or through the Moderator decides who speaks and determines the procedure for the meeting. The public and government officials alike raise concerns and offer firsthand knowledge of some of the issues facing the community and their lives.

I observed Brentwood New Hampshire's 2023 Town Meeting of 322 participants (Town of Brentwood Minutes 2023).¹ Participants repeat "we are not looking for a Taj Mahal here" when discussing capital projects.² They reflect in humorous ways when debating a partisan balloting system with a woman raising that "[the community has] always accepted me for who I was, [...] the crazy woman who talks to woodchucks."³ Then, when it comes to bathroom renovations a member of the town's leadership states "I'm against peeping Toms."⁴ You also notice individuals citing the local Brentwood Newsletter, public meetings, federal and state laws, grants, statistics from government and research reports, past town meetings, and bringing their own expertise as engineers, police officers, firefighters, librarians, teachers, construction workers, lawyers, and public works employees. People of many backgrounds attend the meeting with both the smell of horse manure coming from people's shoes and exasperated discussion about commuting to the metropolis of Boston.

The New England Town Meeting is one of the few face-to-face assemblies at such a large scale in the United States that has eligible residents enact binding collective action decisions for their governments. (Bryan 2003, xii; Clark and Teachout 2012). Participants at the town meeting are treated like producers rather than consumers of social change, countering the predominant trend of citizens being treated as consumers (Speer and Han 2018). The town meeting removes distance between public policy, organizations and organizational strategy, and individual participation in the civic feedbacks model (Han et al. 2023). Han et al. advocates that to understand collective action and democracy scholars must clarify the forms and strategies of collective action. They create two distinct frameworks of collective action, organizing and mobilizing, and call for more qualitative case studies testing their proposal (2024). This paper seeks to understand how organizing and mobilizing are utilized in action at the New England Town Meeting.

Literature Review

Han et al. observed that existing organizing theory was incomplete with it underpredicting the success for low-resourced groups while overpredicting the success of high-resourced groups. They answer this gap in theory by proposing civic feedbacks which incorporates organizational strategy

¹ Participants can come and go at the meeting, this is the amount of registered voters who attended at some point during the meeting.

² "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Janice 5:26:00.

³ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Kate P. 6:57:00.

⁴ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Robert 3:53:30.

and agency into the existing participation framework (2023). Low-resources groups have succeeded at town meetings, particularly those historically marginalized, not in the majority, or with less power being able to hold power, develop policy, or resist outside powers (Bryan 2003, 213-231; DiNatale 2023; Kotler 1974; Mandell 2019; Moore 2018). Many town meetings attempt to increase inclusion through expanding suffrage (Bahl-Mine and De Angelis 2023) while scholars debate the extent of inclusion in the colonial town meeting (Brown 1976; Martin 2019; Levy 2009).

Mansbridge found that the open town meeting results in the majority reigning over the minority and shuts down the minority's deliberation (1983). Many also debate over the representativeness of participation and find that the more affluent participate more than the less affluent, even if the less affluent have greater representation in the town meeting compared to other levels of government (Bryan 2003; Kotler 1974; Mandell 2019; Martin 2019). Additionally, declines in participation overall at the town meeting threaten its ability to properly represent communities (Bryan 2003; Clark and Bryan 2023; Cobb 2024; Mansbridge 1983; Robinson 2011; Rule 2012; Zimmerman 1999). The town meeting provides examples to prove Han et al. correct in their assessment of organizing theory underpredicting low resourced group success (2023). However, scholars debate the extent of low-resource groups' success in the town meeting and almost universally find a challenging future with declining participation.

Culture is a central influence on organizing and democracy. Bringel and McKenna provide global organizing examples and call on research to connect the content (political and cultural) and form (organizational, tactical, and temporal) of social movements (2020). Cossart and Felicetti discover that culture fostered the deliberative qualities of town meetings while reducing their democratic features (2018). Townsend (2009), in the case of town meeting, and Best (2005) and von Heyking (2004) in broader cases, find that democracy is cultural and its governance is discovered through deliberations. Solomon (2023) and Zimmerman (1999) identify the significance of culture in the level of attendance and engagement at town meetings. The town meeting provides cases to test how politics, culture, and social movements interact. However, many scholars disagree about the exact connection between culture, deliberation, and democracy in town meetings.

Theoretical Framework

Community organizing is defined as "a process through which residents come together and build social power to investigate and take sustained collective action on systemic issues that negatively affect their daily lives" (Christens et al. 2021, 3003). A substantial debate within community organizing is whether non-ideological Alinsky or ideological neo-Alinsky institutional approaches are more effective in recruiting, educating, or developing strategies in community organizing (Kleidman and Post 2025, 4; Kleidman 2004, 404). This paper does not seek to answer the effectiveness of using non-ideological or ideological methods. However, the open town meeting, the form of town meeting in this case, allows any resident to organize others to attend the town meeting (Zimmerman 1999, 172). Hence, this case offers an opportunity to observe institutional participatory democracy, which aligns with the non-ideological or populist stance in community organizing (Kleidman 2004, 404). Further, Freire argues that dialogue, rooted in love, hope, humanity, and critical thinking, is essential to education and the practice of freedom. He emphasizes that the presence of dialogue, done correctly, leads to transformation where individuals become aware and take action to make change (1974). Deliberation relates to Freire's concept of dialogue with

Bächtiger et al. defining deliberation as “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern.” (2018, 2). Further, the educative aspects of Freire’s dialogues align with participatory democratic theory and its focus on individuals learning to participate by interacting within democratic authority structures (Pateman 2012, 10). This paper conceptualizes town meeting participation as citizen control where eligible residents govern institutions, policy and managerial aspects, and negotiate the conditions under which “outsiders” may change them (Arnstein 1969, 223).⁵

Scholars conceptualize the New England Town Meeting within many forms of democracy. Often the town meeting is conceptualized as direct (Bryan 2003; Robinson 2011; Zimmerman 1999) or deliberative democracy (Townsend 2004; 2009; Townsend and Milburn 2023). Townsend and Reiss, however, classify it as both (2022). The town meeting is different from a citizen assembly and many other deliberative or participatory processes as it goes beyond advising and utilizes direct decision-making. Mansbridge conceptualizes the town meeting as adversary democracy where the majority rules and the less powerful are suppressed. Her determination contrasts with unitary democracy where there is a high degree of common interest, consensus, face-to-face assembly, and a rough equality of respect among members (1983, x). Townsend and Milburn offer a solution to Mansbridge’s adversary democracy in finding that the town meeting is an ideal location for the collaborative practice of play - where enemies are made into contingent adversaries (2023). Leslie builds on Mansbridge’s work (1983) and like Townsend and Milburn (2023) classifies the town meeting as collaborative (2013, 36-46). Bryan et al. (2019) identifies the town meeting as consisting of deliberation and participation, and many scholars agree with this characterization (Cossart et al., 2019; Leslie, 2018; Townsend and Reiss, 2022). Elstub defines participatory deliberative democracy, drawing from Cohen (2009) and della Porta (2013), as “where citizens deliberate to make collective decisions.” (2018, 191). Clark and Teachout use the town meeting as one example to create slow democracy. Citizens make decisions locally in slow democracy through inclusion, deliberation, and power (2012, xxvi). Slow democracy also provides actionable suggestions to community organizers as to how to put its ideas into practice (Clark and Teachout 2012). McCoy and Scully further relate these concepts of deliberative (with dialogue) and participatory democracy to community organizing in explaining how community organizing is aimed at engaging people to make changes in these institutions (2002).

Organizing practice and scholarship is fragmented – with no established “orthodoxy” in theoretical or methodological approach (Kleidman and Post 2025, 9). I focus my theoretical frameworks within political science - an area with less attention to community organizing (Christens et al. 2021, 3002) - and use a lens of collective action. However, I also draw extensively on works in communication, anthropology, and history which adds to efforts to change community organizing, and town meeting, from multidisciplinary to interdisciplinary (Kleidman and Post 2025, 9).

Recent work has made substantial efforts to create distinctions between types of collective action (Han 2014; McAlevey 2018; Woodyly 2022). Han et al. conceptualizes organizing by drawing on four areas of scholarship – one of these areas being Alinsky and its following works (2024, 250-251). Han et al. argue that community organizers in practice have made a distinction between organizing and mobilizing and it is time for scholarship to realize the value of this distinction (2024, 246). Further,

⁵ See Levy (2009) and his discussion of “outsiders” at town meeting.

Han et al., similar to Freire (1974), focuses on transformation yet breaks it down into individual, group, and the public sphere (2024).

The collective action framework I use comes from Han et al. (2024). They create two frameworks for understanding collective action. One framework is organizing, "an approach to collective action that seeks to change individuals and groups into effective actors in the public sphere" (2024, 246). The second framework is mobilizing, "an approach that conceptualizes collective action as a process of aggregating and expressing preferences without an explicit focus on changing individuals or groups." (2024, 246). Han et al. do not provide explicit examples of organizing or mobilizing, instead they call for more qualitative case studies to answer this. They also raise that there is likelihood for organizing practices to occur within democratic self-governance (2024, 257-8). Thus, this paper seeks to understand how mobilizing and organizing operates within self-governance and begins to provide empirical examples of these concepts for future practice and research. My research question is: What examples of mobilizing and organizing are present in this specific case of town meeting?

Methodology

Positionality and Case Discovery

I initially attended the 2023 Brentwood, New Hampshire Town Meeting without a specific research question to observe a debate about the community changing from an open town meeting, where citizens gather in a room deliberative and vote, to an Australian ballot (SB2), where citizens deliberative and then make final decisions on a separate election day via ballot. I also suspected that I would observe ample debate as the community is known for its lively town meetings and divided politics. I was familiar with Brentwood as I grew up in a neighboring town. I went to middle and high school and was in a Boy Scout Troop with those from Brentwood. Thus, when I observed the meeting, I was known to some already at the meeting and I knew or knew about others at the meeting. I sat next to several people I knew from high school and their families. Many of them were long-time town meeting goers and they introduced me to several of the prominent actors at the meeting. They also narrated the meeting to me, giving me information about what was going on, their reactions, and historical background.

Though there are no clear political sides in a town meeting, people do still sit together based on a variety of factors including political leanings (Rule 2012). I was situated in a more fiscally conservative section. I did make sure to visit and talk to other sections that included those I knew prior to the meeting and new individuals that I introduced myself to. I did this during breaks and ballot voting periods. In reflecting on my positionality, I acknowledge that I may have been biased by those I knew and from what I knew about the community prior to my observation. However, in socializing in this way, I did gain an in-depth understanding of the town meeting that would not have been possible otherwise. Further gender, racial, and age dynamics, with me being perceived as a young white male may have influenced my view and others view on me.

Town Meeting Dynamics

Some dynamics to note about the town meeting setting and process come from Townsend (2004; 2006; 2009) and Rule (2012). Brentwood's town meeting also exemplifies many of these dynamics despite it being a different variation of town meeting than some of the literature. Townsend

analyzes Amherst Massachusetts' representative town meeting from 1999 to 2000 and categorizes it as a communication event (2004; 2009). The representative town meeting is different than Brentwood's open town meeting. A representative town meeting has residents elect other residents to the town meeting to attend, deliberate, and make decisions rather than all voting residents being able to do these activities as it is at the open town meeting in Brentwood. Townsend finds that the participants of the representative town meeting use self-imposed rules and regulate themselves, resulting in protection of the minority. Townsend discovers that people act by "speaking to the issue," "weaving," "scene-changing," and "active listening" throughout the event and that many town meeting members utilize the "trustee" style of representation (2004; 2006). Townsend observes that unlike legislatures that are in continuous existence the town meeting must have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning is the most formal, the middle has the greatest variation of emotion and pitch, and the end can bring relief, exhaustion or both. Townsend also notes that speaking influences policy outcomes and that town meeting politics are fluid with people realigning from issue to issue (2009). Rule spent years collecting stories and observing the open and Australian ballot (SB2) town meeting in New Hampshire. Her book outlined many of the trends at the town meeting including that people tend to choose their seats based on political affiliations, philosophies, familial ties, or physical needs. Rule also outlined the "characters" of the town meeting – how people act and the common actions they use (or do not use) to advance or hinder the town meeting (2012). Townsend and Rule offer background on how the town meeting operates and how individuals act which is essential to understanding how collective action – and mobilizing and organizing – arise at the meeting.

Case Selection, Data Collection, & Analysis

Brentwood New Hampshire is a town of 4,575 residents. The community is predominantly residential with owner occupied single unit homes and wooded with scattered agricultural fields, a highway of retail businesses, and a road of some industry. The town is also the county seat and is the location of county services and offices such as the courthouse, nursing home, and jail. Brentwood is 95% white, has a median age of 44.3, a median household income of \$161,318, and 52.7% of its population has a bachelor's degree or higher. Brentwood when compared to New Hampshire and the United States is much whiter, older, wealthier, and more educated (Census Reporter, 2025). Politically the town is quite divided or leans Republican with 40% of voters registered as unaffiliated, 32% as Republicans, and 28% as Democrats (NH Secretary of State 2023). The town meeting in Brentwood begins with the government setting an initial agenda and eligible voters, through a petition process, adding to the meeting's agenda. The finalized agenda with government and citizen proposals, called a warrant, is then publicized throughout the town. Eligible voters then attend the town meeting in March to deliberate and decide on the items on the warrant article. Items on the warrant article are anything within the purview of a local government in New Hampshire. Commonly this will include the annual budget, capital costs, taxes and tax credits, and governance arrangements (e.g. creation of boards/institutions, ways elections should be held, or how the government conducts itself). School related issues are separate and managed by a school board with a similar process. After the meeting, the decisions participants make are final and are implemented by the government – usually through the selectboard, other elected trustees or officials, or by appointed employees or volunteers directed by elected officials.

I take a nominal approach to my case selection. This approach frames the social world as occasions for meaning with making and casing as an ongoing research activity. The approach recognizes that there is a preliminary casing of a study with the researcher being attracted to the case for practical reasons (Soss 2021). I was attracted to my case as I was near a town that was discussing a research topic of interest, the switch from open to Australian ballot (SB2) town meeting. The topic, however, was delayed until next year due to procedural errors. I still stayed and observed the meeting with an openness to uncovering potential re-casing with other concepts and theories (Soss 2021). I take an exploratory case study approach as I am testing a new approach to collective action. Thus, rather than trying to explain or describe a phenomenon I explore how mobilizing and organizing may be present in speech within a real-world participatory deliberative structure (Yin 2018).

I took an ethnographic approach to data collection (Curato and Doerr 2022) inspired by the many ethno-rhetorical town meeting works by Townsend (2004; 2006; 2009). I familiarized myself with the data by attending the 2023 Brentwood Town Meeting and taking general field notes utilizing participant observation (Musante 2015). Following my participant observation, I reviewed the video of the meeting numerous times and produced a set of data based on a research question developed after the observation.⁶ I combined my field notes and data from the video to create a dataset. I then utilized Kleinheksel et al.'s approach to latent content analysis (2020). I developed emergent codes from these combined notes based on and defined by the acts of individuals. The codes were then grouped into organizing or mobilizing categories, based on Han et al (2024)'s conceptualization. Themes were finally developed following the coding and categorization of the data. Table 1 defines themes, Table 2 defines codes, Table 3 defines categories, and Table 4 outlines how the themes, codes, and categories fit together.

Theme	Definition
Authority	Authority is the use of power to influence or achieve decisions.
Discovery	Discovery is the bringing, prompting, or exchange of new information.
Process	Process is the use of rules to influence or achieve decisions. It also involves the explanation of process or of policies.
Emotion	Emotion is the expression of feelings which enhances actions.

Table 1: Definitions of Themes

Code	Definition
Invoking a Higher Authority	Referencing powers perceived as above regular participants.
Using Experience	An individual sharing their experiences.
Using Data	Sharing or citing evidence from outside the environment or individual experience.
Asking Information Gathering Questions	Inquiry prompting others to ideate on, repeat, or reveal information.
Sharing Ideas	Presenting new solutions.
Continuously Pushing for a Position	Using procedural rules several times towards the same goal.

⁶ These data all come from the public domain within a legislative body conducting a publicly held, televised, and recorded meeting. There was no need to secure permission to use participants' words or names as the material occurred as a part of a legislative meeting (Townsend, 2006). Further, I only use quotes and names from the video recording of the meeting which recorded official meeting actions and discussion where individuals identified themselves by name and spoke to the public.

Simplifying Policy	Rephrasing or reframing information related to proposals.
Modifying the Process	Using procedural rules to change how the environment operates.
Acting with Emotion	Verbal or non-verbal indicators that suggest the expression of feelings.

Table 2: Definition of Codes

Category	Definition
Mobilizing	"an approach that conceptualizes collective action as a process of aggregating and expressing preferences without an explicit focus on changing individuals or groups." (Han et al. 2024, 246).
Organizing	"an approach to collective action that seeks to change individuals and groups into effective actors in the public sphere" (Han et al. 2024, 246)

Table 3: Definitions of Categories

Themes	Codes	Category
Authority	Invoking a Higher Authority	Mobilizing
Authority/Discovery	Using Experience	Organizing
Discovery	Using Data	Mobilizing
Discovery	Asking Information Gathering Questions	Organizing
Discovery	Sharing Ideas	Organizing
Process	Continuously Pushing for a Position	Mobilizing
Process	Simplifying Policy	Mobilizing
Process	Modifying the Process	Organizing
Emotion	Acting with Emotion	Mobilizing

Table 4: Themes, Codes, and Categories

Findings

The 2023 Brentwood Town Meeting had examples of mobilizing and organizing related to the themes of authority, discovery, process, and emotion. Within authority, organizing led to the use of experiences while mobilizing was utilized by invoking a higher authority. Within discovery, organizing led to the use of experiences, the asking of information gathering questions, and the sharing of ideas. Within process, organizing enabled individuals to modify the process while mobilizing involved simplifying policies and continuously pushing for a position. Emotion was a theme present throughout many of the other themes with many acting with emotion to mobilize others at the meeting.

Authority

Authority is the use of power to influence or achieve decisions. Authority arose in two forms at the town meeting. The first was individuals drawing on their experiences about their involvement in past town meetings, other government functions, their observations as employees of the town, time spent living in town, or outside expertise from their profession or hobbies.⁷ The sharing of experience was used to establish authority in arguments by proving the individual's knowledge. The authoritative sharing of experience is more closely related to organizing as individuals had to have

⁷ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at 3:53:30; Chris 4:05:32.

been transformed into an actor by these prior experiences. The sharing of experiences also promoted discovery by sharing more knowledge – this is discussed in the discovery section.

The second example of authority was invoking a higher authority. Interestingly, the different authorities invoked were not universally positive or negative. For example, the federal government was viewed positively when it was an opportunity for grant money but negatively when that money was restricted for certain activities. Some examples of commonly invoked authorities included the town meeting or local government, state government, the federal government, judicial interpretations or rulings on policy, news organizations, history, national political debates, and individuals – such as former town employees or officials.⁸ Invoking a higher authority was a form of mobilizing as it did not require an individual to be changed into a public actor. Individuals could simply make arguments drawing from general knowledge rather than drawing from specific public actor knowledge. Occasionally, individuals utilized local knowledge by invoking local individuals which suggested past involvement in the public sphere. Thus, in these instances there were aspects of organizing.

Discovery

Discovery is the bringing, prompting, or exchange of new information. Discovery arose in four forms at the town meeting. The first was using data. Individuals would cite data, whether it be accurate or not, to further their arguments. There were many instances of individuals citing reports from various governments, NGOs and news media - particularly the local Brentwood Newsletter. Individuals would bring prepared statements⁹ or use their computer or phone to find data or even do their own math while speaking on the floor.¹⁰ The validity of this data would also be debated.¹¹ The use of data was a form of mobilizing as individuals did not need to be savvy public actors to utilize it. Data collection could qualify as organizing¹² as the action may require being an effective public actor, yet the sharing of that data does not necessarily transform individuals into public actors.

The second example of discovery was using experience. Experience in many cases presented new information that was then incorporated into the discussion. It was also used to establish authority - as explained in the authority section. The instances of using experience related to sharing information about past town meetings, other government functions, observations as employees of the town, or outside expertise from professions or hobbies.¹³ This is more closely related to organizing as to gather knowledge from these experiences the individuals would have needed to be engaged public actors, or private actors who could relate their experiences to the public arena.

The third example of discovery was asking information gathering questions. Individuals would usually ask those with authority such as government officials or experts to share more information about the issue or to come up with ideas on how the policy could be altered to more closely address the interests of the citizens.¹⁴ These questions were more closely related to organizing as they led to or attempted to lead to the transformation of policy and the viewpoints of individuals.

⁸ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Louise 1:31:58; Police Chief 3:06:53.

⁹ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Jack 6:14:00; Robin 00:36:44; Becky 6:25:27.

¹⁰ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Jim 1:08:29; Jim 4:01:52.

¹¹ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Gabby 0:59:39.

¹² "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Robin 0:36:44.

¹³ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at 3:53:30; Chris 4:05:32.

¹⁴ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Robin 2:29:45; Robin 4:10:00.

They offered opportunities for actors to transform their policy proposals to retain their interests or address the question with enough evidence to address citizen interests.

The fourth example of discovery was sharing ideas. Sharing ideas revealed new policy options and actions for the town meeting to take. It also demonstrated to citizens that they could have ideas and change their town's policies. For example, citizens shared different sources for funds by reinterpreting legal definitions and practices.¹⁵ In another instance, citizens shared ideas about taking a different action by moving town data to the cloud rather than using physical servers.¹⁶ Sharing ideas was more related to organizing as these ideas sought to change policy and encouraged citizens to shape policy by demonstrating that it could be done.

Process

Process is the use of rules to influence or achieve decisions. It also involves the explanation of process or of policies. Process arose in three forms at the town meeting. The first was continuously pushing for a position. This would occur with individuals proposing similar amendments, usually to reduce spending, and if one of those amendments was defeated proposing a less extreme amendment.¹⁷ This was a form of mobilizing as the goal was to reach a certain policy or quick compromise rather than transform others to make these policies due to the immediate proposals with limited discussion. Some organizing aspects may involve some being inspired by these actions or taking part in these efforts due to coordination before or during the meeting.

The second example of process was simplifying policy. This strategy was used to assign more relatable money figures to items or impacts. For example, when discussing purchasing radios, the per radio cost was used rather than the cost as a whole.¹⁸ Another strategy of simplifying policy was to relate a specific policy to national political discussions. For example, connecting solar panel tax credits to the national debate on climate change.¹⁹ These are forms of mobilizing as it simplifies the policy to allow individuals to relate the policy to something more tangible or understandable. Actors in these environments can choose to use these short cuts to think less about the decision, rather than thinking more about the issue and possibly transforming their views.

The third example of process was modifying the process. This was quite present at the Brentwood Town Meeting as the moderator, who controls the process, felt unwell and thus had less control over the meeting. The moderator eventually stepped down due to his health, and the assistant moderator took over. Individuals at the meeting were more able to modify the process or became confused by the moderator's actions, especially relating to whether they take a hand or ballot vote. There were four ways in which the process was modified.

One way to modify the process was to institute secret-ballot voting rather than a public vote. This allowed individuals to vote without concern about how their neighbors could perceive them. For example, Brentwood lost a police officer in the line of duty in 2014, and the meeting was voting on whether to add another police officer to the department that would allow the department to have two officers instead of one on duty 24/7. One of the predominant arguments made in favor of this

¹⁵ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Chris 4:05:32; Jim 4:46:39.

¹⁶ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Mark 2:42:00.

¹⁷ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Liz 1:23:50.

¹⁸ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Liz 4:30:44.

¹⁹ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Bill 6:34:00.

warrant was that having two officers instead of one on duty would increase the safety of the officers – and decrease the risk of another officer being lost in the line of duty. Voters quickly turned this warrant into a ballot vote as the warrant was especially emotional and personal.²⁰ Yet as the issue was discussed, it became evident that most were in favor and the ballot vote was cancelled.²¹ As the meeting went on, voters became less and less energized to participate in ballot voting. Ballot voting required the meeting to stop, for everyone to fill out a ballot, turn it in, and the ballots to be counted. This took a much longer time than having participants simply raise their hands. As the meeting dragged on those who signed their names to have a ballot vote removed themselves to speed up the meeting process.²²

A second way to modify the process was to move the order of warrants – warrants are the policy proposals.²³ As the meeting goes on people tend to leave,²⁴ so if you have allies in the crowd or think it is widely popular among those present it may be advisable to move the order of warrants. Also, the longer the meeting goes on the more disgruntled or impatient the participants become, especially because there was no food at this meeting beyond Girl Scout cookies, and people became hungry. As time goes on more funds also tend to be allocated and people may begin to not want to spend anymore. Thus, moving a warrant may result in a different outcome.

A third way to modify the process is to amend a warrant. An actor can change the warrant in a way that aligns with or moves the discussion towards their interests.²⁵

A fourth way to modify the process is to table the warrant. This is an action taken that does not reject the warrant but delays its vote to another time or indefinitely. It is softer than an outright rejection and is usually used when individuals are not comfortable with taking a definitive vote on the issue. In this meeting, tabling was argued as the proper action as the warrant process did not happen correctly²⁶ and the proposal was deemed not ready for a vote.²⁷ Modifying the process is a result of organizing as for it to occur it requires actors to understand how the process works to act and transform the policymaking process.

Emotion

Emotion is the expression of feelings which enhances actions. Emotion was a theme present throughout many of the organizing and mobilizing examples. Emotions were used to enhance the sharing of experiences, thus making them more impactful. They were also commonly used out of frustration at individuals or the process, which usually led to further frustration. Some of the time emotional statements were called out of order. Emotion is a form of mobilizing as it may motivate individuals to act in a certain way in the moment, especially with regards to frustration. Emotion could transform individuals and be organizing through the sharing of an especially impactful experience.

²⁰ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Louise 02:58:25.

²¹ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Louise 03:19:35.

²² "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Ward 4:41:00.

²³ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Robert 6:19:00.

²⁴ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Alena 4:20:00.

²⁵ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Robin 2:29:45; Liz 4:30:44; Jim 4:46:39.

²⁶ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Robin 00:36:44.

²⁷ "Brentwood Town Meeting 3-18-2023," at Liz 5:51:00.

Discussion

Transformation is a key aspect of community organizing (Freire 1974), and thus the presence of plentiful organizing can aid in the success of a participatory deliberative democracy. Leslie finds that participatory and participatory deliberative democracy successfully occur when individuals encounter each other, and that encounter results in a new collective understanding and each individual being transformed (2018, 437). McCoy and Scully discuss these connections within community organizing in explaining how community organizing engages people to make change in deliberative and participatory democracy (2002). Organizing can assist in producing successful participatory deliberative democracy by ensuring the transformation of citizens so they will deliberate and make collective decisions. Han et al. (2024)'s framework distinguishing organizing from mobilizing allows us to differentiate between methods that lead to transformation or not. Further research in community organizing may want to investigate organizing, and its transformative value, while differentiating between mobilizing to greater understand its role in creating successful participatory deliberative democracy.

The connecting of organizing to participation and deliberation further reinforces the findings of della Porta (2013) and Levine (2022) who connect citizen decision-making, deliberation, and social movements together, and argue it essential to the success of our societies. Clark and Teachout include power in addition to inclusive participation and deliberation within their classification of the town meeting. They define power as "a clear connection between citizen participation, public decisions, and action" (2012, xxvi). Bryan reminds us that the town meeting was created to govern and not to enhance participation and deliberation (Bryan et al. 2019, 13) while others conclude that the town meeting governs (Robinson 2011, 211-212; Schaffer 2019; Zimmerman 1999, 191). Hence, I propose, after synthesizing these literatures and observing them in this case, that the town meeting consists of participation (citizen control) (Arnstein 1969, 223), deliberation (Bächtiger et al. 2018, 2), and governance. Governance I define as "the interactive processes through which society and the economy are steered towards collectively negotiated objectives" (Ansell and Torfing 2022, 4). Levy also makes this connection between society, the economy, and steering towards objectives in concluding that the achievement of equity will come from political and not simply economic causes (2009, 296). Governance as a concept expands upon social movements (della Porta 2013; Levine 2022) to include more general connections between participation, public decisions, and action (Clark and Teachout 2012, xxvi). Further, it retains the transformative aspect of community organizing through its "interactive" and "steering" processes (Ansell and Torfing 2022, 4). Steiner connects deliberative democracy and participatory governance. He identifies that a challenge to the model is institutionalizing open communication between citizens and politicians to ensure the consideration of citizen deliberative recommendations by politicians (2018, 49-50). The New England Town Meeting, or deliberative participatory governance, may offer answers to these questions of how to institutionalize interactions between citizens and governments and keep democracies strong and functioning (2018, 49-50) in at least smaller jurisdictions (Clark and Teachout 2012). As Townsend and Reiss conclude, the town meeting has us consider a model where government trusts people to make decisions in deliberation, rather than depending on government or politicians to consider and enact citizens' interests (2022, 8).

For practice, this study outlines several different forms of mobilizing and organizing that those who participate in the town meeting can utilize. New or old participants to the town meeting can use

these findings to participate more and achieve their goals at the town meeting. This paper builds on the work of Rule (2012), Townsend (2004; 2006; 2009), Townsend and Milburn (2023), and Townsend and Reiss (2022) who conceptualized and developed frameworks of the town meeting's stages, dynamics, and characters. This study adds to these works by providing a collective action framework.

A limitation of this study is that it only analyzed what I observed at the meeting itself. This study could have been strengthened by adding triangulation through interviews and document analysis. Thus, this research only investigates the strategies that occur during organizing or mobilizing speech. Further research could include interviews with the individuals acting and data collection before and after the meeting. This study was also a singular case study, and thus the findings here do not necessarily transfer to other cases.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to community organizing and democracy by revealing the importance of transformation. It further provides examples of mobilizing and organizing. The researcher finds that we can use Han et al. (2024)'s framework to make determinations between transformative and non-transformative actions. This paper discovers that examples of mobilizing include invoking a higher authority, using data, continuously pushing for a position, simplifying policy, and acting with emotion. For organizing, this paper found examples of using experience, asking information gathering questions, sharing ideas, and modifying the process. The themes in these examples include authority, discovery, process, and emotion. These examples and themes reveal dynamics and offer strategies for participants of town meetings, community organizing, and democracy to further their engagement. This paper, by building theoretical linkages between community organizing and democracy within the empirical case of the New England Town Meeting finds that studies in community organizing, participatory deliberative democracy, and town meeting must not only consider participation and deliberation, but also governance to provide the transformative connection between participation and deliberation. Participatory deliberative governance with its transformative nature may have potential to produce answers to some of our society's ever-growing challenges.

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