INTRODUCTION

In spring, 2021, UVM student Lucy Heisey updated and analyzed the data on Vermont’s town meetings provided on the Vermont Secretary of State (SOS) website. 2019 data was selected since it was the most recent year that did not include a national primary (which affects voter turnout). The foundational data was volunteered to the SOS by towns, and Lucy worked to refine and analyze the content. Her work included double-checking a number of towns (especially those whose data seemed potentially erroneous), observing patterns based on town size and other factors, and following up with qualitative analysis.

BACKGROUND

Vermont has 237 incorporated towns, all of which use some form of town meeting government. (The nine cities in Vermont do not use the town meeting form of government). Of Vermont’s 237 incorporated, 63 have a population of 2,500 and over, and 174 have a population of under 2,500 (2010 Census data). Of these 237 towns, in 2019 222 towns (93.67 percent) reported their data to the Vermont Secretary of State website. This includes 62 towns (27.93 percent of reporting towns) with populations of 2,500 and over, and 160 towns (72.07 percent of reporting towns) with populations of under 2,500.

Most Vermont towns use a floor meeting for some of their decision-making; some towns have switched partly or entirely to Australian ballot (AB) voting. In 2019, the reporting towns broke out this way:

- Percentage of towns voting on everything from the floor: 24.32%
- Percentage of towns voting on everything from the floor except electing public officials: 21.17%
- Percentage of towns voting on their budget by AB (these towns may or may not elect public officials by AB, but they do not do vote on public questions by AB): 8.11%
- Percentage of towns voted on everything by AB: 17.57%

Note: In the analysis below, towns that have switched entirely to AB are not counted as holding actual meetings, i.e. AB towns’ town meeting vote count is not factored in, since it would be zero. Also note: Some towns report using AB but our research was not always able to confirm what they are using AB for. These towns do not use AB for electing officers, public questions, or voting on the budget. Several of the towns in question use AB for the Northeast Kingdom Waste Management District. These numbers were confirmed or corrected by town clerks.

Process

The research process started by using the information provided on the Vermont Secretary of State’s website. This spreadsheet includes information about voter turnout and type of vote. In the beginning the research focused on towns under 2,500. Later the process of collecting and organizing information was repeated with towns over 2,500 to get a better understanding of patterns in town meeting attendance and voting in Vermont.

The researcher later used information from individual town websites or contacted town clerks. This was done to fact-check outliers in the data from the Secretary of State’s website. In the
The majority of cases this was easy. There were some issues communicating exactly what information was needed from each town. Most of the town clerks the researcher communicated with directly were happy and quick to provide this information on the 2019 town meeting results.

The most difficult part of the process was organizing the information. The different towns had to be separated based on size and the uses of the different votes. Some towns did not report for different sections of the data. Other times there would be missing figures that the researcher would then go back and find.

**FINDINGS**

**Population Size**
Research by UVM professor Frank Bryan has shown that population size affects town meeting turnout. This pattern is borne out in the 2019 analysis:

- In 2019, the average reported town meeting “highest vote count” in towns with populations of 2,500+ was 4.99 percent.
- Meanwhile, the average reported town meeting “highest vote count” in towns with populations of under 2,500 was 12.55 percent.

Towns under 2,500 had more than double the percentage of turnout than larger towns for town meetings. These findings match the research by Bryan which say that small towns have a higher turnout.
Use of Australian ballot
Research by UVM professor Frank Bryan has shown that the use of Australian ballot lowers town meeting turnout. The researchers were interested in: determining whether this pattern persisted in 2019 data; knowing whether the turnout data reflected any pattern in how AB was used; and other insights. While Bryan’s data was based on actual head-counts at town meetings, the data supplied to the SOS (and used in our analysis below) is the “highest vote count” estimate.

The average town meeting vote count in towns with populations of 2,500+ that vote on their budgets from the floor was 4.85 percent.

The average town meeting vote count in towns with populations of 2,500+ that vote on their budgets by Australian ballot was 6.69 percent. (Some towns reported using both AB and floor vote in the voting methods report but did not include floor vote percentages. These towns are not included in this percent.)

The average vote count in towns with populations of under 2,500 that vote on their budgets from the floor was 10.93 percent.

The average vote count in towns with populations of under 2,500 that vote on their budgets by Australian ballot was 7.04 percent.

Thus, in 2019, larger towns voting by AB for the budget showed a slightly higher vote count than smaller towns voting similarly. (This finding is for 2019 only, and cannot be assumed to indicate cause and effect.)

Larger towns tend to use AB more than small towns. Of the towns that are reported in the data, only three towns over 2,500 did not use AB.

Australian ballot versus floor voting
In general, Australian ballot voting is quicker and easier than attending a meeting, and more people are likely to cast ballots than attend a town meeting.

- As stated above, in 2019 the average town meeting “highest vote count” in towns with populations of 2,500+ was 4.99 percent.
- In these larger towns offering some items by AB, the average town meeting “highest vote count” was 4.99 percent. Some towns reported using both AB and floor vote in the voting methods report but did not include floor vote percentages. These towns are not included in this percent. (All of the towns over 2,500 who use a floor vote, also use AB so the percentage is the same as the average town meeting attendance.)
- In larger towns offering some items by AB, average AB voter turnout (ballots cast) was 18.81 percent.
- In larger towns offering exclusively AB voting (no floor meeting), their average AB voter turnout (ballots cast) was 21.83 percent.
- Meanwhile, as stated above, in 2019 the average town meeting “highest vote count” in towns with populations of under 2,500 was 12.55 percent.
• In these smaller towns offering some items by AB, their average town meeting vote count was 10.38 percent.
• In smaller towns offering some items by AB, their average AB voter turnout (votes cast) was 20.76 percent.
• In smaller towns offering exclusively AB voting (no floor meeting), their average AB voter turnout (votes cast) was 24.18 percent.

As predicted, AB turnout was higher than floor vote turnout in the reporting towns. The difference between AB and floor vote turnout was greater for larger towns than smaller towns. The difference for towns under 2,500 was around 10 percent. For larger towns this difference was closer to 15 percent. Although this finding can not be assumed to be cause and effect, it suggests that small towns have higher voter turnout. This could potentially be a result of voters feeling more impactful in smaller towns.

If we can assume that any voter who attends town meeting also participated in any AB voting also occurring, an interesting observation emerges in towns of under 2,500. Here, the percentage of AB voters (20.76%) was double the percentage of town meeting attendees (10.38%), which means these two categories are equal, i.e. an average of 10.38% of voters both cast a ballot and participated in town meeting, while another 10.38% cast their ballot and choose not to attend town meeting. Future researchers could consider whether underlying causes could include AB usage, town meeting accessibility, etc.

Key Issues and Citizen Power
Research by UVM professor Frank Bryan has shown that having important issues on the warning affects town meeting turnout. When spikes in turnout appear, they are usually related to a pressing issue being discussed in the town that year. This pattern is borne out in the 2019 analysis. Most spikes in the original data were found to be incorrect entries. Those that remained high showed that issues impact turnout. In Danby, the AB turnout was 59%. This was due to a “hotly contested selectman's race” according to the town clerk.

As seen in the AB versus floor voting results there is a difference in turnout between large and small towns. Towns that reported numbers for floor or AB that were over 65% or under 5% turnout were checked with the town clerk directly. In most cases these numbers were found to be erroneously reported.

CONCLUSION

After the research process, the researcher is reluctant to fully trust the raw data from the Secretary of State’s town meeting data website. Double-checking information with town clerks often revealed that the SOS data had been reported erroneously. However, this may not be an issue directly with reporting to the town clerk. Town reports and town meeting notes often shared the numbers reported with the Secretary of State. It appears that the errors on the Secretary of State’s website are usually the outliers and the other numbers are close to if not correct.
The Secretary of State’s town meeting website offers valuable raw data. The best estimate of vote reported was sometimes incorrect but the town clerks cannot be faulted for taking the time to volunteer this information. The incorrect information could often be corrected by checking the town reports, town meeting minutes and/or by speaking directly with town clerks. This is information that the Secretary of State and individual town clerks have made an extra effort to make available to the public. Minor human error is natural with this type of reporting and should not outweigh the importance that having this information available provides.

While it is valuable to compare the SOS data with the 30 years of data collected by UVM Professor Frank Bryan, it is important to note that the questions differ. While Bryan’s data included actual head-counts from town meetings, the information from the Secretary of State’s website does not include numbers for town meeting attendance, but instead, estimated “highest vote count” from the floor meeting. Town moderators have observed that there are often people who attend town meetings who don’t vote on every article.

This information from the Secretary of State’s website is self reported by town clerks. Not all towns reported the data on 2019 town meeting results to the Secretary of State. The data is labeled as “by your best estimate.” The numbers reported by individual town clerks may not be 100% correct but outliers were checked.

Fact checking and finding additional information required using town websites and contacting town clerks. In general the town websites were accessible. Each town had a different format for the website, but most towns provided their town reports and meeting minutes online. All but one town with a population over 2,500 reported 2019 town meeting data.

Although based solely on the numbers, it might appear that switching to AB would make sense, there is a qualitative aspect that cannot be forgotten. Many social science researchers have noted the value of deliberative democracy in making informed, durable community decisions and strengthening social capital. In March 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, towns all over Vermont held virtual town information meetings to “replace” their traditional town meeting. All voting was done by AB during the time that would traditionally be Town Meeting Day. As part of this research, Lucy viewed four of these informational meetings, and read about many others. We noticed that many of the attendees of information meetings expressed a desire for things to return to normal. Vermont residents missed the traditional town meeting. It appeared to be less about the efficiency of the process but about community. Vermont’s town governance is one of the few places where individuals can directly participate.

**Further Research**
This report only has information from 2019 Town Meeting Day. With more time it would be interesting to compare the 2019 town meeting results with results from previous years. 2020 and 2021 results were not used due to 2020 being an election year and 2021 being dramatically affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Future research could put the results from those two years into perspective with the results from a “normal” year.

The original results for this research came from the Vermont Secretary of State’s website. However, follow-up emails or calls to town clerks showed that several of the numbers reported
by towns to the Secretary of State were incorrect. In this research, outliers (towns reporting turnouts about 65% and below 5%) were checked directly with the town clerk. For instance Bethel reported a floor vote of 92.48%. The error here was an incorrect report of registered voters. The SOS website had 133 voters while the actual number is 1363. This changed the voter turnout to 9%. The majority of outliers were found to be erroneously reported and the researcher updated the numbers for this report. It was not possible to fact-check all the results from the Secretary of State’s website. Future researchers might take extra time to check all information with town clerks to guarantee correct information.

**About the Author**

Lucy Heisey is a sophomore political science major at the University of Vermont. She is focusing on American government and political theory. Lucy is from the Seacoast of New Hampshire and grew up in a town that holds a town meeting. Attending town meetings as a child gave Lucy important background knowledge for this research project.

Susan Clark, an expert on Town Meeting and the author of "All Those in Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community" (with Frank Bryan) served as Lucy’s advisor and research coordinator on the project.

**Sources**

