

# [***In Vermont, 'Town Meeting' is democracy embodied. What can the rest of the country learn from it?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BK6-Y271-JC5B-G0B4-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

ELMORE, Vt. — Julie wants more donations to the food pantry. Kipp is busy knitting a sweater. Shorty is ready to ask: Why is so much being spent on a truck? The coffee, fresh-baked bread and donuts have been laid out. Eighty-seven voters have squeezed into the Elmore Town Hall.

Town Meeting is about to begin. Moderator Jon Gailmor stands up.

“Good morning, everyone, and welcome to democracy,” he says. “This is the real thing, and we should all be proud that we’re doing this.”

Across the United States, people are disgusted with ***politics***. Many feel powerless and alienated from their representatives at every level — and especially from those in Washington. The tone long ago became nasty, and many feel forced to pick a side and view those on the other side as adversaries.

But in pockets of New England, democracy is done a bit differently. People can still participate directly and in person. One day each year, townsfolk gather to hash out local issues. They talk, listen, debate, vote. And in places like Elmore, once it’s all over, they sit down together for a potluck lunch.

Town Meeting is a tradition that, in Vermont, dates back more than 250 years, to before the founding of the republic. But it is under threat. Many people feel they no longer have the time or ability to attend such meetings. Last year, residents of neighboring Morristown voted to switch to a secret ballot system, ending their town meeting tradition.

Not so in Elmore, population 886. Its residents are used to holding tight to traditions. They’ve fought to keep open their post office, their store and their school, the last one-room schoolhouse in the state. Last fall, Elmore residents voted 2-1 in favor of keeping their town meetings.

Elmore calls itself the beauty spot of Vermont. The town borders a lake, which in early March is dotted with people ice fishing. Beyond, a mountain rises. At night, steam floats up from sugarhouses, where maple sap is being boiled down into syrup.

The heartbeat of the town is the store. “I’ve always said it’s a live, living, breathing creature. I don’t own it; she owns me,” says Kathy Miller, 63, a longtime former owner who still helps out at the store. People would come in not only to buy milk and pick up the mail, Miller recalls, but to use the fax machine, find a plumber or just to swap gossip.

After joining the state grocers’ association in the 1980s, Miller testified before Congress about the impact of credit card fees. Back then, she believed that little people could have a voice in national ***politics***. But these days, she says, Washington has gotten away from the basics. Too big, she says. Too messed up. Tilted off its axis.

Miller describes herself as a Republican who hasn’t drunk the Kool-Aid. But at Town Meeting, she says, political differences don’t mean a thing.

“There’s no animosity,” she says. “People can talk about things. You shake hands with your neighbor when you leave.”

At Town Meeting, she's successful in pushing for an increase to the town’s library funding from $1,000 per year to $3,000.

Gailmor, 75, is a singer-songwriter who describes himself as an independent voter. He first moved to Elmore in 1980 and says he found the town meeting tradition nothing short of miraculous. It wasn’t some politician spouting off but real people taking part. He was so inspired that he even wrote a song about it.

“Greet the old town folks, hear the gossip and the jokes, dip a donut in a good strong cup of Joe,” Gailmor sings. “Find your favorite chair, plant your buttocks there — we’re getting down to business, don’t you know.”

At town meetings, people sometimes go beyond voting on local issues and decide to take a stand on national issues of the day. At home, Gailmor holds a photograph of his late wife, Cathy Murphy, when she was speaking out against nuclear weapons at an Elmore Town Meeting in the 1980s.

This year, Elmore decides to take a stance on another broader issue by adopting a declaration of inclusion. It states the town will welcome all people regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Frank Bryan, a retired University of Vermont professor who wrote a book about town meetings, coined the term “forced civility” to describe the way people dealing with disagreements in person are compelled to recognize each other’s common humanity in a way that larger-scale political interactions do not allow.

But just having voters show up for hours on a weekday morning is challenging. Morristown is one of many Vermont towns to end the tradition of town meetings. Richard Watts, the director of the Center for Research on Vermont at UVM, says people in larger towns tend to feel less sense of connection.

There’s a key downside when a town moves to secret ballot, also known as an Australian ballot because states there were the first to adopt such a system in the mid-19th century: It’s usually a straight up-or-down vote. That means people can’t make tweaks or debate issues. And for some, the open, collegial debate is the genius of the entire system.

Elmore’s Town Meeting has been going for nearly four hours. What has unfolded represents a cross-section of democracy, of people choosing for themselves how to live and work and govern.

An impassioned speech by Julie Bomengen secures an extra $500 for the Lamoille Community Food Share, raising Elmore’s annual contribution to $750.

Several people have been criticizing the town’s spending habits. Others argue that replacing equipment like the road maintenance truck will only end up costing more if the can is kicked down the road. “We have just spent two-and-a-half million on this new garage, and then we go out and put $300,000 into a new truck. I think that’s a little overkill,” Shorty Towne tells the crowd.

After exhaustive discussions, Elmore’s annual town budget of $1.1 million is passed in a voice vote. There is no dissent.

Gailmor commends townsfolk for holding a lively and well-attended meeting. Kipp Bovey, who has been active in the meeting, has made good progress on knitting her sweater. Towne has had his say about the truck. Democracy has unfolded on a small canvas. And the much-discussed American political polarization? It’s nowhere in sight.

It’s time to adjourn.

“Lunch is cold,” Gailmor says. “But it will be in the church.”

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Associated Press journalist David R. Martin contributed to this report. The AP receives support from several private foundations to enhance its explanatory coverage of elections and democracy. See more about AP’s democracy initiative [*here*](https://www.ap.org/press-releases/2022/ap-announces-sweeping-democracy-journalism-initiative). The AP is solely responsible for all content.

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