



# Town Government Survey Results

Leverett Social Justice Committee

March 17, 2021

# CONTEXT

**SJC mission:** Assess policies and practices of the Town of Leverett and recommend changes to address historic and systemic oppression and inequity.

## **Big questions:**

1. ***How well-informed do Leverett residents feel about town government?*** How could that be improved? If they want to be more informed and involved, what suggestions do they have?
2. ***Do Leverett residents face any key barriers that prevent them from attending town meeting?*** How informed do they feel ahead of time? What suggestions do residents have?
3. ***What do Leverett residents report works well and what can be improved for town meeting?*** What experiences do they have? How engaged are residents in discussions? What ideas do residents have for improvements?

# GATHERING DATA

Cast as wide a net as possible:

- Anonymous
- Collected over two months (Dec 2020 - Jan 2021)
- Electronic version via Google Form, identical paper versions at multiple locations (LES, Town Hall, Library)
- Advertised to Town newsletter, LeverettConnects (multiple times), social networks, flyering at Transfer Station (multiple days)

# FINAL DATA SET

- 262 responses: ***Roughly 1 in 6 members of the town voting-age population***; more than attendance at typical TM
- Mostly came in online
- Proportion of ***people of color roughly in line with town demographics***
- ***More respondents identify as women*** than men (2:1 ratio)
- ***Wide range of length of time living in town***, TM attendance

Abbreviations: TG = Town Government, TM = Town Meeting

# DATA AGGREGATION

Some categories were very small, so we grouped them together:

- Collapsed anyone who identified as a race or ethnicity other than White into "Person of color" category. 12 respondents chose not to identify race
- Similar choices for gender; included a TQNB category for transgender, queer, and non-binary responses

# STATISTICAL COMMENTS

Care needed when interpreting results:

- Sample size for some subgroups is small
- Sample likely consists of residents who are the \*most\* connected to and comfortable in town politics and governance

Yet ... only non-anecdotal data we have?

# KEY FINDINGS

## **Finding 1: People report wanting more information about TG and TM**

- People report wanting to understand TG and committee work better
- People report wanting more information and context for TM articles ahead of time

## **Finding 2: People report liking the *promise* of town meeting**

- Time to discuss and understand issues
- Place where *all* can be involved in democratic decision making

## **Finding 3: That promise is often unrealized, especially for women and people of color**

- People report many barriers to attending TM; higher among people of color and women
- People report an intimidating atmosphere at TM; higher among women

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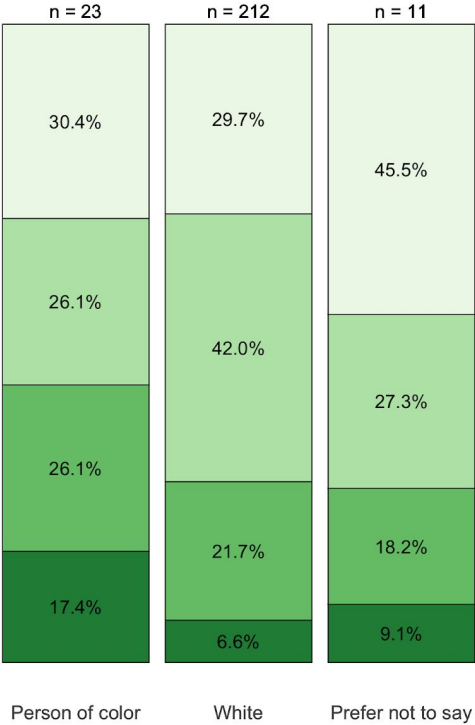
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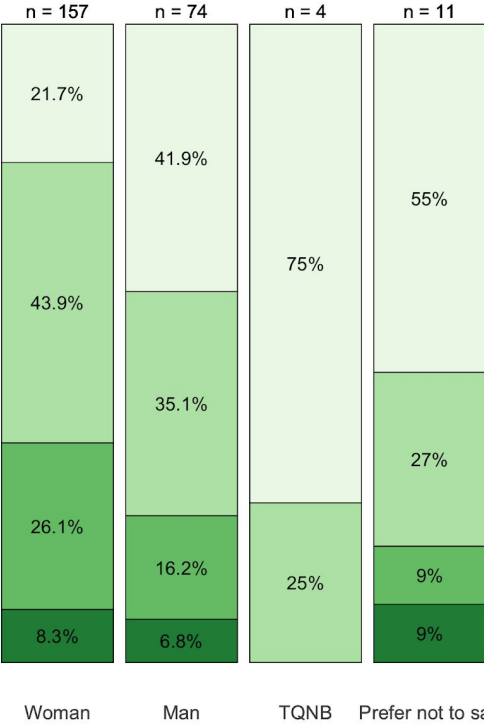
# Finding 1: People report wanting more information about TG and TM

Q4: How well do you understand the structure of Leverett's town government? (The different roles and function of the Select Board, other boards, and committees.)

By race

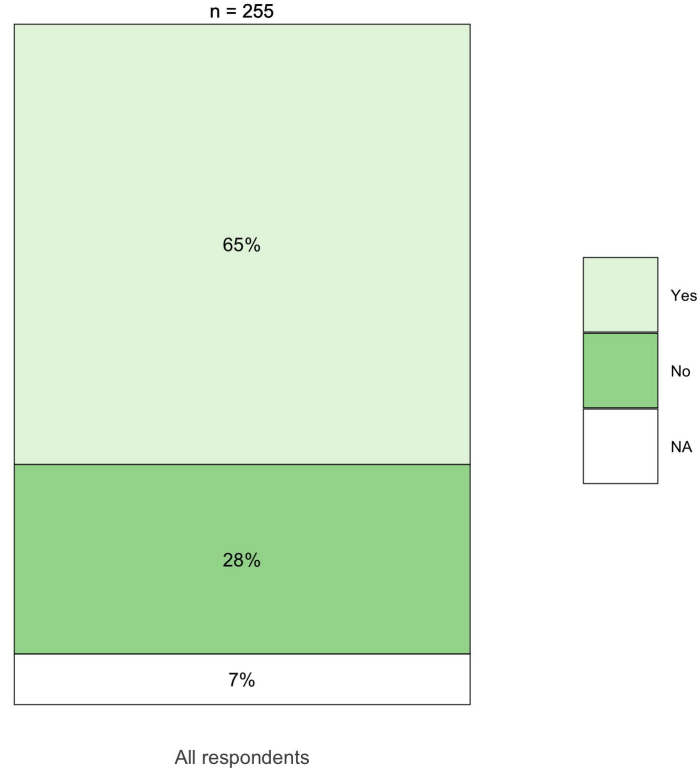


By gender



# Finding 1: People report wanting more information about TG and TM

Q5: Would you like to better informed about the structure and protocols of town government and Town Meeting?



# Finding 1: People report wanting more information about TG and TM

**What suggestions do Leverett residents have for how the Town could help people be more informed before Town Meeting? (n = 74)**

Women (n = 49):

- Want information, updates and alerts sent via web / email / LeverettConnects (17)
- Want more background information on the articles and/or TM process (13)
- Want remote access to and more information about town committees (8)

Men (n = 20):

- Want information, updates and alerts sent via web / email / LeverettConnects (4)

People of color (n = 6):

- Better town website (3)

White people (n = 61):

- Want more basic information about how town government works (7)
- Want remote access to and more information about town committees (6)
- Happy with the amount of information available now (6)

## **Finding 1: People report wanting more information about TG and TM**

**What suggestions do Leverett residents have for how the Town could help people be more informed before Town Meeting? In their own words:**

"An information package for residents would be very useful. Leverett prides itself on being a nice community, but it is actually a very difficult place in which to meet your neighbors and find out about local happenings due to the distance between houses."

"It seems like things are already decided before town meeting. Town meeting is just a formality to hear from people that already know the issues and run the place."

"Create a forum online like LeverettConnects that permits politics so candidates can discuss points of view in more than the 250 word intro in the newsletter."

"Can we join town meeting remotely? That way I could take care of the kids and listen. Can we make it shorter? I can't stay for more than the morning, my kids need lunch and something else to do."

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## Finding 2: People report liking the *promise* of town meeting

### What do Leverett residents like about TM?

- 61%: See neighbors
- 61%: Tradition (35% among people of color)
- 58%: Time to discuss issues before voting
- 57%: Open to all residents' voices
- 48%: Helps understand how TG works

No major differences by race and gender (except as highlighted above).

## **Finding 2: People report liking the *promise* of town meeting**

### **What do Leverett residents like about TM? In their own words:**

"One of the most important means to bring people from different parts of town (and different convictions and denominations) together to shape community."

"Provides space for printed info to be made available to whoever is cruising around."

"Creates and strengthens interest and commitment to the town."

"Direct democracy is terrific, even if it ain't perfect. If you didn't attend and vote, don't complain later."

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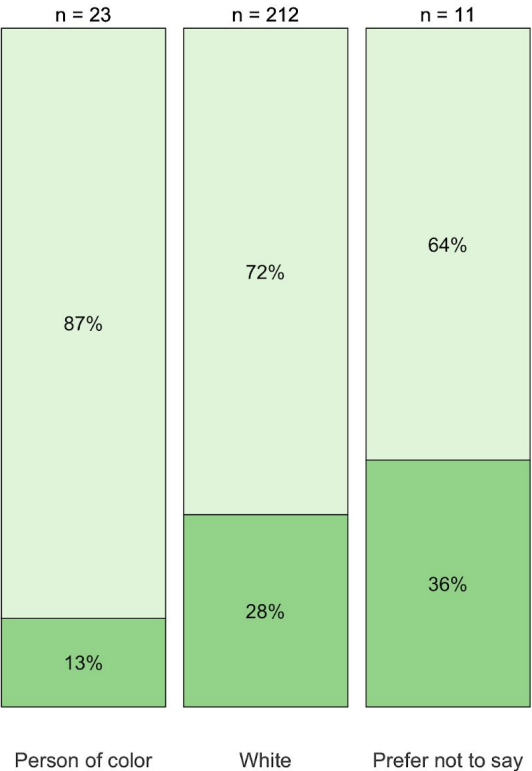
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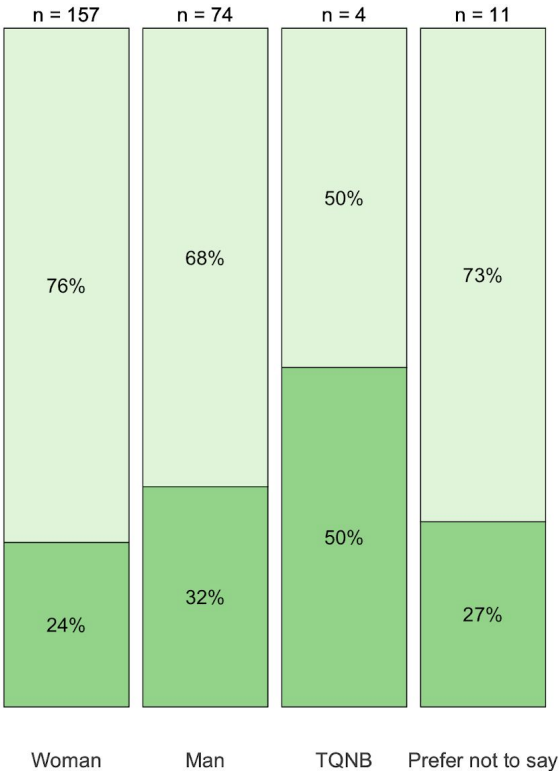
# Finding 3: TM promise is often unrealized, especially for women and PoC

## Are there barriers to you attending Town Meeting?

By race



By gender



## **Finding 3: TM promise is often unrealized, especially for women and PoC**

### **Do Leverett residents face any barriers to attending Town Meeting?**

Most commonly cited barriers among those who cited at least one:

- 52%: TM too long (higher for women)
- 39%: Work
- 34%: Childcare (41% for women, 14% for men, 50% for PoC)
- 15%: Don't know when and where it is (40% for PoC)

73% report that they would like to attend TM more frequently if these barriers were eliminated.

## **Finding 3: TM promise is often unrealized, especially for women and PoC**

### **What does not work well about TM?**

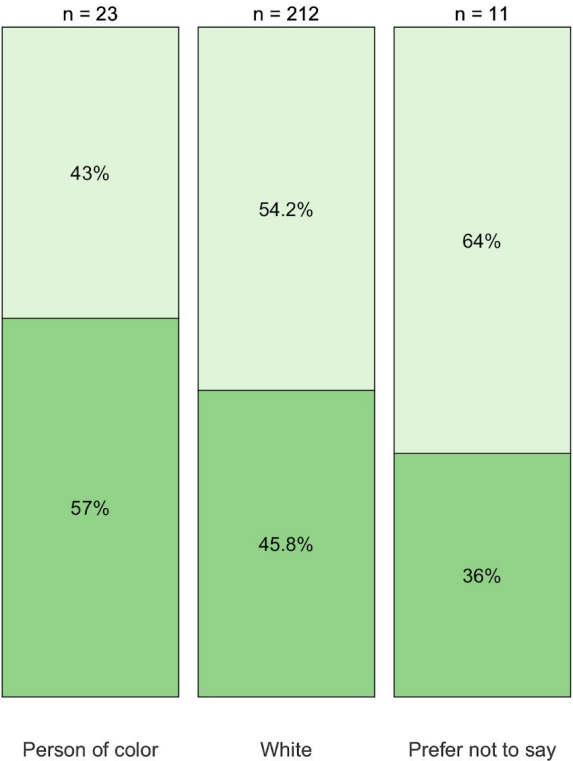
- 46%: Too long
- 37%: It can be intimidating to speak
- 16%: Don't understand rules

Some differences by race and gender.

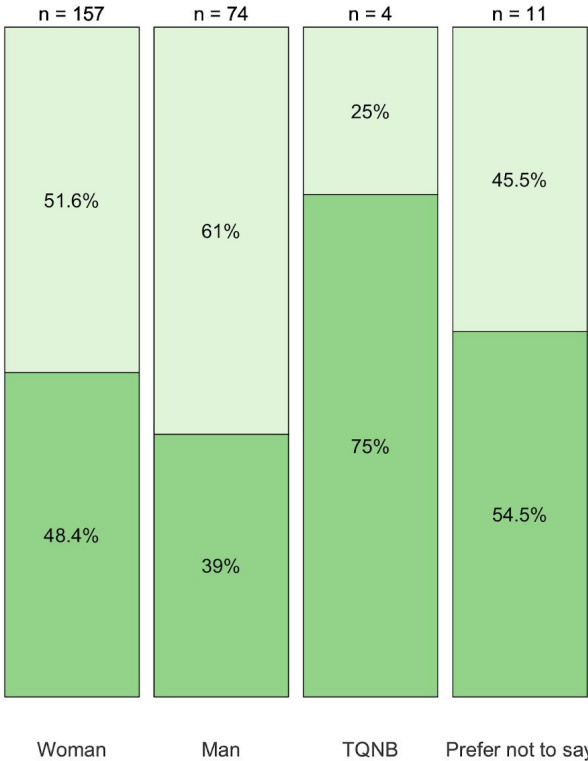
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## Town Meeting is too long

By race



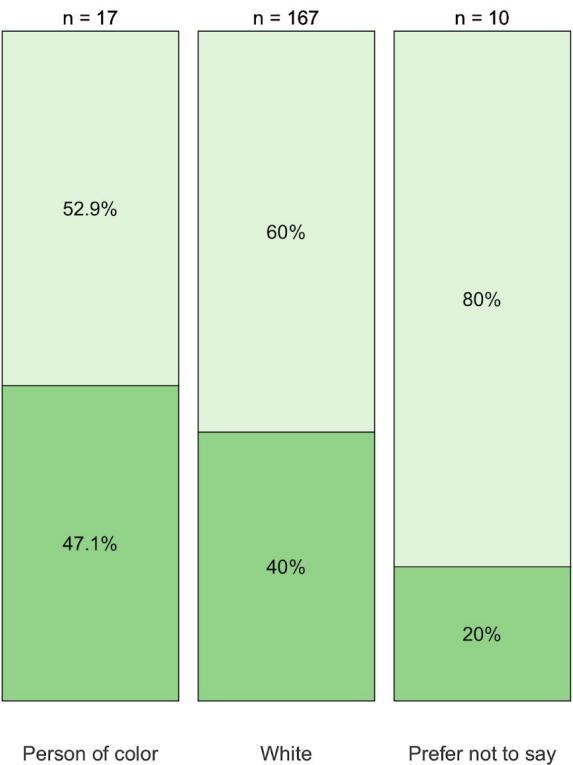
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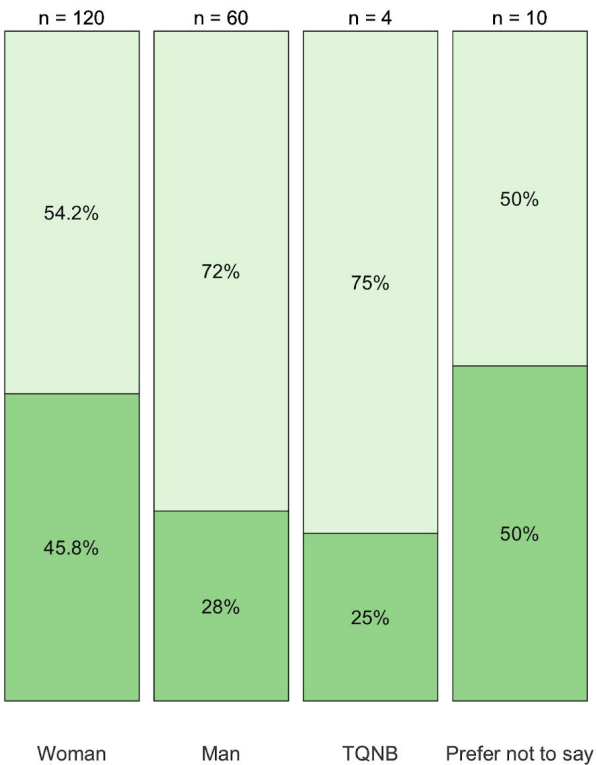
# Finding 3: TM promise is often unrealized, especially for women and PoC

Have you ever felt uncomfortable asking questions / voting publicly at Town Meeting?

By race



By gender



## **Finding 3: TM promise is often unrealized, especially for women and PoC**

### **Why have you felt uncomfortable?**

No major differences by race or gender (n = 56 open responses):

- Intimidated / worried about being judged / rudeness from town officials (37)
- Worried about conflict with others (20)
- Shy / not confident / don't like public speaking (13)
- Hard to speak against the perceived majority (11)
- Feel uninformed, self-conscious about that (8)

## **Finding 3: TM promise is often unrealized, especially for women and PoC**

### **What suggestions do Leverett residents have to solve for this perceived disconnect?**

Lots of ideas!

- Voter guides showing what yes / no votes would mean and alternatives
- Before TM starts, explain how it works and allow written questions
- Avoid acronyms (for committees) and have officials give full name and position
- Remote access to TM
- Anonymous voting on all items (elections and articles)
- Switch to representative TM
- Paper ballot voting, returned over a week, for elected officials
- Absentee voting on articles and elections
- Closing other town offices and locations on TM day (Library, transfer station, etc)

Note: Some of these may not be allowed under current bylaws.

## Leverett residents in their own words

“There has been friction the past few years because people feel criticized by the TM attendees and sometime lash out by saying that we should be more involved in the various meetings that were done over the winter. The reality is that even if I can make it, I am completely lost because I don't know any of the laws that govern the committee decisions.”

“I wish [election] votes could have been handled anonymously, or without the incumbent in the room.”

“Voting for elected officials on the floor by voice is intimidating and error prone. On the other hand, ballot voting during a town meeting takes too long. Ballot voting should happen on another day.”

“Please keep in mind that many town officials are hardly compensated for their work. If the result of this survey is to recommend to give them more work... that won't necessarily be an appealing solution.”



## Leverett residents in their own words

"I suspect your most helpful input will be from those people who haven't found the town as comfortable as I have. I see lots of low-key ways to become part of the community, from friends of the pond to LCA to the Coop to the library, but of course if you don't feel welcome, or you don't understand how easy it is to get involved you won't engage. Would more personal outreach to newcomers help?"

"I love the tradition of Town Meeting, but it is not truly representative of all residents in town. If you can't attend, you can't vote. I feel this is a barrier for me at times due to work, but also for folks who are not able to attend for other reasons ... health, disability, aging, crowd aversion, etc."

"I didn't feel informed enough, didn't want to 'step' into something that may be contentious. I was worried about what my neighbors might think of me."

"It can be difficult to vote against something the fire department or police department wants, or something that neighbors feel very strongly about."

## Leverett residents in their own words

"I'm not a fan of votes being taken purely electronically without attendance at Town Meeting as I think the discussions during Town Meeting are extremely valuable and they do help to inform my (and others') thinking about many warrant articles that are not purely 'housekeeping' matters."

"I have held back opinions and questions a little at TM. I didn't want to prolong it."

"I feel safe but sometimes committee members have used their power and position to intimidate citizens and/or control the nature of a debate in a way that felt threatening or designed to silence critics."

"I really am happy about starting to have this discussion... The idea that everyone could have the opportunity to engage openly / freely is something I hope Leverett (and the rest of the country) embodies."

# RECAP: KEY FINDINGS

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# QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

## How to ask a question for discussion:

- Type “I have a question” in the chat and we will get you in the queue;
- Speak to your own experience (use “I” statements);
- We want to hear from everyone so will prioritize voices that we have not heard already.

## What comes next?

The TG subcommittee will take notes during the discussion and report back to Select Board with an overall summary and recommendations for next steps. We hope this will be the start of a conversation about how to make TG more inclusive.

# RESOURCES

- Gustafson S., (2019) “The Town Meeting Ideal and Race in America”, Journal of Public Deliberation 15(2). doi: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.334>