

["Calling the Question"]

The Politics of Time in a Time of Polarized Politics

Abstract: In this paper, we examine the role of time in shaping decision-making processes in a town meeting, a type of legislative body common in many New England towns. Town meetings are one of the oldest and most democratic institutions of local governance in the United States, and they provide a rich arena in which to investigate how large groups of people convene and make decisions together. A mixed-methods approach enabled our team of researchers to gain insight into the processes and dynamics that played out in one town meeting. We analyze the tensions between democratic values of "taking time" vs. "being efficient." The dynamics are particularly compelling because of an absence of the typical two parties that dominate U.S. political culture. Attitudes toward time closely aligned with voting behaviors. Our study concludes that, even in the context of a culturally and economically homogenous New England town-meeting membership, orientations to temporality are contested and meaningful. Situated historically, these orientations reflect citizens' embrace or rejection of "time-thrift" and suggest implications for participatory democracy.

Keywords: Time, Decision-making, Democracy, Town meeting, U.S. politics.

Introduction

One of the oldest and most entrenched institutions of local governance in the United States unfolds in the context of New England town meetings. This paper draws on three years of research into the Amherst Town Meeting as a case study to propose a theory of time in relation to participatory democratic governance. Town meetings are a historic form of governance that date to the founding of New England communities in the 1600s and 1700s. These are the very civic institutions that Tocqueville praised. In her study of the contemporary linkages between speech and democracy, Townsend (2009: 69) described the town meeting as «an event designed for the expression of town will»¹. Although focused primarily on local issues, the town meeting as a research site has the potential to convey some of the dynamics that create polarization and conflict endemic to other large decision-making bodies.

Amherst is a college town in Western Massachusetts that claims literary luminaries Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost as its own. It boasts a long tradition of citizen participation in local governance. The official population of 37,819 residents (as of the 2010 census) fluctuates dramatically when the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst College, and Hampshire College are in session². The voting population strongly favors Democratic Party

¹ See also Representative Town Meeting (Amherst, Massachusetts, USA), <http://participedia.net/cases/representative-town-meeting>. Accessed September 25, 2013.

² The Fall semester of the academic year runs early September through mid-December; the spring semester begins mid-January and

candidates, as demonstrated in the 2012 presidential election, with 12,798 (82.5%) voting for the Democratic ticket of Obama-Biden, as compared with 1,911 (12.3%) for the Republican Romney-Ryan slate, and 444 (2.9%) for Green Party candidates Stein and Honkala³. Candidates for town meeting do not run with party affiliations.

Town meeting provides a context to explore how large groups make decisions. Not much is known about how large groups make decisions. A mixed-methods approach enabled our team to gain insight into the processes and dynamics that play out in one town meeting, which is particularly compelling because of an absence of the typical two-party binary that currently dominates U.S. political culture. In a *New Yorker* essay, Harvard historian Jill Lepore characterizes U.S. voters and legislators as «more polarized today than they have been at any time since the Confederacy seceded» (Lepore 2013: 75). Despite an absence of official party divisions, our research nevertheless led us to identify group dynamics that fell out along two poles. Contention emerged over specific tactics being used with regard to the deliberative process, and an analysis of those tactics led us to identify the central role of time in shaping the democratic decision-making processes. This paper parses how time is constructed in the context of participatory democracy. We conclude that time itself is a political act.

The politics of time in a time of polarized politics

Over the course of several evenings in late spring 2012, the 240-member Amherst Town Meeting came into session to decide the future of the town. The rules required 50 percent (120 members) to be present to form a quorum, but about 180 or more people usually attended, the actual count depending on the issues under discussion. Members populated the tattered seats in the three lower sections of the Amherst Regional Middle School auditorium. Friends sat next to friends – catching up, exchanging a laugh, even sharing hard candy. Issues before these citizens, elected from 10 town precincts, ranged the gamut: school budgets, zoning articles, social service funding, even an ordinance to opt out of the federal government's controversial immigration crackdown known as the Secure Communities Program. Facilitating discussion and enforcing rules of order stood the town moderator, his fixed expression and white beard artifacts of his 19 years of service in the elected role⁴.

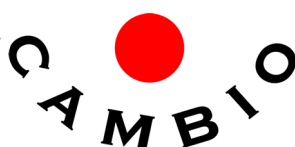
Well into one evening, debate heated up over a zoning proposal to create a “village center” that some supported for its potential to provide more housing as well as badly needed property taxes but that others feared would become a student “ghetto”. A town meeting member raised his hand, the moderator acknowledged him, and the member proposed to “call the question”. Whispered objections ensued. A proposal to call the question puts an end to deliberation and requires a majority vote. The moderator put it to a vote, it got the necessary majority, thereby cutting off debate and making possible a vote on the issue that was on the floor.

Cutting off debate has become a highly controversial tactic in the Amherst Town Meeting. Behind this controversy is an arena of political polarization in a town that is often viewed, by outsiders, as beyond the pale of antagonistic party politics. Indeed, the view is correct to the extent that polarization in this New England college town does not occur around Republican and Democratic conventions. The ballot for town meeting members lists only the names of those running for open seats. There is never any affiliation with a national political party. Even so, polarization does occur, even though people cluster around terms of affiliation that are not immediately demarcated, named, or recognizable, especially to newcomers or outsiders. What is recognizable, however, is the passion and vehemence that divides people and polarizes them into different camps, and the indigenous labels

concludes in early May. The University of Massachusetts Amherst in Fall 2013 reported 20,728 undergraduate students and 4,233 graduate students, making for a total headcount of 24,961 students in residence. Amherst College reported having 1,785 students in Fall 2013. Hampshire College had an enrollment of 1,400 for the same period. For UMASS Amherst, see Office of Institutional Research Fact Sheet, 2013, http://www.umass.edu/oapa/publications/factsheets/enrollment/fall/FS_enr_01_f.pdf. For Amherst College, see <https://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/facts>. For Hampshire College, see <http://www.hampshire.edu/admissions/12331.htm>. Accessed December 5, 2013.

3 Percentages calculated by the author based on Town of Amherst data. Total votes cast were 15,520. See <http://www.amherstma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/21894>. Accessed December 5, 2013.

4 Harrison Gregg began serving as moderator in the Amherst Town Meeting in 1994. He ran unopposed in March 2012 for his 19th term. <http://www.gazettenet.com/2012/03/16/jim-oldham-thinking-about-the-future>.



people use to describe the two dominant groups in the town meeting.

In this paper, we suggest that a profound feature of these two camps emerges in terms of their contrasting orientations to time. Why, we ask, has time become so contentious? What does a focus on the meanings of time reveal about deep-seated cultural convictions and political contestations? The increasingly hardened orientations vis-à-vis time are significant for several reasons, which illuminate the articulating effects of different levels of scale, from the concrete local and regional to the more distant national and global (after Narotzky 2011)⁵. First, a proximate level of scale points to immediate and on-the-ground orientations and how they shape group dynamics. Second, in terms of regional qualities, the orientations reveal deep assumptions about what citizens living in New England and participating in local democratic processes consider to be normal and reasonable uses of time. Third, at a time when global forces as ever bear on local orientations and practices, the different orientations to and enactments of time raise questions about the practices of democracy and the ability of citizenry to collectively engage in the governance of towns and cities in the United States.

Others have noted the different views toward the time of deliberations; however, there has been little elaboration on the group dynamics or different meanings related to those views. Townsend (2009: 74) offered this broad characterization: «Some members value the sometimes slow pace of deliberations, for that constitutes “careful consideration”, whereas others express disdain for what they see as “long, drawn-out talk”». To sum up, we are interested in how orientations to time shape group dynamics, in what orientations to time reveal about its social construction, and in the consequences of these orientations for participation in democratic processes.

Background

In 2009, we began a research project using the Amherst Town Meeting as a case study to understand how large groups make decisions. Given the limited literature on how large groups make decisions, we were inspired to undertake this project. We witnessed subgroup polarization in the town meeting, particularly around controversial issues that end up being close in terms of a voice vote and therefore requiring a tally vote. We have noted, both through interviews and participant observation in the town meeting, starkly different orientations to time between members of the different groups. This orientation also influences the dynamics of the town meeting in substantial and important ways. The process of how discussions among those present take place, and how much time to give to debate, has also been a divisive issue. Below, we parse the politics of time.

Methods

We made use of a mixed-methods team approach for this project. We relied on participant observation over the course of more than three years, semi-structured interviews with about 30 town meeting members, qualitative textual analysis, and quantitative data analysis of historical voting records and demographic data. We also took an insider-outsider approach. One of the authors (Krause) has never served on Amherst Town Meeting; the other author (Sharma) has been a member of Amherst Town Meeting for more than four years and has also served on the Finance Committee. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the individuals and then transcribed. Our interdisciplinary team of two researchers and four student assistants worked collectively to identify themes, define the codes, and write a detailed codebook. We drew heavily on coding approaches discussed in Ryan and Bernard (2003), Bernard and Ryan (2010), and as illuminated by Clarence Gravlee and Amber Wutich in a weeklong training sponsored by the National Science Foundation in 2010. Themes covered six major categories: Memory, Decision Making, Political Practice, Time, Group Dynamics, and Town Meeting Process. We coded using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA.

⁵ In addition to the cited article, this formulation of scale also draws on an advanced seminar that Susana Narotzky delivered in the UMass Department of Anthropology in Fall 2011. Narotzky's visit was sponsored by the European Field Studies Program with support of a training grant from the National Science Foundation, International Experience for Students, *Cultural Heritage in European Societies and Spaces* (Award OISE-098575).

To offer one relevant example from our codebook, we define the theme of *time* as follows: «references to time that emphasize efficiency or inefficiency as well as deployment of time as a strategy» (Krause and Sharma 2010). Our criteria for inclusion (after Ryan's model as discussed in Bernard and Ryan 2010: 99-100) was explicitly focused on references to, or uses of, time in the context of town meeting. We allowed for the inclusion of metaphors related to time or "indigenous" terms. We also specified that these included time-saving techniques or opinions about efficiency or inefficiency (see *Appendix*).

From observations of the town meeting, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and thematic analysis, it became apparent that the divergent views and uses of time between two contending groups were deep-rooted and visceral.

Orientations to time

Cultural orientations to temporality have varied greatly across eras and places. Keith Basso's now classic research with Western Apache in southeastern Arizona on the practice of not speaking for «lengthy periods of time» (1970: 214) provides a counterpoint for what has become a very naturalized, Western orientation to time. Among the Western Apache who informed Basso's work in the mid-1960s, it was considered socially appropriate to remain silent when meeting strangers. Obviously, there are many different possible situations in which one can encounter a stranger and many different types of strangers, and Basso (1970) discusses a good range of these. Because of the speech convention not to launch too quickly into speaking with a stranger, those who violated such conventions were viewed with suspicion. For Anglo strangers, it was often assumed that the stranger wanted «to teach us something» or «to make friends in a hurry» (Basso 1970: 218). Suspicion aroused for wanting to «make friends in a hurry» has implications for denaturalizing assumptions about time that have come to be taken for granted among many busy, middle-class American professionals:

The latter response is especially revealing, since Western Apaches are extremely reluctant to be hurried into friendships—with Anglos or each other. Their verbal reticence with strangers is directly related to the conviction that the establishment of social relationships is a serious matter that calls for caution, careful judgment, and plenty of time (Basso 1970: 218).

In other words, certain things cannot and should not be rushed. A moral economy of time becomes evident here. There are moral implications to how it is used. Certain discipline is required to enact such cultural conventions. Even within a capitalist, Western, linear-time oriented society, significant variations exist.

Historical shifts in contemporary Westerners' sense of time and habituation to "time-thrift" are well documented. The relationship between time, discipline, and action was the theme of E.P. Thompson's classic study of the measures taken to discipline factory workers to productive time. The clock and its use evolved in such a way as to eventually penetrate the workings of society: its rhythms, schedules, even relations, private and public. Thompson presents the implications of a shift from task orientation to clock orientation (see Evans-Pritchard 2007 on the Nuer and Gutman 1973 for a U.S. investigation).

Thompson's observations seem as relevant today as when they were first proposed nearly a half-century ago: first, task orientation «is more humanly comprehensible than timed labor»; second, such communities show less «demarcation between "work" and "life"» or more intermingling and less conflict between the two; and third, those oriented to the clock tend to regard those in task-oriented societies as having an attitude toward labor as «wasteful and lacking in urgency» (Thompson 1967: 60). Thompson details the techniques of time management during England's burgeoning industrial age, focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the effects on working-class subjects as well as their resistance to such rationalities. He identifies tensions that arise as «time becomes currency» and its measurement «a means of labour exploitation» (Thompson 1967: 61). He offers compelling historical insight as «new labour habits were formed, and a new time discipline was imposed», including «propaganda of time-thrift» (Thompson 1967: 90; see also Glennie and Thrift 1996).

Scholarship on time has proliferated, particularly since the 1990s, across disciplines and themes. Scholars have pushed our understanding of subjects in modern society, offering insight into how time gets under our skin, into

our soul, and disciplines us in profound ways (Elias 1992; Nowotny 1992; Sirianni 1987; van Krieken 1990). Millard (1990) exposes the stubborn role of the clock in expert breastfeeding advice with a shift from scheduled feeding regimes (and orientation to an external clock) to on-demand feeding approaches (and an assumption of natural internal clocks). Ingold (1995) notes the persistence of task orientation and the alienating effects of the clock. In a landmark review essay, Nancy Munn (1992: 109) develops the concept of “temporalization” to remind us of the symbolic power of time, that «time is not merely “lived”, but “constructed” in the living».

Studies of time extend into specific arenas such as politics (Miller 1993; Santiso 1998; Santiso and Schedler 1998) and workplaces (Boden 1997; Glucksmann 1998; Isari and De Marco 2010), including themes of gender and “just-in-time labour” (Odih 2003), knowledge production (Hassan 2003), and changes that technology, and globalized time-space compression, appear to necessitate (Castree 2009; Ceccagno 2007; Ladner 2009).

Investigating the rhythms of the modern family, Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik (2013) in *Fast-Forward Family*, time is spoken as something highly valued yet scarce. Modern-day humans seem to be in constant conflict with time. «Family counselors, newspaper columnists, academic researchers – even bloggers – agree on a core problem of contemporary American families: there is too much to do and too little time» (Graesch 2013: 27; see also Southerton and Tomlinson 2005).

This broad swath of research on time provides a backdrop for comprehending its role in participatory democratic processes, such as those that unfold in a New England town meeting.

Politics of time in town meeting

The structure of town meeting shapes the contours of time. State law mandates basic criteria although particulars are left up to each town to codify. Towns with fewer than 12,000 inhabitants, for example, are prohibited from adopting a city council form of government. A Commonwealth of Massachusetts *Citizen's Guide to Town Meetings* describes town meetings as «the purest form of democratic governing»⁶.

The commonwealth allows for both open forms of town meeting and representative forms. The Amherst Town Meeting dates to 1759 and operated with an open format until 1939⁷. In an open form, any or all of the town's voting-age residents can vote on all matters. In a representative or limited form, town members elect town meeting members who are empowered to vote on the town's business. The *Citizen's Guide* makes no mention of required frequency or duration of town meeting.

In Amherst, the 240 elected residents typically come together during two major seasons. Annual Town Meeting is held each spring with a fall Special Town Meeting frequently called each year as needed. Currently, sessions occur in the evenings with a run time of 7:30-10 p.m. in the Middle School Auditorium. Typically, the town notes one date when the session begins with others reserved if needed. For the fall 2013 session, which began on November 4, the additional four dates of November 6, 13, 18, and 25 were reserved. For the spring session, scheduled to begin on April 28, 2014, an additional eleven sessions were reserved for April 30, May 5, 7, 12, 14, 19, 21, 28, June 2, 9, and 11. In addition to the town meeting itself, other voluntary informational sessions are held. Seasonal meetings often kick off with a bus tour, designed to educate citizens on issues as it takes elected members on a tour of the town and highlights areas that are relevant to “Articles” on the agenda, which is known in local parlance as the “Warrant”. Precinct meetings are also commonly organized a few weeks before the first session to inform citizens in each precinct to gather information and express their views on what they think are important issues in specific Articles in the Warrant. In addition, about a dozen committees and boards, populated with elected or appointed members, are charged with providing expert input on the various issues facing the town. The committees deemed to be most important included the Select Board, the Finance Committee, and the Planning Board⁸.

6 William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Citizen's Guide to Town Meetings*, <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm>. Accessed September 25, 2013.

7 Town Meeting Handbook, The League of Women Voters of Amherst, Amherst, MA, 2007.

8 Amherst, Massachusetts, TMCC Events. <http://www.amherstma.gov/index.aspx?NID=1493>. Accessed September 25, 2013.

We identified two major orientations to time, which is itself a fault line: GreenTime vs. BlueTime. These group names are ours, derived from an analysis of tally voting behaviors. In order to indicate the group membership of our informants, we use Blue and Green as their last names; the first names are pseudonyms to protect their identity. One individual with particularly consistent voting behavior that spanned several years and who expressed stable views became the “anchor person”. We then developed a “Green Scale” that compared every member’s voting record with that of the anchor. A member who voted the same way as the anchor would receive a score of 100; a member who always voted opposite the anchor received a zero. Those with scores between 0 and 30 almost always voted in support of fiscally conservative positions; those with scores between 70 and 100 almost always voted in opposition to development projects and in support of funding town/human services. In common parlance, those scoring 0-10 or 90-100 could be considered “hard-liners” who rarely, if ever, changed their positions on issues. We gave the name “Greens” to those on the top third of the 0-100 scale, and “Blues” to the bottom third. The remaining third became the “Middles”.

Local parlance for these two groups exists and is often derogatory or ironic. For example, the Blues often refer to the Greens as “the Tribe.” The Greens call the Blues “Centrists” or “Kool-Aid drinkers.” Self-referential labels also exist. The Blues call themselves “Sustainable Amherst” or “the Rationalistas.” The Greens call themselves supporters of “true sustainability.” Although the names do not suggest different relationships to time, the orientations aligned rather consistently. The Greens placed a premium on process and open debate. They valued the town meeting for its deeply democratic procedures. The Blues, on the other hand, found this orientation to time deeply objectionable. Blues believe in the efficiency of time. In fact, the amount of time that decisions generally took was such a central issue that in the past it had driven some members to try to eliminate town meeting altogether, and when that didn’t work, they formalized their group and systematically began recruiting newcomers who shared their frustration. Those in the middle expressed views that bridged these two camps but did not offer much in the way of different relationships to time.

The value of democracy: taking time vs. being efficient

In this section we analyze the key tensions that emerged around time on the floor of town meeting, as well as in our field interviews. We found that town meeting members’ voting behaviors lined up in predictable ways in terms of their orientation toward and views on time – as if orientation toward time was a deep wedge that separated the two groups. The Greens valued taking time when developing a viewpoint whereas the Blues favored being efficient. Both sides spoke about the need to respect the process; however, they expressed starkly different ideas of what respect for the process meant in practice. In broad strokes, the Blues tended to place a good deal of trust in their fellow town meeting members who held authority positions on key governing committees, such as the Select Board, the Finance Committee, and the School Committee. The Blues tended to be skeptical of town meeting as a form of governance although there was a range here in terms of tolerance – some would prefer an altogether different form of government, such as a city council with a mayor, whereas others were quite satisfied with ongoing strategies to reform town meeting.

The Greens were not without their fair share of skepticism, but theirs was skepticism of authority figures and they did not believe in empowering the officials to make decisions but rather favored giving as much as possible of their own voices to as many different points of view as were available. They admitted that decision making can be slow, take a lot of time, and be messy, but they believed that this messiness was a critical part of the democratic process, and that the collective body of town meeting will arrive at significantly different – and better – decisions when more time for discussion is permitted. The Blues as a group did not tend to believe that more discussion leads to different or better decisions; they saw it rather as redundancy, “political theater”, or as a “time sink”.

So anyway— so other things that— the good, the bad, and the— so you ask about the length of town meeting. Well— you know, jury deliberations can take a long time, too. And democracy takes a— Some things are time consuming and somewhat messy— but they may be the best system we have. (Grace Green)⁹

⁹ Dashes follow linguistic anthropology conventions to represent a repair, latch, or abrupt end. A “repair” occurs when a speaker «starts

Several Greens made concrete arguments for the materiality of time. They suggested that longer debates changed close votes, and hence resulted in different decisions for the town than what a quick vote would have produced. One member recalled a revote that concerned keeping one of the public swimming pools open. She claimed she was convinced that the fact that deliberations continued for a fairly long time tipped the balance in favor of funding the pool. She recalled one older woman saying, «My husband always used that pool», and another person adding, «I'm handicapped. That's the only pool that has a lift that I can get down in». Describing herself as «on the progressive side of things», and that indeed the «whole valley is on the progressive side of things», she believed that the shorter debates favored the less progressive politics of the Blues.

If debate is cut short, um, things that might have been a close vote or might have tipped more towards the perspective that— that I'm more inclined to— won't happen if there's a short debate... And if enough people talk, um, the most progressive outcome may just grow out of the body... And these are people who would never speak in the first twenty minutes or even thirty minutes of a debate. But when there was enough time so that— so that they could have the courage to raise their hand— and I'm talking like forty-five minute to hour debates sometimes. People you never heard from, um, or who might be— might be shy about raising an opinion that's different from the bloc they normally vote with. So you saw it on the pool vote, you saw it on the public transportation vote— (Grace Green)

This gesture toward the importance of giving voice to people who may be less courageous about speaking reflects a viewpoint that time allows for more voices and hence new possibilities with different results. This view contrasts starkly with that of the Blues as expressed here:

So there also just seems to be almost people who really want to make sure every, every single person has gotten to speak even if it sort of seems like a decision is— is getting close. And also that I think frankly a much greater willingness to spend inordinate amounts of time at town meeting. (Danielle Blue)

Furthermore, questioning the value of what to her seemed like endless debate about trivial things, she said,

It also strikes me that there is a lot of discussion about just tiny, tiny, tiny little things. And that strikes me as, you know, in some cases I think not respectful of people's time... So I find it to be a frustrating form of government. I— I don't—I don't like inefficient meetings and it strikes me as sort of an exercise in, you know, a lot of wasted time for a pretty small result. (Danielle Blue)

Another member of the Blues group remarked,

[Our group] tends to be a little bit more inclined to respect the process. In other words, if it's been vetted by the Finance Committee and the Select Board... if it's been through this long process of people who are well-informed and have considered the arguments, all things being equal, they would tend to believe, you know, to accept the recommendation. Not to try to second guess it and rethink it on— re-debate it on the spot with two hundred plus people. And yet any citizen has the right to make a motion there. And so this was emblematic of a larger tension, I think, about process and efficiency. (Frank Blue)

Yet for the Greens, the town meeting was the foundation of the town's tradition of civic engagement. To force a premature end to an ongoing debate was, to them, disrespectful in the democratic process and violated a fundamental premise of the free exchange of ideas.

I didn't buy— the argument was being made that [town meeting] is inefficient and I think, you know, efficiency isn't the highest value and that what we were saying a moment ago about the— the value of bringing in multiple perspectives and letting, you know, all different voices be heard and learning to listen to your neighbors are all higher values than just the efficiency of getting to a decision because the importance is you want a good decision and you want people

to say one thing and then (maybe) says another, or repeats the same thing again» (Philips 1998: 143). A latch, or hitch, is a slight pause in the flow of talk. The dash is also used to signal where a speaker stops talking but the intonation does not resemble the typical pattern heard at the end of a sentence; such abrupt endings commonly occur when the speaker is interrupted or interrupts themselves.

to share ownership of that decision. (Aaron Green)

For the Greens, the calls for efficiency were a code to defer the decisions to the authority structure of the town, and to justify cutting debate so as to short circuit the decision process. They were strongly opposed to this tactic.

Clearly, my view was that nothing is decided. There are no people in authority to whom— that are more knowledgeable, more important— [decisions] should be deferred to in any way... having people say that they were in authority and I should defer to them was like— I mean, they were doing terrible, stupid things. I mean, during Vietnam, during the civil rights movement... and making really serious errors of judgment and— and manifestly clear. I mean, anyone with— with the inclination to inquire could find out— I mean, there was enough literature about Vietnam so that if you took a couple weeks off, you could realize how stupid things were. This was in '64, '65. You— you could realize that this is crazy. So the idea that one should defer to people in authority was— had long since departed from my— [laughter]— you know, sort of my— like the way in which I look at the world. (Steve Green)

Despite these generally stark views, and references to historically loaded events in American popular memory, each side had its moments of moderation. Despite the Greens' commitment to deliberation, they were not immune to a sense of frustration regarding the time that town meeting could often take:

But sometimes when I was sitting there I think this a crazy way to do business. I do— I do— because I think, oh my goodness, these people all have to speak. And we have to vote and then somebody wants a tally vote and then we have to count votes and it just seems interminable. (Meg Green)

Likewise, one member of the Blues who described town meeting as «glacially slow» in a moment of moderation said, «So, the slowness, you know, drives you crazy but in general, geez, that's why Amherst is still kind of cute» (Alex Blue).

Calling the question: the nitty-gritty of the politics of time

The different orientations toward time not only reflected fundamental differences in the views of the two groups on such things as efficiency and authority, but they also incited the groups to use time itself as a tactical weapon in the debates. As such, not only did the different orientations toward time reflect deep-seated differences between the groups, time itself was used by the two groups as an instrument for highlighting their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the other group. Indeed, the use of time became a tactic deployed on the floor of the town meeting. As visible actions for all to see, such tactics were a way of communicating continuing solidarity on fundamental values (such as efficiency and authority) that group members shared.

One of the most contentious yet frequent procedural tactics that the Blues used was the motion to end debate and force a vote on the issue under consideration. According to the rules of the house, any member of the town meeting could raise her or his hand and, when called on by the moderator, say, «I call the previous question» —indicating a request that the debate be ended and the issue voted on. This was the way for the member to say that s/he had heard enough of both sides and was ready to cast her or his vote and expected that most others in attendance were also ready to cast their vote. The moderator was then obliged to take a vote on this request and, if the vote was successful, the debate was promptly ended and the vote taken on the main motion. Such a vote to end the debate was not always successful, and it was mostly called by members of the Blue group but was never called by those who were strongly affiliated with the Greens.

There was a great deal of solidarity among the Blues, in fact, to end debate quickly, and many group members took turns calling the question. Blues often used texting technology to communicate with each other and to signal when the question should be called. A key player in this group explained:

On the rational side, one of our goals has been to reduce the length of town meeting... Um, we try to make it more efficient via a few tools. One is calling the question, which basically ends debate on a topic. Um, so, we try to end

debate at a reasonable point. Like, we don't have the view everybody should be heard. We have the view every opinion should be heard. (Alex Blue)

Here, Alex draws a significant distinction between the idea of *every person* being heard and *every opinion* being heard. He admits that this is a highly controversial point of view and that calling the question and cutting off debate is a highly charged tactic.

And so we call the question and then there's a vote. Um, so, that's— that's a question, you know, that a lot of people don't agree with, you know. There's a lot of people who agree— who feel that everybody should get to speak on every issue. Um, that's kind of crazy. I mean, it's just— it would be grossly inefficient. (Alex Blue)

Indeed, the Blues broadly shared the view that the town meeting was an inefficient form of governance and that decisions could be made much more quickly only if the debates could be cut short. They also were inclined to acquiesce to the opinions of the various committees, boards, and town staff, whose domain expertise they much respected. As is evident in the comment by Steve Green above, the Greens expressed much more skepticism toward such authority figures and favored the broadest amplification possible of the many points of view they felt existed in the town meeting. Core members of the Greens deeply objected to the tactic of calling the question.

We now turn our attention to the “nitty-gritty” of the politics of time, drawing inspiration from Paul Willis and Mats Trondman's *Manifesto for Ethnography* and their suggestion to tend to ordinary details and present them in ways that may «produce maximum “illumination” for readers» (2000: 12).

The nitty-gritty of town meeting politics caught our attention one evening in Spring 2013, when a time-related drama erupted on the floor of the Amherst Town Meeting. It had already been a long season, having begun on May 6 and ending with a particularly long-running meeting on June 10. During that final evening, Sharma was seated, as a member of the Finance Committee, facing the auditorium, and therefore had a view of everyone and could clearly witness the impatience growing as members moaned and rolled their eyes. People were just tired and wanted to be done with it, especially the Rationalistas, i.e. the Blues, the leading critics of the amount of time it took for the to debate and decide. With just one more hour to go, there were eight articles left and it was not clear how long those would take. Exhaustion was setting in, attendance was dropping as people up and left to attend to their personal lives, and at one point it seemed as though even usually cordial members were losing patience with the speakers – voicing opposition to some speakers' requests for additional time.

The last several sessions had dealt with controversial articles, most of which concerned zoning and the ever-present housing issue – families were being squeezed out by student rentals; calls for more development (“smart growth”) were met with skepticism and resistance from those who suspected the motives of the developers and feared that the town staff were in cahoots with the monied interests.

Things came to a head as the clock reached the official time to end the proceedings (10 p.m.) but still with several more articles to be voted on. Now the Greens wanted to call it a night, arguing that people were tired so it was best to come afresh a few days later and have a fully informed debate on the remaining issues. The Blues would have none of that. They wanted to stay for another hour or more if they had to, and push through the remaining articles; doing so was to them more efficient as this would then be the last session for the spring town meeting and people would not have to come back. One member, Select Board Chair Stephanie O'Keefe, who usually voiced Blue positions, noted that making this the last session would save the environment by avoiding the carbon footprint from people driving their cars to get to the meeting and would avoid using other resources necessary to run the meeting. The Greens thought this was a ploy to push through controversial articles.

A motion was made to extend the meeting. It passed on a strong voice vote. All of the articles that came up for vote during this extended period went easily the way of the majority, with hardly any debate. The Blues had it. They used time tactically to get their way on the articles.

Time was used by both groups to gain tactical advantage during the debates. Where the Blues most used it to cut debates short by calling the question, the Greens often talked to the clock, extending their verbal arguments through the full three minutes allotted to any one speaker at any one time. Running the clock was a common practice, in fact, to slow down what they thought was a rush to judgment and to give additional points of view to

develop and broaden the debate. The procedural tactics were used by both groups, in essence, to articulate their fundamentally divergent views about process and efficiency, and about respect for authority or lack thereof. As visible acts that highlighted the salient differences, or fault lines, between the two groups, orientations toward time were highly successful in building solidarity among the members of each group.

Time to serve

One of the most salient issues related to the time demands of town meeting was the problem of who can devote the time to serve. The «aristocracy of time» was the most colorful description of this situation. One interviewee, a strong member of the Blues, noted that all of the committees and issues meant that «it's more and more time that people are devoting to things» and that it is not always necessarily «the best possible people», and that «maybe you don't need the best possible people doing things, but it's the people who have the time» (Dawn Blue). As she reflected on the time she put into the meeting, saying that she would be spending every Monday and Wednesday night possibly for the next eight weeks, the phrase «aristocracy of time» came to mind. A number of people noted the challenge for parents with young children even though town meeting provided free childcare; several also pointed to the lack of early career professionals serving the town, such as tenure-track assistant professors, who represent a common and constant influx of labor power in this college town. Elaborating on this idea, Dawn Blue noted, «if you still have little kids who want you to put them to bed, if you have to travel for work, if you even work out of town and don't have any flexibility on, you know—». Time constraints, they argued, shaped who served the town.

Our demographic data confirmed the assumption that residents beyond the midcentury mark and those who were economically secure had the time to serve the town. The median age was 58. A whopping 95% of town meeting members were homeowners with property values averaging \$355,000 (see Krause and Sharma 2012:640 for statistics). This is above the average property values of \$326,000 as of 2011¹⁰. Students and other renters living in low-income housing were clearly underrepresented on town meeting. A number of interviewees described how they joined town meeting when they were retired, widowed, or once their children had grown. There were a few exceptions, and the Blues in recent years had systematically recruited more parents of young children to join. This demographic swath, pressed for time, tended to be happy to embrace the more streamlined version of town meeting.

We noticed that the actual time that people took to serve the town was a challenge for people to specify. As we asked individual town members to do so, during interviews, across the board they tended to at first skirt the issue and then engage in calculation. It seemed as though they were reflecting for the first time on the actual amount of time that town meeting required of them. Some people admitted to spending a lot of time preparing for the town meeting; others said that they hardly prepared at all. How they prepared varied a good deal. A lot pointed to the different activities that took time and their personal dilemmas about whether to continue.

Most town meeting members calculated the time of each evening when the meeting was in session, usually 7:30-10 p.m. One longtime member remembered how town meeting used to go longer, as late as 11:30 p.m., but for fewer nights. Besides the meeting itself members mentioned the time they devoted to reading the materials, varying levels of guilt and responsibility associated with that task, participating in the educational town meeting bus tour, pre-session precinct meetings, and League of Women Voters informational sessions. Some members mentioned committee work. Other emphasized the significant time they devoted to specific issues.

«The bigger amount of time is spent sitting at town meeting», laughed Henry Blue. Lloyd Blue characterized his overall commitment as «not that big a deal in terms of time. The worst part is really, you know, the six, seven hours a week for town meeting when it's in session for four or five weeks or whatever. You know, because that's—it kind of wears down on you after a while— worst part is when town meeting is in session».

Grace Green recalled the moment when she decided to join town meeting after somebody came to her door canvassing to save the town meeting when it was up for a charter vote that would have changed the town

¹⁰ <http://www.city-data.com/city/Amherst-Massachusetts.html>. Accessed December 5, 2013.

governance to a mayoral and council form. «I've done door knocking in my lifetime so somebody's taking the time—I was like—I forget whether it was a cold day but I thought, “Here is this person trudging door to door and, you know, anybody who's willing to do that”».

The way they tracked their time suggests a fluidity of civic engagement. Even the people with the strongest Blue voting records did not demonstrate precise timekeeping in a factory, clock-in-clock-out sort of way. This reminds us of what Elias noted about time, that time is not actually an object but that it is lived experience. Clearly, people's ideologies of time and the values they associate with time and democratic process shape their experiences of time. Of course, material conditions will also influence different experiences of time.

Conclusion: time as political act

The dynamic uses of time in the context of town meeting serve as a valuable reminder of how time is not a fixed object, but that it is socially and politically constructed, and that it has a history, one that is ongoing and in process. Each town meeting member participates in that history as he or she enacts any particular orientation to time on any particular evening. Indeed, in the Amherst context, time orientation mapped onto different ideas about what democracy should look like. Ultimately, the focus on time revealed the nature of democracy itself as a contested terrain and illuminated particular features of that terrain.

Clearly, there is a balancing act in a democratic society between who has the privilege, passion, and popularity to participate in politics and who has too many restraints to make such civic participation possible or desirable. In part, civic participation is about priorities and, in part, it is about privilege. Here, we cannot attribute the differences in priorities vis-à-vis time orientation to differences in class privilege for in our data set those who are in town meeting are equally economically privileged.

Starkly different orientations toward time remind us that there is not a single recipe for citizen participation in democratic process. Even in a small-town context where Democratic and Republican party lines are absent, other proclivities can polarize politics and shape decision making. These tendencies may well link to other contexts or even to one's sense of self. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, we noted patterns in personal biographies. More Greens came from activist backgrounds or even Quaker upbringings, and more Blues from professional corporate backgrounds. Orientations to time are likely linked to normalized notions of what counts as efficient time – or resistance to conform with those dominant notions. Such normalized ideas in the contemporary era have found their way into myriad workplaces and governance. By virtue of being shared or not shared among people, time orientation provides a component of group identification, dividing people into groups on the basis of how they orient toward time.

As the legacy on research related to time and discipline has shown, orientations to time are deeply historical and linked to economic eras. People have been socialized into efficiency. Middle-class Americans are products of it, they embody it in their schedules, they respond unthinkingly to greetings of “how are you?” with “Busy!” This culture of busy-ness has become a core of middle-class existence. Certain conditions, such as when working people have to care for children or elderly relatives, may cause the time crunch to be felt even more poignantly.

What are the implications for efficiency in the context of local democracy? Town meeting is a unique and historic form of local democracy. It is an institution that gives voice to a wide range of people and perspectives. It is also experienced as time-consuming.

Although we have empathy for “both” perspectives in this story, we suggest that not merely calling for the question but calling for consciousness around and reflection upon one's orientation to time, as well as the consequences of this orientation, has value for healthy democratic processes. Each enactment of time itself represents political action. We suggest that reflecting on commonsense assumptions about time is itself a political act. The consequences of time orientations on democratic institutions will perhaps only become clear in due time.

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Appendix. Codebook: Dynamics of Decision Making in Large Groups

TIME

Detailed Description	References to time that emphasize efficiency or inefficiency as well as deployment of time as a strategy.
Inclusion Criteria	References to, or uses of, time in the context of town meeting. May include metaphors related to time or “indigenous” terms. May also include timesaving techniques or opinions about efficiency or inefficiency.
Exclusion Criteria	Terms unrelated to the town meeting and its process, e.g., “sometimes”, “at one time”, “at the time”.
Typical Exemplars	“time as a weapon”, “time’s money”, “calling the question”, “coordinating in real time”, “time consuming”, “dollar cost of time”, “their time to speak”, “grossly inefficient”, “glacially slow”, “wasting everybody’s time”, “the amount of time and abuse they take”, “I’ve been putting so much time into it”.
Atypical Exemplars	References to busy people and the time they have for town meeting. References to strategies that involve time, e.g. “I would wait and hear what they had to say”. Or references to the time-related aspects of the process, e.g. “That kind of slowness prevents a lot of development”.
Close but no	“as time evolved”, “she was on town meeting for a long time”, “we had a hard time”, “that was the second time they tried”, “old-timers”.

Source: Sharma and Krause (2010)

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