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# Town Meeting

## Background

In Vermont, the first Tuesday of March is Town Meeting Day. On that day, “floor meetings,” Australian ballot voting, or a combination of the two decide much of the business of towns, including electing local officials and voting on town budgets.

Town meeting has its roots in the early Puritan settlements of New England, in which church authorities often governed towns, and members of the church got together on a regular basis to make decisions about town issues. The first town meeting in what is now Vermont was held in Bennington in 1762, before Vermont became a state. The tradition continues in many Vermont towns today.

Before a town meeting is held, a warning, or agenda, is published. In the “floor meeting” format, issues are publicly debated and decided by the registered voters attending. In an Australian ballot, otherwise known as a secret ballot, votes are cast anonymously in the voting booth or even by mail. Today, most towns use a combination of floor meeting and Australian ballot voting to do their business.

Exceptions to town meeting include cities, which by charter do not have town meeting, but do conduct elections to choose public officials and vote on city business. Brattleboro has a representative town meeting, in which voters form districts within the town and choose representatives to vote for them at town meeting.

Vermont town meeting is often cited as an example of pure democracy, yet it is not universally admired. In recent decades, some have argued that town meeting actually undermines democracy, as relatively few of the citizens of a town may choose or be able to attend the meeting. These citizens favor voting

by Australian ballot. Supporters of town meeting argue that a floor meeting engenders a deeper investment in town issues, allows for the adjustment of a proposal rather than a simple up or down vote, and prepares citizens to decide issues with civil debate rather than acrimony.

The breadth of issues brought before town meeting has also created controversy in recent years. Issues such as global climate change, a proposal for the impeachment of President George W. Bush, and the debate over the continued operation of the Vermont Yankee nuclear power facility have all been part of Vermont town meeting discussions. Some support the inclusion of these broader issues, stating that town meeting represents the perfect opportunity for citizens’ voices to be heard, and that national issues often have local effects. Others oppose the inclusion, taking the position that only issues directly related to town business should be decided at town meeting.



*A Vermont town meeting in the 1950s.*

photo: Vermont Historical Society

## About This Segment

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Produced by Dorothy Tod, this segment explores Vermont town meeting in theory and in practice, including the controversies it engenders and the passions that arise during debates on the town meeting floor.

### Before Viewing

- How do citizens of your community, the State of Vermont, and the United States make decisions about government issues?
- What do you know about town meeting and how it works?
- What are some of the possible advantages and disadvantages of the town meeting process?

### Vocabulary

**floor meeting:** a process in which issues are decided by a public debate and voted by those attending town meeting

**Australian ballot:** a vote by secret ballot, using paper or other format. The ballots are prepared beforehand, so there can be no change to the question being voted upon. There is no floor discussion of Australian ballot issues at town meeting.

**warning:** a published notice listing the issues to be decided at a town meeting

**moderator:** the person presiding over the meeting, who is responsible for making sure participants obey the rules of town meeting debate and voting

**representative town meeting:** a process in which groups of voters choose representatives to vote for them at town meeting

### After Viewing

- What are some of the reasons people in the film support the “floor meeting” format?
- Why do some people favor the use of the Australian ballot?
- Why do some people prefer a combination of the two, such as voting for the town and school budgets by Australian ballot and other issues by a floor vote?
- Why isn’t a floor meeting possible in some larger communities?

## Grades 4-5

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**Hold a Class Meeting** If you want to find out what it’s like to participate in a town meeting, hold one of your own. Start by learning more about town meeting and how it works. A great resource for this is “A Citizen’s Guide to Town Meeting,” which can be found online at [sec.state.vt.us/townmeeting/citizens\\_guide.html](http://sec.state.vt.us/townmeeting/citizens_guide.html). After you know the rules for conducting a meeting, create an agenda for yours. What are some issues your class or school needs to decide? It might be whether to create a school garden, how to raise funds for a class activity, or where to go on a school field trip. Then hold your class meeting, with different students playing the role of select board members, citizens, and moderators. Share your decisions with the rest of your school.

#### *Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations*

Design research (3-4:3; 5-6:3); Conduct research (3-4:4; 5-6:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (3-4:5; 5-6:5); Make connections to research (3-4:6; 5-6:6); Communicate findings (3-4:7; 5-6:7) Act as citizens (3-4:14; 5-6:14); Understand various forms of government (3-4: 15; 5-6:15); Understand issues of human interdependence (3-4: 16; 5-6:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (3-4:17; 5-6:17)

**Spread the Word** Many towns are trying to get more people to vote or attend meeting on Town Meeting Day. If your town is one of them, maybe you can help. Contact town officials to find out about the schedule

and agenda for this year’s town meeting. Then create posters that encourage more people to participate. In the weeks before Town Meeting Day, place your posters in prominent places—at your town library, in local businesses, at recreation areas, and at other locations. You’ll be contributing to a better future for your town!

#### *Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations*

Design research (3-4:3; 5-6:3); Conduct research (3-4:4; 5-6:4); Make connections to research (3-4:6; 5-6:6); Communicate findings (3-4:7; 5-6:7); Act as citizens (3-4:14; 5-6:14); Understand various forms of government (3-4: 15; 5-6:15); Understand issues of human interdependence (3-4: 16; 5-6:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (3-4:17; 5-6:17)

**Eating at Meeting** At most town meetings, a potluck meal is part of the scene. Do your part to make town meeting more enjoyable by making some goodies to share. Work with your teacher and school food service director to choose some menu items. Then prepare them and share them on Town Meeting Day. While you’re at meeting, be sure to watch and listen as the people in your town debate and vote on local issues. Some day, you might be doing the same thing!

#### *Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations*

Act as citizens (3-4:14; 5-6:14)

## Grades 6-8

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**Voting Twice** Look at the warning for the next town meeting, and choose an issue for you and your classmates to explore. First, learn more about the issue and have the class vote on it by Australian ballot. Then debate the issue in a “floor meeting” format, using procedures outlined in “A Citizen’s Guide to Town Meeting,” which can be found at [sec.state.vt.us/townmeeting/citizens\\_guide.html](http://sec.state.vt.us/townmeeting/citizens_guide.html). Hold another vote. Then discuss which meeting approach was more effective. Record your Australian ballot vote, your floor meeting debate, and your discussion about the two on digital video and share it online, so the citizens of your town can see which method you found most effective and why.

#### *Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations*

Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (5-6:5; 7-8:5); Make connections to research (5-6:6; 7-8:6); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Act as citizens (5-6:14; 7-8:14); Understand various forms of government (5-6:15; 7-8:15); Understand issues of human interdependence (5-6:16; 7-8:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (5-6:17; 7-8:17)

**A Town Meeting Movie** The creators of the video you have just watched made a short film about town meeting. You can do the same thing. Prepare by reviewing your town meeting warning and checking with local officials to find out more about the issues to be decided at this year’s meeting. Then ask permission from town officials to film the proceedings. As you film, remember to record a variety of different perspectives, and to be respectful of meeting participants. When you have finished shooting, edit your footage to create a short film that shows how the meeting takes place in your town.

#### *Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations*

Design research (5-6:3; 7-8:3); Conduct research (5-6:4; 7-8:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (5-6:5; 7-8:5); Make connections to research (5-6:6; 7-8:6); Communicate findings (5-6:7; 7-8:7); Act as citizens (5-6:14; 7-8:14); Understand various forms of government (5-6:15; 7-8:15); Understand issues of human interdependence (5-6:16; 7-8:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (5-6:17; 7-8:17)

## Grades 9-12

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**Promote Town Meeting** Citizen participation is a critical issue for all communities in Vermont, whether they hold a traditional town meeting or not. To help improve participation in your community, create a

media campaign to encourage participation on Town Meeting Day. Your campaign can include emails, on-line and local cable video, and FaceBook groups. You can also send out press releases to local newspapers and provide interviews to local radio stations. In all your efforts, do your best to stress the importance of citizen participation in local politics. To determine the effectiveness of your efforts, compare participation numbers for the Town Meeting Day you've targeted with those of previous years. Was your campaign a success? Why do you think so?

*Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations*

Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (9-10:5; 11-12:5); Make connections to research (9-10:6; 11-12:6); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Act as citizens (9-10:14; 11-12:14); Understand various forms of government (9-10:15; 11-12:15); Understand issues of human interdependence (9-10:16; 11-12:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (9-10:17; 11-12:17)

**Floor Meeting or Australian Ballot?** Which is the best way to do town business—a floor meeting, an Australian ballot, or a combination of the two? Divide your class into groups and debate the issue. Each group should gather as much evidence as possible, including participation statistics, to support its position. Invite panelists from outside your classroom to judge the debate. Record it on video and share it with town officials.

*Vermont History and Social Sciences Grade Expectations*

Design research (9-10:3; 11-12:3); Conduct research (9-10:4; 11-12:4); Develop reasonable supporting explanations (9-10:5; 11-12:5); Make connections to research (9-10:6; 11-12:6); Communicate findings (9-10:7; 11-12:7); Act as citizens (9-10:14; 11-12:14); Understand various forms of government (9-10:15; 11-12:15); Understand issues of human interdependence (9-10:16; 11-12:16); Understand how access affects justice, reward, and power (9-10:17; 11-12:17)

**On the Road**

The best way to learn more about town meeting is to attend one. With the help of your teacher, arrange for a field trip to attend a town meeting in your town or a town that does at least part of its business using a floor meeting. It's a great way to learn more about how democracy works and how to solve problems cooperatively. While attending meeting be sure to be respectful of all participants. You may wish to record what you see to share with other students in your school.

**Career Corner: News Reporter**

As events unfold in the world of politics, news reporters tell us what is happening and why it is important. To prepare for their jobs, news reporters often get a start working for local cable access television stations, Web sites, or newspapers. Most career reporters study journalism or media communications in college. The rewards of a reporter's career can be many, including travel and the chance to meet people from all walks



*A contemporary town meeting in Strafford.*

of life. If you like news, enjoy writing and video production, and like to learn about new subjects, a career as a news reporter might be a good fit for you.

**RESOURCES**

**Links**

**A Citizen's Guide to Town Meeting:** [sec.state.vt.us/townmeeting/citizens\\_guide.html](http://sec.state.vt.us/townmeeting/citizens_guide.html).

**Books**

Bryan, Frank M. *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.