

## **Voters in Representative Town Meeting Elections**

Shannon Jenkins  
Douglas D. Roscoe  
David Borges

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

### **Abstract**

Over one million people in New England live in communities with representative town meeting governments. Like open town meeting, all residents can participate in debate at representative town meetings, but only elected representatives may vote. Past research suggests these communities moved from open to representative town meeting because they believed it would make more informed decisions and better represent the general public. These qualities assume voters in these elections are more informed and more representative. This study examines these assumptions using data from an exit poll in Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Our findings suggest there may be a tension between the representativeness of the town meeting electorate and its level of information. Voters are fairly well informed and connected to town politics, but they do not appear to be representative of the town population. These findings raise important questions about the quality of representation in representative town meeting communities in New England.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the UMass Dartmouth Office of Undergraduate Research for their support of this project.

The town meeting is a classic form of U.S. government distinctive to the New England states. These meetings have been held across the region since this form of government developed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629 (Zimmerman 1999); they are open to all eligible voters, who serve as the town's legislative body. As Newcombe (2010) notes, "Town meetings are often called the purest and most democratic form of government—direct democracy where the town's business is discussed, debated, and voted on by members of the community." However, concerns about the functioning and representativeness of open town meetings have led some communities to move away from these assemblies. Most commonly, they have adopted mayor-council or council-manager forms of representative government.

But some New England states (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont) present local communities with another option: representative town meeting. Towns in these states that meet certain eligibility guidelines may officially convert their open town meetings to representative town meetings. These representative town meetings generally function like classic town meetings in that all present can discuss and debate town business; the key difference is that only elected members of town meeting may vote on town business. This distinction is critical as it means that town voters must select the people who represent them at these meetings. Only Massachusetts and Connecticut currently have towns that use this form of government; representative town meeting is most prevalent in Massachusetts where approximately 10 percent of the 351 municipalities utilize this form of government (MMMA n.d.). In Massachusetts, the size of these representative town meetings varies, but some have more than 400 elected members (Zimmerman 1999, 146).

In Massachusetts alone then, over one million people live in communities with representative town meeting; collectively, thousands of people are elected by voters to represent

them in these official bodies. Yet little is known about representative town meeting elections. Who votes in these elections? And what shapes their vote choices when selecting who will represent them at town meeting? Here, we use exit poll data from a town meeting election in Dartmouth, MA to answer these questions and to shed light on this unique form of government.

### **Representative Town Meeting**

While open town meeting dates back to the 1600s, the advent of representative town meeting (RTM) is much more recent, having been first adopted by Brookline, Massachusetts in 1915 (Zimmerman 1999, 142).<sup>1</sup> Originally, communities needed a special act from the Massachusetts state legislature to allow voters to adopt representative town meeting. However, the Massachusetts home rule constitutional amendment, adopted in 1966, authorizes towns to create a new charter that may contain provisions for representative town meeting, provided they meet certain qualifying criteria.

In 1999, Zimmerman found that 42 towns in Massachusetts had representative town meeting; however, in 2016, the Massachusetts Municipal Managers Association reports that just 35 communities still have this form of government. Because Zimmerman does not provide a list of communities with RTM, it is not possible to compare the lists to see which towns have moved away from RTM. Nonetheless, based on the MMMA data, collectively over one million people live in communities with RTM.<sup>2</sup>

These communities have adopted representative town meeting over a number of years, but Zimmerman (1999, 143-44) identifies four main reasons why these communities have selected to do so. First, many communities lack facilities to accommodate all voters who might attend an open town meeting. Second, conducting a town meeting with thousands of people would be next to impossible. Third, some believe that open town meeting may be subject to

undue influence from a minority group who may organize to dominate; thus, proponents of RTM argue that the structured legal representation provided by representative town meeting is preferable to the chance or accidental representation provided by open town meeting. Finally, proponents argue that representatives will be better motivated and therefore better prepared and informed.

While the first two reasons are practical reasons for adopting representative town meeting, the latter two reasons are more theoretical. That is, proponents theorize that representative town meeting will be more representative and make better decisions. Of course, both of these prospects focus on the elected members of town meeting—town meeting members will represent the community better and be better informed. But the odds of representative town meeting being more representative and informed than open town meeting are no greater than they would be under open town meeting unless voters in representative town meeting elections are representative of the community at large and base their choices on concrete information about town issues and the candidates for town meeting. This raises two key questions about representative town meeting elections: who votes in these contests and what factors shape their vote choice?

### **Who Votes?**

Turnout in local elections is generally lower than turnout at national and state elections; this is particularly true when these local elections are not held at the same time as state and/or national elections. All of the communities with RTM hold their elections at off-time; most hold elections in the spring, while the town of Saugus elects town meeting members on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of odd-numbered years (Zimmerman 1999 145-6). Given this, it seems reasonable to expect that these contests will be low turnout affairs. As such,

there are reasons to question whether the voters in these low turnout contests will be representative of the community at large. Instead, it seems more likely they will be unrepresentative. For example, Oliver and Ha (2007) examine turnout at city council elections in small suburban communities across the nation and found that voters in these contests were highly engaged stakeholders, who tended to be older and better educated than the community at large. But they also find that these voters tend to be fairly knowledgeable about local politics suggesting that proponents of RTM may be wrong about representativeness but right about information.

### **What Factors Shape Vote Choice?**

Unfortunately, most research on the factors shaping voters' choices tends to focus on national, state, or urban elections, so little is known about the voters and their choices in small scale elections. Much research demonstrates that party identification is a key factor in predicting vote choice (Campbell et al 1960), but RTM elections in Massachusetts are all nonpartisan.<sup>3</sup> While some nonpartisan elections are still influenced by party organizations, given the low visibility of representative town meetings (vis-à-vis Select Board elections in these communities), it is most likely that candidates in these elections are like "teams without uniforms," such that party is not available as a cue for most voters to guide their decision making (Adrian 1959; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001).

Research has also demonstrated that candidate issue positions and retrospective evaluations can play a role in shaping vote choice (Campbell et al 1960; Miller and Shanks 1996). But the low visibility of town meeting elections may make it difficult for voters to use these cues in these contests. Zimmerman (1999, 182) notes that a number of towns print attendance records of town meeting members, but they do so in the hopes of shaming them into

attending town meeting, not to provide voters with information about their representatives. If towns are not even providing attendance records (or they are providing them to induce attendance not inform voters), then it is hard to imagine that they would provide the kind of information (roll call votes) that voters would need to allow them to base their decisions on the issue positions and performance of town meeting members. For example, the town of Dartmouth publishes attendance records for town meeting members on the town website, but votes in town meeting are made by a show of hands and are not recorded individually. This means that even if voters wanted to figure out how their elected representatives voted at town meeting, they most likely could not, unless they recorded the town meeting and watched it numerous times. Thus, it seems unlikely that these factors will play a strong role in shaping vote choice in town meeting elections either.

In the absence of the party cue on the ballot and other information in the environment, research suggests other cues provided by the ballot may play a role here; one of the most important of these is incumbency (Oliver and Ha 2007; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). Schaffner, Streb, and Wright (2001) find that the effect of incumbency on vote choice is twice as large in elections without party labels, and Oliver and Ha (2007, 400) argue that low information local elections are primarily referenda on incumbent performance. Of course, these studies primarily examine town council elections; even though these elections are low information and low visibility contests, they are certainly more visible than representative town meeting elections. In most communities with representative town meetings, there are a few Select Board races on the ballot, but many more town meeting slots. Because of this, Zimmerman (1999, 145) argues that “re-election of incumbents is nearly automatic in every town” that lists incumbency status for elected town meeting members on the ballot.

Ballots may also provide demographic cues that influence voter decision-making. Race, ethnicity, and gender are the easiest demographic cues to ascertain from the ballot and thus tend to be the most influential. Research suggests that in the absence of other information, voters look to candidates' names for demographic cues, which guide their vote choice (Hajnal and Troutstine 2014; Matson and Fine 2006). These cues may play a positive role or negative role in influencing a voter's propensity to vote for certain candidates, given their predispositions, but what is clear is that these cues provide critical information to voters.

Finally, research suggests that having some connection to a candidate can increase voter's likelihood of voting for a candidate, which is one of the reasons why incumbents in higher offices focus so much time and effort on constituency service (Serra and Moon 1994; Yiannakis 1981). In small communities, these personal connections can have a strong influence on vote choice. For instance, Oliver and Ha (2007) found that voters in suburban council elections have a high degree of personal familiarity with candidates and this familiarity affected vote choices.

It is important to note, though, that much of the research on voter choice tends to focus on elections that pit two candidates against each other. However, most representative town meeting elections present voters with a list of choices, ranging from several to over a dozen names, at one time. This further exacerbates the cognitive limitations faced by voters (Redlawsk 2004), leading them to rely on whatever other cues they have at hand (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). Of course, as Zimmerman (1999, 181) notes, the number of candidates for town meeting is small and frequently either equal to or less than the number of seats available. In these situations, voters do not have to make a choice. They can simply vote for all listed candidates. But voters do not have to vote for every candidate listed and, if they do chose to

support some but not others, then the ballot cues listed above may play a role. Thus, while there is no research that examines voting in representative town meeting elections, the studies that examine voting in other small scale elections point to the conclusion that it will be unlikely that the two key arguments put forward by proponents of representative town meeting will be supported by the evidence.

### **Town Meeting Elections in Dartmouth, Massachusetts**

The town of Dartmouth is one of the Massachusetts communities with a representative town meeting form of government.<sup>4</sup> The town is divided into 9 precincts with 44 town meeting representatives in each precinct, making it one of the largest representative town meetings in the state. Every year, one-third of the seats are up for election and members hold their seats for three years. So long as representatives meet town standards for attendance at town meeting, they are listed as incumbents on the ballot. Only one precinct actually has 44 sitting representatives, although three others have 43 members. In these precincts, there is often true competition for the seats. The rest of the precincts almost always have more slots than people running, with a range of five to fifteen open seats.<sup>5</sup> Two town meetings are held annually, one in June and one in October. In between these town meetings, the business of the community is overseen by an elected five member Select Board. Additionally, the town has numerous other elected boards. The most prominent of these boards is the five member School Committee, but other boards, such as the Health, Parks and Public Works, are elected as well.

Dartmouth holds town elections for these positions every April. No other elections are held during this time, so these events generally have low visibility and low turnout. For instance, turnout in the 2013 town elections was 11.8 percent; it rose to 14.5 percent in 2014, then declined to 11.4 percent in 2015 (Town of Dartmouth Clerk 2016). Occasionally, turnout is

higher in these elections; this tends to happen when there is a controversial ballot question, such as when voters are given options to override property tax caps or to amend the town charter. Still, even in these situations, turnout is typically lower at town elections than it is even at midterm or state elections.

Given questions about town meeting elections, we decided to conduct an exit poll to examine vote choice in the 2015 Dartmouth town meeting election. With a limited budget and nine precincts, we realized we would not be able to exit poll all day at all polling locations. And given the low turnout numbers in some precincts (for instance, just 209 voters turned out in precinct 2 in 2013), it wouldn't be cost effective to poll all day at every location. Therefore, we decided to conduct exit polls at six of the nine precincts. In three of the highest-turnout precincts, we were able to cover most of the day; just over 1,520 votes were cast in these three precincts. In two other, lower turnout precincts, we were able to cover at least half of the day, including the morning and lunch hours at one and lunch hours at another. Official results show just 457 voters turned out at these two precincts.<sup>6</sup>

If workers were not conducting a survey, they asked every voter who came out of the polling location to participate in the survey until someone agreed; this procedure yielded 177 interviews. This number represents about 6.5 percent of all voters at this election and close to 9 percent of voters at the precincts we surveyed. Respondents were asked a variety of questions about their knowledge of town government and the factors influencing vote choice.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, we conducted a follow up survey of town meeting representatives at the 2017 spring town meeting. While we could not assess the influences on vote choice or information in the same manner as we did with town meeting election voters, we were able to ask these representatives the same demographic questions we asked on our exit poll, which allows us to

assess how similar these representatives are demographically to town residents and town meeting voters. Surveys were distributed to all town meeting members present; of the 209 representatives who participated in that meeting, 123 of them returned surveys, a 58.9 percent response rate.

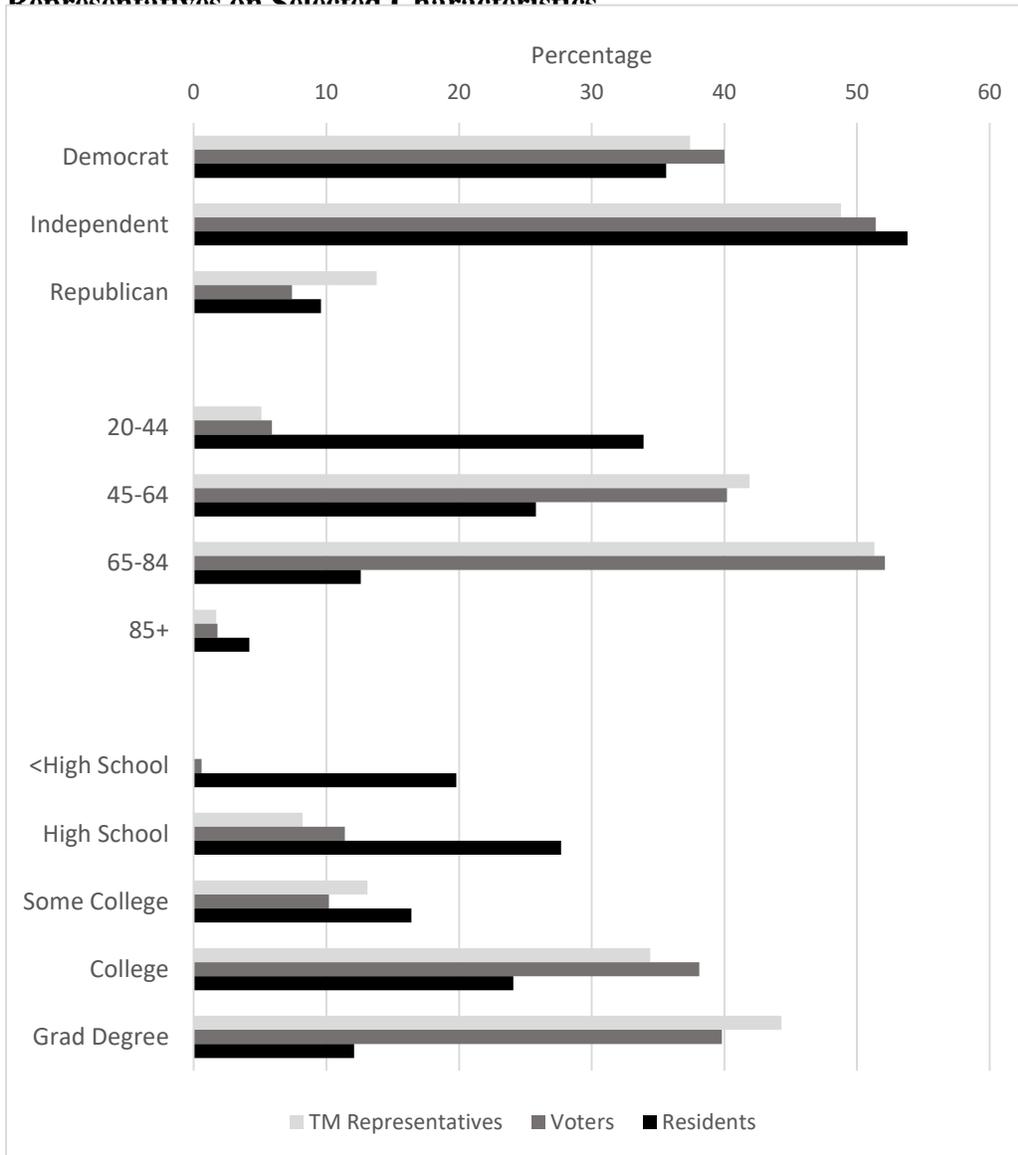
## **Results**

### **Who Votes in Representative Town Meeting Elections?**

The first theoretical argument for adopting representative town meeting was that structured representation of RTM is better than the chance representative of open town meeting, so first we turn to the question as to whether voters are indeed representative of the town at large. As Figure 1 shows, the party registration of our respondents was fairly close to the distribution for registered voters in the town.

There are slightly more Democrats and fewer Republicans and Independents among town voters as compared to the town population, but in each case, our numbers were within 5 percent of corresponding town distributions. Differences between town meeting representatives and the town population are at or below 5 percent as well (though, interestingly the data suggest the electorate is more Democratic than the population but elects a set of representatives leaning more Republican than the population). It is worth noting that these numbers are also very similar to the distribution across the state overall. The data suggest local elections do not generate a partisan bias in turnout. This is important evidence regarding the representativeness of town meeting elections, at least insofar as issues of importance in Dartmouth fall along party lines. Of course, the old saying that there's not a Democratic or Republican way to clean a street casts some doubt about whether local issues are partisan issues; nonetheless, if they are, then the electorate accurately reflects the partisan distribution in town.

**Figure 1. Comparison of Dartmouth Population, Town Meeting Voters, and Town Meeting Representatives on Selected Characteristics**



*Note:* The data represent the percentage of voters and residents that fall into each category. The partisanship data are formal party registrations; Massachusetts law permits voters registered as independents to choose which party ballot to complete on the day of the primary. State and Town party identification statistics from Galvin (2015). Age and education data are from the American Community Survey by the Census Bureau.

In contrast, the voters in this local election are clearly much older, on average, than voters in other elections, confirming the existing research that looks at voter turnout in city elections.<sup>8</sup>

As Figure 1 makes clear, the electorate in Dartmouth was much older than the community overall. The median age of voters in the Dartmouth election was 65, with a mean of 63.8. Just 6

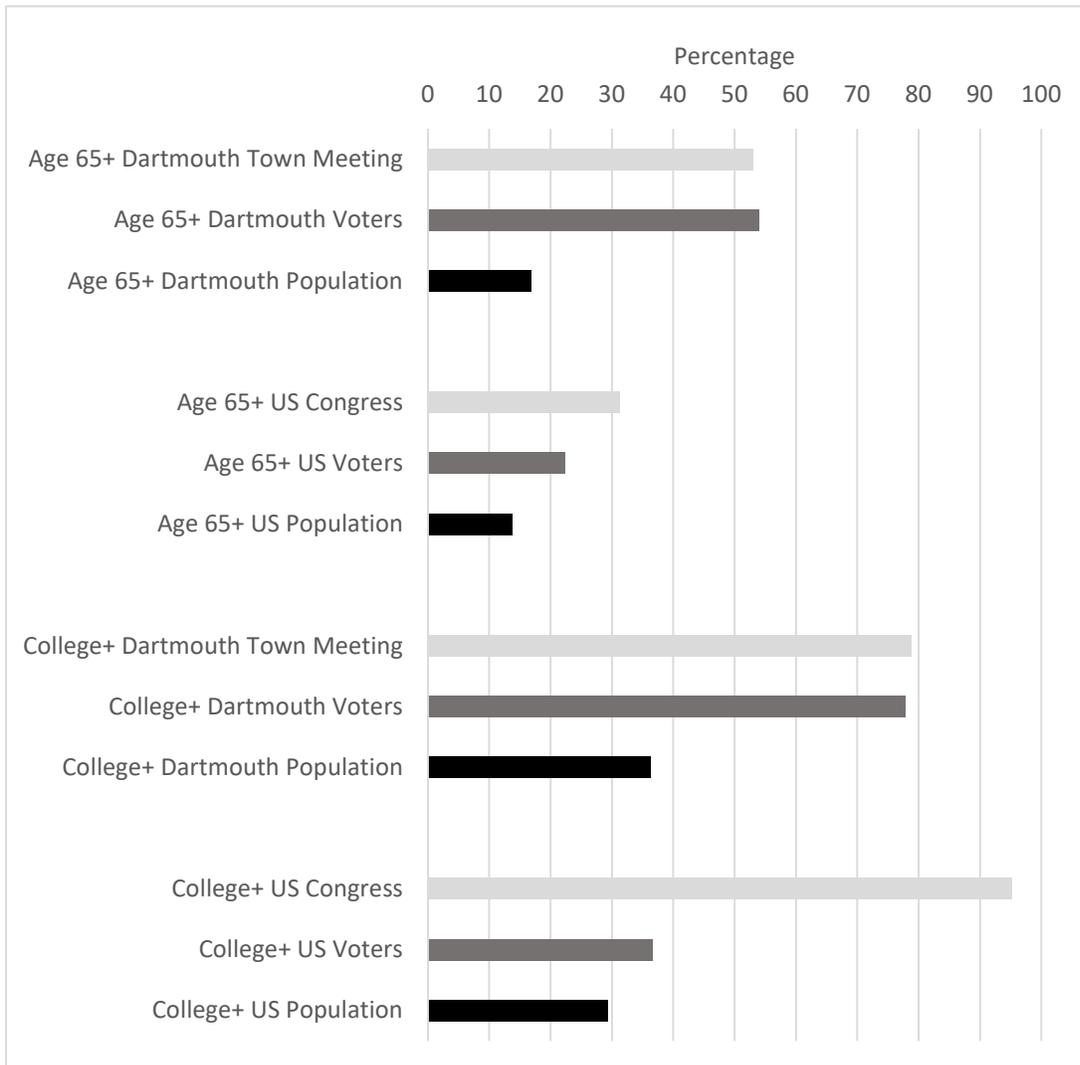
percent of the voters were under 45. In contrast, fully one-third of the total population in the town is between 20 and 45. A similar pattern holds with town meeting representatives; the mean age of representatives is 62.6 with a median of 64. Just over 5 percent of town meeting representatives are under 45.

It is possible this observed age bias may reflect the fact that younger voters were less likely to agree to respond to our survey. Indeed, at least one poll worker told a story at the end of her shift of an older voter who would not stop talking to her about the election, even though the voter had already responded to all of the survey questions. However, when asked about their experiences, nearly all of the workers independently remarked on the fact that most of the voters coming out of the precinct were older. None of them noted a tendency of younger voters to decline the survey. Furthermore, the age distribution of town meeting voters is very similar to the age distribution of town meeting members. Thus, there is some face validity here as the workers indicated to us that the people who participated in the survey seemed to be representative of the people who actually turned up to vote.

Voters in the Dartmouth town election are also far more educated than the town population. Figure 1 compares voters in our sample to the town population overall. Only 36.2 percent of Dartmouth residents over the age of 25 had a college degree, while 77.9 percent of the Dartmouth voters had a college degree or higher. This is also well above the state average; 38.2 percent of Massachusetts residents have college degrees, the highest for any state in the nation. Town meeting representatives are also highly educated as 78.7 percent of them held a college or graduate degree. Thus, demographic biases in who turns out to vote in the town election produce biases in the demographic characteristics of those who are elected as town meeting

representatives, undermining the assertion of proponents of this form of government, who felt representative town meeting would be more likely to reflect the community at large.

**Figure 2: Age and Education Comparisons between Populations, Voters, and Representatives in the US and Dartmouth**



*Note:* Data represent the percentage of the total population and the voter population that are 65 years of age or older and that have a college degree. Data for the US and Dartmouth populations are from the American Community Survey. US voter data are from the Current Population Survey for the 2012 electorate. Age data from the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress comes from Legistorm (ND) and education data comes from Manning (2017).

Given that research has shown older and more educated voters are more likely to turnout to vote, these differences are not entirely surprising. Most electorates are older and better

educated than the constituencies from which they emerge. But the degree of bias in the Dartmouth town election and town representation far surpasses that found at the national level. Figure 2 provides the relevant comparisons. The figures here compare the percentage of Dartmouth residents who are 65 years of age or older with the percentage of Dartmouth voters and town meeting representatives who also fall into this older age group. A parallel comparison is provided for the national population, the 2012 presidential electorate, and the 115<sup>th</sup> US Congress. A similar comparison is provided for the percentage holding a college degree.

The data show there is indeed an age and education bias at the national level. But the gaps in the Dartmouth election were far larger. For example, 22.3 percent of US voters in 2012 were 65 or older, while only 13.7 percent of the full population was 65 or older—a gap of 8.6 percent points. In contrast, the gap in Dartmouth was 37.1 percent points. The gap for college degree status in the US was 7.3 percent points and 41.7 percent points in Dartmouth.

Interestingly, at the national level, these gaps increase when we move from voters in these elections to the representatives; that is, members of Congress are more unlike the full population than voters are. However, this is not true in Dartmouth. Town meeting voters and town meeting representatives are distinct from the population, but similar to each other.

Given these gaps, it is not surprising our data suggest the people who turned out for the Dartmouth town elections also turnout for other elections, as 96 percent of them reported they always vote. Just 3.4 percent of these voters reported they only voted sometimes, while one voter said he or she rarely turned out. No town meeting members said they rarely turned out, and just one member said they sometimes participated. The other 99 percent of town meeting representatives say they always voted. Overall, these results seem to confirm Oliver and Ha's

(2007) finding that the voters who participate in these elections are stakeholders, who are more politically engaged in their local community.

Despite the fact that these voters were older, more educated, and voted more frequently as compared to national election statistics and town demographics, their knowledge levels of town government and the candidates do not appear to be as outstanding.<sup>9</sup> To assess political knowledge, we used two approaches. The first approach assesses voter knowledge about institutional facts; more specifically, we asked voters to recall the length of the term for town meeting members and the number of members on the Select Board. Correct recall was mediocre, as Table 1 indicates. Less than half knew how many members were on the Select Board, the most prominent governing body in town; voters knew slightly more about the length of town meeting terms, although over 40 percent of the respondents did not get this question correct, despite the fact that the term length was printed on the ballot above the list of candidates.

The second approach assesses voter knowledge of the Select Board candidates, which we measured by asking them to recall the names of the candidates on the ballot for Select Board. In this election, there were two races; neither race featured an incumbent, although one of the candidates ran unopposed for one of the seats. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Political Knowledge among Dartmouth Town Voters**

	Percentage Correct
Recall the length of term of Town Meeting members	57%
Recall how many members there are on the Select Board	41%
Recall name of Opposed Candidate 1	75%
Recall name of Opposed Candidate 2	74%
Recall name of Unopposed Candidate	20%

Respondents did poorly recalling the name of the unopposed candidate—only 20 percent could recall this name. But they did considerably better recalling the names of the two

candidates running against each other, with about three-quarters getting these names correct. This difference suggests the information flows in a campaign can elevate levels of voter knowledge. More media attention, to the extent there was much, was directed at the competitive race and more effort was expended by the campaigns to reach voters. That said, it is important to keep in mind that the interviews were conducted just *after* people voted, so they had just looked at a ballot with the candidates' names on it only minutes earlier. In light of this recent exposure to the correct information, the recall levels seem quite low, particularly for the unopposed candidate (who had served for several years as the chair of the town's Finance Committee and had run unsuccessfully in the past for the Select Board, and thus might be expected to enjoy at least some baseline name recognition among the most-informed voters).

We can combine the two approaches into an index that serves as a general measure of political knowledge. The index we use is a simple additive one, summing the number of correct recalls among the five institutional and candidate questions. The distribution of this index is highly dispersed with a median of 3 correct recalls out of 5. About a third of voters scored a 4 or 5, while only one fifth scored a 0 or 1, suggesting most voters had at least some knowledge.

It is, of course, unreasonable to expect extremely high levels of political knowledge among any electorate, so it is more interesting to understand how the Dartmouth town electorate compares to other groups. While a direct comparison to national populations is not feasible, the data compiled by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997) provide some interesting contrasts. Their data suggest only 25 percent of adults can correctly recall the length of US Senate terms, 30 percent can correctly recall the length of US House terms, 35 percent can recall the name of both US senators, and 28 percent can recall the name of their state senator (Delli Karpini and Keeter 1997, 70-75). The Dartmouth voters appear to have a higher level of knowledge than the

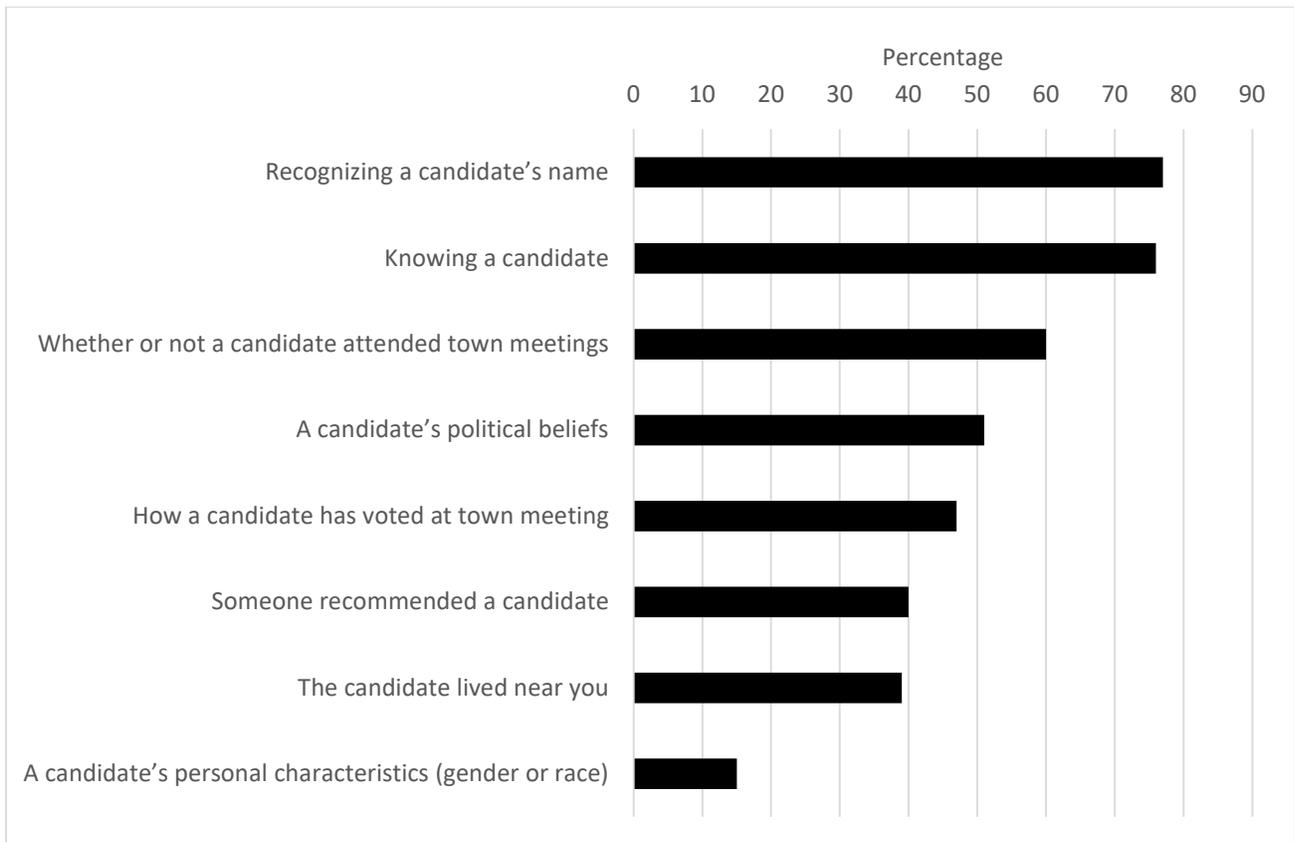
national population, as close to 60 percent could recall the length of town meeting terms. Of course, the data here come from an exit poll rather than a general survey, which may have helped voters with recall. Indeed, this caveat implies the Dartmouth voters are still not a particularly well-informed group in an absolute sense, although they seem more informed about town politics than the national population is about national politics.

### **What Kinds of Voting Cues Do They Rely on?**

Given these knowledge levels, we might expect voters to rely on a number of cues to help guide their vote choice. Of key concern here, given the arguments of proponents of representative town meeting, is whether these cues indicate that these voters are making informed choices. Our survey asked respondents to indicate whether a number of factors “may have potentially influenced” their vote for town meeting that day. It is important to keep in mind that this measurement approach relies on a subjective judgment about what was influential, and respondents may not be entirely accurate in their self-perceptions. Nonetheless, this approach is similar to the one used by Oliver and Ha (2007) to study suburban council elections.

Figure 3 presents data on the frequency of cue reliance for town meeting voters. The two most-used cues are recognizing a candidate’s name and knowing a candidate. Both of these cues are devoid of issue or policy content and are even divorced from any particular candidate characteristics. Familiarity was paramount for voters in this election. This reinforces the notion that voters in these elections are engaged stakeholders. These voters appear to be plugged into networks in town that expose them, at the very least, to the candidate’s name and also to the actual candidates.

**Figure 3. Percentage of Voters Relying on Various Voting Cues**



The next three most frequently used cues are more substantive: the candidates' attendance at town meetings, their political beliefs, and their voting record at town meeting. About 50-60 percent of voters reported relying on these cues, which suggests a mix of both personal and policy cues were important. The interesting part about this is that information about these sorts of cues is difficult to come by. It may be that some of these voters themselves are town meeting representatives, although these voters represent at most approximately 15 percent of the possible electorate. Given the importance of personal connections, it is more likely that voters know of town meeting candidates' political beliefs through these connections. The next three cues were used by fewer voters, though about 40 percent said they based their vote on someone's recommendation or the candidates' residential proximity to the voter. Demographic cues, like race and gender, were used by only 15 percent of voters.

To check for underlying structure in cue reliance, we factor analyzed the cue variables. The results, presented in Table 2, suggest that voters did tend to rely on certain sets of cues.

**Table 2 – Factor Analysis of Voting Cue Reliance**

	Factor 1: Performance	Factor 2: Interpersonal	Factor 3: Characteristics
How a candidate has voted at town meeting	<b>.84</b>	.03	.05
Whether or not a candidate attended town meetings	<b>.82</b>	.05	.08
Recognizing a candidate’s name	-.12	<b>.76</b>	.02
The candidate lived near you	.11	<b>.65</b>	.18
Knowing a candidate	.34	<b>.59</b>	-.10
Someone recommended a candidate	.36	.28	-.32
A candidate’s political beliefs	.40	.24	.43
A candidate’s personal characteristics (gender or race)	.04	.06	<b>.86</b>
Initial Eigenvalue	2.17	1.18	1.02
Proportion of Variance	.23	.19	.13

*Note:* Scores are rotated factor loadings from a principal-components analysis with varimax rotation. Loadings of .5 or higher are indicated in bold.

First, there is a Performance factor, which reflects attendance and voting records at town meetings. The second factor we label Interpersonal, because the cues loading on it all involve some personal connection between the voter and the candidates. Finally, there is a third factor we describe as Characteristics, because it represents the demographics cue. These patterns of loadings hint that there may be different types of voters, some of which are more inclined to examine candidate performance and others who rely more on interpersonal connections or demographic cues.

### **What Correlates with Cue Reliance?**

To explore the possibility that different types of voters rely on different sorts of cues, we report correlations between the vote cue factors and a number of other variables.<sup>10</sup> These

variables include: the political knowledge index; a 5-point measure of partisanship that combines the party registration question with a follow-up question for independents about their party identification (low responses are Democrats); college degree status; age; and a measure of whether respondents report that elected town meeting members from their precinct represent their interests. Table 3 presents these correlations. First, it is notable that those with higher levels of political knowledge and education are not more reliant on performance cues. In fact, the data show that the college educated are actually more likely to rely on interpersonal cues than those without a degree. While we might expect the most highly educated and most knowledgeable voters to focus on candidates' performance in office, the findings suggest they look more toward the personal connections they have with candidates. More educated voters seem to be more engaged in political networks in town, which shapes their choices.

**Table 3. Correlates of Voting Cue Reliance**

	Performance	Interpersonal	Characteristics
Political Knowledge	.00	.02	-0.9
Party Identification	.10	-.07	-.22**
College Educated	.01	.17*	.11
Age	.02	.11	.01
Represented	.22*	-.06	-.04

*Note:* Entries are correlation coefficients; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Second, there is a tendency for Democrats to be more reliant on candidate characteristics like race and gender as voting cues. This correlation is not surprising. Democrats generally are more supportive of symbolic or ascriptive representation (Sanbonmatsu 2003) and more likely to be concerned about the underrepresentation of women or minorities in government. Particularly in low information elections like this one, these kinds of considerations can rise to the top for some Democratic voters.

Finally, we find that voters who are more satisfied with the representation they get through their town meeting members are more likely to use performance cues. We suspect this relationship emanates from a particular group of voters—many of whom probably watch the meetings on television or are even town meeting members themselves—who are particularly aware of what happens at town meeting and subsequently able to use that information to guide their vote choice. Being more aware of town meeting activity, they are able to more confidently assess the degree to which town meeting represents them. Interestingly, this group is not particularly knowledgeable overall; political knowledge is not correlated at all with any of the cue factors or satisfaction with representation.

### **Conclusion**

Proponents argued that representative town meeting would be more representative and make more informed decisions. But in order for elections to serve as democratic linkages and for these arguments to be supported, two conditions must be met. First, the voters must be able to choose candidates who will represent their interests and preferences. Second, the voters must be representative of the preference distribution among the entire public.

The first condition requires that voters have enough information to cast reasonably informed votes. Town meeting elections present a challenge in this regard. Without partisan information, campaign advertising, or media coverage, voters must rely on cues to guide their vote choice. This study suggests town meeting voters rely on a large and varied set of cues, including those connected to incumbent performance and those related to interpersonal connections. It is difficult to say whether these cues are enough for voters to make rational decisions about who would best represent their interests. When asked, however, most town meeting voters were satisfied with town meeting representation. In our survey, 62 percent of

respondents said the elected town meeting members from their precinct represent their interests, and another 10 percent said they didn't know. Fewer than 30 percent said they did not represent their interests. While this is not overwhelmingly positive, it does suggest that, on balance, town meeting voters feel positively about representative town meeting and that they believe they have the ability to select town meeting members who will represent them. Additionally, we find the elected town meeting representatives have a partisan and demographic profile very similar to those who elected them.

The second condition—that voters represent the full population—seems like it might be more problematic. The Dartmouth town meeting electorate was a very small proportion of eligible voters and considerably older and better educated than the Dartmouth population. In turn, these voters elect town meeting members who resemble them, as town meeting representatives are also considerably older and better educated than the town population. These results support the idea that the less engaged and informed fall off as elections provide less and less information, leaving the remaining group smaller but fairly engaged and informed. To the extent these voters' informed opinions reflect the opinions of the town at large, then proponents may be right about representative town meeting. Indeed, bringing in more voters to make the electorate broader is likely to bring in people with less information and engagement, which may potentially undermine representation of the public's preferences even more.

Whether this small group of highly engaged voters represents the broader population in terms of town issues is difficult to say. The data suggest the party distribution of voters very closely matched the population. But it may be the case that party lines do not represent the major differences on town issues. Partisan and ideological orientations often do not align with town issue cleavages; coalitions are often fluid from issue to issue; and the major issues

separating town meeting members change from year to year. On other markers, voters in town meeting elections are clearly not representative of the town as a whole; they are much older and more educated. Other studies have demonstrated that low turnout in city elections leads to sub-optimal policy outcomes for racial and ethnic minorities, who turn out at lower levels in these contests (Hajnal 2009). More research is needed to determine whether the policy preferences of town meeting members, voters in town meeting elections, and town residents generally are congruent, but it seems most likely at this point to say they are not. For example, on issues of school spending, it would be reasonable to expect younger residents with children to have different preferences than older voters. If so, then town meeting voters may not reflect the issue preferences of the full population and may be voting for representatives that are out of alignment with the demands of the town population. Certainly, they are voting for representatives that are out of alignment with demographics of the town population.

The implications of this are not positive for representative town meeting. Reformers who advocated for representative town meeting in the New England states believed that the structured legal representation of representative town meeting was preferable to the chance or accidental representation provided by open town meeting. They were also concerned about the potential for undue influence from minority groups who may organize to dominate. While representative town meeting makes short term mobilization and domination of town meeting more difficult, it certainly does not prevent a group of people who do not resemble the town as whole from coming to dominate town meeting. As such, contemporary reformers looking to change their form of open town meeting form of government may be better advised to move to a council-manager or mayor-council form of government, as opposed to a representative town meeting. Since Zimmerman (1999) published his study of town meetings in New England, seven of the 42

communities (16.6 percent) that had representative town meeting have abandoned this form of government. Indeed, Dartmouth is considering just such a move.

Despite the fact that these findings cast somewhat of a dark shadow over representative town meeting, the results do suggest that voters in these meetings are making fairly sophisticated choices, even if they do not approach the democratic ideal. An ideal issue voter would learn what is on the issue agenda and then assess which candidates take positions closest to their own. But the issue agenda that town meeting actually tackles may not be known yet at the time of the election. And an incumbent's past votes on old issues may not be that helpful in understanding how they might vote on future issues, so even retrospective voting is difficult. Perhaps the most sophisticated approach in the real world is for voters to find people they know who are trustworthy and have good character. From this perspective, the extensive use of interpersonal cues we found among Dartmouth town meeting voters may actually be a sign of sophisticated voting and suggest that the key mechanism that enables representative town meeting to satisfy so many voters is trustee representation, as opposed to delegate representation.

## References

- Adrian, Charles R. 1959. "A Typology for Nonpartisan Elections." *Western Political Quarterly* 12 (June): 449-58.
- Campbell, Angus, Phillip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X. and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Galvin, William. 2015. "Enrollment Breakdown as of 2/1/2015." *Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*.  
[http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/elepdf/enrollment\\_counts\\_20150201.pdf](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/elepdf/enrollment_counts_20150201.pdf) (24 February 2016).
- Hajnal, Zoltan. 2009. *America's Uneven Democracy: Race, Turnout, and Representation in City Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hajnal, Zoltan, and Jessica Trounstein. 2014. "What Underlies Urban Politics? Race, Class, Ideology, Partisanship, and the Urban Vote." *Urban Affairs Review* 50 (September): 63-99.
- Legistorm. ND. "The 115th Congress by the Numbers." Legistorm.  
[https://www.legistorm.com/congress\\_by\\_numbers/index/by/house.html](https://www.legistorm.com/congress_by_numbers/index/by/house.html) (14 June 2017).
- Massachusetts Municipal Management Association (MMA). N.d. "Form of Government."  
[http://www.massmanagers.org/sites/mmma/files/file/file/mma\\_form-of-gov3.pdf](http://www.massmanagers.org/sites/mmma/files/file/file/mma_form-of-gov3.pdf) (9 August 2016).
- Manning, Jennifer E. 2017. "Membership of the 115th Congress: A Profile." *Congressional Research Service*. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44762.pdf> (14 June 2017).

Matson, Marsha and Terri Susan Fine. 2006. "Gender, Ethnicity, and Ballot Information: Ballot Cues in Low-Information Elections." *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 6(Spring): 49-72.

Miller, Warren E. and Merrill Shanks. 1996. *The New American Voter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Newcombe, Tod. 2010. "American's Oldest Town Hall Meeting." *Governing*.  
<http://www.governing.com/topics/mgmt/267-year-old-community-tradition-Massachusetts.html> (9 August 2016).

Oliver, Eric J. and Shang E. Ha. 2007. "Vote Choice in Suburban Elections." *American Political Science Review* 101 (August): 393-408.

Redlawsk, David P. 2004. "What Voters Do: Information Search During Election Campaigns." *Political Psychology* 25 (November): 595-610.

Sanbonmatsu, Kira. 2003. "Gender-Related Political Knowledge and the Descriptive Representation of Women." *Political Behavior* 25 (December): 367-88.

Schaffner, Brian F., Matthew Streb and Gerald Wright. 2001. "Teams without Uniforms: The Nonpartisan Ballot in State and Local Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 54 (March): 7-30.

Serra, George and David Moon. 1994. "Casework, Issue Positions, and Voting in Congressional Elections: A District Analysis." *Journal of Politics* 56 (February): 200-13.

Town of Dartmouth Clerk. 2016. "Town Clerk's Election Results." *Redacted URL for Blind Peer Review* (24 February 2016).

UMass Donahue Institute. 2015. "Population Estimates Program." *Massachusetts Population Projections*. <http://pep.donahue-institute.org/> (10 August 2016).

Yiannakis, Diane Evans. 1981. "The Grateful Electorate: Casework and Congressional Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 25 (August): 568-80.

Zimmerman, Joseph Francis. 1999. *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group.

**Appendix: Survey Instrument**

Today, University students are asking voters to complete a brief survey about the election. Would you be willing to take a few minutes to answer some questions? Your participation is voluntary, and your answers will be kept anonymous and confidential.

First, I'd like to ask you a few questions about Town Meeting. Did you vote for any candidates for Town Meeting today?

Yes    No

***[If Yes]***

Approximately how many of the town meeting candidates did you vote for? Did you vote for all of them, most of them, just a few?

All of them    Most of them    Few of them   Volunteered number: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you feel the elected town meeting members from your precinct represent your interests?

Yes    No    Neutral (volunteered)    Don't know (volunteered)    Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Can you recall the length of term of town meeting members? \_\_\_\_\_

Can you recall how many members there are on the Town Select Board? \_\_\_\_\_

Can you recall the names of any of the candidates who ran for Select Board this election?

***[check names they volunteer only; if they only know last names it still qualifies for a check]***

[Candidate 1]                       Yes    Came close but didn't quite say it right

[Candidate 2]                       Yes    Came close but didn't quite say it right

[Candidate 3]                       Yes    Came close but didn't quite say it right

Other name(s) given: \_\_\_\_\_

Next, I am going to read a list of factors that may have potentially influenced your vote choice in today's election both for town meeting and the select board. As I run through the list, please indicate with a yes or no whether this factor influenced your vote choice today. Let's start with Town Meeting candidates. Did any of these factors influence your vote? ***[check off Town Meeting column for Yes]***

Now, how about the Select Board. Did any of these factors influence your vote for Select Board? ***[check off Select Board column for Yes]***

	<b>TOWN MEETING</b>	<b>SELECT BOARD</b>
Knowing a candidate		
Someone recommended a candidate		
Recognizing a candidate's name		
The candidate lived near you		
A candidate's personal characteristics, such as their gender or race		
A candidate's political beliefs		
Whether or not a candidate attended town meetings		

How a candidate has voted at town meeting		
A candidate's position on important town issues		
A candidate's lawn sign—Did that influence your vote choice?		
A mailing from a candidate		
A candidate's performance at one or more of the candidate forums		
A newspaper story about the candidate or election		
Are there any other factors that affected your vote choice that we missed?		

Finally, we'd like to ask a few demographic questions for research purposes. How often would you say you vote in town elections? Always or almost always, sometimes, or rarely?

Always or almost always    Sometimes    Rarely    Never (volunteered)

What is your current party registration?

Democrat    Republican    Independent

**[If Independent]:** Do you identify more with one party?

Yes, Democrats    Yes, Republicans    No

What is the highest level of education you have completed? **[let them volunteer a response, but read categories if they struggle]**

Less than high school    High school    Some College    College    Graduate Degree

What is your age?

\_\_\_\_\_

That's all the questions I have for you today. Thanks for your participation!

**[Notations: use DK for don't know; use RF for refused; use NA for not applicable]**

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the historical information about representative town meeting comes from Zimmerman (1999), which contains a chapter with an extensive and excellent history and analysis of representative town meeting.

<sup>2</sup> Population figures are for 2015 and come from the UMass Donahue Institute (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Zimmerman (1999, 145) reports that nomination papers for town meeting members in Montague contain political party designations, but the Montague town clerk confirmed via email that this is no longer the case.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, historical information about why the town adopted RTM is not available, so it is not clear whether this change was driven by practical considerations, concerns about representation and decision-making, or both. Despite this, we can still use the presence of RTM in Dartmouth to test theoretical propositions about RTM.

<sup>5</sup> This does not include the precinct 3 which consists solely of students from the University. This precinct has just one elected town meeting member, reflecting the fact that most students are not on campus when the main, annual town meeting is held in June.

<sup>6</sup> One of these locations is also where the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth students love and vote; just one voter in that precinct cast his ballot at this location, so officially 458 voters turned out at these locations.

<sup>7</sup> The full text of the survey is available in the Appendix.

<sup>8</sup> While most voters gave their exact age, several voters gave a range, i.e. "I'm in my 50s." As such, we excluded these people from calculations of averages.

<sup>9</sup> Because of the different contexts (an all-day town meeting versus a town meeting election), we could not ask town meeting representatives the same questions about knowledge; given the length of town meeting, representatives would have had ample time to look up answers to knowledge questions, for example. So the rest of this analysis focuses on voters.

<sup>10</sup> While it would be preferable to explore this question using multivariate models, the survey does not provide a sufficiently rich set of control variables to fully specify a model. Multivariate analysis that we conducted using the set of variables that are available turns up the same pattern of significant findings that are observed among the correlations.