

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON VERMONT

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Public Information Town Meetings 2021: Attendance Drops; Australian Ballot voting increases

New research from UVM's Center for Research on Vermont examines attendance at the public information town meeting meetings held this March, comparing it to previous years.

Student researchers watched videos of 50 public information meetings, counting attendance, participation and looking for the most spirited debates and conversations.

The data suggests a fall off about 56% in attendance between 2019 town meetings and 2021 public information meetings. Attendance rate is based on a percent of registered voters attending.

Although less people attended, more than 45% of the people in the public information meetings had something to say during the course of the meeting. This measure of participation – based on counting the number of different individuals who spoke -- follows on 30 years of research conducted by Political Science professor Frank Bryan, who studied and attended more than 1500 town meetings.

Over time, Dr. Bryan found that town meeting attendance correlates with town size --smaller towns have higher attendance rates --and with the issues on the town warning. Issues that are more contested, draw more people, Bryan found.

“Declines in attendance at the information meetings directly relates to lack of decision-making” said Richard Watts, Director of the CRVT. “This is a wake up call for those who believe in the direct democracy form of decision-making that happens at town meeting.”

At town meeting voters decide, and can change and amend, the issues on the town warning. At public information meetings, it is simply a chance to discuss the items on the ballot. No decisions are taken.

Researchers also found an upward trend of Australian ballot voting. This may have to do with the increasing access and support of mail in ballots – several towns in the study (Middlesex) actually mailed the town meeting ballot to every voter.

“I will be interested to see what towns decide about their meetings in the years to come,” said Emily Anderson, CRVT research coordinator. “Relying solely on Australian ballots does have its advantages, however we definitely heard many people express the hope that they can return to in-person meetings next year.”

FINDINGS

This report includes 47 towns.

Across those towns, we saw attendance rate decrease by an average of 56% between 2019 and 2021. More than half (29) of the towns' attendance rates decreased by more than 10%, while only three towns had their attendance rates increase. Those towns were Canaan, Danby and Underhill.

Australian ballot turnout information was not available for every town for both 2019 and 2021. For towns that did have both years' data available, we found an average increase in Australian ballot turnout of approximately 39% between 2019 and 2021. Only three towns reported decreases in Australian ballot turnout: Danby, Sheldon and St. Albans (town).

BACKGROUND

Student researchers viewed videos of the public information meetings and in some cases checked data with meeting minutes and town clerks.

Town population numbers were taken from the US Census American Community Survey five year rolling average, year 2018.

We used attendance, participation and Australian ballot turnout numbers from 2019 and 2021 because 2020 was an extremely unusual year, due to both the start of the Covid pandemic and the primary elections. Australian ballot numbers 2021 directly from town clerks, for 2019 from the Secretary of State.

This is a project of the Center for Research on Vermont.

A number of student researchers contributed to this report: Valentina Czochanski, Lucy Heisey, Emma Blahut, Ally White, Noah, Nick Beal, Chandler Donovan, Ruben Trauba, Calin and several others. Valentina is the student leader, Emily the overall research coordinator.