

The essense of participatory democracy?

A New England town meeting moderator's explanation and advice

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EDITOR'S NOTE – *If respect for diversity and other views are the essense of democratic process, how is that practiced? It has been observed that New England town meetings are among the purest forms of participatory democracy. Every voter in the community is entitled to attend and vote; all are heard. The Town Meeting normally happens once a year – in the spring – and the business is usually conducted from a “warrant” – a booklet listing matters to be voted upon. In Williamstown (pop. 8,400), in a rural part of Massachusetts known as The Berkshires, attorney Stan Parese had been serving as the elected town moderator for a decade on May 18, 2010 when he delivered these remarks. An attorney, Parese was voluntarily stepping down and this was his last year in the moderator role – the person who manages the flow of business primarily according to Roberts Rules of Order.*

Before we get started with the business of the meeting, I want to go over some preliminary matters. I am Stan Parese. I am the Town Meeting moderator. My role is to help move this meeting through its agenda. Our agenda is the Town Meeting Warrant. If you've been to many town meetings, consider this a refresher. If this is your first town meeting, this is to help you understand town meeting. Generally, and also to understand the procedures we will follow tonight.

Town meeting – as an institution of government – is not perfect. It is, however, remarkable. Tonight – for the next few hours – in the most literal sense of these words: *you are your government*. As one commentator put it:

“Town meeting . . . catches an important meaning of freedom and expresses a classic conviction of believers in democracy. Ordinary [people] may or may not be the best judges of [their] own interests, but if [they] do not exercise effective authority over matters that are in their immediate range of interest, they may be well-tended animals, but they are not free. Freedom in the concrete, freedom as it is experienced in daily life, is the experience of having a hand in determining the issues that touch the individual.”

So as you think about and experience this town meeting tonight, recognize that everyone in this room gets to participate in this process. Everyone gets to have a hand in determining the issues. Everyone in this room *is experiencing freedom*.



Former Town Moderator Stan Parese
[\(Photo courtesy of iBerkshires\)](#)

I say to you, without a hint of sentimentality or exaggeration, that in this world *that* is extraordinary. People throughout the ages have given what Lincoln called "[the last full measure of devotion](#)" – people have given their lives – so that people like us could have meetings like this. Now, "Freedom" does not mean "free-for-all." There are procedures we will follow to work our way through the agenda, through the warrant.

First – in order to vote tonight, you need to have checked in over in the cafeteria and picked up a tan voting card. Second – all communications this evening are to be directed to me. No one is to speak unless I recognize them. Williamstown has a long tradition of moving through its agenda in a civil and efficient way, with frank and thoughtful discussion of the questions to be decided. Town meeting is a special time and place for our community. It's the one place we come together – face to face, in large numbers – to make decisions, recognizing that we don't always agree on what those decisions should be.

I can assure that not all the votes tonight will be unanimous. In a way, that is the whole point of a town meeting. If all people always completely agreed on everything, life would be unimaginably boring, and there would be no need for town meetings. This means we all need to accept – I would suggest celebrate – the obvious fact that there are people in this room who will disagree with your view of things during this meeting and that this meeting will at times be very much divided in its thinking.

Notwithstanding our differences, we need at all times to remain respectful to one another. We need to *treasure everyone's right* to speak. In concrete terms, that means we don't hiss or groan at one another. We don't attack one another because we have differing points of view. In practice, it's surprisingly simple: Speak to the substance of the issues. Leave any feelings you have about other people out of it. As a rule of thumb, if you find yourself about to say someone's name, you are probably on very thin ice.

Also – Williamstown is something of a "company town." Our major "companies" are in the business of education and culture. As a result, we have many citizens who are very highly educated, wonderfully articulate, and for whom speaking in front of large groups is a matter of routine. I am also mindful that there are many people in town who don't share those traits – and for whom speaking in front of large groups may be a frightening prospect. We all need to remain clear that this meeting belongs to *everyone* in Williamstown. That means that one does not need a Ph.D., a master's degree or – for that matter – a high-school diploma, to step up to that microphone and address your fellow citizens in this meeting. This is a town meeting. Everyone's voice is welcome here. So the so-called "bottom line" is that it's my job as moderator to see to it that this meeting is a place where every citizen – from every walk of life, on any side of any issue – can speak and be assured that they will be treated with respect. I take that job very seriously.

Now, as for procedure. We do exactly the same thing with each warrant article. I read it. A motion is made. There is a second. Then there is time for discussion and questions. We vote. I announce the vote. We move on. Many motions carry with little or no discussion. Others are discussed at length. All is done by motion, second, discussion, vote.

Listen to others when they speak. Many times a point you may want to make will be made by someone speaking before you. It doesn't help your cause to repeat the same point over and over. It also doesn't help to be long-winded. In fact, it likely hurts your cause. When you wish to address the meeting, come to the mike. And I'll recognize you. When I recognize you, please give your name and your address before beginning your comments.

Now let's get to work.