
To the Editor

Opinion in Public

For many people the term “town meeting” evokes the fake nostalgia of a Norman Rockwell painting (rather than the more frequent reality of a bickering session dominated by a few loudmouths). This image may be an important factor in the public perception of town meetings; in a poll reported in the July/August issue of *Public Perspective*, a plurality of 43% named town meetings as the best way for officials to learn what the majority of people think. Opinion polls ranked second, named by 25%.

There are other factors favoring the idea of town meetings over polls. Attending one is an active, individual decision. Responding to a poll is a reactive accommodation to a stranger’s request. You can award yourself brownie points for the former, but not for the latter. Further, the image of polls may have suffered a decline over the last 30 years because of the growth of partisan polling. The polling pioneers, Gallup, Crossley and Roper, took pains to appear politically neutral, which gave credibility to their findings. We now have Democratic and Republican pollsters whose results tend to run suspiciously parallel to their affiliations.

In theory at least, a town meeting is a forum for a great variety of views, and discussion of their relative merits and flaws. In a poll interview, respondents are guided into narrow channels, both of the subjects covered and the response alternatives available. They usually have no opportunity to say what they would really like to, to qualify their answers in a way that will be reflected in the poll results, or to ask for clarification of questions they consider unclear or ambiguous. For many people, being polled is a frustrating experience.

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The media’s strong preference for polls (52%, versus 25% for town meetings) is understandable. It is easier to communicate simple, numerical results than summaries of messy town meetings.

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Have an opinion? Perhaps a reply to something appearing in Public Perspective? Direct submissions to the editor at pubper@ropercenter.uconn.edu. Submissions should be no more than 750 words. Authors will be contacted prior to publication.