

To: Act 133 Working Group

From: Susan Clark

Date: July 21, 2025

Re: “Electronic participation and voting for Annual Meeting: Study the feasibility of using electronic platforms to support remote attendance and voting at annual meetings”

I offer this memo as background information for our group’s July 24 discussion on electronic participation and voting at town meeting. I drafted this as a quick overview of my initial research and observations on this topic, as a democratic scholar/practitioner and a town moderator. This memo does not necessarily represent the views of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns.

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1) Key facts about town meeting (boring but important):

- Town Meeting is a town's "annual meeting" -- a meeting of legal voters of each town, held each year to elect town officers, adopt the budget, and address public issues. When voters gather in person, it's called a "floor meeting" (as opposed to ballot voting).
- On issues of finance and governance, town meeting is roughly equivalent to the town's legislative branch. You can think of the selectboard as the executive branch. They serve as checks-and-balances to each other.
- Only *towns* have town meetings. Cities don't. Vermont's ten cities use things like mayors and city councils, a different form of government.
- The town meeting form of government is used widely in hundreds of towns across Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, as well as throughout Switzerland.
- Vermont towns are not required to use floor meetings. Towns can vote to switch to a ballot system instead (officially called "Australian ballot"), preceded by an informational meeting. Australian ballot voting can be adopted for any/all of these:
 - Election of officers
 - Adoption of budget
 - Public questions
- "Australian ballot" just means a pre-printed paper ballot. It's what most places just call a "ballot."
- Another option under Vermont law is a "representative town meeting" where people are elected to attend town meeting. Brattleboro is the only Vermont town that has this form, but it is widely used in other New England states and Switzerland.
- Rough estimate: Maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of Vermont towns currently make decisions of some kind from the floor? It's tricky to summarize accurately, but one chart is available [here](#).

THE ISSUE: You must be present to vote at town meeting. Concerned about disenfranchising voters who cannot attend in person, many Vermont towns switch to Australian ballot. Meanwhile, concerned about losing empowered deliberative democracy, many other towns retain floor meetings. Towns are asking: How can we create more inclusive access to our deliberative meetings? Figuring out how to allow remote participation and voting could be a "both-and" solution.

OUR CHARGE: "Study the feasibility of using electronic platforms to support remote attendance and voting at annual meetings"

2) More background (optional reading)

- Town meeting is very different from a public hearing or so-called “town hall” event. That’s because town meeting is *direct, deliberative* democracy. “Direct” means the voters themselves are the governing body (as opposed to representative democracy, where we elect people to govern us). “Deliberative” means it’s not just an up/down vote; voters have the power to discuss and amend items before voting.
- The other “direct, deliberative democracy” system in the U.S. is our jury system. (Jury members deliberate and make binding decisions, acting as part of the judicial branch of government.) Studies show that offering empowered deliberation is a way to strengthen democracy. Findings show it often results in people being more civically engaged over the long term—increased voting, participating in politics, having faith in public institutions, being involved in local discussions, following the news, and feeling empowered about their own and their neighbors’ political abilities.¹
- Offering remote town meeting participation would ensure this democratic experience is available to people who can’t attend in-person town meeting due to disabilities, people who serve as caregivers, who struggle to find child care, who are deployed in the military, and more.
- American voters trust *local* democracy most—more than state and a lot more than federal². However (reality check): local democracy consistently draws less voter participation. Both in Vermont and across the U.S., unless there is a big controversy, turnout in *local* voting—whether voting from the floor or voting by ballot—is consistently far lower than voter turnout in state and national elections.³

Town Meeting is a Deliberative Body

Executive and Legislative Branches What they mean at different levels of government

	Executive	Legislative
National:	President	U.S. Congress
State:	Governor	State Legislature
City:	Mayor	Board of Aldermen
Town:	Selectboard	YOU – And all of your neighbors who attend town meeting

3) Electronic Participation & Voting for Town Meeting: Questions & (some) Answers

Q: Many town boards have remote participation and voting. So why not town meeting?

A: Quick answer: Concerns about voting security. How can election officials be certain that the remote participant is who they say they are?

Additional areas of concern are: legal (uncertainty about what the law allows); technological (how to conduct hybrid deliberation and voting); and resource-based (town equipment, training and staffing/funding availability).

Q: Isn't there software that deliberative bodies use for secure voting?

A: Kind of. During the Covid pandemic, the Vermont Legislature met over videoconference and voted remotely (Everbridge mobile app). Brattleboro, which uses a representative town meeting system, also did (Zoom). However, these meetings were simpler because they were fully remote--not hybrid. They had a limited, quickly identifiable list of participants. These participants could be given exclusive access, and could reasonably be expected to get training; and the bodies were well staffed. All of this becomes more challenging with an open town meeting, which has a large electorate with a wide range of electronic access and capabilities.

Also, secure voting software costs money. (See below under Wayland, Massachusetts.)

Q: Have any Vermont towns tried hybrid town meeting participation?

A: A few. Here are some:

Cambridge, VT: In response to a voter's request for an ADA accommodation, Cambridge facilitated a voter's remote participation and voting, from a room in the same building where the town meeting was held. Participation was facilitated using YouTube and Zoom. A justice of the peace was available to assist the voter with paper ballot voting.

On-site accommodation eliminated voter identification concerns.

Both town officials and the voter have expressed satisfaction with the arrangement. However, this system only accommodates voters who have the ability to travel to the meeting site.

Middlesex, VT: Between 2008-2020, the Town of Middlesex offered remote town meeting participation (RTMP). The goal of Middlesex RTMP was to allow town meeting participation for citizens who could not attend the meeting, while maintaining an efficient and vibrant town meeting for those in the meeting room. A volunteer committee developed the process over several years, changing and improving it over the 12 years it was in place. Middlesex consulted with the then-Secretary of State (Deb Markowitz) and discussed the project with attorneys at multiple Town Moderator trainings.

Minimum staffing required: One person to run camera, sound, internet feed, and trouble-shoot tech issues; a second person to act as liaison between the remote participant(s) and moderator. (Would require more volunteers if there were more remote participants). Requires town moderator to be fully informed/integrated in the process. Volunteers train remote participants in software use.

Equipment and software required: On the provider side: laptop and web conferencing platform (e.g. GoToMeeting), a webcam on a tripod, reliable internet connection. Also, phone cables and a conference phone as back-up. When ORCA Media began live-streaming town meetings, camera and sound could be provided by them (which was great).

On the user side: Phone, internet connection, computer with camera, up-to-date browser software, web conferencing software installed on computer, training on how to use it.

Volunteers visited with interested remote attendees and did test runs to ensure that their internet was acceptable and that they were comfortable with the software. (The volunteer group made free computers available but none were requested.)

Voting: For voice votes, a volunteer liaison ensured that the remote voter's voice could be heard in the room. On show-of-hands votes, the liaison turned the monitor toward the podium so the remote participants can be counted. (Backup plan: If video were unavailable, the liaison could hold up a sign indicating the votes cast by remote participants.) Paper ballots were never required during those 12 years, but if they had been, the plan was for the moderator to ask for the assembly's consent to allow the remote voter to vote through the RTMP liaison. (This is necessary to suspend the rules against "Proxy voting" under Robert's Rules of Order.)

Voter identification: Vermont statute requires "the presiding officer shall follow reasonable and necessary procedures to ensure that persons who are not voters of the town do not vote." 17 VSA 2656. Extensive pre-meeting visits, training, and real-time meeting communication, gave the presiding officer confidence in remote participants' identity.

Starting in 2020, thanks to the Covid pandemic, everyone's interest in and understanding of remote meetings increased dramatically. Coincidentally, however, this was also a period when nationally, enormous attention was being given to (real or imagined) voter fraud issues, and election officials were being subjected to unprecedented scrutiny. In an abundance of caution, Middlesex was advised not to offer remote town meeting voting until the voter identity issue could be clarified.

Jericho, VT*

At the 2024 Jericho Town Meeting, Jericho voted to approve these motions:

- Article VI "Shall the Town adopt all budget articles by Australian Ballot with the Selectboard directed to hold a hybrid format budget review meeting to allow citizens to adjust the budget proposal." and
- Article VII "Shall the Town adopt all public questions by Australian Ballot with the Selectboard directed to hold a hybrid format review in order to allow citizens to provide amendments."

Voters asked for an empowered town meeting process followed by a ballot vote. However, this is not currently allowed under Vermont law. In an effort to get as close to this as possible, Jericho's ["Reimagining Town Meeting Task Force"](#) developed a three-part process: Early fall kick-off meeting to develop ideas and vision for the year; a January meeting to review draft budget, with ability to amend; Australian ballot voting on Town Meeting Day. They offered remote participation at the fall meeting and, most notably, the January meeting (which most resembled a town meeting).

*Note: Jericho's meeting was not technically the town meeting; it was a Selectboard pre-meeting. For this reason, they could experiment with fewer legal concerns about voter security.

Jericho widely publicized and encouraged unlimited online participation, and 52 people joined the January meeting in this way. According to the committee's report to the Selectboard, "It took the whole TMR Task Force going full throttle working with key staff from the town and from MMCTV, starting with a series of dry-run episodes in the auditorium, to put together the integrated presentation of the town budget with the remote and present citizens being visible to one another and successfully bringing motions to amend to the floor and vote them up and down." Jericho's model included numerous dedicated staff and volunteers including professionals with expertise in remote meeting facilitation. An online "moderator" partnered with the elected town moderator in the room, to monitor online participation and count votes.

At the end of the meeting, the Selectboard voted immediately to approve all amendments made by the meeting participants.

Jericho's report notes that it is proud of their effort and it accomplished the goals of broad inclusion.

It also notes concerns. "Jericho does not have adequate space or equipment infrastructure to support effectively a large hybrid meeting." They are considering alternative spaces, to allow for better acoustics and visuals. The report notes, "It was clear that many online participants weren't familiar with the tools and functions relating to participating online. The hands up/hands down function and closed captioning are two things that were new to some people. ... Sound quality, visuals, and vote counts were all problems for online participants."

The report notes problems with counting votes online, ensuring that only those registered to vote are voting, and what to do when two voters are sharing a screen. They want to make the same voter requirements of both online and in-person attendees. They suggest adding a requirement for both groups to check in/identify themselves; requesting online participants to turn on cameras to speak; and requesting online participants to include their names on their screens.

The report makes suggestions for improvement, including providing a user's guide for remote participation in advance; dedicating one screen to online participants and another to the budget and amendments; slowing the process to allow remote participants to speak and vote; and developing a clearer plan for making motions and voting in hybrid meetings.

While the town is realistic about needed improvements, townspeople and leaders are enthusiastic about the experiment and Jericho is actively planning to continue and improve it.

A more detailed report regarding the online portion of the meeting is expected later this summer.

Q: What about places that use town meeting outside of Vermont?

A: I'm still working on this research, but here's what I've found so far.

New Hampshire: "We do not have remote town meetings, and it does not seem our legislature is looking to change that. For regular public meetings, other than town meeting, our various boards and bodies have the option to provide remote participation options for the public but nothing is required other than in person attendance."

Jonathan E. Cowall, Municipal Services Counsel, New Hampshire Municipal Association, email March 20, 2025

Maine: "With regard to hybrid meetings, public participation has been allowed remotely, but participation at say an annual town meeting is still not allowed at this time. Perhaps in the future this will be looked at. ... I think the problem is the voting piece, but I'm not 100% sure on that."

Rebecca J. Lambert, Municipal Issues Specialist, Maine Municipal Association, email March 25, 2025

Connecticut (No response yet)

Switzerland: The Swiss communities that use representative town meeting (like Brattleboro) have offered remote participation. I have not yet received info on any towns with floor meetings that do so.

Massachusetts:

The town of Wayland, MA is seeking home rule authority from their legislature for a pilot program to incorporate remote participation into their open town meeting. Wayland's volunteer Electronic Voting Implementation Subcommittee (yes, that's ELVIS!) is led by a software engineer, and the group has examined myriad technical issues regarding hybrid town meetings.

They focused on four "technical impediments" to remote participation and voting: 1) How to make remote participation simple; 2) How to detect a widespread internet outage; 3) How to secure votes cast via the internet; and 4) How to detect and deter proxy voting (one person casting votes on behalf of another).

They have imagined a "remote voting system" solution to these points. Under their solution: Remote voters use their own smartphone or tablet (town provides if you don't have one); they pre-register with town clerk and receive a voter code, password, and audit code. Voters log into a web page; the page has one button for each activity (request to speak, vote, obtain help, etc.). The remote voting system captures a photo of the participant to be used for random reconfirmation of voters, and to deter proxy voting; an audit function allows voters to report discrepancies. The web page voters see offers real-time transcription of the meeting, displays a list of people requesting to speak, and allows remote voters to cast their vote and see results of voting.

If approved by the legislature, Wayland is confident they can recruit companies to develop the system. This approach has already worked for them for a different democratic tool: hand-held "clickers" to replace floor voting during town meeting. (Wayland envisioned the clickers, private companies manifested the clickers, the MA legislature legalized use of the clickers, and now 70+ MA towns use them. See below.)

Bills to legalize remote town meeting participation have been submitted to the MA legislature, but none has been brought to a vote. At least 15 towns are monitoring Wayland's progress with the Legislature.

4: Additional changes to consider:

Voting "Clickers": Legalize the use of voting clickers in Vermont. Used widely in MA, these [hand-held clickers](#) can replace traditional floor voting (voice-vote, hand-raising, or paper ballot), and allow floor voting to be private and fast. They use close-circuit technology (off-line). Can be used if a voter is in an adjoining room—cannot be used offsite. Towns need to buy or rent them, but sharing arrangements with other towns are possible.

Two-Part Town Meeting:

New Hampshire does not have the same Australian ballot system as Vermont. Instead, under [NH's "SB2" system](#) (named after Senate Bill #2 that created it), towns hold a "deliberative session" each spring where voters can discuss and amend the budget and

other articles. About a month later, the budget and articles are voted on by citizens at the ballot box (absentee ballots are available). Adopted in 1995, SB2 is used by over 60 NH towns, primarily in the larger towns in southern NH. The idea is to combine the advantages of a deliberative meeting with the accessibility of a ballot vote.

This is not unlike the model Jericho voters called for, but were not able to create under Vermont law (Jericho has created a two-part meeting, but their deliberative session vote is advisory—not officially binding until ratified by Selectboard vote).

Cambridge, Vermont calls for the legislature to allow this system in VT, in their study of modernizing town meeting: “We can retain our citizens’ power at Town Meeting to amend and change the budget, nominate candidates for town office and consider all articles. However, we propose that this good work should then be codified by Australian ballot on a date certain after Town Meeting. This ... will require a legislative or town charter change.” (Annual Town Meeting Modernization Advisory Committee Recommendations)

5: What are improvements towns can offer now to maximize town meeting accessibility and increase participation? (Starter list, lots more we can add to this!)

- Offer childcare, preferably free. Town meeting research shows that childcare can improve attendance measurably, especially among women.⁴
- Highlight the issues. Next to town size, the most significant factor in town meeting attendance is whether there are interesting issues on the warning.⁵ Town leaders and volunteers can do advance publicity to increase public understanding of and interest in key topics and decisions.
- Use microphone runners. (Volunteers—they can be kids—bring the microphone to those who have been recognized to speak.) Using mobile mikes rather than a stationary mike at the front of the room supports those with mobility issues, and lessens anxiety around public speaking.
- Use simple, plain language in all outreach.
- Include information (town website, town report, etc.) on how residents with disabilities can request accommodation.
- Review all printed and online materials for accessibility.
- Use a projector and screen to show articles and proposed amendments during the meeting.
- Livestream town meeting. This is already being done in many areas of the state. While this does not allow voters to speak or vote, it increases government transparency and can improve residents’ understanding of town issues.
- Your ideas:

RESOURCES:

Jericho, Vermont created the Reimagining Town Meeting Task Force. You can find their work here: <https://jerichovt.org/jericho-town-meeting-2-0>

The Cambridge, VT Selectboard created the Town Meeting Modernization Advisory Ad Hoc Committee. You can find their findings here: <https://cambridgetownvt.documents-on-demand.com/?l=77ff7cd369f7ee11a3f9000c29a59557&r=721AD4D8DCA0F2B32C051EB09B04C07C>

¹ John Gastil, E. Pierre Deess, Philip J. Weiser, and Cindy Simmons, *The Jury and Democracy: How Jury Deliberation Promotes Civic Engagement and Political Participation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/512651/americans-trust-local-government-congress-least.aspx> See also the 2025 Vermont Civic Health Index, <https://sos.vermont.gov/secretary-of-state-services/civics/civic-health-index/>

³ “Across the U.S., only 15 to 27 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot in their local election.” National Civic Review, Spring, 2020, “Increasing Voter Turnout In Local Elections.” <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/ncr-article/increasing-voter-turnout-in-local-elections/>

⁴ Susan Clark and Frank Bryan, *All Those in Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community* (Montpelier, Vermont: RavenMark Publishing, 2005 and 2015). For more suggestions, see chapters 11-12.

⁵ Frank M. Bryan, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).