



# Town Meeting Advisory Committee Recommendations to the Board Of Selectmen

League of Women Voters

November 14, 2015

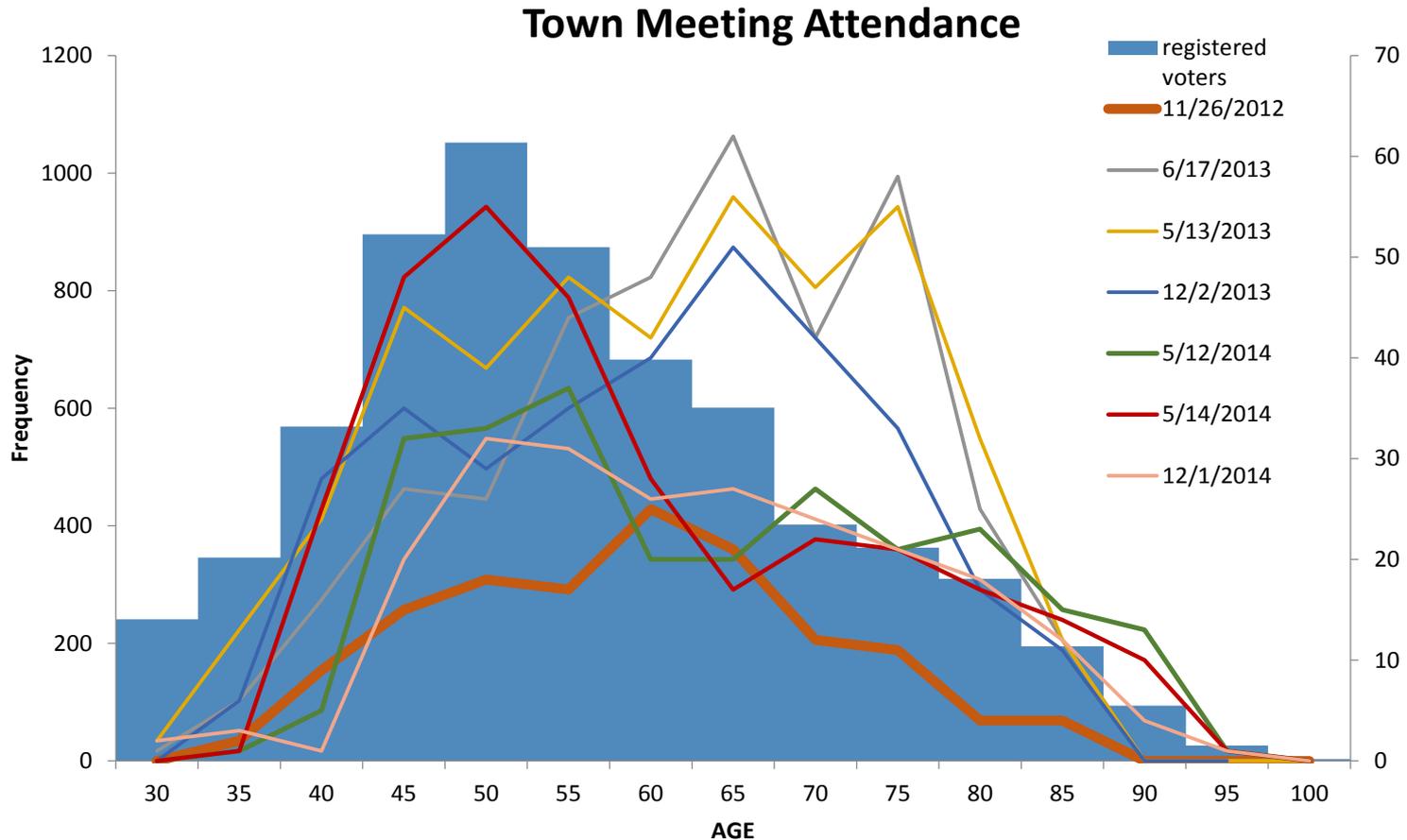
# Purpose of committee

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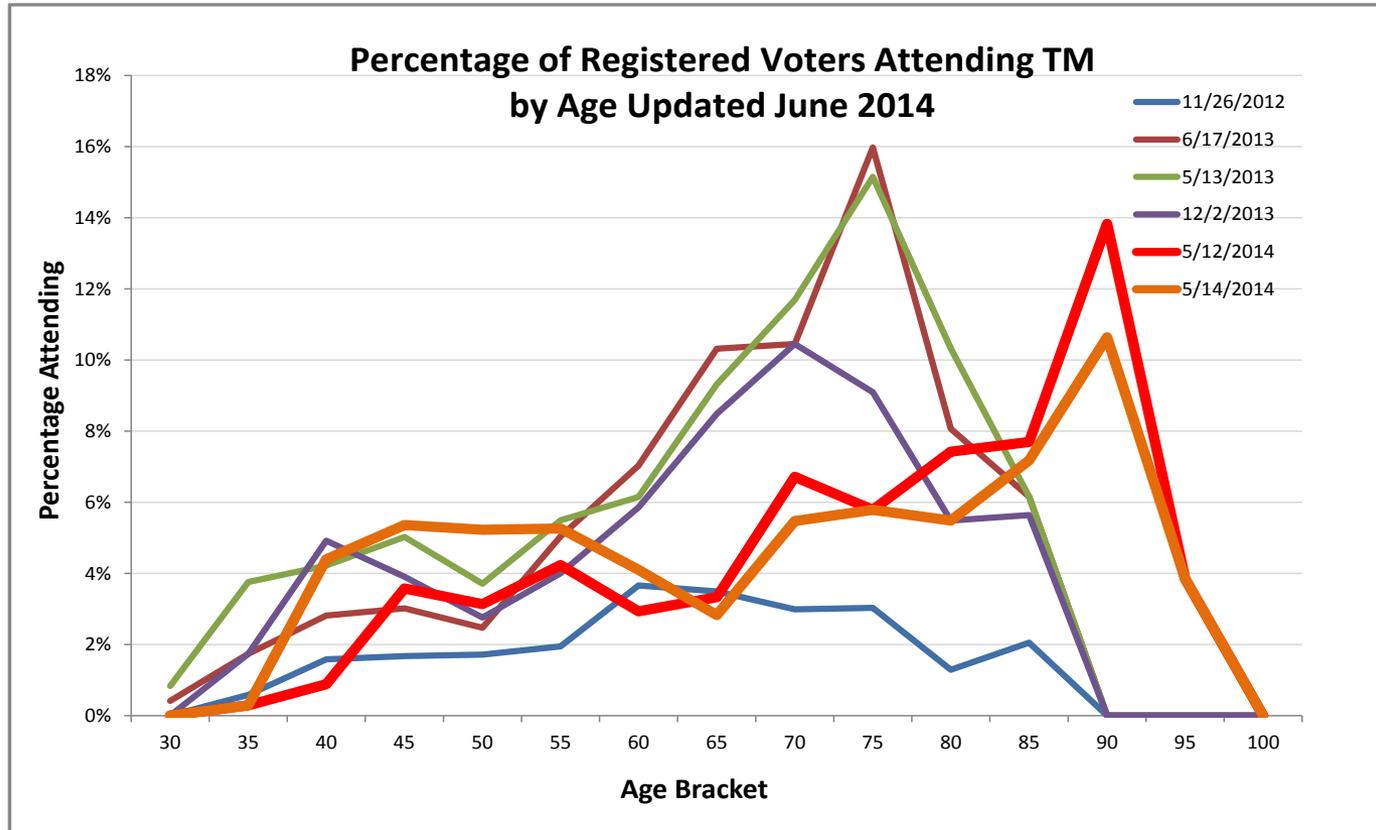
- Appointed by Selectmen in June 2013
- Membership includes 4 at-large, 5 town committee, 3 town organization, and 3 ex-officio (non-voting) members
- Purpose is to make recommendations to the Board of Selectmen regarding Article 1 of the General By-Laws of the Town relating to town meeting
- This includes
  - Day of the week and time of day that Town Meeting is held
  - Notification requirements
  - Method of voting
  - Town Meeting procedures
- In addition, the Committee may make related recommendations relative to the conduct of the Town Caucus and the Town budget hearing
- The purpose of any recommendations is to improve voter participation in, and the conduct of the Town Caucus, the Budget Hearing, the Town Election, and the Town Meeting



# But First, Who Is Attending Town Meeting?



# But First, Who Is Attending Town Meeting?



# Town Wide Survey

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- Used to frame the committee's recommendations
- Conducted online and open for approximately 5 weeks
- Notice given by town wide mailer, advertised on town website, myGrapevine, & through community organizations
- Consisted of 18 questions and took approximately 20 minutes
- 635 respondents
  - represents almost 10% of the 6,655 voters 30 years of age or older
- Cross-referencing attendance with the indicated participation of the respondents represent on average over half the attendees
  - 28% of respondents indicated they attended none of the specified recent Town Meetings
- age distribution of respondents skewed a little younger than the age distribution of registered voters
  - age range and distribution of respondents was still broad and robust enough to provide useful data at all ages



# Town Wide Survey

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- Insert survey



# Recommendations to the Board of Selectmen

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- Use of a Consent Agenda
  - Used to handle the more routine articles at Town Meeting
  - Any 10 voters can object and remove an article
  - Examples include
    - Appropriation to Stabilization Fund
    - Appropriation to OPEB Trust Fund
    - Continue Departmental Revolving Funds
    - Accept Chapter 90 Road Improvement Funds
    - Approve Property Tax Deferral Income Limits
  - Potentially be expanded as public becomes more comfortable with its use
- Combine May Special Town Meeting and Annual Town Meeting
  - Traditionally these meetings were held separately in order to distinguish between the current fiscal year and the next fiscal year
  - No legal requirement to do so
  - Will streamline the Town Meeting Process by eliminating the need to start and stop two meetings with a break in between
- Live broadcast of Town Meeting
  - allows voters who cannot commit time for the entire Town Meeting to monitor the progress of Town Meeting and at least potentially participate in the warrant articles they are concerned about the most



# Recommendations to the Board of Selectmen (continued)

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- General By-Law Change to use *Town Meeting Time* instead of *Roberts' Rules of Order*
  - *Roberts' Rules of Order*
    - Based on parliamentary procedure
    - Written in 1876 (11 editions since)
  - *Town Meeting Time*
    - Written by Town Moderators from Swampscott, Brookline and Lincoln in 1962 and revised and amended in 1983 and 2001 to address the issues specific to Town Meeting that are absent or ambiguous in Roberts' Rules
    - Provides an alternate authority to Roberts' Rules
    - Takes parliamentary law and applies to Town Meeting and rules related to special circumstances
- Town Meeting Start Time
  - allow Town Meeting to start as early as 7:00pm
    - Originally started at 7:30pm
    - the survey results indicated that moving the start time 30 minutes would not result in a loss of attendance
    - Allows for 30 more minutes for business to be completed each night



# Recommendations to the Board of Selectmen (continued)

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- Presentation Time Limits
  - Initial presenters and organized opponents limited to five minutes per side
    - Exception of 10 minutes for
      - operating budget
      - CPC annual report
      - large capital expenses
      - significant zoning changes
      - other major issues
      - subject to the voter approval at the beginning of each Town Meeting
    - Longer presentation limits allowed at the discretion of the Moderator
  - Second highest factor for survey respondents for not attending a Town Meeting in the past is that there was a sense that it was too long and takes too many hours/evenings
    - presentation times are a time-consuming component
    - voters have become too reliant on Town Meeting to become educated on the issues
- Establish a PowerPoint protocol for Town Meeting presentations
  - Format
  - Submission deadlines



# Recommendations to the Board of Selectmen (continued)

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- Citizens Petitions
  - Use has been increasing
  - Can be valuable part of town legislative process
  - Developed a Guide to Citizens Petitions to maximize the perceived reasonableness and potential efficacy of any such petition and to reduce the demands on Town staff time and resources
  - Voters should use a citizens' petition as a last resort and encourages them to first work with Town boards and committees to collaborate where possible
  - Established Town Counsel "office hours" several weeks before the submission deadline for Annual Town Meeting to assist voters in reviewing the language, legality, and actual effect of a potential petition, drafting the petition, and answering any other questions they may have



# Recommendations to the Board of Selectmen (continued)

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- Increase the number of required signatures for Annual (May) Town Meeting to 100
  - Currently only 10 required
    - Will bring it in line with Special Town Meeting which currently requires 100 signatures
  - Will demonstrate broader support for the citizens' petition
    - may increase the likelihood of it passing
    - increase the perception as a position held by more than a very small minority more worthy of the entire Town Meeting considering it and its potentially circumventing usual processes
  - In the past 5 years 23 at ATM and 3 at STM
    - 6 passed at ATM
    - All 3 passed at STM
  - Overwhelmingly supported 4 to 1 in the survey
    - 60% supporting or strongly supporting the change and only 16% opposing this change, with the remaining 24% being indifferent
  - Requires a "home rule petition" for a special act of the state legislature
    - More details on the process



# Recommendations to the Board of Selectmen (continued)

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- Alternate Voting Methods
  - Examine Further Voting at Town Meeting with a Hand Held Device
    - Potential Advantages
      - Allows for a quick and accurate vote count that is on the record
      - Anonymity in voting (for its privacy)
      - Currently allowed under State law
    - Potential Disadvantages
      - Costs
      - Anonymity in voting (for its lack of transparency)
      - Potential difficulties of use (handset distribution and collection, education, etc.)
      - Potential reliability issues (tabulation accuracy, system failures, security, etc.)
      - Little or no improvement (and possibly even deterioration) in speed of voting process, if extra time on electronic voting for routine matters materially offsets time saved from elimination of standing vote counts
      - Maintenance and technological obsolescence, if purchased
      - Need to over-order handsets based on potential turnout
  - Recommendation is based on potential benefits in accuracy and efficiency, which are perceived to be greater than the non-financial disadvantages and not based on costs



# Recommendations to the Board of Selectmen (continued)

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- Alternate Voting Methods (continued)
  - Remote Online Voting
    - Voters who do not wish to participate in debate or cannot physically attend Town Meeting vote remotely while watching on TV or online (virtual town meeting)
    - Potential Advantages
      - Reaches a broader number of potential voters and increasing voting participation, from anywhere, even while away from Weston or unable to leave home
      - Retains more of the existing Town Meeting structure than the split-debate/ballot voting approach discussed below
      - Allows remote participants to vote on amendments and procedural motions
      - Dovetails with use of electronic handheld voting
      - Anonymity in voting (for its privacy)
    - Potential Disadvantages
      - Requires changes in state law to be permissible
      - Decreases in-person Town Meeting attendance, potentially to the detriment of quorums and floor debate
      - Online security and reliability concerns
      - Costs
      - Anonymity in voting (for its lack of transparency)
  - Overwhelmingly supported in the town wide survey
  - Committee recommends that the Selectmen (via a new Committee) further explore remote online voting, where voters are able to vote in real-time while attending Town Meeting either in person or remotely, to put Town voters in a position where they can better decide whether to actually pursue remote online voting as an option

# Recommendations to the Board of Selectmen (continued)

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- Alternate Voting Methods (continued)
  - Split Debate and Ballot Vote (“Australian ballot”)
    - Debate occurs several weeks before an actual ballot at Town Hall
    - Potential Advantages
      - Reaches a broader number of potential voters and increases voting participation, including those unable to attend the deliberative session
      - Allows for absentee ballots
      - Allows voters to better budget their time and attention, based on their own priorities and ability or desire to attend Town Meeting
      - Anonymity in voting (for its privacy)
      - Existing use and experience in other states, which is informative and may increase comfort and legislative amenability to necessary changes in state law
    - Potential Disadvantages
      - Requires changes in state law to be permissible
      - Decreases in-person Town Meeting attendance, potentially to the detriment of quorums and floor debate
      - Retains less of the existing Town Meeting structure than the remote online voting approach discussed above
      - Anonymity (for its lack of transparency)
      - Logistical complexities relating to ballot creation, approval, and notice
  - Overwhelmingly supported in the town wide survey
  - Committee recommends that the Selectmen (via a new Committee) further explore split debate and ballot voting to put Town voters in a position where they can better decide whether to actually pursue remote online voting as an option



# What We Discussed and Didn't Recommend

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- Caucus reform
  - Allow nominees time to speak after nomination?
  - Transparency and public notice on incumbents' decision to seek reelection
  - Remove caucus nominee?
- Representative Town Meeting
  - 120-240 elected representatives vote at town meeting
  - Residents still allowed to participate in debate
  - Currently allowed under State law
  - unanimously agreed to not pursue due to a lack of support in the community
- Review of Warrant book
  - More detailed?
  - Relevant board recommendation in addition to FinCom?
- Town Meeting Day of the Week
  - Saturday not a popular solution
- Limits on Articles Brought to Special Town Meetings vs. Annual Town Meetings
  - There should be no delineation between the two meetings



# Additional Resources

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- Town website
  - Selectmen's Town Meeting Advisory Committee (2014) page
  - Know the Issues page
- Weston Media
  - Online videos of Meetings
  - Local Access Channel
  - On Demand



Questions?

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THANK YOU!

