Introduction: This Is What Looks like Democracy

One of the recurring themes of the first two years of the Trump presidency has been the erosion of democratic norms. The 2018 midterm election witnessed widespread voter suppression in Georgia, alleged vote theft in North Carolina, and a wholesale effort by a lame duck state legislature in Wisconsin to subvert the electoral outcome in the gubernatorial race. These departures from established democratic practices occurred against the background of reckless statements from a president whose blithe disregard for the separation of powers outlined in the U.S. Constitution would be comical if it were not terrifying. Many of these reckless statements reflected the president’s concern over ongoing investigations into the possibility that his 2016 electoral victory was in part the result of foreign interference.

This essay is not concerned with these transgressions against the operations of democracy but rather with an ongoing phenomenon that reflects and sustains the conditions that make these transgressions possible. The town meeting is an iconic form of direct citizen democracy. It is increasingly overshadowed by the town hall meeting, however, where those in power unilaterally
convey information to their employees or other constituents. Over the past decade or more, the town hall meeting has become a staple of corporate and academic governance. The forms of these town hall meetings are varied, but they all involve announcements and questions about a foregone conclusion, rather than the propositions, deliberations, and votes of an actual town meeting. I do not wish to claim that U.S. citizens cannot tell the difference between a gathering of citizens voting “yea” or “nay” on road improvements in their town versus a CEO of a corporate behemoth holding a press event to unveil a new smartphone. Rather, it does not seem we care much about the difference.

Town Hall Meetings and the Death of Deliberation outlines the town meeting in its original context: as a form of democratic community governance in New England. The essay then traces the structure of the town meeting as it mutates into a format for presidential debates, becomes a staple of corporate governance, and emerges as a way for universities to simulate affective labor. In its most recent iterations, the town hall meeting returns to its local and political roots—but this time with corporate underwriters.

Generations of observers have celebrated the local, direct, and immediate nature of the town meeting as a particularly American form of democracy. This reverence takes an iconic form in artist Norman Rockwell’s Four Freedoms series, where the painting Freedom of Speech depicts a man standing up and speaking at a town meeting. The town hall meeting, however, has since emerged as a spectacle designed to emulate the scale and intimacy of the town meeting but lacking direct political consequences. Beginning in the 1992 presidential campaign, the town hall meeting debate format has emerged as a recurring feature of the presidential debate debate schedule. As opposed to a traditional debate, where the candidates engage with one another directly or respond to questions from a moderator, the town hall format
features questions from members of an audience. These debates can have an impact on public opinion, and in turn on voting preferences, but they do not carry the immediate electoral stakes of a town meeting. As Donald Robinson points out in his study of town meetings, the critical feature of the town meeting is that the assembled people discuss and then vote on questions over which they have jurisdiction.\(^1\) Participants in the audience of a town hall–style debate have an indirect influence on the outcome of the election through the questions they pose to the candidates. But the power to decide the election does not lie with the people in the room for the town hall–style debate. The salient difference between a town meeting and a town hall meeting is the devolution from direct jurisdiction to vague influence. Participants in a town hall meeting are in the room where it doesn’t happen.

A public gathering that mimics a deliberative democratic process but does not offer any direct power to the people assembled has proved compelling to leaders of various stripes. Especially in the wake of the 2016 election, many elected officials have held town hall meetings to allow constituents to sound off but without directly affecting legislation. Beyond the realm of electoral politics, the town hall meeting has also emerged as a way for college presidents and even CEOs to conduct what amounts to press conferences but with the flavor of democratic ritual.\(^2\) In particular, the political turmoil that attended the presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump resulted in a renewed interest in various forms of social engagement. Many incumbent politicians held town hall meetings that essentially just gave their constituents an opportunity to yell at them. At the same

---

2. See https://evp.nd.edu/town-hall/ and https://9to5mac.com/2016/02/04/tim-cook-india-iphone-apple-watch-android/
time, gatherings convened by academic and corporate leaders to unilaterally disseminate information also carry the name of “town hall meeting.” These gatherings seem democratic but are ultimately ineffectual.

This essay is thus concerned with the differences between the town meeting and the town hall meeting (sometimes just called “town hall”). These terms sound almost identical and are often confused. In my research for this project, I encountered scholars of deliberative democracy who insisted the terms were fundamentally interchangeable. Indeed, the terms are used in a variety of conflicting ways. For our purposes here, “town meeting” will refer specifically to gatherings open to all citizens of a town. This assembled body of citizens has the power to vote in its elected officials, vote on how to be taxed, and vote on how best to spend the town’s money. Put another way, the town meeting is a deliberative assembly that has jurisdictional power over state functions that devolve to local government, most notably the power to tax and to enforce those taxes through the threat of confiscating property or incarcerating a citizen. Conversely this essay will use the phrase “town hall meeting” to refer to assemblies, either public or private, that identify themselves as “town halls” or “town hall meetings.” These town hall meetings emulate the direct democratic atmosphere of the town meeting, but the people in attendance do not have any immediate jurisdictional power over the subjects under discussion. For lack of a more elegant term, we can refer to what happens in town meetings as direct democratic deliberative discourse. “Town meeting” and “town hall” are frequently conflated or confused, but the difference is between a structure where citizens have power and one where citizens are either customers or employees.

I come to this topic as a scholar of seventeenth-century New England, and scholars working in this field have a complicated relationship with declension narratives. As L. D. Burnett once
Introduction

observed, “Narratives of declension ain’t what they used to be.” The argument of Town Hall Meetings and the Death of Deliberation is a declension narrative, because I believe direct democratic deliberation has more to offer U.S. citizens than, say, developers holding a town hall meeting where they listen to complaints they are free to ignore. At the same time, nostalgia for the town meeting can manifest as nostalgia for a whiter and more rural America—where “true democracy” once flourished among hardy souls tucked away in small New England towns—while now all we have is a “vulgar spectacle.” Even as we can be sure we are currently confronting all sorts of vulgar spectacles, the argument I still hope to advance is as much an appropriation and proliferation narrative as a declension narrative.

Rather than valorizing the good old days of direct democracy and seeing the present as some sort of perversion of that ideal, I am interested in how the traditional democratic institution of the town meeting has been repurposed in the service of various neoliberal institutions, in particular the university and the corporation. If we consider the transition from seeing people as citizens to seeing people as customers or employees to be a hallmark of neoliberalism, the town hall meeting is an institution that helps manage this transition as smoothly as possible.

Anyone who considers the intersection of democracy and neoliberalism in the contemporary United States writes in the wake of Wendy Brown’s work, especially *Undoing the Demos*. In some contexts, “neoliberal” has become a label so freely applied that it can mean not much more than “bad.” But for this project, I deploy the term with an understanding that it refers to an ideology of unswerving loyalty to the logic of the market. As

Brown describes her argument, “Neoliberalism, a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms, is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy. These elements include vocabularies . . . habits of citizenship . . . and above all, democratic imaginaries.” These negative impacts of neoliberalism on democracy point to another uncomfortable question: Are democracy and free markets compatible? For some, of course, democracy and free markets are nearly synonymous—when the U.S. engages in a project to “spread democracy,” this effort comes with a promise that free markets are coming right behind democracy, or perhaps even before. At the same time though, it appears that democracy and the free market have a rather uneasy relationship as they exist under late capitalism. Evidence to support this concern is not hard to locate. As Brown details in *Undoing the Demos*, the democracy that the United States brought to Iraq very quickly emerged as one more concerned with free markets than with free people. More specifically, Brown’s trope of a “hollowing out” of democracy that she invokes in *Undoing the Demos* resonates with the transformation we see in the town hall meeting. In its later permutations, the form of the town hall meeting remains intact, like the skin of an avocado; but the substance—where all the nutrients are—has been removed, reserved for another time and place.

This transformation may offer a way to think about democracy as having both a form and a substance that can exist independently of each other. The substance of democracy without its form is hard to imagine, and it seems hard to scale beyond an organization of small size. But the form of democracy without its substance is all around us. We see a common example of this when critics assert that institutions do or do not “listen to”

people. In a democracy, the most immediate form of being heard is through voting—constituents vote and the incumbent either keeps the job or relinquishes it to a challenger. But for every instance of a contested election, there are dozens of moments when citizens express a grievance or concern. In the wake of a satisfying electoral outcome, it is commonplace to comment that “the people have spoken.” This is not the only time people, or the people, speak. But in these other instances, it is harder to discern just who is listening to the people, and what, if anything, they might do in response. As such, one critical aspect of the town hall meeting is something we might call the performance of listening. It is when congresspeople return to their home districts to hold gatherings where constituents can air grievances. The impact of these conversations on future congressional votes, however, can be hard to discern. The performance of politicians in these town hall meetings can have an impact on the overall perception of a candidate and on their chances of reelection. But there is no immediate way that the attendees at one of these meetings hold the political fate of the hosting politician in the same way they would at a town meeting.

To complicate things, listening is a passive act, and it is difficult to see if someone is truly listening. In interpersonal communication, the phrase “I hear you” can be either a genuine expression or an infuriatingly dismissive platitude. Sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference. As we will see, the town hall meeting permits elected officials, university leaders, and CEOs to perform the act of listening in order to mollify a public, especially in situations where that public has no power to give their grievances electoral or budgetary teeth. By stripping it of its deliberative function, the town hall meeting reimagines democracy as something akin to customer service. Unfortunately, the model of customer service is even harder to scale than the deliberative town meeting itself. As Danny Meyer describes it, one of the keys of great customer
service is fixing mistakes by overdelivering, or “writing a great last chapter,” as he puts it. Your soup was cold? We will take it off the bill, and dessert is on us. Your infrastructure is crumbling? That’s harder to fix. Making it right is a viable way to manage individual grievances, because it is one thing to use an institution’s resources to soothe a disgruntled customer. But it is untenable if, instead of a customer, you have a public facing the challenges posed by limited resources. Free desserts can fix cold soup, but all the pie in the world won’t fix the impact of a bridge closure that adds an hour to your commute.

If Brown is correct in her diagnosis of the current political moment, this essay goes on to detail a set of symptoms visible in the ever-expanding permutations of the town hall meeting as they drift further and further from direct deliberative democracy. This adaptive radiation of democratically conceived public culture into non-democratic forms ultimately works to silence and disenfranchise citizens in a variety of contexts.

There is perhaps some irony in describing the town meeting—a political ritual available to a small minority of (overwhelmingly white and property-owning) U.S. citizens—as democratic, while characterizing the town hall meeting—available in one form or another to most U.S. citizens—as a perversion of democracy. As one indicator of the makeup of many town meetings in New England, the cover of the 2005 book *All Those in Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community* features small photographs of eighteen different people. They are heterogeneous in terms of age and gender, but all appear to be white.

6. Susan Clark and Frank Bryan, *All Those in Favor: Rediscovering*
True enough, the town hall meeting is “more democratic” in the sense that we might describe a lower-priced version of a luxury good as a more democratic offering. Describing the offerings at the three-star French restaurant Coucou in 2016, Pete Wells observed, “The wine list covers the historic old appellations of France, but it also embraces emerging ones and exciting regions from other countries while pricing bottles in a range that’s unusually democratic.” In a similar vein, David Landsel proclaimed in Food & Wine that, “In-N-Out is perhaps one of the most democratic institutions ever to grace this great democracy. Like everywhere, In-N-Out’s prices have been creeping upward in recent years, but the fact remains that there are almost no barriers to enjoying a burger at In-N-Out—a perfectly cooked hamburger, piled high with fresh vegetables and slathered judiciously with tasty spread, still costs just $2.25.”

This sense of “democratic” as a synonym for “affordable” is benign on some levels—tasty and affordable food is a good thing, as Martha Stewart might say. At the same time, the conflation also works to erase the distinction between voter and consumer. This use of democratic to mean “economically accessible” recapitulates the neoliberal valorization of the logic of the marketplace as the only logic that matters. As Brown details, “As each term is relocated to the economy and recast in an economic idiom, inclusion inverts into competition . . . freedom into deregulated

--------

*the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community* (Montpelier: RavenMark, 2005).


marketplaces, and popular sovereignty is nowhere to be found.”9 And as Lisa Duggan observed along similar lines, “The primary strategy of turn-of-the-century neoliberalism is privatization, the term that describes the transfer of wealth and decision-making, from public, more-or-less accountable decision-making bodies to individuals or corporate, unaccountable hands.”10

Tracing the evolution of the town meeting from a deliberative political exercise to a form of electoral theater to an institutional ritual of compassion to a corporate product launch ritual does not mean that subsequent forms replace preceding forms of the town (hall) meeting. Instead, the mutations and permutations continue to exist simultaneously, which makes unraveling their different forms more complicated and more urgent. Chapter 1 offers a description of the town meeting as it functions as a form of direct deliberative democracy, and it considers some of the aspects that have contributed to the mythology of the town meeting as a cornerstone of American democracy. Chapter 2 traces the emergence of the town hall meeting as a format for presidential electoral debates and televised spectacle. Chapter 3 considers how politicians who have been elected use the town hall meeting as a form of constituent service and as a way to perform the act of listening as a form of spectacle in itself. Chapter 4 takes up a similar phenomenon in a different context by investigating the campus town hall as a way for an institution to simulate the process of affective labor. The campus town hall can take different forms: (1) the reactive town hall is held in response to campus trauma, which calls for a performance of institutional affective

labor; and (2) the informational town hall is where campus leadership announces a new budget or new austerities, and it relies on this form to give the meeting a flavor of democracy, if not its substance. This iteration of the town hall as an entity that unilaterally transfers information is the focus of chapter 5, which takes up the corporate town hall. It can function as a glorified press conference for the public or as a way to deliver bad news to employees in a way that feels somehow more democratic because of the Q&A after the announcement from leadership. Chapter 6 concludes this brief study by considering the ever-expanding universe of town halls, hosted by entities as disparate as Luther Campbell, Bernie Sanders, CNN, Jimmy Buffet, Whole Foods, the Koch brothers, and Fox News.