

The SB2 vs. Town Meeting debate



The Temple Select Board, including Gail Cromwell, Bill Ezell and Ken Caisse, heard comments from residents during a public hearing on a proposed warrant article on the ballot this year to adopt ballot voting for all articles, in place of Town Meeting. Staff photo by Ashley Saari» Buy this Image

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Faced with the question every year for the past 13 years, Temple voters have kept the Town Meeting format of government, over ballot voting – though sometimes by the slimmest of margins.

The towns operating under the ballot voting system in the region have been doing so for some time, adopting the process shortly after it became available in 1996, and so far, they've all stayed with the system, despite the occasional attempt to switch back.

Moving from Town Meeting to SB2, or vice-versa, takes more than a majority consensus – by law, 60 percent of the voting population must be in favor.

The arguments for and against:

Adopting ballot voting, or SB2, named for the senate bill that outlines the process, requires the town hold a budget hearing and a deliberative session.

Deliberative sessions function similarly to Town Meeting, where voters hear the articles on the warrant presented, and can debate and amend them. However, they do not take a final vote on any of the articles. All of the issues are decided at the polls.

Proponents of both systems have similar arguments. Those in favor of Town Meeting say voters get the chance to hear arguments for and against articles up for review. SB2 proponents say the deliberative session model gives voters time to consider the arguments and answer any additional questions they have before making a decision.

Ballot voting participation is higher than participation in Town Meeting, and offers absentee ballots for those who can't attend, but deliberative session turnouts, where amendments can be made, typically have low attendance.

Rick Reed, a long-time Bennington resident and Budget Committee member, said he was in favor of a measure put forth a few years ago to switch back to Town Meeting. The vote didn't gain enough support to pass.

"I think we lose a lot in SB2," Reed said. "Folks who go to the voting booth are largely uninformed and I think we miss the camaraderie of coming together."

Most school districts in the area, including Jaffrey-Rindge , Mascenic Regional, Mason,. and ConVal, have all adopted the SB2 system as well.

Earl Somero of New Ipswich, who served as both the town and school district moderator and deputy moderator for a combined two decades or more said the ballot voting system had its advantages and he was "comfortable" that voters still had the same amount of control under SB2.

While deliberative sessions typically have a lower turn out than Town Meeting attendance, it still gives voters the same opportunity to speak their mind about an issue, and to make changes to the warrant, Somero said.

"Everyone has a right to speak," he said.

New Ipswich's voter checklist is about 3,700 people, Somero said, and there's nowhere in town that would hold every registered voter at once.

That said, his own personal preference is for the Town Meeting format, he said – both for the tradition it holds, and the community aspect that comes with gathering a large segment of the population together for the day.

"The thing I miss is the flavor of the discussion," he said. "It's those things that made Town Meeting interesting.

Low deliberative turnout is a trend:

According to recent town reports in New Ipswich, Bennington and Rindge, which have ballot voting for all warrant articles, recent deliberative sessions drew less than 3 percent turnout of registered voters.

In 2017, the most recent town report available in Bennington, 26 voters, or 2.3 percent, attended the town's deliberative session.

In New Ipswich, 96 people attended the deliberative session in 2018, and 81 in 2017. That represents 2.5 percent and 2.1 percent of the population, respectively.

In 2017, approximately 50 people attended Rindge's deliberative, which is about 1 percent of the population.

Proponents of the Town Meeting system argue low turnout at deliberative session results in a less informed voter base, and that a particularly low turnout could mean a small voter base could amend and drastically impact the warrant articles the larger voting base sees at the polls.

A study of SB2 voting results, done by the New Hampshire Center for Public Policy in 2002, called the ability for small groups of voters to control the amendments voted on by the whole population a potential "fatal flaw" in the SB2 system. While voters are not allowed, by law, to change the "intent" of an article, it is possible to essentially eliminate an article by amending it to reduce the amount to be raised to any amount – including \$0. That means a much smaller voting population could essentially dictate the outcome of the vote.

David Tower, who moderated for Rindge between 1972 and 2016, under both systems, said in his experience, the latter argument isn't something he's seen happen in reality.

"There would occasionally be amendments, but I don't think there was ever a case where it had that great an impact overall," Tower said.

In recent years, during one of Mascenic Regional School District's comparatively well-attended deliberative sessions, voters did make a deep cut to the proposed budget.

In 2015, a total of 13 voters from Greenville and 235 voters from New Ipswich voters to cut Mascenic budget from \$19.3 million to \$17.7 million.

In that case, at the polls in March, district voters voted down the cut budget, putting in place the default budget, of about \$19 million, instead.

There has been shown to be a statistical difference in the amount of articles voters approve when in a Town Meeting versus at ballot voting.

According to the NH Center for Public Policy report, in 2002, looking at the state as a whole from 1997-2001, towns with ballot voting passed bonds at a rate of about 45 percent, where towns with ballot voting passed them at about 71 percent of the time.