

these findings suggest that a reasonably representative politics can be achieved with levels of participation somewhere between the 10 and 20 percent levels now measured by most indicators and the 50 percent turnout in presidential elections.

That will not be easy. Consider Concord again, one of the minority of New England towns with a traditional town meeting—as close to direct democracy as occurs in the United States. Although the meeting is no more than a fifteen-minute drive for anyone, average turnout is less than 10 percent of registered voters, with a modern high of 14 percent.<sup>46</sup> It is doubtful that another 30 or 40 percent of the residents could be induced to give up several evenings each year. The problem is that classic forms of participation like this are far too costly for today's citizens. New England town meetings are traditionally scheduled for early spring, after the snows have melted but before the fields are dry enough to plow. For the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century participators, town meeting must have been a welcome diversion after a long lonely winter, especially in an era with no television and little reading material. In contrast, consider the situation of today's two-worker commuter families. Spend several evenings a week listening to your fellow citizens debate issues?<sup>47</sup> That's bonkers. Spend your precious Saturday afternoon at a caucus? Oh, right. Give up dinner out in order to make a contribution? Let them get their money from the PACs.

It is time to abandon the notion of political participation as part of human nature. It is not; it is an unnatural act. The experience of the city-states of antiquity where the civic engagement of the political class was supported by slave labor cannot serve as the model for today's complex mass democracies.<sup>48</sup> Nor can the experience of a nineteenth-century agricultural society where alternative forms of entertainment were unavailable.<sup>49</sup> Contrary to the suggestions of pundits and philosophers, there is

46. Figures reported in Stephens (1995). Mansbridge (1983, pp. 131–32) reports mid-nineteenth-century attendance rates for Concord of about 40 percent, but they soared as high as 70 percent on occasion.

47. Another study concluded that the Concord town meeting was demographically representative, except that the proportion of attendees from households with children under eighteen was only 65 percent of their proportion of registered voters (Bracco and Frasier, 1997). I suspect similar underrepresentation would be found for residents who commute to Boston, for single parents, and for couples who work full time.

48. While Jones discounts the extent to which Athenian democracy was dependent on slavery, he also notes that at times police literally had to rope citizens into the Assembly in order to get a quorum (1957, p. 109). Evidently participation was problematic at times even in ancient Athens.

49. For a discussion of the Lincoln-Douglas debates as entertainment see Holzer (1993).