

# An Informal Guide to Town Government and Town Meeting

(with examples from Maynard and Arlington)

For both newcomers and experienced Town Meeting voters

by Glenn C. Koenig  
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Note: PDF copies of this guide are available at:  
<https://www.townwidemall.com/essays.html>

Local government operations in Massachusetts have a long history, starting about three centuries ago, so how they work and the language they use can be a bit confusing to the uninitiated today. So herein is a quick idea of what's going on.

In Massachusetts, municipalities come in a few different forms, but essentially there are two main ones, cities and towns. Here, I will discuss how town governments work, as they are where I've had the most experience. Also, cities, with their mayors and city councils are relatively common, whereas town governments in New England are a bit lesser known.

First of all, although most levels of government hold their elections in November, including federal, state, county, and even cities, towns are different. Local town elections are typically held in the Spring, usually between March and May.

Of the traditional three branches of government, most towns have only two, an executive and legislative. Typically, the judiciary (the court system) is handled by counties or state government.

Let's start with the legislative branch. (see note regarding the executive branch, later.)

The United States Congress has a bicameral (literally, Latin for "two rooms") legislative branch, consisting of the House of Representatives and the Senate. In towns, there is no Senate, just a "House" (or unicameral legislature - "one room") which is called "Town Meeting."

Town meetings do not run continuously, as Congress does (with certain recesses). Instead they are typically held one or two times per year, once in the Spring and perhaps again in the Fall. They convene to conduct business all in one night, or in a series of nights, for a week or so, depending on how many items are up for a vote.

Towns run on a fiscal year that runs from July 1st through June 30th of the following year. These fiscal years are named after the year in which they end. So voters gathered at a meeting in the Spring of, say 2023, are voting on budgets that will go into effect on July 1st of 2023, but the fiscal year they're voting on is known as "FY 2024," because it ends in June of 2024. They have to complete all budgetary votes before mid June (of 2023, in this example) because the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (in all its wisdom) requires that every town submit its budget for review at the Statehouse in Boston, before they can go into effect on July 1st.

In larger towns, voters are divided geographically into a number of precincts, and voters in each precinct elect a number of representatives to attend Town Meeting to represent them. This is known as a "Representative Town Meeting." For example, in Arlington, where I used to live, the town was divided into 21 precincts, with each one electing 12 representatives, known as "members" to represent them whenever Town Meeting convened. That's a total of 252 representatives, to represent a population of over 40,000 residents. Although these members are elected, they are all volunteers; and

thus are not paid any salary. In Arlington, they each serve three year terms, staggered so that only four of them are elected each year, from each precinct.

In smaller towns, Town Meeting is called an "Open Town Meeting." That is, any registered voter in that town can attend Town Meeting and vote on issues that are to be considered. Now, in a town, such as Maynard, where I now live, there are just under 11,000 people. So, an open Town Meeting would seem to be absurd - if all the voters showed up at once, there wouldn't be nearly enough seats in the hall!

In fact, only a portion of voters typically attend. It may not seem obvious, but legislation is a lot of work! Those who attend must read many pages of text, including supporting documents and reports, understand the basics of public finances, including budgets with hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars, and have a pretty good idea of how the various departments in town function. They also need a lot of patience, as sometimes, people get up to speak who ... are not quite focused, shall we say.

For many people, especially those working more than one job, those who have a disability that limits their travel, or people with children to care for at home, their decision is often to let others show up and vote on their behalf, with the hope that things will turn out ok.

That may seem to be a rather "undemocratic" way to run things, but remember, this entire system was devised back when life was very different from what it is today. The bulk of residents back then worked on family farms, or in small local businesses. There was likely a local newspaper, but that was it. Even the telegraph hadn't been invented yet, much less radio, TV, copiers, the internet, web sites, and so forth, as we have today.

In addition, There were fewer residents in most towns, compared to today. And the complexity of local government has increased markedly since then.

For one example, an entire community may have gotten together to build the local schoolhouse themselves. All they needed were a foundation, four walls and a roof, doors, windows, and a pot bellied stove for heat, along with some desks and chairs for the teacher(s) and students, and they were all set. Compare that to today where school buildings have to meet almost endless federal, state, and local requirements, are designed by architectural firms, built by professional contractors and sub-contractors, and can sometimes cost over \$100 million to construct!

So, ... Besides the "House of Representatives" in towns being referred to as Town Meeting, there are other terms to know.

In Congress, there are "bills" or "acts" on which the representatives and senators vote, but in Town Meeting these are called "Articles" instead.

In Congress, there is a “Speaker of the House” and a “Senate President” but in Town Meeting there is a “Moderator” instead, who decides who will present each article, which member or voter to call upon to speak next, and generally keeps things in order.

In Congress, there is a “docket” to list the bills to be considered, but in towns that’s called a “Warrant.” The Warrant has a list of articles to be voted on when the meeting convenes. As with bills in Congress, articles are listed by number in the Warrant, and usually “taken up” (selected for discussion and vote) one at a time, in numerical order. On occasion, a group of articles that are somehow related may be discussed and/or voted on at the same time, or an article may be taken up out of its numerical order.

In addition, an Article is really only an agenda item. It introduces what is to be considered, and sometimes includes specific language that may be voted into law printed with it, but the language *actually voted on* is known as a “motion.” The Warrant may contain these motions and their language, but at the meeting, some motions are printed in separate reports. Also, members, officials, or committees can propose “substitute motions,” in which they may specify some alternative language.

In Congress, and at the state level, legislatures can have a voice vote (when the relative volume of voices saying “Yes” or “No” is clearly indicative of whether a motion is approved or not), or a roll call vote, where each representative is called by name and their vote recorded. In many towns this time consuming practice has been dispensed with. Instead, voters attending the meeting are each handed a small pad of paper ballots when they walk in, numbered consecutively, with a “Yes” and a “No” checkbox on each page. (Some towns may have a more “high tech” version of this.)

If a voice vote won’t do (as when an actual vote tally is needed for the record), then the voters in the hall are asked to mark the appropriate ballot, tear that page off the pad, and then wait for volunteers with baskets to come around and collect them all. Staff at a table in the front of the room then count them up and the Moderator announces the result. As not all articles require such a “secret” vote, the ballot numbers often “fall out of sync” with the article numbers, which can introduce a source of confusion in the hall.

There are other terms, such as “Certified Free Cash,” “Overlay Reserve,” or “Stabilization Fund” but most Warrants usually provide an introduction with definitions of most of these terms. If you are new to Town Meeting, it pays to read these definitions ahead of time, and perhaps consult with someone with experience to explain the fine points to you.

For more information, the Massachusetts Municipal Association has a more thorough description of types of local government, including the different forms of the executive branch in towns, at this web page: <https://www.mma.org/local-government-101/>

For those who wish more information on Town Meetings, The Massachusetts Moderator’s Association has a site: <https://massmoderators.org/for-the-public/> Their book, “Town Meeting Time,” is available for order from a link on that page.