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ABSTRACT

A research project into large group decision-making in a New England Town Meeting surprised us with the degree to which sustainability came to be the axis around which political debate revolved. We identified two very different yet overlapping conceptions of sustainability: one emphasized fiscal responsibility; the other asserted the merits of environmental stewardship. Each of the two conceptions had proponents, with strong views about what constituted good versus bad governing practices, each with a strong sense of what was good for the town. In this paper, we sort out those meanings. We seek to understand and expose the contours of sustainability, how the discourses around sustainability enter political processes, and to shed light on ongoing debates about the form of governance best suited for a democratically inclined New England town. Methods involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches, including data collection and analysis activities that comprised four levels: (1) participant observation of the Town Meeting; (2) quantitative analysis of voting behaviors; (3) interviews with 30 of the 240 members of the Town Meeting; and (4) thematic analysis, codebook development, and coding. Finally, in the spirit of contributing to the making of a future possible world, the authors ponder the courses forward for democratic processes and the future of a town caught in a 'pitched battle' over the terms and stakes of sustainability.

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'Pretty clearly the notion of sustainability is about our obligation to the future. It says something about a moral obligation that we are supposed to have for future generations.'

–Robert M. Solow

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainability has become a core symbol that orients people to the future. As we learned during a research project on decision-making in a New England Town Meeting, sustainability is also a highly contested term. We were surprised with the degree to which the political debate in the Town Meeting revolved around two drastically different conceptions of sustainability—differences that seemed to reflect contrasting visions for the future of the town. One group was deeply invested in maintaining an agrarian heritage and looked askance at major zoning by-law changes that would encourage new development; the other was strongly motivated to address mounting economic pressures and wanted the

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town to grow the tax base by encouraging new property development. The contrast between the two groups had intensified following looming cuts in services, as the state aid had shrunk by more than 9% in one year following the global financial crisis and the prospects for the future did not appear to be good. Whereas those supporting economic development argued that the town's financial situation was not sustainable, those opposed argued that the fundamental character of the town could not be sustained if aggressive development was pursued. The voting behavior of the two groups revealed their conviction in their version of the term 'sustainable'.

In this paper, we sort out the different meanings of the term sustainable—to expose the contours of sustainability, to understand how the discourses around sustainability enter political processes, and, furthermore, to shed light on ongoing debates about the form of governance best suited for a democratically inclined New England town. To begin, we draw on Arturo Escobar's 'nuanced reading of the discourse of sustainable development' from a post-structuralist orientation:

> The post-structuralist analysis of discourse is not only a linguistic theory; it is a social theory, a theory of the production of social reality which includes the analysis of representations as social facts, inseparable from what is commonly thought of as 'material reality'. Post-structuralism focuses on the role of language in the construction of social reality; it treats language not as the reflection of 'reality' but as constitutive of it ([1]:326).

In his project about how capital mediates natural and social systems, Escobar seeks to understand how language constructs social reality. In the same spirit, we examine here how discourses centered on sustainability construct social reality in the specific context of a liberal, semi-rural New England town. In particular, we investigate opposing cultural logics at work as they vie to define social reality and shape priorities for allocation of the town's resources.

In the first part of this paper, we lay out our methods of data collection. Next, we present and analyze the discourses related to sustainability to explore how one community confronts what Escobar calls 'the double task of building alternative productive rationalities and strategies, on the one hand, and of resisting culturally the inroads of new forms of capital and technology into the fabric of nature and culture' ([1]:327). To that end, we ask: How do different versions of sustainability assert moral supremacy in the struggle to establish a hegemonic field on which political debates unfold and decisions are made? What do the cultural logics underlying positions on sustainability reveal about orientations toward local governance? Finally, what do these logics expose about the best possible course forward for the future of a town?

2. Methods

We chose to study sustainability as it emerged in discourses around local issues in a New England town known for its progressive orientation and for the democratic processes enshrined in a Town Meeting form of governance. As residents of the town, we were immersed in the social and political milieu in which sustainability both shaped debates and was also actively used as a discursive device to stake out positions and arguments. Our specific research setting was the Amherst Town Meeting, an historic political body of 240 elected members who come together several times every spring and fall, as mandated by state law, to engage in and make decisions about a range of issues related to the governance of the town. 'Sustainability' emerged as a key term at the center of political debates, readily co-opted and variously used by members of the Town Meeting to advance quite different and sometimes starkly opposing agendas.

Like many New England towns, Amherst has had a Town Meeting since its inception in 1759 [2]. It used an open-meeting format until 1939, which means that any citizen could show up and vote. That year, the town transitioned to the representative form that persists to this day. Rebecca Townsend's research into communication structures of Town Meeting described it as "a democracy that is elaborate and orderly" ([3]:76). In 2009, the Amherst Town Meeting (ATM) drew members from 10 precincts and included a number of ex-officio members who represented various offices and committees of the town government. The other important functions of the town are performed by such bodies as the Select Board, the School Committee and Trustees of the town library, and the Town Meeting moderator, all elected in local town-wide ballot votes. The town manager is the key executive in charge and reports to the Select Board; the Finance Committee is appointed by the moderator.

When we began this project in 2009, state aid had already been declining, and the town budget was under severe pressure. The larger economic crisis and a reduction in local tax revenues had caused projected budget shortfalls. As a result, there was a deep concern that the town would be unable to continue providing services at the level to which townsfolk were accustomed. One year after the end of our fieldwork, the town offset some of the revenue shortfalls by raising local property taxes.

In executing our empirical work, we engaged both quantitative and qualitative methods. In particular, our data collection and analysis activities comprised four levels: (1) Participant observation of the Town Meeting; (2) quantitative analysis of past votes of current members; (3) interviews with 30 of the 240 members of the Town Meeting; and (4) thematic analysis, codebook development, and coding.

The first stage of the research involved participant-observation situated in the Town Meeting, long recognized as a complete and essential form of data that enhances analytic inquiry concerning social processes ([4]:28). In the words of H. Russell Bernard ([5]:342), 'Participant observation fieldwork is the foundation of cultural anthropology' Although there are variants to the method of participant observation, in essence it involves directly exploring phenomenon rather than testing

hypothesis and working primarily with unstructured rather than data that have already been structured or coded at the point of collection ([6]). To be reliable and valid, the approach requires consciously working to establish a rapport with members of a community and, as such, it relies on cultural competence, practice, and sensibility ([7]). Michael Agar hails this method as particularly adept at "[u]nderstanding how the social world works" ([8]:17). Furthermore, ethnographic inquiry can produce ah-ha effects—surprises that other social science methods may elide [9].

The fact that the Town Meeting is an open public forum facilitated observations for this research. Moreover, research design featured an insider-outsider team approach. One of the co-authors (Sharma) had been an active member of the Town Meeting for more than three years; the other co-author (Krause) was not a member but rather a newcomer to Town Meeting procedures and politics. Each had been a resident of the town for at least 10 years at the onset of this project. This two-pronged vantage point enabled a productive dialectic during the research process.

The second stage of the research involved obtaining a variety of quantitative data. Since the Town Meeting is a public forum, much data about past decisions as well as the identity of the participants were accessible through town records and through data compiled by engaged citizens (www.tallyvotes.org). For each member of the Town Meeting, we were able to compile historical voting records and demographic information such as tenure, attendance, address, property value, age, and sex. We analyzed the past votes for patterns of voting so as to identify key members—beyond what was visible through direct observation. See Appendix A for descriptive statistics pertaining to the Town Meeting as a whole as well as those of the subgroup of 30 members that we interviewed.

Based on our direct observation of and participation in the Town Meeting over a period of more than three years we identified several individuals who had displayed consistent and highly stable preferences through their comments and actual votes on issues. We then chose one of these as the anchor person as s/he had longest voting record spanning several years and seemingly stable views that appeared to represent a strongly held underlying belief system. Given the anchor's orientation, we developed a "Green Scale" as follows. Every member's voting record was compared with that of the anchor. When a member voted exactly the same as this anchor person on every single issue, we gave that member a score of 100; when a member voted exactly opposite to the anchor on every single issue, we gave a score of zero. Each member therefore got a score between 0 and 100 on the Green Scale. With some exceptions, those with scores between 0 and 30 almost always voted in support of fiscally conservative positions; those with scores between 70 and 100 voted in opposition to development projects and in support of funding town/human services. In common parlance, those scoring 0–10 or 90–100 could be considered "hard-liners" who rarely, if ever, changed their positions on issues.

We should note that the Town Meeting was in constant flux as old members left and new members came onboard. Even so, it was common knowledge that there was polarization in the Town Meeting, and our analysis of tally votes allowed us to quantitatively define the nature of such.

The third stage of research involved interviewing 30 Town Meeting members, and we used the Green scores and our personal knowledge of Town Meeting members to identify candidates for the field interviews. The interviewees were selected in such a manner so as to fairly represent a range of different perspectives and positions often expressed during the discussions, debates, and votes. Ultimately, we interviewed members from each of the two contending subgroups and those who fell in the middle.

The two co-authors together and in-person conducted all the interviews, which were designed to prompt the interviewees to freely recollect and reflect, with particular emphasis on encouraging them to develop narratives about their experiences and decisions. The interview protocol prompted interviewees to recount personal and family history of participating in politics, their entry into the local Town Meeting, and their reflections on Town Meeting as a form of governance.

The interviews are crucial to our data collection efforts and to our understanding of the dynamics that inform sustainability debates in the Town Meeting. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The transcripts and the audio recordings were sent to the interviewees for their review. During fall 2010, our research team grew to include three graduate students and a post-baccalaureate student. The team met throughout the semester and then again in spring 2011 to identify themes and to develop and refine a codebook [10–12]. MAXQDA software was used to code, organize, and retrieve the interview data.

3. Data and analysis

It became clear from participant observation and from the interviews that the term 'sustainability' was variously used during the debates. There was no single agreed upon understanding of what sustainability meant. On the one hand, the term was invoked to stake out positions of fiscal discipline and development of taxable property. On the other hand, it was used to assert preservation of the town's rural character, which involved supporting green open spaces as well as raising of local food and opposing new construction projects. It became evident from our data that sustainability was a common premise that informed the perspectives of divergent political persuasions, and it did so by being malleable to the differing definitions that its protagonists imposed upon it.

In these so-called sustainability wars, if we may, the merits of saving the town coffers became pitted against preserving the city's rural landscape, its social services, and the Town Meeting form of governance itself. At the risk of oversimplifying the situation, those predominantly concerned about money and those passionately committed to preservation of open

spaces and town services emerged as stark opponents. Particularly salient were the terms of debates, as the glaringly different meanings of sustainability also came to be paired with preferences for different governing styles. In indigenous terms, 'rationalistas', as Sustainable Amherst people called themselves, squared off against those they viewed as 'irrational' activists; or, from the point of view of those who identified themselves as supporting 'true sustainability', the other side posed a fundamental threat to the contemplative agrarian, book-and-the-plow way of life and the long-standing tradition of open debate and citizen involvement in local governance. To bolster arguments, the latter group often invoked the 'book-and-the-plow' during debates, referring plainly to an imprint on the town seal that indicated the dual agrarian and education heritage of the town.

The polarization in town politics came somewhat as a surprise given the town's liberal reputation and voting record. Town records show that 87% of votes in the 2008 presidential elections were cast for Obama/Biden versus only 10% for McCain/Palin. In the December 2009 run up to the Special Senate elections, 3130 votes were recorded in the Democratic Primary versus only 119 in the Republican Primary. The split in local politics does not, therefore, fall out along typical U.S. party system lines of Democrats and Republicans.

In what follows, we examine the ways that different subgroup members drew on and in many ways co-opted the idea of 'sustainability'. In doing so, we uncover the underlying assumptions of each group in terms of profound differences vis-à-vis their ideologies as well as their different conceptions of what is in the town's long-term interest. As such, we aim to make transparent underlying logics of the contrasting positions in the debates, with the hope of promoting vibrant discussions going forward.

3.1. 'Pitched Battle'

The contours of how sustainability became a linguistic and socially charged issue can be traced back to the formation and emergence of one well-intentioned though controversial group that called itself 'Sustainable Amherst'. The group was formed in early 2006 and the first posting on its new website was made on March 31 of the same year. By spring 2009, approximately one-fourth of Town Meeting members had signed up for a list-serve managed by the organizers of this group. Because of its power to shape the terms of debate, we focus here on how its members positioned themselves and the political ripple effects from their use of the term 'sustainable' in their name.

Members of the group were quick to identify themselves as being concerned first and foremost with fiscal sustainability—although their ultimate aim was to serve the broader interests of the community. To that end, along with the list-serve, its leadership also began reporting on their website a scale on which they rated Town Meeting members according to a fiscal sustainability scale, i.e., whether a given person voted with or against Sustainable Amherst positions. In the eyes of those leading Sustainable Amherst, this strategy was designed to inform voters of their elected representatives' positions. In the opinion of those who opposed Sustainable Amherst's agenda, this public ranking system stirred up trouble and fomented hard feelings. Town Meeting members who asserted a markedly different notion of sustainability and who did not appreciate their 'negative' scores were especially upset.

Our analysis of voting records revealed two strong clusters in the Town Meeting. Only members in one voting cluster acknowledged affiliation with a named group, Sustainable Amherst. This second voting cluster did not have a name for itself. Even so, from patterns in the votes and observed social behavior, it was evident that several members acted in at least a loose affiliation. To that point, a two-page brochure distributed to Precinct 9 residents during the spring 2011 election campaign, though lacking a political 'brand', endorsed candidates who asserted their commitment to three key issues: environment and true sustainability; diversity in town and social justice; and citizen involvement in local government.

These different groups have a history even if their existence seems only of late to have become so pronounced—and significantly around the terms of sustainability. The group Sustainable Amherst emerged in a context in which two groups had been at loggerheads for well over a decade. The existence of these tensions is most clearly evidenced in efforts to change the town's form of governance via two charter votes (2001 and 2004) to eliminate Town Meeting and replace it with a mayoral and city council form of government. On either side of the issue were people opposing and supporting the change. Sustainable Amherst came onto the scene soon after the second charter vote of 2004 failed. The group was organized by relative newcomers to town, but it also included a devoted coterie of longtime residents and members of the Town Meeting. The organizers and the core leadership of this group were strongly affiliated with parents, particularly at one local elementary school. Hence, the background pre-dating the emergence of Sustainable Amherst as a formal group was a strong movement to eliminate the Town Meeting form of governance. The Town Meeting was seen, especially by the town hall staff and by many of its opponents, as obstructionist, as blocking development, and hence as preventing the expansion of a tax base that could support vibrant public schools and other town services. From its very inception, therefore, Sustainable Amherst was seen by its opponents as aligned with the persistent undercurrents of anti-Town Meeting sentiments that had existed in the town for quite some time.

Having lost the charter vote twice in three years, and now led by a core group of three individuals, those affiliated with Sustainable Amherst began meeting, first as a breakfast club. Group members soon committed themselves to reforming the Town Meeting itself. Part of their approach to accomplish such was a strategy of recruiting people whom they could count on to support their agenda of fiscal sustainability. A self-conscious and purposeful indigenous vocabulary underwrote their position. The search for 'rational people' against a backdrop of people who were 'irrational', 'ideological', 'misguided', or

'emotional' appears frequently in the interviews with members of this group. One member whom we call Matt[2] used the battle metaphor to describe the different sides:

> Matt: I think there was more of a sense of there were the people who wanted to pave Amherst and the people who wanted to keep it green. And there was sort of this battle. And we were sort of like, 'We don't want to pave Amherst but we'd like to keep it green but we'd also like to keep it fiscally, you know, solvent'. And so we– we– sort of came– there was a sense that there was sort of a pitched battle and we were trying to be in the middle.

Those critical of Sustainable Amherst did not share the viewpoint that Sustainable Amherst occupied a middle ground. Even so, these individuals were reticent to form a counter group with a name. At the time of the spring 2011 elections, some candidates opposed to Sustainable Amherst acknowledged their shared positions in the flyer distributed to Precinct 9 residents: 'We believe strongly in the institution of Town Meeting and in the process of local, participatory democracy that it embodies…' The candidates identified their first important community issue as 'The Environment and True Sustainability':

> We actively support the protection of open space in town, as well as local solutions to sustain our town and our planet. We support local food production and local businesses, and practices and policies that promote energy conservation and reduced use of natural resources. We also support both public and alternative forms of transportation (and many of us regularly walk or bike through the neighborhoods).

Particularly interesting about this expression of 'true sustainability' is its emphasis on things local: spaces, food production, businesses, practices, and policies. This group's embrace of locality sets it apart from the Sustainable Amherst group, which relies heavily on fiscal arguments, as stated on their website [13]:

> Our mission is to protect and enhance Amherst's quality of life by creating a more fiscally sustainable town that can support strong schools and services, open space, diversity, and a family-friendly, small town feel, without overburdening the taxpayers

On the surface, it may not seem that these groups are very opposed—as both articulated a clear desire for quality of life issues and for sustaining a way of life. On the ground, however, they were quite strongly opposed. Interestingly, the polarization of these groups as entities emerged during the course of our research project. Indeed, the dynamics leading to the constitution of the second group as a group per se provides an excellent example of the materiality of discourse. In this case, the social forces of Sustainable Amherst were so powerful that they encouraged those in opposition to assert their like-mindedness on issues and to clarify their positions.

3.2. Morality keys

Actual discursive strategies reveal a great deal about how different sides assert moral supremacy. Political theorists Corrigan and Sayer [14] once wrote that state formation is never complete, that it is akin to ongoing moral revolution. Antonio Gramsci in his classic theory of political hegemony noted the importance of moral leadership in the formation of any historic bloc [15,16]. Although local government is hardly equivalent to a nation-state, in terms of ongoing political projects with moral overtones, it is the state in miniature. For groups to retain their dominant position, they must continually assert moral supremacy because, as anthropologist Roseberry observed [17], of the fragility of hegemony.

3.2.1. The key of rationality

To understand the tensions over contemporary sustainability, we parse how in particular Sustainable Amherst asserted its moral supremacy in its struggle to establish a hegemonic field—one on which political debates largely unfolded and decisions have largely been made in the last several years. The interviews delve beneath the public face of the group to uncover the power of the trope of rationality, which underlies Sustainable Amherst's position. This discursive strategy has had a powerful influence in terms of recruiting new members to Town Meeting. One of the people we interviewed couched his discussion in the historical moment of the second failed charter vote. Many residents who had supported the charter, he recalled, had become frustrated with what they viewed as a large, inefficient, even dysfunctional body, had thought the charter was going to prevail, and hence had been choosing to not run to renew their place in the Town Meeting. Alex was a relative newcomer to Town Meeting, having been voted to his first term in spring 2005. (*Note*: We use hyphens in the interview excerpts to indicate linguistic repairs or latches.)

> Alex: I arrived and- and was very- I was struck by the lack of rational people that were there. […] A large exodus had occurred. And so a couple of us kind of got together and started recruiting people to come back. And not only come back but recruiting new people like me who had just moved to the area and, you know, didn't have the baggage of Town Meeting. And we were pretty successful. We recruited, you know, like eighty to a hundred people over a number of years and really changed, I felt, the voting dynamic in- in Town Meeting.

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[2] All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Recollections of the contrast in the dynamics of Town Meeting between the early 2000s and 2009–2010 emerged as a common theme from those who spoke with us. Kurt, a Town Meeting member since 1994, noted a strong presence of the Sustainable Amherst group and another group, which he was only able to name with reference to one individual, an outspoken activist. He spoke about a 'really interesting shift' that happened after the second charter initiative had failed by a small margin.

> Kurt: I feel that what happened with the charter votes is a lot of rational people, a lot of people that I tend to agree with and- and feel the same way about things, a lot of those people disengaged from Town Meeting. They worked for the charter, they weren't as interested in running [again] for Town Meeting or going for Town Meeting. They were fed up with it for a lot of reasons–

This longing for 'rational' people appears throughout the conversations with members of the Sustainable Amherst group. It becomes linked with people who are friendly to economic development. Indeed, this assertion of rationality emerged as a strong rallying point. Alex couldn't be more explicit when asked to explain:

> Alex: The basic concept was– especially given that we had just passed an override in '04– was the town was not being run in a fiscally sustainable manner. [. . .] And I use the word rational because that's kind of the term that we've adopted. We call ourselves the 'Rationalistas'. [laughter] Like, you know, we don't always – this group of people doesn't always – we don't always agree on things – but- but we're all coming at it from a rational mind.

The key of rationality hence proved to be an effective tactic that provided the foundation on which an argument for fiscal sustainability was thereby asserted. Sustainable Amherst members often self-identified as 'Rationalistas', claiming to use a rational approach against the emotional or ideological tendencies of non-allies. This was a political strategy to attain dominance, and it was powerful because even though most researchers now agree that human behavior across cultures and contexts is rational, '[i]n modernity, rationality based on reason and logic has been regarded as a value in itself. It has built the ground on which our scientific worldview grows' ([18]:584). Yet in reality, sorting out analytic knowing from other ways of knowing—social, emotional, historical, moral, embodied—remains a puzzle. Appeals to the modern ideal of rationality was therefore a powerful strategy in the hegemonic struggle for moral leadership.

3.2.2. The key of fiscal responsibility

During the interviews, we noted that fiscal sustainability was a value that individuals affiliated with the Sustainable Amherst group could easily articulate. The idea was to sustain growth for the future of Amherst. As Lloyd remarked, 'the sustainable basically came from the idea of, you know, some sort of- sustaining Amherst, sustainable growth.' A number of interviewees expressed that this pro-growth stance emerged from the context of a town that had a history of being unfriendly to new businesses. Frank emphasized a need for 'quicker movement' along the lines of economic development so as to 'have the funds to pay for. . . programs worth supporting'. Particularly striking about this 'key' is how frequently members incorporated the voices of others as they illustrated their position. This voicing served to contrast their position with those who were aligned against them. One Town Meeting member affiliated with Sustainable Amherst was quick to put the group in historical perspective, contrasting it with a time when he viewed Town Meeting members as not acting in a fiscally responsible manner, pointing to a tendency to be unwelcoming to new businesses:

> Max: I felt that they weren't, you know, acting fiscal responsible and I also felt like they weren't trying to create kind of a sustainable future for Amherst and- and the citizens. You know, I kind of felt like they were- in some ways they seem, you know – yes, you know, rights for everybody – but on the other hand they're like, 'No, we don't want any changes in our town.' – 'Oh, you want to- you want to create a new business? No, you have to go through, you know, fifty-five hurdles'. So, you know, all those sort of motivated me to- to take part.

A pattern emerged in which Town Meeting members sympathetic to Sustainable Amherst criticized their non-allies for wanting things without concern for how to pay for them. The reference to 'rights for everybody' points to a rift in voting behaviors between the two groups. The Sustainable Amherst members tended to vote against funding social services. The 'rights for everybody' is a gloss for budget conflicts that have arisen over paying for services that benefit the town's low-income residents. It is worth noting that Max's comment is characterized by several moments of hesitation, which may signify an ideological conflict between altruistic and capitalist worldviews ([19], after [20,21]).

Another interesting aspect of many of these excerpts is the quoted speech. At times it resonates as mocking. Max's quoted speech is iconic here as it represents the core of what the anti-Sustainable Amherst people were thought to stand for: flush services and green spaces without an income stream. Quoted speech appeared in another member aligned with Sustainable Amherst who echoed Max's sentiment. He positioned the people he was quoting as wanting the world but in a rather impractical and infantile sort of way that required intervention. He described the group as offering a 'proactive attempt' at carving out a viable future in which the town could sustain a quality lifestyle for its residents:

> Matt: –to say, 'We love our schools, we love our open space, we love affordability' but we really need some fiscal- fiscal sensibility. Or because we had a sense that in the past people would vote – always vote to preserve open space and never vote any business friendly zoning. And so our sense was that we needed both. You know, that if we were going to continue to have open space and good schools and affordable- have some sort of sense of affordability in town that we

needed to have some economic development. And so we started writing a column and we started talking to other people about sustainability – fiscal sustainability.

Another common theme emerged around orientations to change. Sustainable Amherst affiliates depicted themselves as open to change and depicted the other side as resistant to change – a difference that they used to justify the emergence of the Sustainable Amherst group. This resistance referred to change in terms of development and to Town Meeting itself as a decision-making body.

> Kurt: One component was an – a resistance to any change in the status quo that might take– that might– I don't know if this is going to– one piece of it was resistance to anything that would take away the power from Town Meeting to decide things. Another is any resistance that they perceived– any resistance to anything that they perceived would be giving advantage to anybody that might make money off of anything– any builder or any developer. And then just resistance to any change leading to any kind of– development– that, you know– without looking at any details of what it might do in the pros and cons just if it was anything where something was going to be built– a resistance to it.

Sustainable Amherst members, by contrast, viewed themselves as having a particular orientation toward the future as mutable and positive. This theme appeared frequently.

> Alex: And, you know, we're- we're looking at it from, 'Hey', we're not- we're not saying things like 'I want it to be like in 1967'. We're saying, 'Look, the world's changing. We need to manage it in some way'. We might agree on an override, we might disagree on an override. We might agree on, you know, allowing this piece of property developed or not – but in general we understand that there has to be forward positive movement to make our town fiscally sustainable.

Another interviewee, Frank, spoke about his dedication to historic preservation, the vision he brought to the town's future, and how he squared his visions with his affiliation with Sustainable Amherst. He recalled his application to serve the town:

> Frank: And I think I said, 'I'm very dedicated to historic preservation and I want to keep these buildings and landscapes – but I also don't want to live in a museum'. The thing with history is that things change. I think historic preservation is really a very good way for me at least– it's how I can see all this fitting together, that is keeping what we like and allowing for change and growth at the same time.

3.2.3. The dissonant key of 'sustainability'

The notion of embracing change and growth simultaneously was not a perspective that was widely shared. In fact, the use of fiscal with sustainability began to cause dissonance among the cadre of Town Meeting members who disagreed with Sustainable Amherst. In fact, even people affiliated with Sustainable Amherst were quick to articulate criticisms levied against their group for its name and its tactics:

> Dawn: [...] that's one of the push backs you see against [the] sustainable thing, too with some of the people who actually originally associated with us said, 'Well, fine. I don't want to be associated with your sustainable thing – because it's too rigid'.

> Lloyd: 'How dare they use the word sustainable'. There very much is [objection].

> Matt: [the naming] drove some of the greens in town crazy because we were using the word sustainability in a fiscal context, which they thought was just, you know they- that they had ownership of.

These expressions of the other side's complaints, as articulated in Dawn's and Lloyd's comments, reveal acute awareness among Sustainable Amherst members of objections to their political strategies. Matt also clearly articulated ire that the naming provoked.

Judith, of the 'true sustainability' affiliation, affirmed the others' suspicions; she was critical of the use of language that Sustainable Amherst had chosen. She went so far as to draw a parallel with the political marketing guru of the George W. Bush presidential era:

> Judith: I think that it's interesting that the words they're choosing seem very much like Karl Rove did on the national level when George Bush was president – the term Amherst Center. Everybody thinks of themselves as sort of the center of things. I've always thought of myself as center. And they use that phrase and then they're using the phrase Sustainable Amherst. Well, to me sustainable means it can continue on without damaging– you know, without harming the environment, without whatever. And I see myself as an environmentalist and I'm fairly frugal with money – and I've been ranked the lowest on the Sustainable Amherst website based on my votes. [...] But it also angers me, their misuse of language. That, you know, they're saying sustainable when they'll, you know, vote against putting a piece [of] land in conservation or something like that.

Judith's critical view of Susatinable Amherst's use of the term 'sustainability' was absolute. Her accusation that the group's tactics mirrored those of Rove is a serious criticism, particularly given that those voting with Sustainable Amherst did

not at all see themselves as right-wing sympathizers. Judith also equated her vision of sustainability as pointing to environmental-friendly politics such as acts of land conservation. Another person aligned with the 'true sustainability' views offered an ample definition of sustainability that spoke to her vision of quality of life:

> Grace: But, you know, having a community [swimming] pool, promotes community and promotes, you know, free recreation and helps probably reduce crime in some ways I would even go so far as to say – and that saves money. And- and so how– keeping the libraries open when, you know– when some people have no internet access except at the library. […] There are certain parts of our community that I think really promote community and promote equal access to some of the best things in life. Quality of life. And those I think are what really promote sustainability in the community.

The struggles over the terms of sustainability were creating nothing short of a new political and social landscape in this New England town. The implications of this shift did not end with whose definitions prevailed but rather extended to democratic processes.

3.3. Sustainable governance

How do these debates over 'sustainability' lend shape to the dynamics of democratic processes? In this research, we discovered that when controversial issues came to the floor of the Amherst Town Meeting, differences in the points of view of the two main contending groups were manifest in distinct voting patterns, and different conceptions of sustainability were often at the core of their opposing positions. These contrasting sensibilities have a history. Longtime members recollected various divisive issues over the years, such as a new parking garage in 1999–2000 and, of course, the two charter votes of 2001 and 2004. The charter votes in particular were also indicative of divisions and point to sustainability of a different sort: one that touches at the heart of participatory forms of democracy.

Numerous interviewees commented on an increase in polarization since the formation of Sustainable Amherst in 2006. They suggested that the historical cleavages were intensified by the group's clear agenda to support economic development and its drive to actively recruit like-minded individuals in order to change the composition of the Town Meeting. It was evident that the group had been successful in developing a clear identity around a coherent message, consistently delivered that message through a column in the local newspaper, had taken a clear stand on certain contentious issues, and generally succeeded in recruitment drives. In the eyes of many, the organizing apparatus typically associated with party politics had come to Amherst.

Notably, as reported by www.TallyVote.org, the general trend over the past few years indicated a decline in attendance: 76% in 2007, 72% in 2008, 68% in 2009, 72% in 2010. The 67% attendance in spring 2011 was the lowest since 68% in 2002 when the data had begun to be compiled. The decline in participation could be attributable to a range of things, including the nature or contentiousness of issues on the warrant. It is also possible that the decline supports the argument that the Town Meeting is an ineffective form of local government that has outlived its relevance. Alternatively, the statistics could mean that one group's success in filling Town Meeting seats with its allies may have attracted citizen-representatives who were unable to attend regularly. Yet another interpretation of the decline in attendance might be that polarization had worn down the community, led to feelings of frustration, and perhaps created disillusionment, distrust, and detachment.

Scholarship related to group dynamics has a strong strain that speaks to issues of polarization in groups. Decades of research since Stoner [22,23] reveals that groups have a tendency to take more extreme positions than do individuals, and that is especially so when the group members have had robust discussions amongst themselves. Persuasive group members or strong leaders [24], social identification [25], and the desire of individuals to be socially acceptable [26] are considered to be the chief reasons why group polarization occurs. Although the processes are complex and the particulars of effects are contingent upon context, the hundreds of studies in this stream of work are largely supportive of the basic hypothesis that processes of social influence encourage dynamics where members vie with each other to take on more and more extreme positions in the direction of their original preferences [27–29]. Some work using self-categorization theory has also proposed that the presence of an out-group, especially one that is starkly different in attitude and opinion, intensifies the forces of polarization and makes group members more extreme in support of their initial positions [30].

Of course, the danger of polarization is that it forecloses vibrant discussions across groups. It is common for polarized groups to attribute extreme positions to the others, inviting similar extreme attributions in return. For instance, Sustainable Amherst was sometimes portrayed as not being keen on land conservation even though most members of the group routinely voted to do so. Similarly, those affiliated with 'true sustainability' were generally presented as not concerned with being careful about the town's finances, when in fact most members of this group would have vehemently denied such attribution. Strong rhetoric used to fix the position of the opposition was often seen as unjust and unfair, and it was an important reason for polarization in the Town Meeting.

Criticisms about the way in which tactics of Sustainable Amherst fomented polarization came from those such as Aaron, who leaned more toward the 'true sustainability' end of the voting spectrum and consistently voted in opposition to the positions of Sustainable Amherst. He noted:

> Aaron: I really– I feel like I've been pushed into being part of a faction – and I am not happy with that. I don't agree with– I find there are some people who take– who- who- who take that same scoring that- that Sustainable Amherst do–and turn it on its head and take pride in negative numbers–

Another member who typically voted against the positions of Sustainable Amherst echoed those sentiments of discontent:

> Rachel: –now, I think, probably in the past four or five years that particularly with the introduction of the website Sustainable Amherst– I think there's been a real polarization in Town Meeting, which I don't think is good.

Despite his voting record being strongly aligned with the Sustainable Amherst agenda, Kurt also offered a mixed assessment of whether things had improved compared with the Town Meeting of the years past:

> Kurt: [W]hat I liked about [the old days] was [that] you could never quite predict how people would vote. I liked that there didn't seem to be political blocs that were sort of firmly entrenched and it was always this group against that group. And it seemed to me that a lot of people really did sort of take the issues at face value and try and learn about them and decide how they felt about it. I feel that's a lot less true now than it was.

These observations about the rise of factions and the decline in individuals engaging with issues on their own terms hit a nerve. Several of our interviewees offered a perspective on the dynamics that resulted in the shift in the Town Meeting. To some, the experiences over the years had shown that a large group like the Town Meeting was just not suited for making well-thought-out decisions on important issues – that being a large group the Town Meeting was driven by emotion and ideology and not by careful deliberation of the facts. Kurt, indeed, pointed out that one of the points of the charter movements was to eliminate the sway of 'misleading' emotions.

> Kurt:[T]his was a huge argument of the people who were for a charter and against Town Meeting – is how easy it is – for- for a majority of any group to be misled or- or led by emotions rather than by facts. And, you know, has to do with the issue of how much a majority can really study the issues and understand the issues and how easily they can be swayed by a last minute argument.

Those strongly opposed to the agenda of Sustainable Amherst took particular issue with the group's practice of ranking the members of the Town Meeting. The ranking system, as several members described it, was broadcast on the Sustainable Amherst website with the aim of informing townspeople about the degree to which each member's voting record was consistent with the agenda of Sustainable Amherst. A newspaper article reported that 'a score of 21 makes one a 'sustainable rock star', while a score of minus 21 means the recipient of that score is 'dooming the town' [31]. One Sustainable Amherst critic recalled her reaction to the list.

> Grace: [...] I think listservs that promote communication are generally a good thing. Um, but the ranking, I think, is divisive because, um, well- well, I – they- they decide what they think the right answer is, and then they rank people who give the wrong answer. So generally whoever has the most negative score are the people I would tend to be closest in voting– like my– I'm almost the worst negative in my precinct. I strive to be the worst. [Laughter] Joe Greene might surpass me because he's been there longer. I'm trying to get to the bottom.

The emergence of strong divisions and factions, some noted, were taking a toll. A prominent theme among 'true sustainability' Town Meeting members was a concern that the Sustainable Amherst group was undermining participation in local governance.

> Judith: –I feel like there is some people who are voting in lockstep. I think that when the Sustainable Amherst folks put up their website a couple years ago where they said, 'We'll do the research for you and then we'll just recommend who you should vote for Town Meeting', it kind of over-simplified and it- it– [...] And my thought is that there are people who are saying, 'Okay, I'll be a Town Meeting member because you've urged me to join but I don't have much time and so, you know, we need to shorten the number of nights that Town Meeting meets'. [...]There is an e-mail that I'm told gets sent out before Town Meeting to some of these newer recruits from Sustainable Amherst folks and they're basically told, you know, which is the way we're going to vote.

4. Conclusion

Our research identifies two overlapping yet very different interpretations of what sustainability means and why it matters. One strongly emphasizes fiscal responsibility; the other asserts empathetic stewardship of communities and environmental resources. Each reflects strong views about what constitute good governing practices and, as such, what is good for citizens at large.

The terms of debate in the Amherst Town Meeting reflect the increasing intertwining of sustainability rhetoric with substantive issues. Clearly Sustainable Amherst was a carefully chosen label, emphasizing the need to put fiscal responsibility squarely in the business of governing the town. Yet it was also a twist on the term that was conventionally used to suggest good stewardship of environmental resources and other public goods that are the common possession of all human kind.

Interestingly, the lack of a firm definition and absence of a clear common understanding of what sustainability means opens it up to being adapted to suit arguments as one sees fit. As economics Nobel laureate Solow noted [32], sustainability

has become a 'buzzword'. Instead of being a force for uniting disparate interests in the stewardship of a common heritage, sustainability appears to have become a lightning rod for old antagonisms, deepening the rifts that have existed for quite a while.

Perhaps, like so much other rhetoric, sustainability is simply another instrument with which groups seek to define and strengthen their identities. Perhaps, instead of unifying attention and focusing available resources on seemingly intractable problems of relentless depletion of the already fragile ecosystem, sustainability actually detracts from those problems by polarizing the governance systems. Perhaps it is not possible for even as benign a term as sustainability to remain so because of its vulnerability to co-optation by social groups in the service of common good as *they* see it.

All this beg the questions: How can communities (or for that matter, towns, states, nations, or any large aggregate) get past social cleavages to solve common problems? How can they even get to the point of collectively defining problems such that the definitions incorporate the multiple perspectives that are bound to co-exist in pluralistic societies? Democracies, after all, are envisioned to engage multiple, often opposing, points of view. They are deemed to be better than all other forms of governance. Yet, as is evident from this study, democracies are also quite vulnerable to social dynamics that take an attractive and seemingly innocuous term like sustainability and use it to polarize and suppress debate rather than promote it.

We recognize that the Amherst Town Meeting clearly is not representative of the wide-ranging places where struggles over the meanings of sustainability take place. Other contexts such as the state and national legislatures or other towns with different forms of government or even large corporations are also venues for wide-ranging discussions about sustainability. The word has come to mean different things in different settings and, as our research shows, different things to different people in the same setting. It is imperative that scholars understand how the different conceptions of sustainability shape debates, order priorities and foster action in pluralistic societies that by definition are home to multiple often conflicting points of view. We have reported here our analysis of how sustainability enters the political processes in a New England town. We hope others will join us in doing the same in a range of different contexts – and help shed further light on the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the notion of sustainability.

Acknowledgments

Appendix A

	Median	Min	Max	Male	Female
Statistics: Full Town Meeting, N = 245 (including ex-officio)					
Age	58	23	90		
Sex				135	110
Green score	38	0	100		
Tenure	60	9	112		
Attendance	80%	14%	100%		
Property value	360	157	848		
Statistics: Interview Sample, N = 30					
Age	62	41	84		
Sex				17	13
Green score	56	6	100		
Tenure	98	21	112		
Attendance	90%	70%	100%		
Property value	355	168	723		

Notes: (1) The "Green" scale was developed to organize each member's historical voting record on a linear scale 0–100. The votes considered were those related to the town budget; zero implied strongly development oriented fiscally conservative and 100 implied strongly inclined toward open spaces and human services but generally quite skeptical about new development and usually opposed such. (2) Tenure is duration of Town Meeting membership measured as number of discrete sessions the member was expected to attend. (3) Attendance is number of sessions attended divided by the number of discrete sessions the member was expected to attend. (4) Property Value is assessed value in $000 as of 2009. Home ownership in the full Town Meeting was 95% and in our interviewee sample it was 93 percent.

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