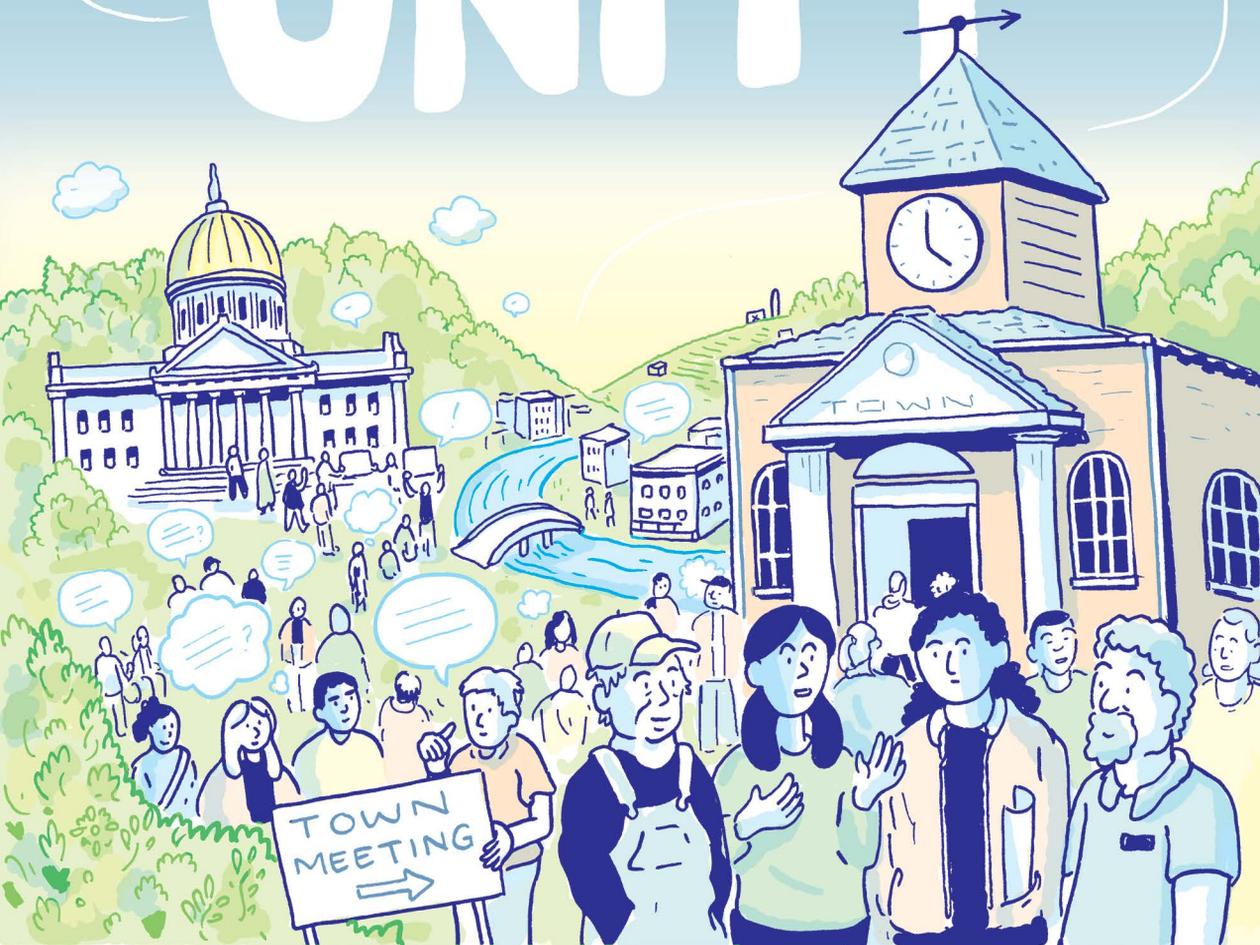


CCS  
PRESENTS:  
AN APPLIED  
CARTOONING  
PROJECT



# FREEDOM AND UNITY



A Graphic Guide to Civics and Democracy in Vermont

## NOTICE

The readers are hereby notified that the following content will be explored in this comic book:

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There are many things that make Vermont a unique and sometimes puzzling place to live.

It has a very **small population**, and even **smaller communities**.

Vermont's landscape is famous for its **natural beauty**, and also for its **difficult winters**.

billboards are illegal.

(and a pre-Spring "mud season")

Vermont has a long history of **immigration**, but is **less racially diverse** than almost any other state in the U.S. today.

Vermont is known for its **progressive values**, but also has a prominent **conservative tradition**.

Even the state motto suggests a curious **duality**.

What does all this mean for how we practice **democracy** in Vermont today?

**"FREEDOM and UNITY"**

The idea of democracy has meant different things to different people over time,

Greek root means "rule by the people"

called by different names, too



but it tends to mean something like "people coming together to govern themselves."

Democracy is much deeper than elections—

it's an ideal that people and communities have used to solve collective problems throughout history,

from Native Americans like the Iroquois,

to community groups in modern neighborhoods.



If this seems unlike the state of government in the U.S. right now...



...you're not wrong.

Democracy tends to work differently everywhere

and over time, Vermont has developed its own approaches.

Vermont's democracy is influenced by its landscapes, culture, and history,



and a desire to balance freedoms for individuals with the collective good.

In Vermont, democracy is an ideal that shapes our government and communities,

Vermont Democracy

a range of approaches for participation and representation.

Youth Councils

What challenges do these systems face?

Journalism

Discussion

And what does democracy ask of us?

Culture of Democracy

Where did these processes come from?

Representative Government

Neighborhood Assemblies

FOR THE PEOPLE

BY THE PEOPLE

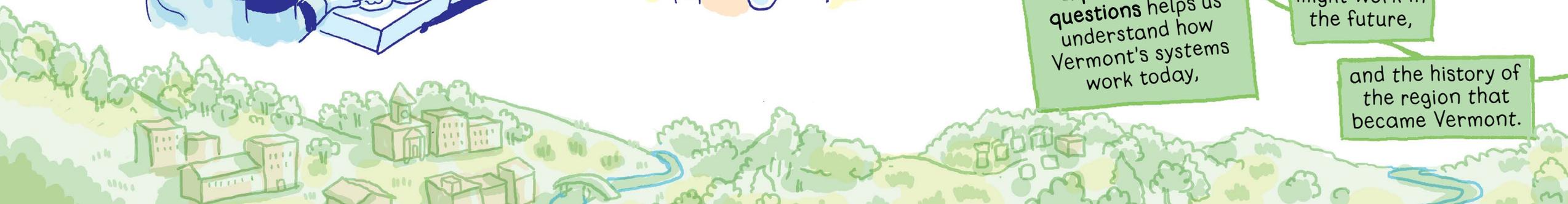
Exploring these questions helps us understand how Vermont's systems work today,

how they might work in the future,

and the history of the region that became Vermont.

Town Meetings

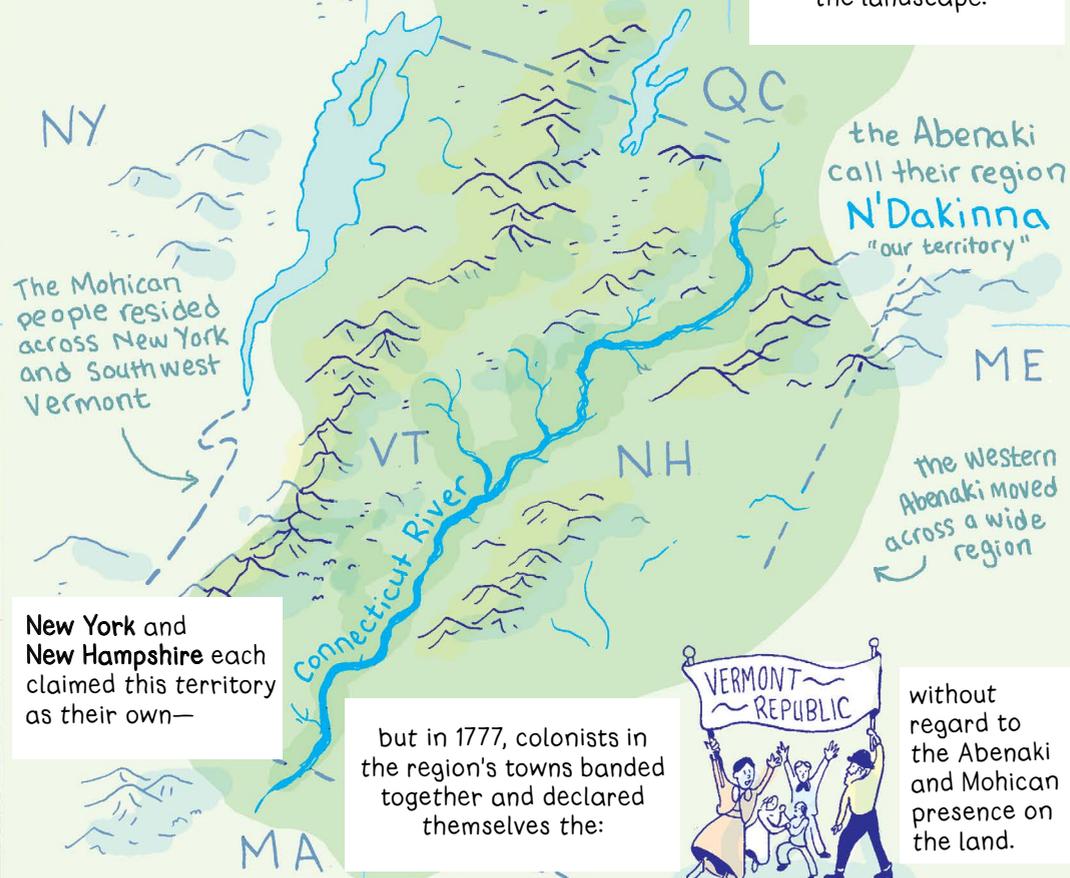
(way more than can fit in this comic).



The land we call Vermont is part of the original homeland of the **Western Abenaki and Mohican peoples.**

Native American communities have been living and moving across the region for **thousands of years,**

long before European colonists settled and drew boundaries across the landscape.



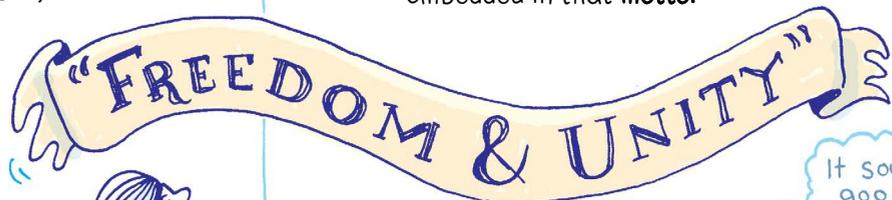
but in 1777, colonists in the region's towns banded together and declared themselves the:



without regard to the Abenaki and Mohican presence on the land.

Since the founding of the Vermont Republic,

the state has aspired to democratic ideals that are sometimes in tension, embedded in that **motto:**



(VT became a part of the U.S. 14 years later, in 1791.)



It sounds good, but um what does it mean?

Vermont's rugged environment of mountains and valleys fostered a culture of **seclusion and self-sufficiency.**

But since there was very little state government in early Vermont,

members of each community would gather at a local meeting place to sort out their **collective needs.**



The earliest **town meetings** took place decades before Vermont was a state,

people discussed what their new towns **needed,**

and how to **make it happen.**



For over **250 years,** as new people arrived and Vermont communities developed,

the tradition of gathering as a town has continued,

typically around the **first Tuesday of March.**



Today, town meetings occur across New England, and remain a vibrant and unique part of Vermont's local democracy, where all citizens can become legislators for the day.

Town meeting is a form of democracy where people hold equal power to discuss issues, set policy, and decide how the town money is spent. Town meeting gives people a chance to speak their mind about local matters, as well as the role the town plays in more global concerns.

It allows residents to hear from neighbors, hold elected officials accountable, and even offer amendments to help find agreement.

(Town meeting is also a chance to hang out and check in with each other)

Town meeting involves procedures for discussion, known as Robert's Rules, to protect and enhance the voice of the minority, while moving forward with the will of the majority.

I make a motion... Second! I make a motion to amend that motion... Second! I make a motion to amend that amendment...

Town meetings are led by an elected moderator, who guides the discussions, helps people get their questions answered, and makes sure everyone gets to participate.

Sometimes keeping these meetings together can be tricky— moderation requires a mix of expertise and empathy to help people feel comfortable expressing themselves.

I'm sorry, you don't have the floor. You, in the back. I just want to add...

The process isn't as simple as checking a box, but participatory democracy is a way to remove the barriers that divide us, and achieve some balance between freedom and unity.

all in favor, say aye! (at least until next year).

While town meetings are an example of **direct democracy**, Vermont also has different layers of **representative government** where people vote to give power to members of the community to act on our behalf in running our schools, towns, and state.

Municipal governments run the day-to-day business of the towns and cities throughout the year. Towns are governed by an elected selectboard, also sets the agenda for town meeting. Citizens can contribute through committees while Vermont's ten cities use a city councilor system.

all meetings are required to be open to the public

Mayors and town managers serve as municipal bosses, the "point person" for a city or town, overseeing workers in our town and city governments.

residents in some cities elect a mayor

a town clerk supervises elections

Public Works

Fire Dept

Police

Parks+Rec

Library

tree warden

ETC.

At the state level of government, Vermonters elect part-time **representatives** and **senators** that meet in Vermont's State House for **two-year terms**.

Different **committees** propose and change laws, and figure out how to spend an **annual budget of billions of dollars** across the whole of Vermont.

150 representatives are elected to the House (more local) 30 to the Senate (more regional)

the Capital used to move from East to West each year eventually settling on **MONTPELIER** the smallest capital

Once every **two years** Vermonters also elect a **team of six state officials** to oversee state agencies, manage around 8,000 state workers, and be the "point people" for the state of Vermont.

Sec of state

Lt governor

attorney general

auditor

treasurer

GOVERNOR

Vermonters also elect a delegation to send to D.C. and **two senators to the U.S. Senate** to represent us at the **federal level**.

We send **one representative to the U.S. House** (elected every 2 years)

(every 6 years)

D.C.

LEGISLATIVE

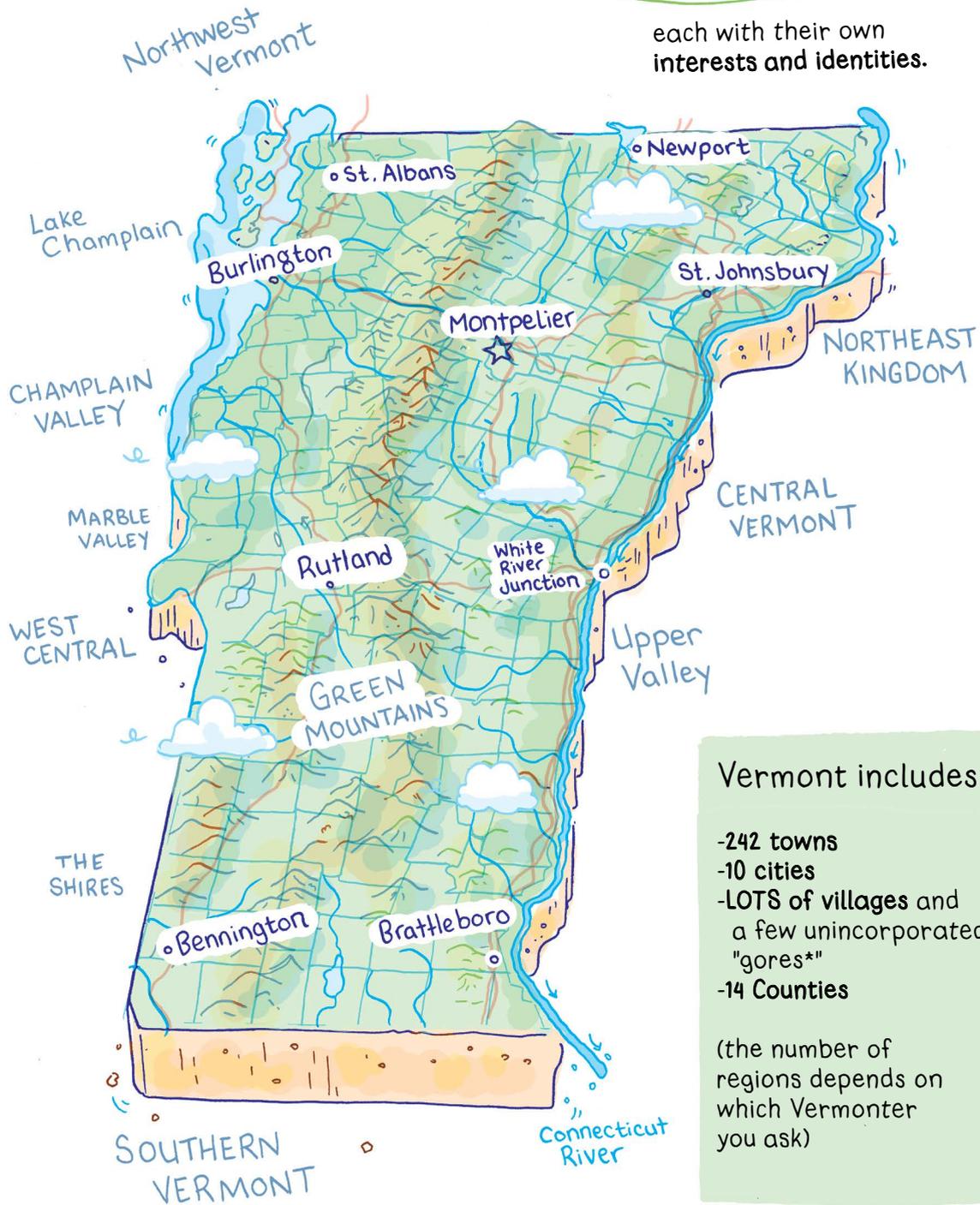
EXECUTIVE

FEDERAL

While these are some of the democratic systems that Vermont communities have in common,

Vermont is a patchwork of different regions, towns, and communities,

each with their own interests and identities.



Vermont includes:

- 242 towns
- 10 cities
- LOTS of villages and a few unincorporated "gores"
- 14 Counties

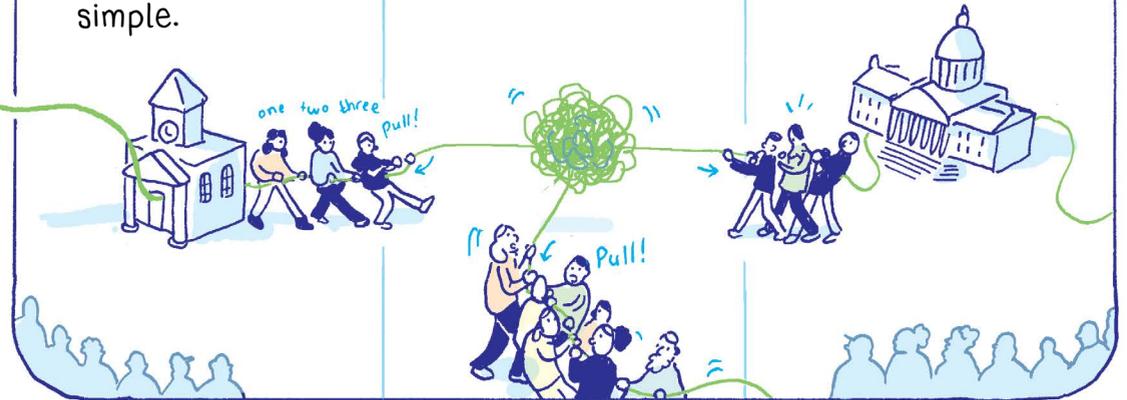
(the number of regions depends on which Vermonter you ask)

\*Gores are in-between areas of land left over from when town boundaries were established.

Looking closer, democracy in Vermont is not so clear and simple.

Vermont's **people**, its **towns and cities**, and the **state government**

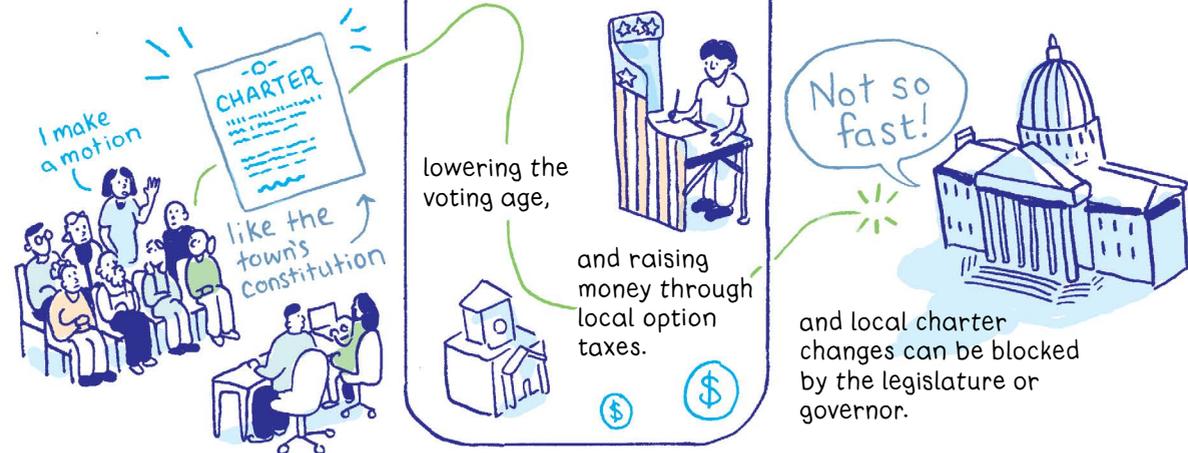
often disagree over who should have the power to do what.



For example, residents of **towns and cities** can change their **charter** to enable new possibilities,

such as empowering non-citizen residents to vote in local elections,

But in Vermont, **towns and cities** only have the powers that the **state** gives them,



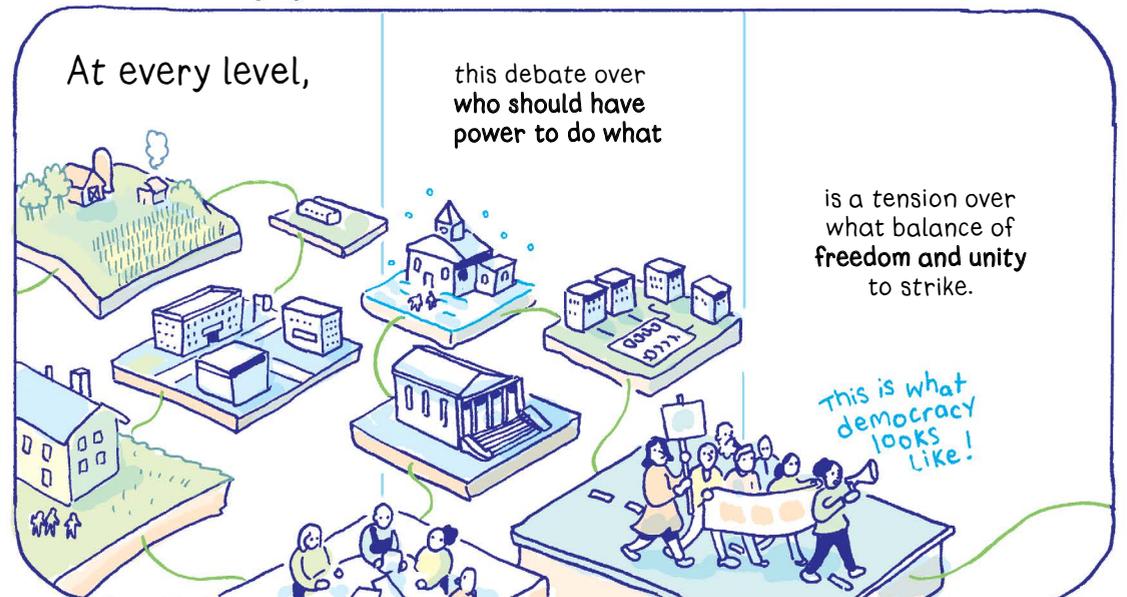
lowering the voting age,

and raising money through local option taxes.

At every level,

this debate over who should have power to do what

is a tension over what balance of **freedom and unity** to strike.



Living in Vermont, it can be easy to overlook the **challenges, contradictions, and histories** that keep the state from living up to its democratic ideals.

Vermonters still have a lot of work to do.

People are often **unable, uninterested, or feel unwelcome** participating. **Constructive dialogue** can collapse amid **division and distrust**, and **polarization** can push Vermonters to dig into their positions.

Vermont also has a violent history of **racism and eugenics**, and its systems in **towns and at the state level** can still **exclude** Vermonters, especially **Black Vermonters, Indigenous people, migrants and other marginalized groups** across the state.

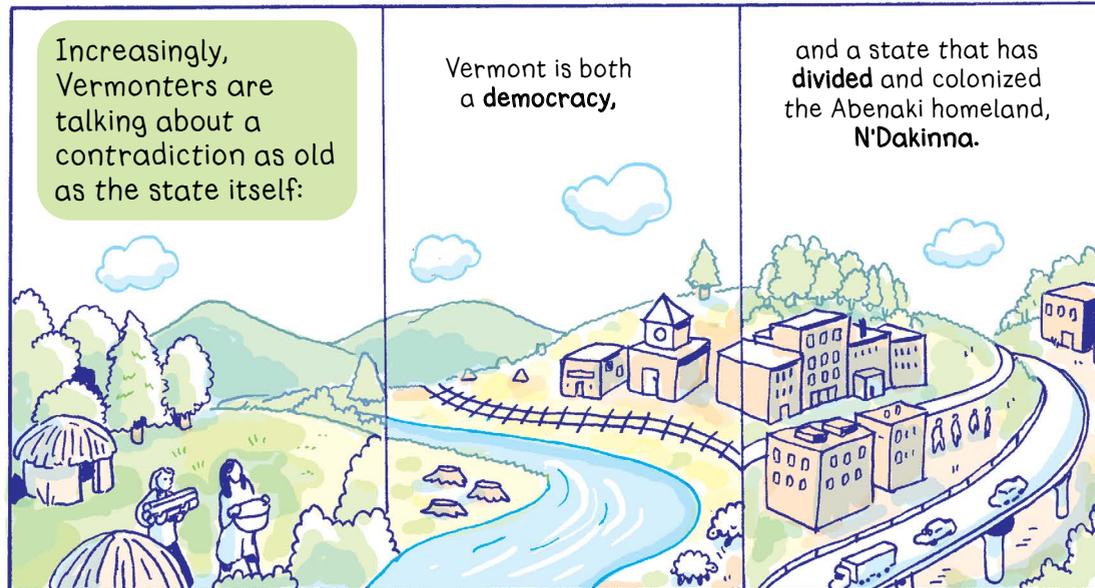
People are increasingly acknowledging and talking about these issues, not only in **Vermont**, but across the **U.S.**, and the scale of it all can feel **discouraging**.

What's goin' on in the world?  
nothing good

But democracy has never been a fixed thing in the U.S., or in Vermont. Vermonters have constantly worked to fix our longstanding issues, retooling our government to achieve greater representation.

VT Senate created in 1836  
Women were barred from voting until 1920  
Until 1965, the smallest towns and largest cities each had **one** vote in the VT house, regardless of different populations.

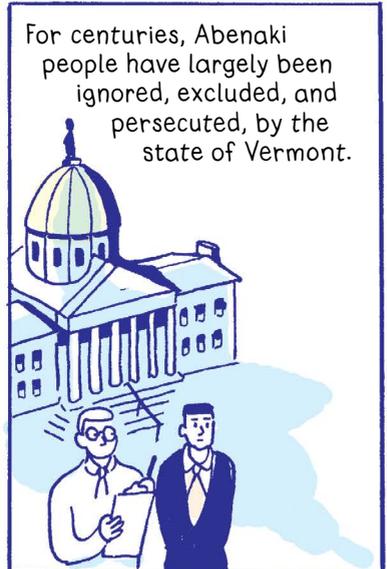
The scope of our problems have been inspiring Vermonters into action at the local level. Vermonters are learning more about our region's history, and working to adapt old traditions and adopt new ideas, bringing fresh energy into our democracy.



Increasingly, Vermonters are talking about a contradiction as old as the state itself:

Vermont is both a **democracy**,

and a state that has **divided** and colonized the Abenaki homeland, **N'Dakinna**.



For centuries, Abenaki people have largely been ignored, excluded, and persecuted, by the state of Vermont.

Despite this, Abenaki people continue to live in the state and across the region,

working to sustain and grow their culture and community.



Four Abenaki bands have received state recognition by the Vermont Legislature.



One way for us to strengthen Vermont's democracy

is to inform ourselves about the traditions of the region's longest-established inhabitants,

while finding better and lasting ways to recognize and support Indigenous culture and authority.

tribes often use a consensus process for major decisions,

in which everyone gets a say.



Vermonters are exploring new options for even their oldest democratic practices.



Many communities are adapting town meeting to be more inclusive.



Casting ballots, rather than voting at town meeting, is one way.

also known as "Australian ballot"

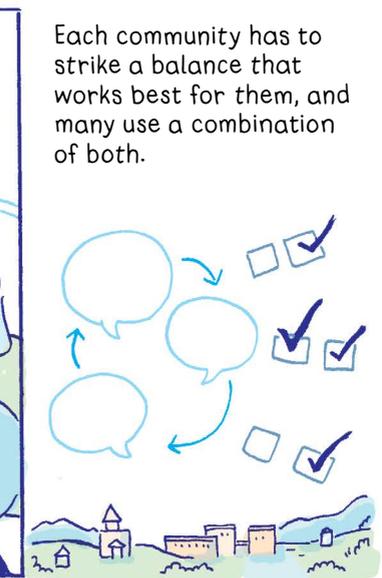


Using ballots to decide municipal issues can greatly increase the number of people who vote...

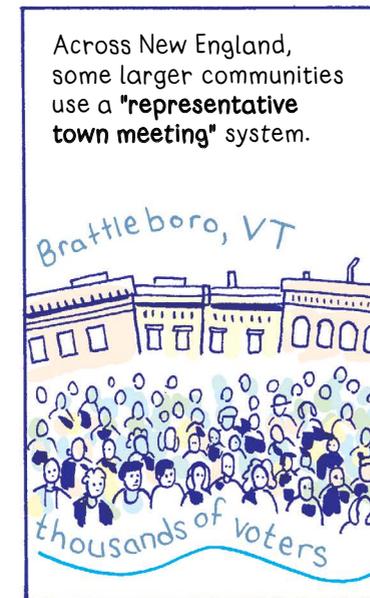
Stopping by after work  
likes not sitting in long meetings



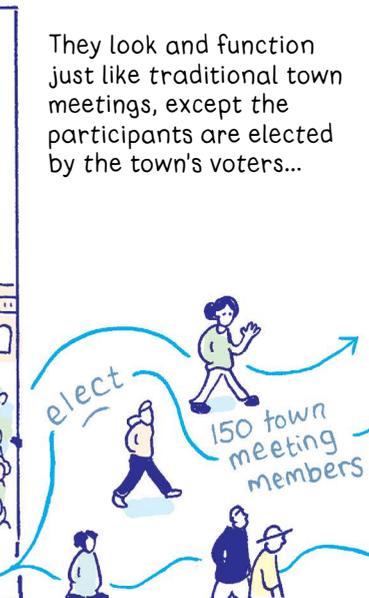
but communities lose the unique benefits of deliberation, including the power to **change** or **amend** policy.



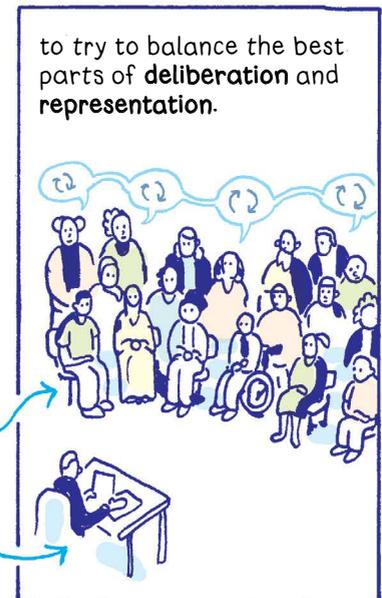
Each community has to strike a balance that works best for them, and many use a combination of both.



Across New England, some larger communities use a "**representative town meeting**" system.



They look and function just like traditional town meetings, except the participants are elected by the town's voters...



to try to balance the best parts of **deliberation** and **representation**.

Vermonters are also thinking about ways to make their **representatives** more...

umm... representative? obv

select board

City Councilor

Rep

Senator

Vermont's House and Senate have more representatives per citizen than almost any other state,

1 Rep = 4,287 residents

1 Senator = 21,476 residents

HOUSE CHAMBER

but Vermont's representatives tend to be older and white, and a new, more diverse generation is seeking election.

Vermont also has a prominent third party, the **Progressive Party**, at the state and local level

**Young people** are mostly excluded from our representative democracy,

unique insight

Very affected by policies

but can now join youth councils to research and get funding for projects which they then help carry out.

Using a democratic process called participatory budgeting,

up to \$5K

Youth councils have hosted events, planned trips, and more.

And a new state-wide youth council now allows young people to **advise the governor and legislature.**

Vermont Youth Council (ages 11-18)

There are many ways democracy can take place even within neighborhoods.

In Burlington, residents in "Neighborhood Planning Assemblies" discuss issues facing their wards.

BURLINGTON WARDS

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

People in **each ward** know their community's **unique issues**,

might offer language translation or help new residents vote

and through the **assemblies** local residents as **young as fourteen** can offer ideas and help solve problems.

**BUT** all of this only works when people are informed.

The local news closest to us often struggles to compete with national and world news,

and social media is run by undemocratic algorithms that users don't have a say in.

that happened in our town?!

Blah Blah Blah

Vermont has media outlets providing different ways of staying informed,

articles, radio, podcasts, video

editing

fact-checking type type type

provides different perspectives

holds reps accountable

empowering us to discuss and debate issues in our community.

Supporting local journalism is another way to support democracy.

Democracy is more than representation and assemblies—it can be a part of our culture, economy, and community.

For example, **member-owned cooperative operations (co-ops)** have been essential to providing food, goods, and services throughout the state,

especially where larger businesses and organizations didn't see it as **profitable to set up shop.**

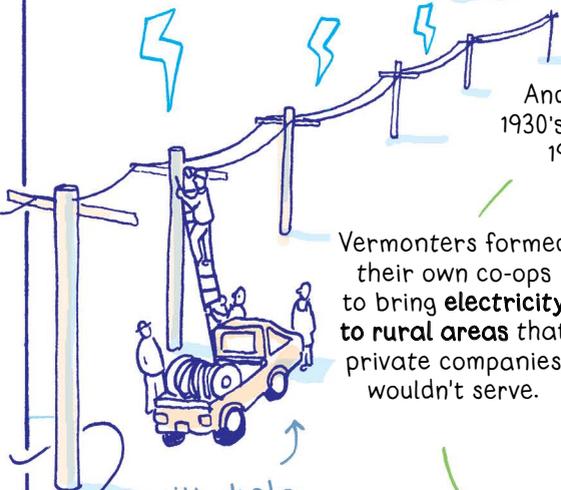
Vermont co-ops have their roots with **small dairy farms** that teamed up in the 1800s and early 1900s to share expenses.

Vermonters formed their own co-ops to bring **electricity to rural areas** that private companies wouldn't serve.

And in the 1930's through 1960's,

Many of those electric co-ops are still running **today,**

and some are now helping to connect high speed internet to hard-to-reach communities.



We see democracy at work in Vermont's many grassroots advocacy groups,

where Vermonters organize to combine their voices

to raise awareness and push for change



on specific issues and values

We can see democracy in Vermont's network of **Restorative Justice centers.**

Volunteers at Restorative Justice Panels meet with offenders to **ask:**

While the traditional legal system asks:



to hold their neighbors **accountable,** and work to **repair harm** within the community.

We also see democracy in the **mutual aid networks** set up by communities,

to take care of each other,

and support their neighbors in need.



In each of these examples, communities are looking for a balance between **individual freedoms** and the **collective good**,

while asking what it means to be **more democratic**.

But democracy is more than government—and it requires us to ask how other aspects of our communities could better serve people,

bringing people's power and participation to places we don't always expect it:



How can we make sure more people are capable and comfortable participating?



How can you make your voice

HEARD?



Can we make decision-making more engaging and **CREATIVE**?

How can people be involved throughout the year?



How can we stay informed

and understand other people's perspectives?

In public safety



health care



in schools



workplaces



and neighborhoods



across the state



There's a lot that Vermonters are doing to bring the **process** of democracy to communities,

and it's okay if we still have more questions than answers.

It's important for us to recognize what we **DO** know...



We know the benefits of bringing diverse groups of people together,

and of locally-focused democracy.



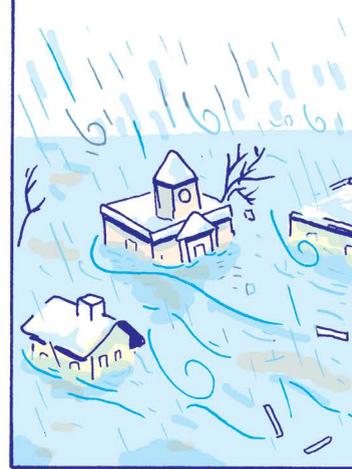
Coming together, we realize that being an "expert" doesn't just mean having a degree or certification—

it's about wisdom and lived experience developed over time—

all of which a community needs.



We also know that in times of crisis



local connections help neighbors respond quickly



and maintain resilient communities.



The listening, mediation, and engagement required for democracy helps us personally—

it changes how we think of where we fit in the community,

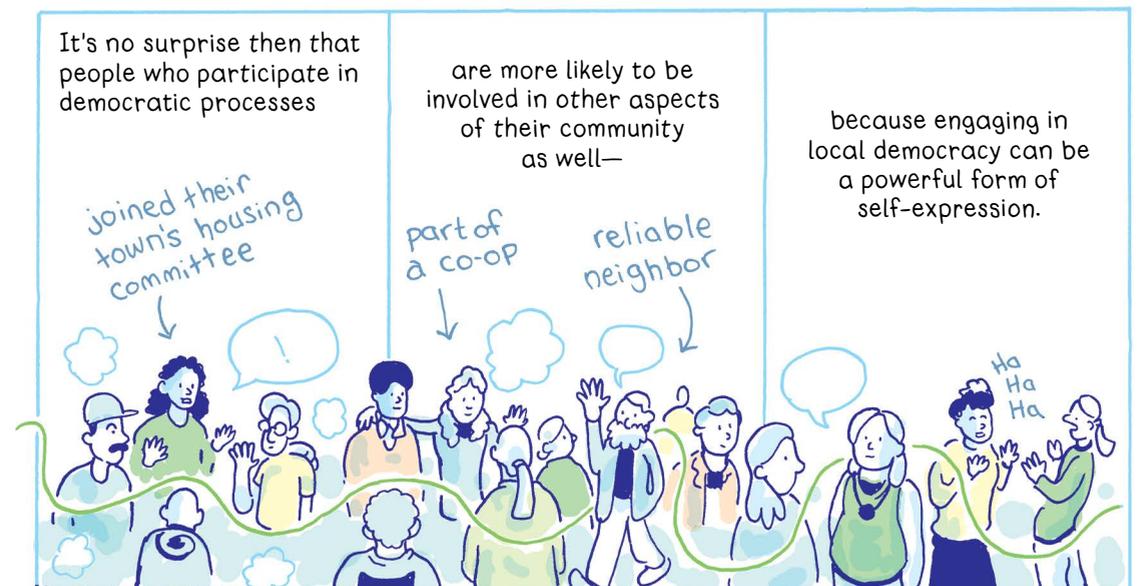
providing us with skills and a sense of belonging that carries over into other aspects of our lives.



It's no surprise then that people who participate in democratic processes

are more likely to be involved in other aspects of their community as well—

because engaging in local democracy can be a powerful form of self-expression.



The scale of our communities often means that no matter **how** people get involved,



it makes a difference.

And it also means that when people **don't feel welcome** or **encouraged** to participate,



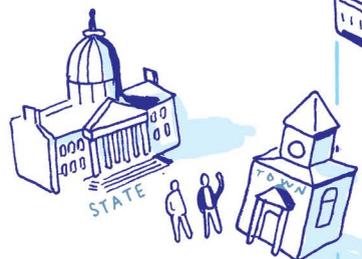
that makes a difference too.

We all need to find where we can be involved,



and help others do the same.

Democracy in Vermont is a mix of **participation** and **representation**,



of government,

and people doing things **themselves** and with their **community**,



of adapting **old traditions**,

and starting **new projects**.



**"Freedom and Unity,"** isn't about making something perfect,

it's about working through these tensions to create something **that fits** for our **time and place**.

Accepting the challenges of democracy allows us to appreciate what makes Vermont unique,



and to embrace our roles in its future.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### Selected Vermont organizations working on democracy & community:

- Abenaki Arts & Education Center: [abenaki-edu.org](http://abenaki-edu.org)
- Common Good Vermont (non-profit support): [commongoodvt.org](http://commongoodvt.org)
- Snelling Center for Government: [snellingcenter.org](http://snellingcenter.org)
- Vermont Arts Council: [vermontartscouncil.org](http://vermontartscouncil.org)
- Vermont Council on Rural Development: [vrural.org](http://vrural.org)
- Vermont Humanities: [vermonthumanities.org](http://vermonthumanities.org)
- Vermont Afterschool (Vermont Youth Councils): [vermontafterschool.org](http://vermontafterschool.org)
- Vermont League of Cities and Towns: [vlct.org](http://vlct.org)
- Vermont League of Women Voters: [lwvofvt.org](http://lwvofvt.org)
- Vermont Secretary of State's Office: [sos.vermont.gov](http://sos.vermont.gov)
- Vermont Legislature: [legislature.vermont.gov](http://legislature.vermont.gov)
- Your town/city clerk's office, and your local public library

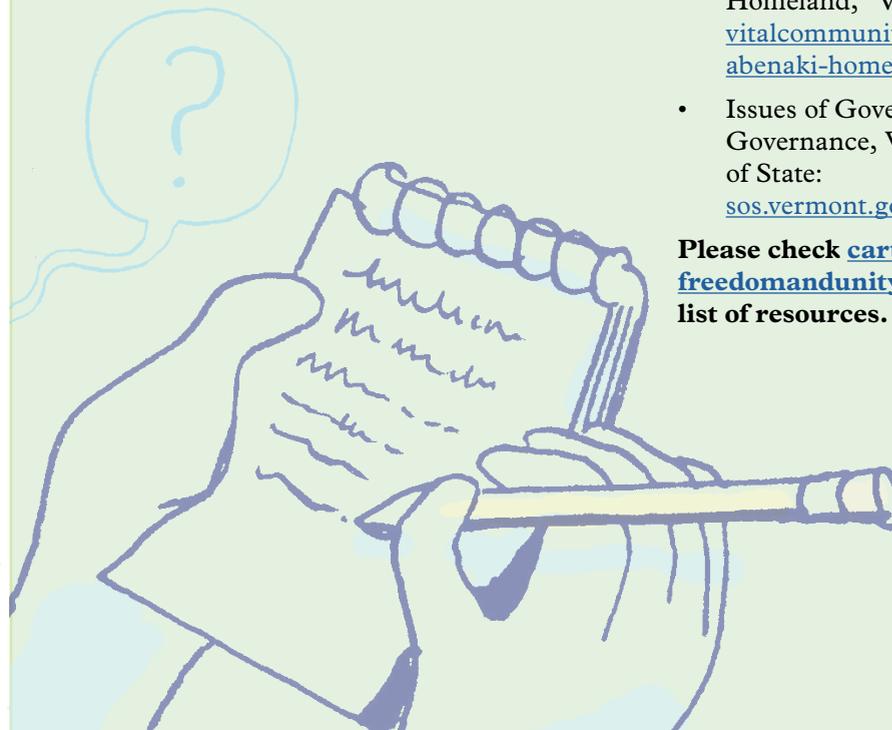
### Tools for community engagement:

- Vermont Council on Rural Development's Vermont Community Leadership Network: [vrural.org/leadership/guide](http://vrural.org/leadership/guide)
- Vermont Institute for Government's resources for local democracy, including *All Those In Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community*, and resource pamphlets: [vinstituteforgovt.weebly.com/resources.html](http://vinstituteforgovt.weebly.com/resources.html)
- *Strengthening and Sustaining Public Engagement: A Planning Guide for Communities*, Public Agenda: [publicagenda.org/reports/strengthening-and-sustaining-public-engagement-a-planning-guide-for-communities/](http://publicagenda.org/reports/strengthening-and-sustaining-public-engagement-a-planning-guide-for-communities/)

### Background reading & listening:

- *Brave Little State* podcast: [vermontpublic.org/podcast/brave-little-state](http://vermontpublic.org/podcast/brave-little-state)
- *VT Digger*: [vtdigger.org](http://vtdigger.org)
- Donna and John Moody, Winter Center for Indigenous Traditions, Norwich, VT, "This Abenaki Homeland," Vital Communities: [vitalcommunities.org/this-abenaki-homeland](http://vitalcommunities.org/this-abenaki-homeland)
- Issues of Government and Governance, Vermont Secretary of State: [sos.vermont.gov/vsara/learn/](http://sos.vermont.gov/vsara/learn/)

Please check [cartoonstudies.org/freedomandunity](http://cartoonstudies.org/freedomandunity) for an extended list of resources.



## HOW THIS COMIC WAS MADE

The Center for Cartoon Studies was given an ambitious mission: to create a comic book about democracy in Vermont that includes the scope of its history, contradictions, challenges, and opportunities. Furthermore, this all had to fit in a comic book. Mission accepted.

We set about our task inspired by how democracy works best: collaborating in good faith, seeking out expertise on a variety of fronts, and trying to make the most out of whatever resources were available. By presenting the various ways Vermonters have come together to collectively self-govern, we hope this

comic book inspires readers to practice democracy in their own communities. Our state's future depends on it.

A very special thanks to everyone at Vermont Humanities and the Vermont Office of the Secretary of State who provided the vision and support to make this comic book happen. Only in Vermont!

To find more resources and information about strengthening democracy in the Green Mountain State please visit: [cartoonstudies.org/freedomandunity](https://cartoonstudies.org/freedomandunity).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### Special thanks to:

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### Other contributing organizations:

Abenaki Arts & Education Center, Vermont Historical Society, Vermont State Archives, and the Vermont State Curators Office



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Creation of *Freedom and Unity* was funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities through their “A More Perfect Union” initiative which encourages projects that explore, reflect on, and tell the stories of our quest for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable society throughout our history. Additional funding was provided by two initiatives administered by the Federation of State Humanities Councils and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the “Democracy and the Informed Citizen” initiative which seeks to deepen the public’s knowledge and appreciation of the vital connections between democracy, the humanities, journalism, and an informed citizenry, and also the “Why it Matters: Civic and Electoral Participation” initiative. Finally, the Vermont Arts Council and the Vermont Community Foundation provided critical funding to distribute *Freedom and Unity* across Vermont.

## EDITORIAL & CREATIVE TEAM

James Sturm is cartoonist and cofounder of The Center for Cartoon Studies; Susan Clark is a town moderator and co-author of *Slow Democracy*; Kit Anderson is a cartoonist and comics editor; and Glynnis Fawkes is a cartoonist, illustrator, and educator. Research assistance by cartoonist and writer Masha Zhdanova.



Lead cartoonist Dan Nott is an illustrator, and educator living in Vermont. Dan graduated from The Center for Cartoon Studies and was also the lead cartoonist for CCS’s first graphic guide, *This Is What Democracy Looks Like*. He is the author of the graphic novel *Hidden Systems* (Random House Graphic, 2023). You can find out what he’s currently working on Instagram at @dan\_nott or visit his website at dannott.com.

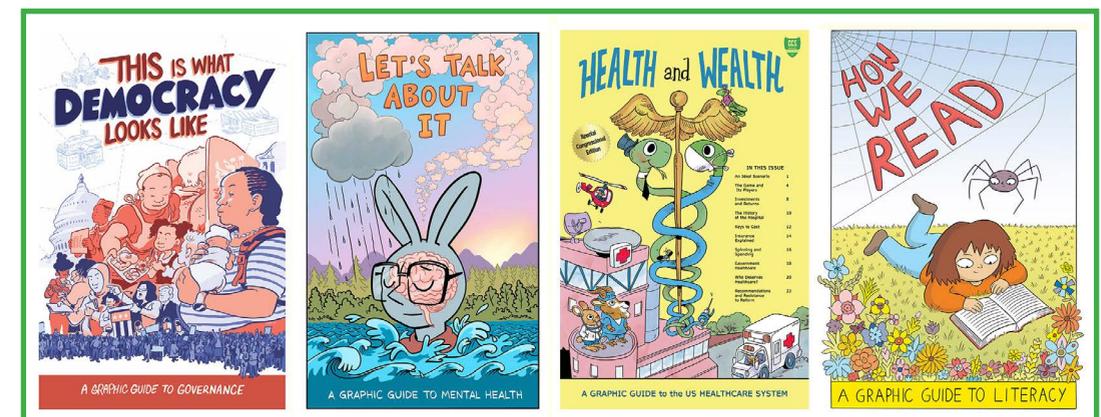
## THE APPLIED CARTOONING LAB

The Applied Cartooning Lab at The Center for Cartoon Studies uses comics to foster civic engagement and social change.

To learn more about the Applied Cartooning Lab, purchase copies of any of CCS’s graphic guides, or commission a project, please visit: [appliedcartooning.org](https://appliedcartooning.org)



To learn more about The Center for Cartoon Studies, a college for cartoonists, visit: [cartoonstudies.org](https://cartoonstudies.org)



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Democratic systems have been used by many communities throughout history to solve problems cooperatively. Here in Vermont, freedom isn't a free-for-all, and unity doesn't mean uniformity.

From town meetings, to cooperatives, and all the way up to the state house, Vermont's approach to democracy is by turns unique, varied, and inspired.

*Freedom & Unity* is an overview of the past, present, and promise of democracy and civics in our brave little state.



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