

SB2 at 15: Trends in Official Ballot Voting and Deliberative Session Attendance

Chris Porter, Researcher, NH Municipal Association

The *Official Ballot Referendum* form of town meeting, commonly known as SB2 (RSA 40:13), marks its fifteenth year of existence in 2012. Approved by the legislature in 1995, adopted in thirty municipalities in 1996, and put into practice for the first time in 1997, SB2 is now in place in more than 60 New Hampshire towns.

Much has been written over the years about the decline in attendance at the first session of an SB2 town's annual meeting, known as the deliberative session, where warrant articles may be discussed, debated, and amended, but not voted upon. Conversely, compared to the number of voters attending traditional town meetings, the number of votes cast in SB2 towns during the so-called second session of town meeting is often reported as having increased significantly.

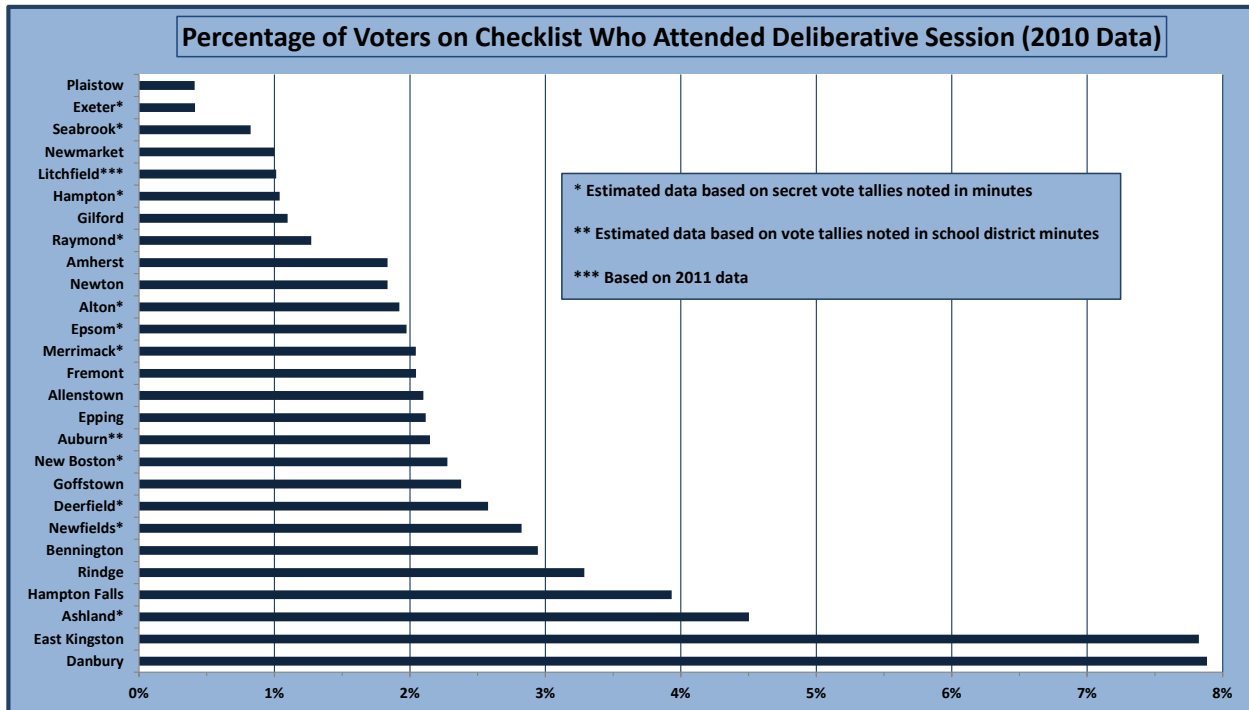
So what is the reality behind these two claims? What percentage of an SB2 town's voting population attend the deliberative session? And how many vote on the official ballot a month later? This summary report will provide some answers.

Data for this analysis were culled from 2011 SB2 Town Reports, which contain 2010 information on deliberative session attendance and subsequent warrant article vote tallies from official ballots. While vote tallies were available in a majority of these reports, attendance figures for deliberative sessions were found in only twenty-seven, which now constitute the sampling universe for this analysis. Voter checklist data (circa 10 May 2010) were found on the Secretary of State's website.

Based on the 27 towns in this SB2 sample, an average of 2.4% of voters on the 2010 checklist attended their deliberative session. The median indicates that half are above and half are below 2.0%. Attendance ranges from a low of 0.4% in Plaistow to a high of 7.9% in Danbury. These percentages are healthiest in the smaller towns—those with fewer than 2,000 voters—such as Ashland, Danbury, East Kingston, and Hampton Falls. Statistically, there is a fairly strong negative correlation between town size and deliberative session attendance, such that the larger the voting population, the lower the attendance (Corr. = -.62).

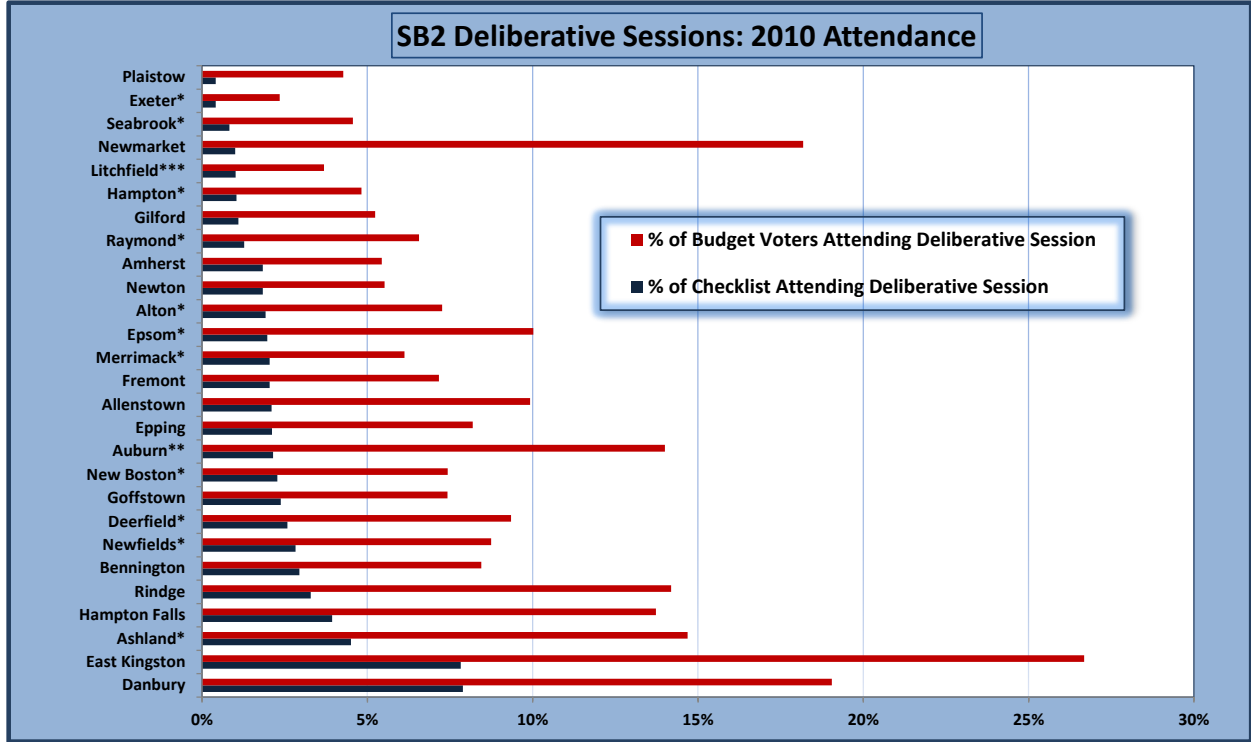
These findings are presented in the following graph. The data footnotes that appear in the first graph also apply to later graphs.

Merrimack, Newmarket, and Seabrook are charter towns which have adopted town meeting provisions that mirror the SB2 Official Ballot Referendum system. As such, they are typically counted among the state's SB2 communities by the New Hampshire Department of Revenue Administration and others.

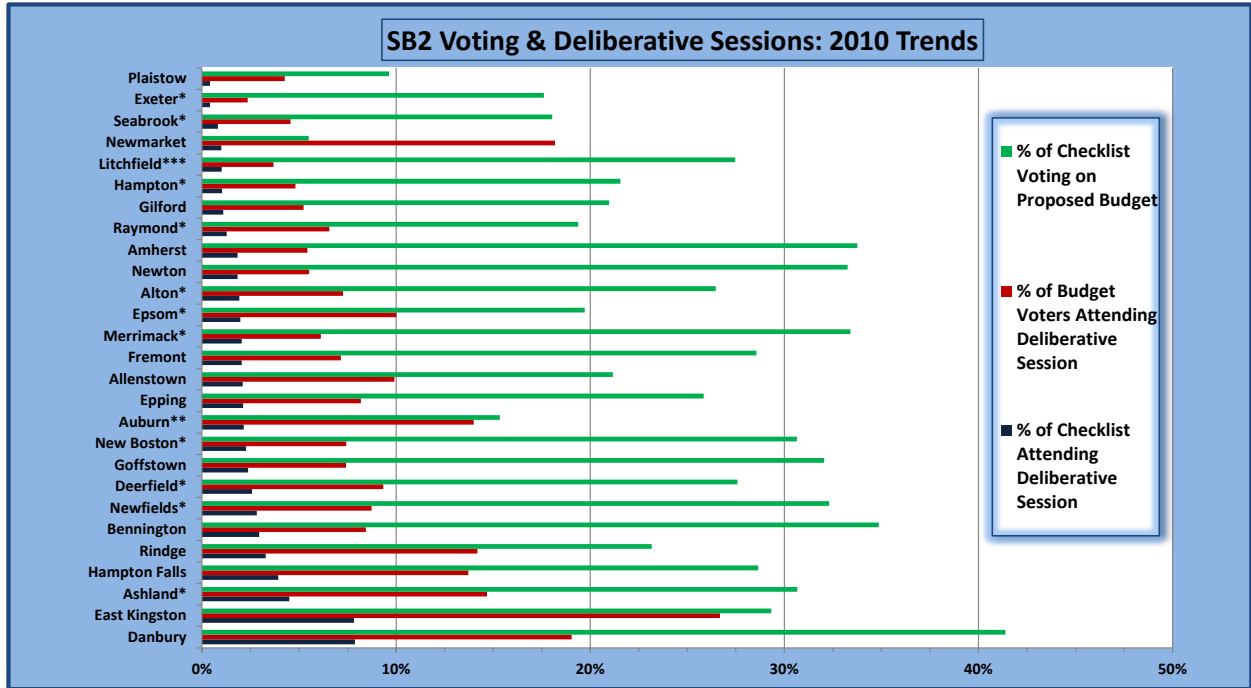


Rather than compare deliberative session attendance to the universe of potential voters as in the previous graph, the next one highlights attendance based only on those who actually voted on their town's 2010 official ballot. With this condition in place, average attendance jumps from 2.4% to 9.4% across the 27 SB2 towns (Median = 7.4%). East Kingston leads the list with 26.7%; Exeter's 2.3% trails. The negative correlation between town size and deliberative session attendance is slightly less strong than before (Corr. = -.52). The attendance pattern established in the first graph is mostly duplicated in the second. However, towns such as East Kingston, Auburn, Allenstown, Epsom and Newmarket convert more deliberative session attendees into official ballot voters than earlier trends anticipated.

Both sets of data of shown in the following graph.



To complete the picture of attendance and voting, another data series is added to the graph below showing the percentage of each town’s 2010 checklist that voted on the official ballot, irrespective of their attendance at the deliberative session. Average voter participation climbs to 25.5%, ranging from Danbury’s high of 41.4% to Newmarket’s low of 5.5%. The correlation between town size and voter turnout is low (Corr. = -.38). The vote counts used were those found for the proposed operating budget warrant article.



The graphical data presented above are summarized in the following table.

	% of Checklist Attending Deliberative Session	% of Budget Voters Attending Deliberative Session	% of Checklist Voting on Proposed Budget
Allenstown	2.1%	9.9%	21.2%
Alton*	1.9%	7.3%	26.5%
Amherst	1.8%	5.4%	33.8%
Ashland*	4.5%	14.7%	30.7%
Auburn**	2.1%	14.0%	15.4%
Bennington	2.9%	8.4%	34.9%
Danbury	7.9%	19.0%	41.4%
Deerfield*	2.6%	9.3%	27.6%
East Kingston	7.8%	26.7%	29.3%
Epping	2.1%	8.2%	25.8%
Epsom*	2.0%	10.0%	19.7%
Exeter*	0.4%	2.3%	17.6%
Fremont	2.0%	7.2%	28.6%
Gilford	1.1%	5.2%	21.0%
Goffstown	2.4%	7.4%	32.0%
Hampton*	1.0%	4.8%	21.6%
Hampton Falls	3.9%	13.7%	28.7%
Litchfield***	1.0%	3.7%	27.5%
Merrimack*	2.0%	6.1%	33.4%
New Boston*	2.3%	7.4%	30.6%
Newfields*	2.8%	8.7%	32.3%
Newmarket	1.0%	18.2%	5.5%
Newton	1.8%	5.5%	33.3%
Plaistow	0.4%	4.3%	9.6%
Raymond*	1.3%	6.6%	19.4%
Rindge	3.3%	14.2%	23.2%
Seabrook*	0.8%	4.6%	18.0%
AVERAGES	2.4%	9.4%	25.5%

* Estimated data based on secret vote tallies noted in minutes

** Estimated data based on vote tallies noted in school district minutes

*** Based on 2011 data