

Split session summary

We identified four possible options for a split session:

- Combined session (status quo)
- Split session in a single day
- Split session in multiple days
- Hybrid (splitting out deliberation of potentially contentious topics into a separate session)

The purpose of this summary is not to decide on a way forward, but to gather options and enumerate benefits and drawbacks of possible solutions.

Combined Session vs. Split Session

This section will examine a split session in the general case of separating deliberation and voting, as many of the same arguments apply across any type of split session..

Why are you considering this?

A split town meeting has been proposed as a way to increase voter participation by providing a more consolidated and predictable voting session for those with time constraints.

How would this work?

All deliberations would take place in a designated session. At the time when the members of the Town Meeting choose to call the question, a vote would be taken to end deliberation on an article. If the vote to call the question succeeds, the deliberation is over for that question, and body would move on to the next motion **without** voting. At a designated time, all votes would happen in succession, no further debate as the question was already called.

How do we address concerns about voters being uninformed if they don't listen to the deliberative session?

The issue of uninformed voters exists regardless of whether the sessions are split or combined. We cannot force people to pay attention or engage with the deliberative process, but we can require their presence for the vote.

What about amendments?

Amendments would be done in the deliberative session ONLY. If you wish to make an amendment or vote on whether an amendment is made, you must be in attendance at the deliberative session. One concern is that amendments could be used to change the intent of an article during a deliberative session. For example, if an article is presented to allocate \$50,000 for a sidewalk improvement. Opponents could take advantage of low attendance and organize to present an amendment to change the amount to \$5, which would effectively prevent any action.

What about moving to a ballot vote?

Lincoln follows an Open Town Meeting form of government, which, under MGL, requires in-person participation and does not allow ballot voting.

What about remote participation in remote sessions?

We are exploring with Town Council if remote participation would be allowable in the deliberative session. ALL voting will need to take place in person, as per MGL.

What would need to change?

The current Town by-laws is prescriptive in how the date of the Town Meeting is selected but does not define the day's structure in detail. We believe a single-day split session may be permissible under existing MGL and Town by-laws, while a multi-day split session may require a by-law amendment. We are consulting Town Counsel to confirm this interpretation.

Pros and Cons of Combined Session vs. Split Session

Benefits of a Combined Session

- Encourages community interaction and social engagement
- Provides a forum to surface and address important issues
- Enhances opportunities for education and information-sharing
- Encourages participation in both the deliberative session and voting, which may lead to a more informed voter base

Drawbacks of a Combined Session

- Unclear time commitment may discourage participation
- Can impose a significant time burden on some residents
- Susceptible to distractions that slow the process
- Lengthy deliberations may lead to voter fatigue or early departures

Benefits of a Split Session

- Reduces time burden, potentially increasing voter participation
- Makes the process more accessible for those with limited availability
- Ensures voters with time constraints do not feel disenfranchised

Drawbacks of a Split Session

- May reduce participation in the deliberation session
- Increases the risk of strategic amendments that undermine broader goals

- Could leave deliberative session attendees feeling ignored or undervalued

Models for Split Sessions

This section will explore different ways to structure split sessions, such as within the same day or across multiple days. There are multiple models that could be used when deciding the type of split to use. Below, we describe how these models would work and any additional pros/cons specific to this type of split session. These are pros/cons in addition to the ones listed above.

Single-day Split: Deliberative session would be earlier in the day; voting period on all Articles (as amended during deliberation) would take place afterward at a designated time (e.g. 3PM vote). However, it is not permitted to artificially cut off debate before the deliberative body permits.

Additional Drawbacks of Single-day Split:

- Timing and logistics are complex

Multi-day Split: A deliberative session on a specific day (e.g. the Saturday before). Vote would be taken on Articles, as amended, on a subsequent day or evening session. There are multiple options for when the deliberative session or voting would take place.

Additional Benefits of Multi-day Split:

- Deliberation could be recorded and shared with those unable to attend, portions can be skipped that are not of interest to the voter

Additional Drawbacks of Multi-day Split:

- Would have to allocate multiple days to Town Meeting, which increases logistics and voter commitments

Hybrid Split: The deliberative session for some potentially contentious issues could be split in either a multi-day split or a single day split model and voted on at a specific time

Additional Benefits of Multi-day Split:

- Keeps some of the benefits of the split session

Additional Drawbacks of Multi-day Split:

- Keeps some of the drawbacks of the split session

Things to think about when evaluating this topic for the voters:

- What does the Town value most? Should we aim to maximize efficiency, participation in voting, participation in deliberation? What is the right balance?
- How much has the deliberative session changed votes? (Potential survey question)
- How does the town want to structure any change? Do we modify the by-law to be flexible for the Moderator and Select Board? Or do we want to be prescriptive in the type of meeting?

Metrics for Monitoring

In order to monitor the effectiveness of a split session, we should set up metrics. As Town Meeting participation varies over time based on the impact of decisions, this would need to be done year over year. Suggested metrics are:

- Number of people participating in the deliberative session
- Number of people participating in the voting session
- Demographics (e.g. age) of those participating in each session
- Number of downloads of zoom meeting / Number participating over zoom

Proposed Split-Session Working Group Deliverables

- Questions for the town-wide survey
- Inputs to interim/final TMSC Report & Documentation
- Language for a by-law change
- Suggestion on how to structure the vote for the town / language for a by-law change
- Metrics

Questions for the Larger TMSC:

How do we want to engage the public?

- Town Meeting
 - ... but do we want to hit audiences that do not attend town meeting
- Lincoln Talk
 - ... but we can not directly respond, and it could spiral
- Survey
 - ... but we don't have much space to describe in detail as above
- Our reach sessions
 - ... but how well attended are these
- Other ideas? Mailing? Website? How are other committees thinking about this?

Open Items:

- We have not found any other towns in MA that use a split session
- Few questions awaiting input from Town Council

Next Steps:

- Review Padlet Feedback for additional pro/con comments from the public and update document
- Review current document with larger TMSC committee for feedback